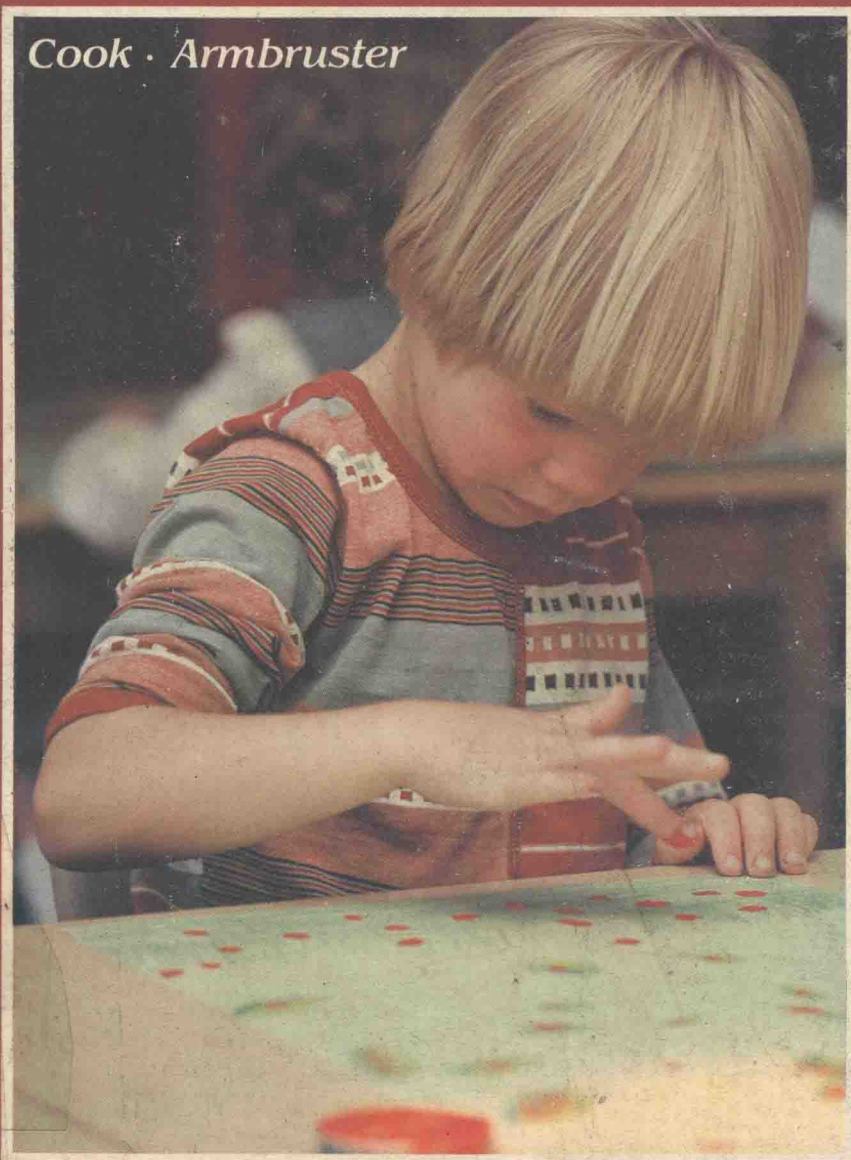# Adapting Early Childhood Curricula

suggestions for meeting special needs

Cook · Armbruster

ADAPTING EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULA
suggestions for meeting special needs

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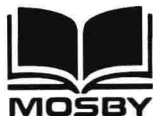Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Edwardsville, Illinois

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with 67 illustrations

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Preface

As the necessity to accommodate special needs within early childhood education expands, so does the new field of Early Childhood Special Education. This book provides teachers, parents, and paraprofessionals with the information and techniques needed to develop curricula and instruction to meet unique needs of individual children within any preschool classroom. Teachers working with groups of handicapped children in special education classrooms will also find the curricula adaptations suggested throughout this book to be useful.

As more is learned about the effectiveness of early education, perspectives change. Currently the goal is to identify high risk children as soon as possible and to provide their parents with guidance in nurturing them mentally and physically. Although it is generally acknowledged that all children are more alike than different, the unique differences must be identified and conscientiously considered when programs are planned. To meet the special needs of children, instruction oriented toward individualization is advocated. Environments are tailored to help all children achieve their full potential by building on individual task capabilities.

