



Young Children Learning

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Introduction

This book is the account of an unusual research project. Some years ago, with the help of our colleagues Gill Pinkerton and Helen Carmichael, we made tape-recordings of the conversations of four-year-old girls at morning nursery school and at home with their mothers in the afternoon. A discussion of some of these conversations – which we have found a continual source of fascination – makes up the core of this book.

Our main motive for carrying out the study was to describe the ways in which young children learn from their mothers at home. It is nowadays widely assumed, almost without question, that professionals have a good deal to teach parents about how to educate and bring up children. The idea that professionals might learn from observing children talking to their parents at home has hardly been considered.

At the time we were planning our study we were beginning to question this assumption. We had both spent a lot of time observing and studying children in nursery schools, and had developed a strong appreciation of the value of nursery education for both parents and children. We were convinced – and still are convinced – that nursery schools and classes provide an important means of support for hard-pressed parents, and that they provide a secure and enjoyable environment in which young children can play, and explore the wider social world beyond the home. We were, however, uneasy about the claims being made about the value of nursery schools as a source of linguistic and intellectual stimulation. While nursery staff were undoubtedly spending a great deal of time talking to children, this time inevitably had to be shared among the large number of children in their care. When we observed individual children, their conversations with nursery staff were surprisingly infrequent, and often restricted to a few

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brief exchanges. It seemed to us unlikely that the language environment of the nursery was richer than that of the home. However, we knew of no research which had attempted to make this comparison.

It soon became clear that the conversations in the working-class homes were just as prolific as those in the middle-class homes. There was no question of these children 'not being talked to at home', and few signs of the language deprivation that has so often been described. Although there were social class differences in the mothers' conversation and style of interaction, the working-class children were clearly growing up in a rich linguistic environment.

As we started to study and analyse the transcripts, we became increasingly aware of how rich this environment was for all the children. The conversations between the children and their mothers ranged freely over a variety of topics. The idea that children's interests were restricted to play and TV was clearly untenable. At home the children discussed topics like work, the family, birth, growing up, and death; they talked with their mothers about things they had done together in the past, and their plans for the future; they puzzled over such diverse topics as the shape of roofs and chairs, the nature of Father Christmas, and whether the Queen wears curlers in bed. Many of these conversations took place during recognizably educational contexts – such as during play or while reading books – but many did not. A large number of the more fruitful conversations simply cropped up as the children and their mothers went about their afternoon's business at home – having lunch, planning shopping expeditions, feeding the baby and so on.

Not only did we become increasingly impressed with the home as a learning environment, but we also became more and more impressed by the young child as a learner. We had the advantage, not available to a participant, of being able to study a whole afternoon of conversation in detail. It became clear that in many conversations the children were actively struggling to understand a new idea, or some information which didn't fit in with what they already knew, or the meaning of an unfamiliar word. When we looked more closely at

these episodes – which we called ‘passages of intellectual search’ – we realized how much they revealed the young child as a persistent and logical thinker. These were not the illogical or whimsical characters suggested by, for example, the theories of Jean Piaget: they were powerful and determined thinkers in their own right. Their limitations seemed to be due far more to lack of knowledge and faulty assumptions than to any childish illogicality.

When we came to analyse the conversations between these same children and their nursery teachers, we could not avoid being disappointed. The children were certainly happy at school, for much of the time absorbed in play. However, their conversations with their teachers made a sharp contrast to those with their mothers. The richness, depth and variety which characterized the home conversations was sadly missing. So too was the sense of intellectual struggle, and of the real attempts to communicate being made on both sides. The questioning, puzzling child which we were so taken with at home was gone: in her place was a child who, when talking to staff, seemed subdued, and whose conversations with adults were mainly restricted to answering questions rather than asking them, or taking part in minimal exchanges about the whereabouts of other children and play materials.

These differences between the conversations with adults at home and nursery school were particularly pronounced for the working-class children. Compared to the middle-class children, they were more likely to be subdued, to play a passive role in the conversations, and to avoid asking questions of the nursery staff. The working-class children often took part in long and sustained discussions at home, but showed little evidence of this with the teachers. It was not hard to see how myths about working-class verbal deprivation might arise. Faced with an inarticulate child in the classroom, teachers might easily conclude that the child was just the same at home.

