

# Schooling the Postmodern Child

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The child is a gift of nature, but childhood is a social invention. Modern childhood was invented to take account of the newly discovered age differences between children and adults. It was epitomized in the identification of children and adolescents as students, and the central importance of age differences was institutionalized in our age graded schools. Now that we have moved into a postmodern era, we have reinvented childhood in keeping with our new modes of thought. Whereas modern childhood was defined in terms of differences between age groups, postmodern childhood is identified with differences within age groups. This metamorphosis of our conception of childhood has radically transformed educational practice quite independently of any reform movement or agenda.

Accordingly in this presentation I would like to describe a number of educational domains in which our fresh attention to within age group differences has brought about major changes in curriculum and instruction. These changes, however, have not always been recognized nor fully appreciated. For example, many of the more than 70 educational reform movements that were undertaken over the past few decades have addressed schools as they were, not as they are. That may account for the fact that so many of these reforms have failed. Put somewhat differently, educational researchers and policy makers often address the schools as they were, not as they are.

To make my case, I will describe five domains where our conceptualization has shifted from between, to within age group differences. These domains are; language, socialization, intelligence and giftedness, personality, and special needs. In each case I will demonstrate how the shift in emphasis is mirrored in curriculum and instruction. Of necessity the discussion of each domain will be suggestive rather than exhaustive. In addition, it is important to say that while many of the postmodern reinventions of childhood have been positive in the sense of benefiting children, a number have not been. A few of these postmodern misinventions will be mentioned along the way.

### LANGUAGE

In the modern era language acquisition was regarded as a simple matter of the child learning his or her mother tongue. Psychologists documented age changes in the size of vocabulary, the age sequence in the attainment of the parts of speech (nouns before propositions) and in the length and complexity of sentences. Reading was regarded as moving from the identification of letters and whole words to an understanding of phonics. Little attention was paid to within age group language differences such as bilingualism, dialect or language variations related to society and culture. The modern Dick and Jane readers were a mirror of the conception of childhood at that time, white, middleclass and suburban.

Jean Piaget was the first to shift the understanding of childhood language towards postmodern. In his ground-breaking book *The Language and Thought of the Child*, he focused upon the functions, rather than the structure, of children's language. Piaget pointed out that young children often used language geocentrically, to express themselves without taking the listener's point of view into account. But the real movement into postmodernism came with Noam Chomsky's revolutionary theory that children actively construct their own grammars and do not just passively copy what they hear.

The idea of the child as an active constructor of language has been the underlying theme of the “whole language” movement in education.

Accordingly, in contrast to modern writers, postmodern educators such as the Goodman’s and Frank Smith, describe the child as an active searcher for meaning. They have advocated that, given the right language environment, children will learn to read much as they learn to talk. That is to say, children are assumed to be as motivated to make sense out of print on a page as out of the words that they hear. The whole language movement has emphasized the importance of good literature for children which will encourage and support their spontaneous desire to read. There is also much dissatisfaction with the basal reader concept that underlies the Dick and Jane books. These books were written to incorporate an age graded vocabulary and sentence structure. From the whole language perspective, these stories are stilted and uninteresting.

Although the postmodern idea that children are active constructors of their language acquisition is an important one, the whole language idea may have been carried too far. The idea that learning to read is the same as learning to talk is simply wrong. In spoken language there are many non-verbal contextual clues to meaning (such as intonation and facial expression) that are missing on the printed page. Likewise, children are socially motivated to speak because their expressions of desire, unhappiness, fearfulness etc., are responded to by others. No such motivations encourage children to read, books are not interactive.

An even more fundamental difference between learning to speak and learning to read, is the fact that learning to read requires the concrete operations described by Piaget while learning to speak does not. That is to say, in learning phonics the child must appreciate that one and the same letter can represent different sounds and that the same sound can be represented by different letters. That is why phonetic languages, like Hebrew, are easier to learn to read than non-phonetic languages such as English.

For many reasons, then, we have to accept the fact that learning to read and learning to speak are in many ways, different. Young children, given a rich language environment and opportunities to talk as well as listen, can learn to speak and to comprehend with little formal guidance or instruction. The same is not the case with respect to reading. Most children need some thoughtful guidance and direction in mastering phonics. Certainly children should not be introduced to reading via phonics, letter and whole word recognition usually come first.

But at a later point in the learning process more direct guidance is required. A case in point is the TV program Sesame Street that teaches even young children to recognize letters and some whole words but does not teach them to read.