Although terms such as *retarded, physically handicapped, blind,* and *deaf* continue to be used, most professionals recognize that these terms are often not helpful. Children do not come in packages. Two children will respond very differently even though their handicaps may appear to be very similar. For example, although two children have the same hearing loss, each child presents a unique combination of educational strengths and weaknesses.

We provide high risk signals for specific handicapping conditions and suggest teaching strategies for working with children "diagnosed" as having certain problems. However, the plan and focus of this book are different from many others. The content is not organized around traditional handicapping categories. In fact, we suggest that "labels" be avoided whenever possible. Individual needs can be identified best by close observation and analysis of what the child actually can and cannot do. Sensitive awareness of individual strategies is encouraged.

Emphasis is on individualizing educational programs while including children within a group activity or lesson. Learning to analyze a child's learning style and then matching this with an effective teaching strategy is described in detail. Ways to determine the steps children need to take to learn a new skill are explained. Adaptations to daily routines are described and specific suggestions are provided through vignettes, dialogues, and illustrations as well as guidelines. In this way, effective individualization is demonstrated.

Our aim is to reflect a workable integration of the theories, research, and practical applications from both the fields of early childhood education and special education. Because this

blend is in an initial stage of development, we may have left some questions unanswered or issues unresolved and placed heavy emphasis on others. Our rationale for the inclusion of material is highlighted in this overview of the chapters.

The purpose of Chapter 1 is to explore some of the current knowledge and issues related to the education of young handicapped children. The historical, theoretical, and legal overviews presented in Chapter 2 are designed to foster an understanding of why and how the new field of early childhood special education has come to be. Chapter 3 is intended to help teachers realize the importance of their role as daily observers of children. To teachers fall the awesome responsibilities of noticing high risk signals, assessing children to develop programs based on individual developmental levels, and working closely with numerous professionals to provide the most appropriate education for each child. The purpose of this chapter is to help teachers effectively use information gained from informal classroom observation in recognizing each child's educational needs.

Chapter 4 presents the framework necessary for the construction and use of a developmental curriculum checklist designed to create the type of individualization advocated earlier. Although teachers cannot be expected to accomplish this level of individualization immediately, by understanding the process they can avoid wasting time getting started. This process has been implemented, over time, by numerous teachers with impressive success. In each case, they have remarked about the time saved once the process is in place. The result has been and continues to be worth the effort.

Chapters 5 to 8 are characteristic of most books on early childhood education. However, we have given new and different examples along with many of the "tried and true." In all cases, every activity or strategy suggested has been used successfully in classrooms of young chil-

dren with and without handicaps. In Chapter 7 an adaptation of introductory activities from The McGinnis Association Method is described. This adaptation has been found especially helpful in working with overly active children as well as those who have speech and language problems. In addition, these activities are a useful introduction to the auditory discrimination skills required for beginning reading readiness in kindergarten. Extra attention is given to suggestions for working with overly active children and reluctant children because these special needs are found in nearly every classroom.

The length of Chapter 9 reflects the importance of the topic—working in partnership with parents. Research supports the influence of parents in the lives of young children, and we believe that the parents' role cannot be underestimated. They are indeed the primary teachers of their children. This realization motivated us to cover so much in this one chapter. Finally, Chapter 10 focuses on a critical area often neglected. Making effective use of paraprofessionals is becoming of greater importance as the numbers of volunteer and paid aides increase. The format of this chapter is somewhat different because we believe that teachers must learn to be "managers" of the human resources available to them. If not, precious time and skills are wasted.

We present this book with gratitude to the hundreds of children and parents who have been our teachers. From them we have learned to value and nurture the uniqueness of each individual child no matter what his or her background, skills, or abilities. We believe we have found a way to meet unique needs in whatever setting they appear. It has been our purpose to convey the essence of this process to anyone interested in working with young children.

We wish to thank colleagues Dr. William Whiteside, Dr. Thomas Shea, and Dr. Norma Jean Havlin for their encouragement and expert opinions. We are indebted to Marion Boris for

excellence in typing and for saving the manuscript from a tornado that destroyed her home. Sincere appreciation goes to Peggy Ellis for many hours given to proofreading, to Ray Ellis for careful indexing, to Julia Allen Jacobs, Fawn Chapel, and Elaine Steinborn for continued assistance as our editors, and to Robbie Crane and Nyla Snyder for their overall helpfulness.

