

NEPCACA Presentation, Oct. 27<sup>th</sup>

Don't Leave Big Bird Behind:

Children's Television and Socio-Emotional Education

Diane Williamson

Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood both promote the social and emotional learning of preschoolers, leading to lifelong positive effects. Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood has recently been created to replace Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, to an unknown degree of effectiveness. Despite the success of these two shows, we still have a lot to learn about the teaching of socio-emotional skills, but perhaps what is even more unsettling is that the majority of children's programs simply ignore the proven methods of socio-emotional learning that these shows have established, possibly to the detriment of their own goals of cognitive education.

While some children are practically guaranteed a good education because of the resources provided at home and in school, other, particularly poor, minority children are not faring as well. Looking at national reading and math tests, on average across the nation, poor, minority students are roughly three-and-a-half years of learning behind white, middle-class students.<sup>1</sup> In 2007 white, middle-class fourth grades in New Jersey, the highest performing state, scored 50 points, or almost five years of learning, ahead of poor, black fourth graders in Washington, DC, our nation's worst performing school district.<sup>2</sup> Assuming a steady rate of learning, this difference implies that white, middle-class students in New Jersey enter Kindergarten with the same amount of math knowledge that poor, minority kids in D.C. pick up after 5 years of school.

---

<sup>1</sup> McKinsey & Co., Social Sector Office, "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Neverminding the structural racism and classism implied by these achievement gaps, their real lesson is that some kids are not even close to reaching their full potential. We can see this especially in the fact that some states and districts do a far better job educating poor and minority students than other states or districts do, even ones with similar demographics. Combining the negative effects of class, race, and gender, the group of children faring worst in school are poor, black boys, and, indeed, these children, as well as our society as a whole, are paying the price as these boys grow up to then be the men *over*-represented in prison.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, many poor minority students are not reaching their full academic potential, but the reasons for this are more likely emotional rather than cognitive. Most upsetting amongst the grim achievement statistics, are, in my mind, the high drop-out rates, sometimes as high as 40 or 50% (given fraudulent reporting practices), at many inner-city high schools. PBS's *Frontline* recently profiled four students from one such "drop-out factory" in Texas. The cause was not a lack of intelligence, which is what you might expect from students whose goal is to simply get a D in their required classes, but the emotional hurdles they face: homelessness, abuse, pregnancy, the loss of a parent, sibling, or child... Indeed, when Texas conducted a study asking drop-outs for the reasons that they had dropped-out, few said that school was too hard; instead they most often called it "boring." While it is not likely that all of these drop-outs are, in fact, geniuses in disguise, it is likely that what they call "boring" is something on which it is too difficult and irrelevant to focus. Going to school, doing homework, and thinking about one's academic success, seem like boring, useless exercises to students with turbulent home and social lives. Yet they do want to succeed—the problem is not one of aspiration. If only they had the coping skills necessary to climb the steps connecting their present nightmares to their future dreams...

---

<sup>3</sup> Kirp, David, "The Widest Achievement Gap," *National Affairs*, Issue 5, Fall 2010.

While early childhood education may seem far removed from high school and life success, in fact we have some evidence that it, as well as related parenting interventions, can have a meaningful impact. The fact is that poor, minority kindergarteners are at a disadvantage on day one. While the achievement gaps gets bigger as children get older, there is some reason to think that this increase is a type of snowballing that early preventive interventions can deter. Most remarkable amongst the data are three pioneering preschool studies: the Perry Preschool Project, The Abecedarian Project, and Chicago's many Child Parent Education Centers. In these cases preschool education was shown to have an effect on graduation rates, lifetime earnings, incarceration rates, motivation in school, and even IQ.<sup>4</sup>

[We can understand this effect on IQ, found specifically on the very young starting Abecedarian project, if we take into consideration other studies on parent-child verbal interaction. Hart and Risley have shown that a child's IQ correlates with the number of words his parents speak to him.<sup>5</sup> Lareau, as well as Hart and Risley, note that middle-class parents are more likely to be more encouraging foster a conversational back-and-forth, as though they were little adults in training.<sup>6</sup> Singer also recently found that a parent's willingness to engage in the conversationally intense practice of make-believe with their children was also correlated with larger vocabularies and higher IQs for their children.<sup>7</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the IQ gains are a result of the Abecedarian focus on continuous intervention from infancy on. In this case, the preschool teachers are stepping in as parents. ]

A recent American Radioworks documentary on the Perry Preschool Project suggests that what matters more than an effect on IQ, which is an inconsistent result, is increased academic motivation

---

<sup>4</sup>Mervis, Jeffrey, "Past Successes Shape Effort to Expand Early Intervention" *Science*, Vol. 333, Aug. 2011; for a clear depiction of the effects of the Perry Preschool Project, see <http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>

<sup>5</sup> Hart, Betty and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Lareau, Anne, *Unequal Childhoods*, The Regents of The University of California, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, Dorothy and Jerome Singer, *The House of Make-Believe: Children's Play and the Developing Imagination*, Harvard University Press, 1990.

caused by early rewarding academic experiences and changes in parents' attitudes toward their children and school.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, there are a number of programs now that focus on reaching out to parents, with the aim of getting them to better foster their child's education. With this parental support for learning and parental preparation for school, children arrive at their first day of kindergarten prepped for success.

