

THERE IS MORE TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THAN COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a strong influence on early childhood education in the United States. Through its local, state, and national organizations, it has provided useful information to educators across the country. NAEYC's journal, *Young Children*, disseminates valuable ideas about educational topics and findings of child development research. Over the years early childhood educators and NAEYC have focused primarily on cognitive and educational issues.

I believe it is time to examine this focus. As the eminent German psychotherapist, Dr. Alice Miller, wrote in her recent book, *For Your Own Good*, "reason constitutes only a small part of the human being, and not the dominant part at that" (1983, p. 144). I am concerned that by emphasizing cognition in early childhood education, NAEYC and teachers of young children are not presenting an accurate picture of children and their world.

From the point of view of the child's developmental needs, the most important dynamics of life are emotional and social. Cognitive life is secondary, based upon and generated from the child's affective and interpersonal experiences. Would it not be helpful if NAEYC and other leaders in early childhood education focused more on presenting the emotional and social characteristics of young children and how these dynamics interact with cognition and learning? This would offer a more accurate and complete understanding of young children, put early childhood education in developmental perspective, and shed a fuller and more revealing light on learning.

At stake here is how this focus on cognition and curriculum influences the way educators and parents perceive and interact with young children. By emphasizing curriculum and cognitive development in the child's early years, NAEYC and many leaders within the field disseminate an image of young children that is not in developmental focus. They set the stage for adult interactional patterns that can be harmful.

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This is an issue of comparative will and power. In their interactions with children, educators and parents have far more power and influence. Compared to adults, children are relatively

helpless and emotionally vulnerable. As they attempt to help young children become independent and competent, it is easy even for good early childhood educators and parents to overlook these facts and to overpower the will of the child. When this happens most children do not protest. If it happens regularly, the child's creativity, vitality, and feelings are suppressed.

This suppression has long lasting and deleterious effects. Great and enduring damage can be done to the intrinsic motivation to learn and to achieve when early childhood educators impose on youngsters a curriculum that focuses primarily on the attainment of cognitive competencies. With the best of intentions, parents and early childhood educators can harm young children when adult behavior does not reflect an awareness of and sensitivity to children's emotional and social strength and vulnerability. By adjusting the focus of their efforts, NAEYC and other leaders in the early childhood field can sensitize adults and help prevent this covert damage to children.

Peter E. Haiman, Ph.D., is an Education Consultant in the San Francisco area a former Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education, and past President of San Francisco NAEYC.

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