Ruth E. Cook
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Contents

1

Introduction

The butterfly

Her mother thought the butterfly was dead,
But didn't tell her crippled child, whose head
Was bent inspecting him . . . in wonderment.
"I know you can, if only you will try . . .
Just spread your wings and show how you can fly."
She murmured low—about an hour or so.
Once while she watched, she thought she saw him
   stir,
Was it the wind? she couldn't quite be sure. . . .
And then to her delight, he rose in flight!
He circled round her head a time or two,
Then fluttered to a wider, higher view.
the child's enraptured eyes looked to the skies
At black and orange wings against a cloud.
The joy she felt caused her to cry aloud,
"You're free, you're free! Why don't you wait for
   me?"
Forgetting that her chair had wheels, she stood—
(The butterfly in her had known she could)
And as her mother wept . . . she took a step.

*Nancy H. Wiley**

Helping children discover the butterfly within, that they may recognize their own capabilities—what a challenge that is! Parents and teachers together can provide each child with the opportunity to develop his or her own unique potential, beginning with that first step. For those children who appear to have developmental disabilities or characteristics that interfere with normal growth and learning, the stage must be more thoughtfully prepared. Parents and teachers need to work together to create a nurturing environment sensitive to, but not solicitous of, children's handicapping conditions.

Many aspects of mental and physical development seem to "just happen" to most children. They are, however, the result of interaction be-

tween innate capacities and appropriate environmental experiences. With most children comparatively little deliberate effort has to be made to synchronize capacities and experiences. Most have a repertoire of skills and interests that motivate them to explore, experiment, and therefore learn (Allen, 1981). However, children with special needs may not be able to learn spontaneously from the play experiences they naturally encounter. Teachers must carefully adapt materials, equipment, space, instructions, and expectations to provide environmental experiences conducive to learning.

Bijou (1977) concisely captures the basic aim of all early childhood education: "Such a general goal would be the maximization of development of each child in the context of his or her circumstance of living" (p. 13). It is toward this goal that the theory, lessons, and adaptations suggested in this book are focused. Guidelines for analyzing the tasks typical of any early childhood curriculum are offered rather than the proposal of a special curriculum designed for each disability. Suggestions are given for adapting strategies to accommodate individual styles of learning. The intent is to identify ways and means to make it possible for children with special needs to be educated appropriately in regular early childhood programs with nonhandicapped peers. However, these same adaptations are useful to special education teachers in any environment.

WHY INCLUDE HANDICAPPED CHILDREN IN "REGULAR" PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS?

Currently educational literature is replete with convincing arguments in favor of educating handicapped and nonhandicapped children in the same classroom. Among the most cited reasons for the integration of preschool handicapped and nonhandicapped children are three arguments advanced by Bricker (1978): social-

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*Written especially for this introduction by Nancy H. Wiley.

ethical, legal-legislative, and psychological-educational.

1. Social-ethical arguments seek to discourage a negative view of handicapped children. This view is perpetuated by isolating such children. Inclusion of handicapped children in programs with nonhandicapped children contributes to altering societal perceptions; at the same time educational resources are used more efficiently.

2. Legal-legislative arguments evolve from the recent court decisions and legislative acts that mandate that handicapped children are to be educated in the most "normal" appropriate setting.

3. Psychological-educational arguments consider the need for children to interact with a progressively more demanding environment. An integrated program is thought to be more characteristic of such an environment. Studies suggest that learning through imitation occurs when suitable models are available, and activities are arranged to elicit imitative behavior. Integrated intervention programs have been successful when carefully planned and evaluated.

Is "mainstreaming" appropriate for all handicapped children?

Terms such as *mainstreaming, integration,* and *least restrictive environment* are often used interchangeably and seldom are well defined. They usually describe the practice of educating handicapped and nonhandicapped children in the same environment. (This meaning of integration is similar in process to but differs from the popular usage that combines children of various races and cultures within the same environment.) The term *mainstreaming* developed as a result of legislation demanding that children be educated in the least restrictive environment (legal-legislative argument). As a result, confusion has occurred. Some believe that the least restrictive environment is automatically a mainstreamed environment. Believing this, some

children in special education were quickly returned to the regular classroom. Negative feelings arose from an apparent lack of regard for the unique needs of the children or for preparation of the environment into which they were being placed.