These observations of the same children with their mothers and their teachers left us troubled. On the one hand, they showed the power of the home as a learning environment, and the power of the young child’s mind. At the same time, they

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showed how strongly young children could be affected by the move from one setting to another. The claim that children reserve their best thinking for outside school, with a resulting compartmentalizing of the knowledge that they acquire within school, has been made many times before. Our study suggests that this may well be true even at the nursery stage. Thus, although our study was concerned with the preschool period, the findings are relevant to wider educational issues.

We should make it clear that we use the term 'learn' in a loose sense. In order to find out whether children have learnt what has been taught them, a series of careful experiments would be required. In this sense we did not study learning. On the other hand, 'teaching' did not seem the right term, both because much that children appeared to be learning from their mothers was not the consequence of deliberate teaching, and because the children themselves often played an active part in initiating learning by their questions.

We hope that our findings will be taken in this wider context, and not used simply to criticize nursery schools. We do not believe that the problems we have identified are simply those of the nursery school; nor do we believe that they should provide a rationale for cutting back on valuable nursery school provision. As we have made clear many times, both here and elsewhere, there are many arguments for providing a comprehensive nursery service. Nor do we think that nursery teachers should feel personally criticized by our work. We have tremendous respect for their dedication and enthusiasm for carrying out a demanding job under difficult conditions. At the same time, as we point out in the last chapter, we believe that our study suggests some changes which might be made in nursery education.

This book could not have appeared without the help of many people. Above all, we must acknowledge the part played by Gill Pinkerton and Helen Carmichael in the original collection and analysis of the data. We must also thank Maria Harrison, Kathleen Culbard and Janet Panther for devoted and efficient secretarial help; Marion Blank, Vera West, Ian Plewis and Charlie Owen for helping in our analysis; Pat Petrie, Gill

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1. Why we studied children learning

‘One of the most crucial ways in which a culture provides aid in intellectual growth is through a dialogue between the more experienced and the less experienced.’

J.S. Bruner, in *The Relevance of Education*.

The group of children who make up the main characters of this book can indeed be described, in Bruner's terms, as among the ‘less experienced’ members of our culture. At the time our study was carried out they were close to their fourth birthday, still a year short of the age when they would start compulsory schooling, and their experience of life was inevitably of a limited nature. This lack of experience could be seen in the often touchingly naive questions which they asked. It could also be seen in the large gaps which were frequently revealed in their knowledge, and in the many assumptions about the world, and the way people behave in it, which adults take for granted but which they were still in the process of discovering. And yet, despite their limited years, we found ourselves continually being surprised and impressed by these young children. As we studied their conversations we were forced to admire their curiosity, their open, questioning minds, and, above all, the persistent and logical manner in which they struggled to make sense of their world.

In the course of the book, we will see these children engage in two very different kinds of dialogue with the ‘more experienced’ members of our culture. First, we will be looking at them at home, as they talk to the person who is usually of central importance in their lives: their mother. Nowadays, about a third of mothers with children under five work outside the home, generally part-time, leaving their children in someone else's care. In addition, fathers are more involved

than previously in their children's upbringing. Yet, despite these changes, it is still true that most preschool children, like those in this book, spend a large part of their waking hours at home with their mothers. Inevitably, mothers and children spend a good deal of their time talking to each other: about what each of them is doing, about events in the past or plans for the future, about the unexpected events that crop up during the day, or about the ideas and thoughts that occur to them in the course of whatever they are doing. Unplanned and frequently haphazard, these conversations between mother and child provide, as we shall see, a surprisingly rich source of 'aid for the child's intellectual growth'.

As well as looking at these children at home, we will also see them in a very different context, that of their nursery school. Like many British preschool children, the children in this book all attended a daily two-and-a-half-hour session at their local nursery class or school. These nurseries are happy and relaxed places, which provide children with a gentle introduction to the kinds of demands they will later experience in primary school. In particular, they encounter a relationship with an adult which is very different from the one they have experienced with their mothers. For the first time they will be interacting with someone who is trained and employed by our society for the sole purpose of 'aiding their intellectual growth'. Their conversations, as we will see, are of a very different nature from those taking place in the children's homes. Comparison between the home and nursery conversations reveals how differently children can behave in two settings – in some cases it is hard to believe it is the same child who is talking. In addition, the school conversations show how full of traps the deliberate process of aiding intellectual growth can actually be, and how this process can indeed even be counter-productive.

The conversations in which the children were involved provide a fascinating insight into their lives and concerns. They also provide material with which to answer some fundamental questions about the way in which young children think and learn, and the role which adults can play in this process. In the rest of this chapter we will outline the main questions which

we asked, and explain why we thought these questions important. In the following chapters, we will present the (often unexpected) answers which we found, and show how these answers led us to question many prevailing assumptions, both about nursery education and about the way young children think.

