

Celebrating a Life for Children

An interview with
David Weikart

What do you consider to be the most dramatic change in our field during your career?

As I look back over the last 40 years of my involvement in the early childhood field, the most dramatic change is that the field has come into being. So often we view the progress made from the perspective of what is available today, forgetting the long history of development. In 1960, in Ypsilanti, Michigan there was one play group operated by parents in the local Episcopal Church basement and an elite play nursery offered to the Ypsilanti Normal School faculty for their children. Head Start did not begin until 1965. When I established the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in 1962, some university consultants advised us not to provide the program because we would harm the disadvantaged children we wished to serve.

Now, of course careful longitudinal research has documented that high quality service programs for disadvantaged children and their families can make a positive change in the life chances of such children. Thus for me, the greatest change has been the growth and acceptance of high quality early childhood education as a major method of helping poor children and their families. In 1960 there were basically no programs and a fear about their *negative* effects; in 2002 there are programs for almost all children who need such services and we know they make a major contribution to the child's growth and development and for children of all social and economic backgrounds.

What project or piece of work are you proudest of?

Obviously, the center piece of my work in early childhood education is the High/Scope Curriculum Approach. Most programs are trapped into the "tell them what they need to know" or "we provide developmentally appropriate activities where children can learn through play." Early on I did not want to pursue either end of that dimension but sought for another way. Gradually, working from the child play perspective, High/Scope developed the *Plan, Do, Review* curriculum system.

This curriculum development was essential for two things that such an approach permits. First, the child is able to introduce, select, and pursue things that interest him or her. Such decisions on the part of the child alter the classroom discipline context as each child is committed by their own decision to work on a task. Second, such a curriculum pattern gives the teacher not only a support role but a realistic conversational function. Vocabulary and language usage in problem solving are the keys to long term success, but they develop best in realist frameworks where the words have direct and immediate meaning and reflect interests. When a child explains what he or she has accomplished in real time and in their own words, learning is taking place.

Of course, developing the various High/Scope longitudinal studies to validate the High/Scope curriculum has been a very important contribution to the field and I am very proud of the accomplishments in providing such a base for education and public policy makers. But research is not what a child experiences, it is the curriculum.

Without the commitment of many talented staff, the High/Scope approach would not be as developed as it is today and as accessible throughout both this country and the world.

What advice do you have for people entering the field?

I would extend three observations: First, to successfully work with young children you need to have a genuine respect for their need to learn and grow. If you have that quality, then you can accept the starts and stops of behavior and temperament that all children bring to the classroom. Be certain that you are willing to actively engage with children. Second, to understand children you need knowledge. Formal knowledge of the complexity of normal development will be required. From our experience with training teachers all over the world, the more formal the training, the easier it is to adapt and implement a model approach. And that is my third advice point, to be effective a teacher must adopt one of the validated curriculum models now available. Again, from our assessment of thousands of teachers in 15 countries, teachers tend to teach classrooms of children according to their personal beliefs about education and not according to their training, experience, certification level, or own maturity. The only way to break out of this cultural-belief trap and to make a difference for children is to adopt a model approach that has significant research behind it to make it worthwhile.

What one thing would you most want to happen for young children?

My goal as a researcher-educator is to help children (and adults) become committed to thinking and problem solving. To do this they need to make decisions (age appropriate ones) from the outset of their development. Children are not to be filled so they can function at a later time. Their time is now. This day is their life. Through appropriate support in a validated curriculum, they can learn to be effective decision makers. And, as odd as it sounds, with this ability laid as a bedrock in the early childhood years, it becomes their means of interaction with their families, their spouses, their employers, and their community. We can hardly give a child a greater opportunity.

Share the highlights of your career and writing that would be available to others.

Over the years I have initiated five major research projects that, in my opinion, feed directly into the public policy debate about children and families and what programs should do to serve them. The High/Scope Perry Preschool

Study, now in its 40th year, discovered that a well run program can significantly alter the life chances of disadvantaged children. The positive impact appears to last a lifetime; and

a benefit-cost study found that the amount of money spent on the group to provide the benefit of preschool was far exceeded by the costs of managing the asocial behavior of the group that did not have preschool.

The second study was the High/Scope Curriculum Comparison Study which looked at the impact of three distinctly different early education model approaches. The results by young adulthood clearly indicate that programs which place preschool children in rote learning settings fail to reach the potential outcome known to be possible. Indeed they fail to have any impact on improving social behavior.

Third, was the High/Scope Carnegie-Ypsilanti Infant Education Program. We gambled in 1967 that helping disadvantaged children earlier as infants might be even more helpful than waiting for the preschool age. Working through parents, I began a program of weekly home

visits. Like the other projects, the study included a randomly assigned control group. To my great joy, the program produced significant differences especially in language and mother-positive-behavior toward their infant by the end of the study around age three. To my great disappointment, all significant differences disappeared one year later. When checked again at second grade, no significant differences were found. With a few minor exceptions, these findings foreshadowed all the more recent parent-infant intervention work.

Fourth, I had operated a leadership development summer residential program for disadvantaged youth since 1963. In 1988 we began a five year follow up of both the group attending the program and a comparison group. Results found significant impact on college attendance and ability to solve major life problems. These results suggest that preschool is not the only window of opportunity to help youth. Even this late in development, programs engaging youth in problem solving and commitment to self-education can produce highly positive outcomes.

For the fifth study, I have been engaged in examining age-four education programs in 15 foreign countries and the United States. What I have found is that well implemented model programs are required to obtain powerful outcomes. I have also found that despite rhetoric to the contrary, there is a strong general agreement about children and education both within countries and between countries. Of course, there are differences, but not to the extent some would predict.

Each of these studies are available in book format:

Schweinhart, L. J., Barnes, H. V. & Weikart, D. P. (1993). *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press. *Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Vol. 10*.

Schweinhart, L. J., & Weikart, D. P. (1997). *Lasting Differences: The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study Through age 23*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press. *Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, No. 12*.

Epstein, A. S., Montie, J., & Weikart, D. P. (2002). *Supporting Families with Young Children: The Parent-to-Parent Dissemination Project*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press. *Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, No. 13*.

Oden, S., Kelly, M., Ma, Z., & Weikart, D. P. (1992). *Challenging the Potential: Programs for Talented Disadvantaged Youth*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

Weikart, D. P. (1999). *What Should Young Children Learn? Teachers' and Parents' Views in 15 Countries*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.