However, Public Law 94-142, which is discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3 emphasizes the desirable principle of *appropriate* education within the least restrictive environment. When describing mainstreaming, Safford and Rosen (1981, p. 3) state: "Mainstreaming means providing experiences most likely to ensure that handicapped children can realize maximum potential for full participation in society and independence of functioning." They go on to emphasize that the amount or kind of contact with nonhandicapped age peers appropriate for any given child must be individually determined. Only through careful study and analysis of each child and the available educational alternatives can the most appropriate placement be determined.

THE PRESCHOOL YEARS: THE BEST TIME TO INTEGRATE CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

It is not unusual to find handicapped children enrolled in regular preschool classrooms. Many teachers welcome handicapped children and try to provide worthwhile experiences even with limited resources. However, it is also not unusual to find that handicapped children are included only through the untiring efforts of parents and other child advocates. Sometimes mothers have had to accompany their child to the preschool and serve as an aide in order for the child to be accepted. Only recently have educators begun to consider the regular preschool classroom as an appropriate placement alternative. The 1972 mandate requiring Head Start to enroll handicapped children certainly gave the proponents of mainstreaming a chance to demonstrate the wisdom of their beliefs.

Systematic research into the effectiveness of integrating or mainstreaming young handicapped children is still in its infancy. Researchers tend to agree "that simply placing handicapped children in the same educational settings with nonhandicapped children does not accomplish all the goals of mainstreaming" (Cooke, Ruskus, Apolloni, and Peck, 1981, p. 73). However, studies suggest that it is possible to structure interactions so that handicapped children acquire more competent behaviors (Dunlop, Stoneman, and Cantrell, 1980). At the very least, mainstreamed programs can be supported on moral and ethical grounds. Detrimental effects have not been revealed in literature (Vincent, Brown, and Getz-Sheftel, 1981).

The optimal preschool years

One can easily speculate on the factors that may interact to make the preschool years optimal ones for mainstreaming children with handicaps. First, most preschool programs expect children to mature at varying rates during these years of enhanced growth and development. Differences in skills are expected and accommodated within the curriculum. The range of preschool "normalcy" is much broader than that usually found in elementary school classrooms. Teachers also tend to focus on the process more than the product of learning. They are busy setting up centers to allow for sensory exploration rather than grading spelling papers or preparing the next day's language test. In addition, the methods and materials usually found in preschool centers are conducive to the development of all young children. Exploration, manipulation, expression, sharing, and active involvement provide easy opportunities for teachers to structure and reinforce meaningful interaction between handicapped and nonhandicapped children.

Anyone who has worked with young children is readily aware of children's natural ability to accept and even appreciate individual differences. Children respond to one another without making judgments and comparisons. Spontaneous friendships abound with little in the way of ongoing expectations. When differences are observed, questions reflect a natural curiosity. If answered in genuine, thoughtful ways, children accommodate and accept the child who is different.

Labels can be hazardous. The diagnosis of children with presumed learning handicaps traditionally results in the application of categorizing labels such as mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and learning handicapped. Advocates argue that labels lead to efficiency of "treatment" and are often required for financial reimbursement. But most who make recommendations for children in the preschool years try to avoid attaching labels because they realize how tenuous the testing results are for children of this age. Fortunate are the children who are accepted into early childhood programs through open enrollment policies, because they experience a lower probability of being labeled. However, children who are referred because of special problems may arrive with labels. Research suggests that such labels bias the behavior of others toward those who are labeled (Kronick, 1977).

The following two points merit consideration in regard to the practice of labeling young children:

1. Does the label help the teacher plan a better program for the child? Labels can be helpful if teachers use them as guides in their search for teaching strategies relevant to each individual's needs. If, on the other hand, the labels are so broad and vague that they are not useful, they should be ignored. Siegel and Spradlin (1978) believe "the instructional tasks seem to be the same, regardless of whether the child is labeled autistic, brain damaged, retarded or congenitally aphasic" (p. 378). In every case it is the child's characteristics that must be observed closely.