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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Schwebel, Milton, and Raph, Jane, Editors

Piaget In The Classroom

New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973. Pp. xii + 305.

In recent years, many people have studied and written about Piaget. He has been referred to as an eminent Swiss psychologist; an innovative genius; a towering figure in twentieth-century psychology; a first-class biologist; a zoologist by vocation; an epistemologist by avocation; and a logician by method. He considers himself a genetic epistemologist, rather than a psychologist. Whatever the appellation applied to Professor Piaget, his lifelong study of the development of intelligence in children is a rich source for theoretical and practical wisdom on which to base effective methods of teaching. This book, *Piaget In The Classroom*, is aimed at orienting teacher intent toward cultivating intelligence in the classroom.

In the foreword, Piaget personally commends the authors of the book for their insight, and for their thorough comprehension of the role played by actions in the development of children's intelligence and knowledge. He approves the volume as a means of opening "the way for the implementation of a really active pedagogical practice. . ." For the most part, the editors and authors of this book are former students of Piaget, or co-workers with him in Geneva, Switzerland. With outstanding literary competence, they write from deep understanding and daily preoccupation with the applicability of the theories of "one of the fertile minds of the century."

The twelve chapters in this text are grouped in three Parts, preceded by an introduction in which the editors consider Piagetian theory in its relationship to educational policy and the active process of education within school systems. They suggest that a theory such as Piaget's is inappropriate in highly centralized school settings where orthodoxy in thought and behavior, as well as highly disciplined technical skills, are valued above creative and imaginative productivity. As Piaget puts it into words, ". . . the aim of intellectual training is to form the intelligence rather than to stock the memory, and to produce intellectual explorers rather than mere erudition . . ."

In Part I, Sinclair discusses "Cognitive Development Between Four and Eight Years of Age" and "Recent Piagetian Research In Learning Studies." Implications are that development is always the

result of interaction, that the subject himself is the mainspring of his development, and that environment can accelerate or retard development, but only rarely can it change its course. Gruber writes of "Courage and Cognitive Growth in Children and Scientists." For him, the educational significance of Piaget's work relates to the adult's attentiveness to each child's particular mental level, the search for best teaching materials to facilitate cognitive growth in the major conceptual areas Piaget has investigated, and the spontaneous, self-guided active interaction with environment. Teachers must "create a world in which childlike thought will be treated with the respect it deserves . . . in which the child will know he has that respect."

In Part II, Chapters five, six, and seven concern "The Implications of Piaget's Theories for Contemporary Infancy Research and Education," "Language and Thought," and "The Development of Operations." Birns and Golden present Piaget's systematic description of how infants acquire adaptive sensori-motor schemas or behavior patterns which serve as the foundation for all later symbols and abstract thought. They also draw attention to possible misapplications of Piaget's original ideas: (1) attempts to transform his observations into standardized tests for infants, and (2) initiation of programs to accelerate infancy sensori-motor development. Further, they caution that preoccupation with the development of childhood thought should not cause care-taking adults to ignore motivational and emotional aspects of growth.

According to Duckworth, Piaget's theories about language and thought in children have clear messages for teachers, particularly the essence of what he has called "egocentric thought." Good teachers must be good listeners, constantly aware of needing to make more than one interpretation when listening to what children are trying to say to them. One of Piaget's most important contributions to pedagogy is the idea that language development is dependent on the level of thinking, rather than being responsible for the level of thinking. ". . . teaching linguistic formulas is not likely to lead to clear logical thinking; it is by thinking that people get better at thinking."

Voyat deals with the problem of using Piagetian theory to form a basis for structuring whole programs for school teaching and learning. The essential substance of the curriculum here is not the materials used, but the concepts themselves. Implementation of such a curriculum depends upon how intelligence is conceived. He supports Piaget's conceptualization, as described by Sigel:

. . . developmental in format, substantive in content, and

operational in behavior. These characteristics make the theory eminently germane, if not essential, for education.

In Part III, knowledge about the developing mind and the developing child is related and applied to the role of the teacher in the classroom. Wickens contrasts the closed-systems programs where educational *products* are emphasized, and behavioral objectives used as criteria for achievement, with open-systems programs where the emphasis is upon *process*, and skills and knowledge are used by the learner for promotion of individual interests within a humanistic framework of human relationships. Observations of the process are used by the teacher as materials to further his roles of program developer, implementor, and evaluator. Kamii states that the teacher in a Piagetian school should have no need to have standards enforced from outside, but be the kind of adult who has strong personal standards and continues to be a learner all his life. He must believe in Piaget's biological model that views intelligence as an organized, coherent, whole structure, similar to that of an embryo:

The arms, fingers, lungs, head, and eyes of an embryo develop out of a structured whole from the very beginning. If we want well-structured hands, feet, lungs, and eyes, we cannot build them separately and then put them together. The individual parts develop through a process of differentiation, coordination, and construction. This development in a biological sense is an irreversible process that takes place only in one direction. . . . In other words, a characteristic of the biological constructivist view of learning is that what has been learned once is never forgotten.

One of the most intriguing chapters in the entire book is the one on "The Having of Wonderful Ideas." In it, Duckworth suggests that the development of intelligence is a creative affair. She believes that when children are offered matter to think about, when their ideas are accepted, not only do they learn about their world, but their intellectual ability is stimulated, too.

In the final chapter, "The Developing Teacher," the editors emphasize that a teacher must have opportunity for free use of his intelligence. Principals, consultants, and teacher-educators need to behave in ways that will encourage teachers to do their own thinking and rely on their own judgment. Efforts against passivity must be energetic and relentless if the mind is to be free to act upon the school environment. Piaget's work surely has implications for the developing teacher:

Curricula in classrooms influenced by his ideas are occasions for developing the mind. Effective teachers in such circumstances will tend to be active, thoughtful, resourceful adults who rely on the resilience of their minds to activate the interest and intelligence of their students.

Teachers, new to Piagetian theory, who read this book with serious intent, do so at their own risk. For, never again will they view children and their learning exactly as before. The “wonderful idea” which lights the face of some pupil may spark some special sense of wonder in the teacher, too, and forever, in some measure, illuminate both lives.