The demonstrated importance of familial support reinforces the notion that we need to target children while they are young. Young children and parents of young children still have a feeling of hope and possibility. The children have not yet experienced failure and the parents have not yet been told that their children are problems. Three and four year-olds are easy to read to and play with. Indeed, for them, playing and learning are the same thing. Compared to this open door of hope and possibility, the door for the teenager skipping school, fighting, and breaking the law looks pretty much closed and locked. Yet even his door was once open.

Sesame Street was created explicitly with the goal of helping disadvantaged children, and it has been proven to be successful. According to Joan Ganz Cooney, the original creator of Sesame Street, "Our original goal was simple: to create a successful television program that would make a difference in the lives of children, in particular, poor inner-city children, and help prepare them for school."<sup>9</sup> The recent episode "Gabi and Miles Graduate from High School" is just one manifestation of the intense commitment to this goal of equality. This goal is coupled with continuous research as to the effectiveness of the method, and Sesame Street has been proven to be effective, especially in helping poor black boys academically over the course of their school years. The most impressive results come

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/preschool/>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/parents/sesame/about\\_ss\\_overview.html](http://www.pbs.org/parents/sesame/about_ss_overview.html)

from the “Recontact Study,” which demonstrated that viewing Sesame Street as a preschooler correlated with higher grades in high school math, English, science, and more reading for pleasure.<sup>10</sup>

The “Recontact Study” also demonstrated emotional benefits to watching Sesame Street, which is not surprising given the fact that Sesame Street uses a “whole child” approach to education, focusing on cognitive and socio-emotional lessons at the same time. High schoolers who had watched Sesame Street as preschoolers perceived themselves as more competent and displayed lower levels of aggression. Sesame Street aims to teach respect and social skills, preparing kids for school. It is likely that the continued academic advantage that Sesame Street gives should also be explained in terms of early lessons about the value of learning and proper modes of behavior.

Sesame Street accomplishes socio-emotional learning through a variety of means. Characters teach kids emotion words; this demonstrates a focus on emotional literacy. Characters respond to the emotions of other characters and their own emotions; I will call this focus emotional intelligence. Characters have problems and fights and they are helped out; this is a focus on conflict resolution skills. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that, like the preschool projects that reached out to parents to improve their parenting skills, it is likely that these socio-emotional skills will have a positive effect on the parent-child relationship, either in a way that is initiated by the child or because the parent him or herself picks up a more healthy mode of behavior from Sesame Street. It is difficult to overstate the value of what might be a simple fix to a parenting problem, and any psychological support parents might be able to pick up along the way can translate into great benefits for their children.

Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood uses a similar holistic approach to education and it is amazing in its uniqueness. The show focuses on basic social lessons in the first part and emotional relationships in the second, make-believe part. The exchanges between the puppets are surprisingly adult in their level of

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sesame\\_Street\\_research#Later\\_studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sesame_Street_research#Later_studies)

emotional sophistication. While there is a lot that is intuitively right about Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, we still don't know whether or not the show really works. A 1970's study did demonstrate that it had a positive effect on the social interactions of preschoolers, but more long-term research is needed in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

After Fred Rogers' death, Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood attempts to replicate its parent show, Still, there are drawbacks to the new approach. First off, while children might be initially more attracted to the animation of Daniel Tiger and turned off by a "real person" talking, the real video footage of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood is itself the vehicle for teaching kids lessons about their real neighborhoods. For example, in one episode of Mr. Rogers, he takes a walk into a restaurant, talks to the hostess, sits at the table, discusses the place settings, reassures the kids about the location of the bathroom, goes back into the kitchen, helps the chef make a sandwich, and pays his bill at the cash register. None of this is interesting as animation. It is only the fact that it is a real restaurant that makes it credible. Compare this, for example, to Curious George who frequently visits Chef Pasketti's restaurant and kitchen. The fact that there is a monkey in the kitchen meddling with the food already disqualifies this content for being socially educative.

In fact, Daniel Tiger abandons the Mr. Rogers method of devoting the first half of the show to real-world, social lessons and the second half of the show to emotional lessons explored through make-believe. Animation complicates the make-believe method. Daniel Tiger sometimes uses real-world scenarios, which do not include make-believe, like a trip to a music store, but these segments are much relatively similar to those that do use make-believe.

Emotional education is only as valuable as the content of the lesson itself. Daniel Tiger borrows a remarkable amount from Mr. Rogers. For example, they both sing the same "What Do You Do with the

---

<sup>11</sup> Coates, Pusser, and Goodman, "The Influence of 'Sesame Street' and 'Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood' on Children's Social Behavior in Preschool," *Child Development*, Vol. 47, No. 1, March, 1976.