Accordingly, the best approach-to reading instruction is to combine what is best of the modern and postmodern ideas about language learning. Certainly children should be provided the richest and broadest language experience that is possible. At the same time, careful, thoughtfully constructed reading materials are helpful to children. In the case of graded readers, for example, some modification of books like Dick and Jane might be helpful in the early grades. The stories, however, would have to be written to include children of different races, ethnic and social backgrounds. And in keeping with the whole language, or language experience approach, children should be given every opportunity to speak, to hear good language models and to write. It is not a matter of either whole language or phonics, but rather what is the most productive combination of the two.

Another bow to the postmodern concern for within group differences has been the provision of bilingual education programs. Such programs are important, particularly for children for whom English is a second language. Yet we can value other languages while insisting that all children learn standard English. The

Ebonics debate is an example of the focus upon within group differences that is carried too far. Certainly the Afro-American dialect should be respected, as a viable communication medium appropriate in some contexts. But to succeed academically in this society, children need to learn standard English. We must show respect for, and accommodations to, language differences, while insisting that all children be grounded in standard English.

## SOCIALIZATION

Roles are socially defined patterns of behavior that can be performed by different individuals and that serve particular functions within the society. Modern children were presumed to be socialized by learning social roles. Karl Groos, for example, in his classic works on play, suggested that in their dramatic play, children are rehearsing the roles they will play as adults. When children play house, doctor etc., they are in effect learning social roles. It is this conception of play as a means of socialization that Montessori had in mind when she defined play as the child's "work?" She too believed that children's play was the way in which they prepared themselves for adult roles. At the same time, it was also recognized that child role play was far removed from the responsibilities of true adult roles.

In the postmodern era we have moved away from the notion of roles as too general to account for the multiplicity of behavior patterns that make up social life. Today we believe that children become socialized not so much by learning social roles, as by acquiring societal frames and familial scripts. Frames are repetitive social situations with their own rules, expectancies and understandings. Waiting in line, for example, whether at the airport or the supermarket presupposes certain rules (don't cut in), understandings (do not disturb others) and expectancies (everyone will obey the rules). Family scripts on the other hand are frames that are unique to the family. How families celebrate holidays, handle illness and religious rituals, cuts across social, ethnic, and racial boundaries.

The postmodern focus upon frames and scripts reflects the new concern with variations among same age children and less with the variations between age groups. In the classroom, for example, we are now concerned with multi cultural scripts and familial scripts. Frame conflicts often occur when children come from different cultural backgrounds. Native American children, to illustrate, are taught not to look an adult in the eyes when the children address them. Many of our teachers, however, are taught that only autistic children never make eye contact. The focus upon the different frames children bring to the classroom, brings with it a greater understanding of individual differences among children.

An understanding of frames is much more useful in the classroom than is that of roles. For example, one of the common problems in most classrooms occurs when children have to switch frames and go from one activity, or from one room, to another. Frame switching is always difficult and the younger the child, the more difficult it is to make the switch. If we appreciate the difficulty of switching frames-of moving from one set of rules, expectancies and understandings to another-we can take steps to make the switch less stressful. The most important strategy is to inform the children in advance that a frame switch is coming. "We are going to have to clean up in half an hour so start finishing up." Talking about the upcoming activity is another way of preparing children for the frame switch.

Understanding, and accommodating to, varying familial scripts is important as well. For example some children may come from families in which illness is treated with a great deal of concern. The child is allowed to stay home, and is often waited upon and fawned over. In such families, whenever anyone gets sick they get treated with tender loving care. In most cases, the family member who is ill at one time will be the care giver at another. If a teacher, in contrast, comes from a family in which illness is denied and everyone is expected to go about their business regardless, there may be difficulty. A child who feels ill may look to the teacher for loving care whereas the teacher may look upon the child who displays illness and weakness, as weak and spoiled.

The importance of frames and scripts should not blind us to the importance of age differences. As I suggested above, frame switches are more difficult for younger children than they are for older children. It takes more time for the younger child to get settled and comfortable than it does older children and adults. On the other hand, when families are moving from one city to another, it is often more difficult for the adolescent than for the young child. This is true because the adolescent is involved in many more and many more emotionally involved frames than is the young child. So, while differences among same age children in frames and scripts are important, so too are the differences between age groups.

## INTELLIGENCE AND GIFTEDNESS

We generally use the term giftedness to describe children with exceptionally high intellectual ability and talent and to identify children with exceptional musical, artistic or other gifts. Both intellectual giftedness and artistic talent were treated differently in the modern era than they are now.