What do young children learn at home?

The central interest of our study was to describe the educational contexts of the home. What do preschool children learn from their mothers, and how does this learning take place? An immense amount of learning certainly occurs in the early years. By the age of five many of the major intellectual competencies have been acquired – for example, an understanding of space and time dimensions, concepts of causality, of object constancy, and even a good knowledge of age and sex roles. On average, five-year-olds have a vocabulary of over two thousand words, and they can understand and use most types of complex sentence. But little is known about how this learning takes place, or the role that adults play in the process.

Psychologists currently advocate that parents should help their children learn by playing with them and reading to them. We wanted to see whether these were in fact the most fruitful learning contexts, or whether joint activity of other kinds, for example, doing housework together, or watching TV, or simply talking together at mealtimes, might be just as important. We also wanted to see if we could identify anything distinctive about the learning that takes place at home which might be different from the kind of learning that happens at school.

In view of the obvious interest and importance of these questions, it would be reasonable to assume that they had already been thoroughly investigated. But, in fact, the opposite is true. At the time that we started our study we could find little previous research on the topic. There was quite a body of research concerned with the way in which the language of very young children develops through interaction with their mothers. Most of this research involved intensive investigation of a few children, although one large-scale study

of language development by Wells and his associates, which we shall refer to again, was already under way.¹ Little could be found, however, that was concerned with the broader educational questions in which we were interested.

Why has this topic been so neglected? We believe there are two likely explanations. The first is primarily practical. To discover what and how children are learning at home requires that the researcher must actually go into a child's home and observe what is happening there. This not only means an intrusion into the privacy of other people's home lives, but raises the question of whether the very presence of the researcher in the home will have a seriously distorting effect on what is going on. Added to this is the problem of accurately recording – and then analysing – all the unpredictable and sometimes chaotic events that occur. Tape-recorders and video cameras certainly make recording easier, but they also add to the unnaturalness of the situation. In addition, the subsequent analysis of these tapes is a laborious and time-consuming business, particularly if more than a small number of children is studied.

Faced with these problems, those psychologists who have been interested in how mothers teach have almost always brought them to a laboratory, and asked them to teach or explain some task to their children, or play with them using a 'standard' set of toys. The most famous of these studies was carried out by two American psychologists, Hess and Shipman.² They asked working-class and middle-class mothers to teach their child how to use a complex toy, such as 'Etchasketch', and compared the teaching strategies of the two social class groups. They found that the middle-class mothers taught their children more effectively, and used more explicit verbal instructions. However, one must inevitably have reservations about the interpretation of the results. Working-class mothers may well have felt less at ease in a laboratory setting than middle-class mothers. They may also have interpreted what was expected of them differently. More important is the fact that experiments of this kind cannot tell us what mothers choose to teach their children at home, or how they set about it, especially since teaching a specific task is a relatively rare event at home.

At the time that our study began a number of researchers, besides ourselves, were concluding that recording in private homes was the only way in which certain questions about the family could be answered.³ The way in which we ourselves tried to overcome the difficulties we have outlined is described in Chapter 2.

A second reason why so little research has been done on what children learn at home is of a very different kind. The obstacle here is not so much the problem of obtaining information, but the belief in some quarters that there is not much to be gained from attempting to do so. In other words, the reluctance has been due to the general belief that mothers, as educators, have very little to offer.

This attitude may be partly due to the lowly, non-professional status which parenting is frequently given. Educational theorists, in fact, usually define education as a process entrusted by society to a specialist system involving teachers and schools. Hence what a teacher does in the classroom is, *ipso facto*, educational, while what a mother does is only 'upbringing' or childrearing. Parents themselves often accept this view, believing that education starts at primary school and is concerned with school 'subjects'. This leads them to devalue their own contribution, even though it constitutes an essential underpinning of the school system.

It is true that upbringing in the early years, even if it has not been accorded the status of education, has recently attracted a good deal of professional attention. This attention has, however, almost all been critical, and has been concerned with improving, rather than studying, parenting. Psychologists in particular have argued that training for parenthood should begin in school, and be continued by adult education courses and by classes in antenatal and child health clinics. Hardly anyone has pointed out that this movement to educate parents has developed in the absence of any real knowledge on which it could be based. That is, there are remarkably few parental activities which we can predict with any confidence will lead to specific consequences for children.

We knew from our own previous research, and our experience in schools, that this tendency to disparage the parental