Mad that You Feel” song. Still, Daniel Tiger’s main lesson to the viewer in this particular episode is to calm down. Count to four and calm down. The value of this lesson is contingent on what you do after you calm down. When it is shown that Daniel Tiger is able to find a creative solution to his problem after he calms down, then children might buy that calming down is useful; when, on the other hand, calming down just means that you have to accept something you don’t like, then focusing on calming down as the key point is vacuous. Mr. Rogers does not tell the viewers to calm down and count to ten or four or any other number. This emotional knowledge seems to be somewhat faddish. Instead, he focuses on the importance of offering an apology when you have upset someone, and the even more important lesson of forgiving and moving on. Still Daniel Tiger’s message of “Find a Way to Play Together” might cover some of this ground.

While many children’s shows offer some socially educative content, the focus on explicit emotional education, even as simple as emotional literacy, is languishing. For example a recent episode of “Arthur” taught children about asthma, as the program often does. It is perhaps important for kids to know that some kids have asthma and to understand what asthma is. In addition to giving information about Buster’s asthma, the episode focused on Arthur’s fear that buster would become very ill and that the contraction of the disease had been his fault. Buster was embarrassed that he had to behave differently than other kids, taking medicine and the like, and Francine was anxious that she might catch Buster’s disease. This emotional plot is very rich and has great potential to impart useful emotional knowledge; the problem is that it is entirely over a four-year-old’s head. There are no emotion words used in the entire episode, no one said “I feel \_\_\_,” no one explained these complicated emotions to the viewer. At best, the message is that people might be afraid of things they don’t understand and that it is best to try to explain things to people—this was explained to Buster by the school nurse. Still, no one helped Arthur make sense of his feelings, and there is no chance that a four-year-old could understand

Francine's hypochondria. A more explicit focus on emotional literacy would go a long way not only in imparting emotional skills, but also in imparting comprehension.

Similarly, instead of teaching effective conflict-resolution strategies, many shows give kids an unrealistic view of conflict resolution. One of the best episodes of *Dinosaur Train*, for example, is when Tiny leaves her Tiny doll at a different train stop when they're on the *Dinosaur Train* world tour. Mr. and Mrs. Pteranodon are beside themselves because Tiny can't sleep without it. Somehow word gets back to the dinosaurs they were visiting and all of the dinosaurs of the Mesozoic era move heaven and earth in order to get her tiny doll back to her. Now, I confess, the concept of *Dinosaur Train* is brilliant and kids love it and take in an encyclopedic knowledge of dinosaurs thereby, but it is really the *Leave It to Beaver* of children's shows. The mom and dad are always happy and totally devoted to indulging their children's natural curiosity. The children never fight with each other and almost never feel any emotion other than happiness and intellectual curiosity. Unfortunately, it therefore seems that all of this paleontological knowledge comes at the expense of realistic expectations about familial and social relationships. It is probably more harmful for children to expect that everyone will work together to return their dolls to them when they leave them somewhere than it is for them to live without knowing about Pteranodon. Don't get me wrong, I love *Dinosaur Train*, but more caution ought to be exercised in departing from the "whole child" approach to education.

[The most highly-rated show for preschoolers, *Curious George*, with its focus on intellectual curiosity and real-life situations, comes closest to merging these cognitive and socio-emotional goals, but it still neglects to focus explicitly on the emotional skills that children need. Socio-emotional education probably cannot be the goal of a show in which the main character is a monkey. In addition, as with any fantasy, children may become upset when real life does not yield to their curiosity as it does for a monkey who is given free-reign of the adult world.]

It is upsetting that so many children's shows have departed from the effective "whole child" curriculum pioneered by Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. Since NCLB and its concomitant narrowing of curriculum, a number of new (animated) children's shows that focus on reading, math, or STEM skills have been developed, ignoring socio-emotional education. Sesame Street and Mr. Roger's Neighborhood have some interesting similarities: They both use real people, puppets, and real world footage. In turn, they both seem to be more realistic and offer children skills that are more relevant to "real life." While, it is certainly better for children to model the happy, cooperative characters of "Dinosaur Train" or "Super Why" than to be exposed to violence on TV, the presentation of relationships totally devoid of negative emotions or conflict might also hurt the socio-emotional development of children. Additionally, these shows might seem "boring" to kids with troubled home lives. Uncoupling these two educational goals—the cognitive and the socio-emotional—may prove problematic, since real life demands the merging of both sets of skills. At the very least, ignoring socio-emotional education puts kids a risk for failing academically despite having the cognitive capacity to learn.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200011/make-believe>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/02/arts/television/daniel-tigers-neighborhood-in-mr-rogerss-tradition.html>

[http://www.childtrends.org/what\\_works/youth\\_development/education/t5bestbets20.asp](http://www.childtrends.org/what_works/youth_development/education/t5bestbets20.asp)

<http://stallion.abac.peachnet.edu/PSYC2103/9ed/PDF6/chapter%2009.pdf>