### Intellectual Giftedness

The modern conception of intelligence was ushered in with Alfred Binet's publication of his intelligence scales in 1905. Binet conceived intelligence as a global capacity to reason and to make sound judgements. The Binet scales reflect the modern concern with age differences and was an age scale—a child's score was given in years and months and constituted his or her mental age. Binet believed that the child's mental age was the best guide to the child's appropriate educational placement.

When Lewis Terman adapted Binet's scales for use in America he also adopted psychologist Wilhelm Stern's measure of relative intellectual standing, namely the IQ. In contrast to the mental age, that focused upon age differences in ability, the IQ compared children of the same age level. It was thus a precursor to the postmodern concern for within group differences. Nonetheless, Terman still believed intelligence to be a global, inherited capacity. For example, when children of different nationalities and races did more poorly than did white, English speaking children, he assumed that these were real ethnic and racial differences. At the same time, when he found that girls outscored boys, he readjusted the scales to correct this error of measurement.

The postmodern era of intelligence testing was introduced with the publication of David Wechsler's Intelligence Test Scales. Wechsler introduced a point scale such that a subject was given points, rather than months, for correct answers. Wechsler also broke his scale into Performance and Verbal Scales and identified a number of subscales within each of these larger divisions. In contrast to giving the subject a single mental age or IQ score, their performance could now be graphed as a profile of performance on a range of subtests.

Other psychologists, such as Thurstone and Guilford also argued for a more differentiated conception of intelligence as a set of related abilities rather than a single overall capacity. This postmodern view of intelligence did not become widely accepted, however, until the recent work of John Horn who distinguished between "fluid" and "crystallized" intelligence, of Robert Sternberg who proposed a "triarchic" theory of intelligence and Howard Gardner who argues for "Multiple Intelligences." In addition, Daniel Goleman argues for an Emotional Intelligence. All of these new concepts reflect the postmodern emphasis upon within group differences and play down the age group differences emphasized in the modern era.

Although this new differentiated approach to intelligence is to be welcomed, there is a risk that it may be carried too far. In attempts to address multiple intelligences or emotional intelligence, some schools are doing so at the expense of the standard curricula. More importantly, the focus on within group differences sometimes leads to a neglect of the all important age group differences. In addressing the many different

abilities children of same age children, we should not neglect the very real age differences that are present as well.

An approach which accommodates to both the within and between age group differences in ability, is multi-age grouping. Children of the same chronological age, nonetheless mature at different rates. That is why Binet was so insistent upon the use of the mental age measure. And indeed, studies show that mental age is a better predictor of educational progress than either chronological age or IQ. In a multi-age grouping, children of the same mental age can be grouped together for learning particular skills. Multi-age grouping combines the best of modern and postmodern thinking about intelligence. It is an arrangement that recognizes that within age group differences can sometimes be as significant as between group differences.

Giftedness.

Some children are intellectually gifted and score beyond 140 on an intelligence test Other children are gifted in specific domains such as music, art or mathematics. In the modern era both intellectual giftedness and special talent were regarded with suspicion. Intellectual giftedness was seen as a form of precocity that did not have a happy outcome. Newspapers gave lurid accounts of, say, a young man who graduated Harvard at fourteen, MIT at seventeen, taught at Harvard at nineteen and was collecting street car transfers in a one room apartment at twenty-one. "Early ripe, early rot" as the saying went.

Those with talent were not given much better treatment. The artist was supposed to be a little neurotic or psychotic and the image of Van Gogh cutting off his ear, and the suicides of writers like Ernest Hemingway and Sylvia Plath were used as evidence of the relation between artistic talent and emotional disturbance. Psychoanalytic depth studies of artists added to this general impression that artistic talent was always accompanied by some degree of neurosis or psychosis. Because of these prejudices parents were not eager to identify their gifted or talented children and did not push for special programs for them.

Postmodern research and the media have changed these modern associations of the gifted and talented with mental disturbance. One of the studies promoting this change was Lewis Terman's longitudinal investigation of intellectually gifted children. His subjects, now in their seventies and eighties, have on the average, achieved at a higher level than a matched control group. They have demonstrated above average academic and professional attainments, have had successful marriages and families and are, in the majority of cases, emotionally well adjusted and happy. High intellectual ability is thus correlated with high levels of personal and occupational success. Other studies confirm these findings.

With respect to talent, quite different stories appear today than those about the neurotic artist. Instead, today we read about individuals who have overcome the most horrendous backgrounds to attain success in their fields. Again and again, we hear of actors, singers, musicians who came from poor, deprived and often dysfunctional backgrounds to achieve artistic success. Carol Burnett came from a very dysfunctional family as did Oprah Wynfrey. Even precocity is now looked upon in a favorable way. The positive publicity given to the young golfer Tiger Woods, who has been playing since early childhood, is far different from the depictions of precocity prior to mid-century.

This postmodern shift in our evaluation of intellectual giftedness and talent is now reflected in educational practice. Schools are showing a new appreciation of children with talent and are developing fresh approaches to supporting their artistic growth. Many charter schools, for example, cater to children with special talents. And, in general, there are now many more programs for gifted and talented children than there were in the modern era. Although these programs are still not what they should be, there is at least a greater appreciation for their need than was true in the modern period.

This new postmodern positive recognition of talent and giftedness is however, not without its drawbacks. In contrast to the modern era, when parents were reluctant to acknowledge a child with special abilities, many contemporary parents are eager to get their children into the programs for the gifted and the talented. Having such a child is now a matter of pride and prestige, rather than being something to keep hidden.

Unfortunately children who are not truly gifted or talented may be placed in these programs only to “fail” giftedness. In providing programs that support and encourage giftedness and talent we also have to be careful to select children who are truly exceptional and not those pushed by their “Wannabe” parents.

## PERSONALITY

One of the educational domains in which the postmodern emphasis upon within group differences is most apparent is in the various facets of personality. Today there is much more attention to such variables as temperament, birth order, learning style and gender than was true in the modern era when individual differences in these respects were largely neglected. Just a few representative examples of our postmodern concern with these issues will be used to illustrate the point.

### Temperament

Thanks to the work of Chess and Thomas we now can distinguish almost from birth those children who are easy to please, those who are slow to warm up and those who are difficult to please. Fortunately, children who are easy to please are the majority and adapt easily to feeding, toileting and sleeping schedules. Slow to warm up children eventually adapt but take longer to do so. Those who are difficult to please never completely adapt to routines and demands. Knowing a child's temperament type is helpful because we can be less demanding if we know that a child is simply slow to warm up, and not being rebellious.

### Gender

Our new appreciation of within group differences has made us more sensitive to boy/girl differences as well. At the height of the women's movement, many of these differences were denied or attributed to social learning. In part that denial was motivated by the fact that, in the modern era, difference was often associated with inferiority. Today, however, we appreciate that many boy-girl differences are just that, differences, and do not signify superiority or inferiority. Differences do exist, but our evaluation of them has changed.

A case in point are the stages of moral development that were described by the late Lawrence Kohlberg. He believed that it was largely men who attained his last, post conventional stage, of moral development. A student of his, Carol Gilligan, demonstrated, however, that girls used a different evaluative scheme than did boys. Girls tended to put human relations before abstract ethical principles. In effect, girls have a different moral orientation than do boys. This is not inferior or superior, merely different. We appreciate today that much psychological theory was written by men and has a masculine bias. That bias is being progressively overcome as women psychologists give a more even handed treatment of many psychological subjects.

This reduction in bias is already evident in our textbooks in which young women are portrayed in a variety of occupational roles. In addition the exclusive use of “he” has now been altered to “he or she” and in many texts the gender is shifted throughout the book. Postmodern boys and girls look at one another quite differently than did boys and girls in the modern period and this is reflected not only in the

curriculum but in the way in which boys and girls interact. It is now on a much more equal footing than it was in the past.

### Birth Order

Birth order can be a powerful variable, particularly today when family size is shrinking. For example, first borns are generally achievement oriented, competitive and conservative. Depending upon the age separation, middle children tend to be somewhat less achievement oriented and more independent and creative than first borns. Last born tend to share the best of both the first and last born characteristics. They are achievement oriented but willing to break the rules on occasion. These are generalizations of course and vary with the age separation between the children, the size of the family, the sex of the siblings and so on.

Nonetheless, the tendency for parents to have no more than two children is already changing the demographics of the classroom. In any given class there are now likely to be many more first borns and last borns than middle children. This means that there is likely to be a lot more competition than was true when there were many middle children to buffer the competitiveness of the first borns. It is becoming increasingly important, therefore, for teachers to know something about the birth order numbers in the classroom. Dealing with a whole class of first borns presents very different problems than does ability grouping.

### Learning Styles

Modern psychologists believed in universal laws of learning that held for individuals and for all species. Educational psychologists explored the benefits of massed versus distributed practice, and the extent of transfer of training or Skinner's principle of periodic reinforcement. In the postmodern era, however, we appreciate that if there are universal laws of learning these are low level principles that do not apply to higher levels of learning. Indeed, the recent attempts to teach children critical thinking skills is a throw-back to the modern era and the belief in principles that held for all individuals and for all tasks.

The postmodern approach, in contrast, is concerned with particularity. Learning, we now know, is domain specific. Piaget pointed this out decades ago when he demonstrated that concepts like mass, weight and volume are conceptualized differently and at different age levels, even when the same testing materials were employed for all three concepts. There are also individual differences in learning as well. Some children are visual learners whereas others are auditory. Some children need noise to attend away from in order to concentrate, other children need silence while they are reading or studying.

From an educational point of view, this means we have to learn about the different processes children use in learning different subject matter. We also have to know how to identify and respond to children with different learning styles. A child who may pay no attention when we are talking may be quite attentive if the same instructions or material is given to him or her upon a computer screen. One of the real advantages of our new technologies is that we are better able to respond to the diversity of learning styles children bring with them to the classroom.

### CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In the modern era, with Dick and Jane as the stereotypical normal child, there was little recognition of children with special needs. Indeed, there was a strong prejudice against them. Parents, say, who had a retarded child would often try and keep the child at home, for fear of ridicule and abuse. There were, of course, schools for the blind and for the deaf, but once children were sent off to such schools they were largely forgotten by the larger society. Parents whose children had other disabilities, such as cerebral

palsy, had to make do with whatever educational provisions they themselves could provide. Even the president of the United States hid the extent of his polio disability.

World War II and the postmodern movement helped to change our attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. The Second World War was a maiming war in the sense that many more men and women were wounded than were actually killed. Many young men and women, who had left their communities as functioning members of the society, returned with disabilities. There was, as a result, a great effort to rehabilitate such young men and women with health programs and job training. But the presence of so many young people with disabilities in the community helped to change people's attitudes towards these limitations.

The changes in attitude were recognized by parents of children with disabilities. Soon the parents of children with cerebral palsy and with mental retardation began to organize and to lobby the congress for assistance. This lobbying for children with special needs came at the same time as the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights movement which also sought recognition and a more equal playing field for education and jobs. It was in the context of this postmodern movement for those who were different from the mainstream that special legislation for the handicapped was passed in 1975. Public Law 94-142, made it a national policy to provide for the educational needs of all handicapped children.

The new, postmodern recognition of children with special needs has had great impact upon educational practice. Not only have schools been physically modified to accommodate children with special needs but schools have introduced main streaming and immersion as means of providing children with special needs education comparable to that provided for other children. Like other postmodern innovations, however, main streaming and inclusion are not without their problems. In principle, the educational provision for children with special needs is evidence of our new appreciation of difference and of our greater humanity. In practice, it does not always work out that way.

Mainstreaming, or inclusion of special needs children into the classroom can work extremely well and accomplish all the goals set for this policy. But to do so requires a number of conditions that are not always met. These are:

- I. That the teachers be well trained and prepared for such children.
2. That the class be small enough in size so that provision for such children is manageable.
3. That the ratio of special needs children not be such as to overwhelm the teacher and leave NO time to attend to non-special needs children.
4. That the teacher have adequate back up and support services. Certainly, children can be mainstreamed successfully without meeting all of these conditions, but it is a lot more difficult to do and less likely to happen than if these conditions are met.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have reviewed five domains in which educational practice has been transformed as a result of our movement into postmodernism and our reinvention of childhood, As opposed to the modern era in which childhood was defined in terms of age differences, in the postmodern era we have become much more concerned with within age group variations. This new concern for within group differences is what has transformed curriculum and instruction.

The introduction of bilingual classes illustrates our new concern for within group differences in language. Attention to multi cultural differences reflects a new appreciation of within group differences in socialization. Likewise in the expansion of programs for the gifted and talented reflects a heightened attention to this type of within group differences. The modification of our textbooks and of our language to eliminate gender bias is another way in which our teaching practice and curriculum have become postmodern. Likewise in our accommodation to children with different learning styles and in our acceptance of domain specific learning we have moved away from modern universality and towards postmodern particularity. Perhaps the postmodern spirit is best exemplified in our main streaming and inclusion of children with special needs-a group excluded in the modern era.

In highlighting the transformations of the postmodern era, I do not mean to portray the modern as all bad and the postmodern as all good. There were some positive features to modern education-particularly the recognition of age differences. And there are some negative features to postmodern innovations such as the neglect, in the whole language movement, of the differences between learning to talk and learning to read. In the end we will make the most progress if we combine what is best from modern with what is best from postmodern education. We don't need any more educational reforms, we do need educational integration of the best of the modern and the postmodern educational curriculum and instruction.