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Bereiter C & Englemann S. *Teaching disadvantaged children in the preschool.*
Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966. 312 p.
[Institute for Research on Exceptional Children, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL]

This book sets out a preschool program aimed at teaching disadvantaged children the language, mathematical, and reading concepts needed for a successful start in school. Middle-class nursery-school activities are replaced by direct instruction focused on essential content. [The SSC[®] indicates that this book has been cited in over 440 publications.]

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When feelings about an issue run high but choices are limited, a publication that advances an unusual proposal is likely to attract attention. Such was the situation in the 1960s with preschool education of disadvantaged children. There was an upwelling of feeling that something had to be done. A large number of experimental preschool programs sprang up that purportedly differed in concept but that turned out on inspection to all be pretty much alike and very similar to the typical middle-class nursery school.

In 1964 Siegfried Englemann and I were in the midst of a series of experiments in accelerating learning in young children. It occurred to us, along with coworkers Jean Osborn and Philip Reidford, that instead of spreading our efforts over a number of experiments, as first planned, we might better put all of our ideas into a single effort to see how much could be accomplished in teaching academic skills and knowledge to disadvantaged preschoolers. The result was the "Academically Oriented Preschool," instantly recognizable by the public as not at all like what they were used to. There was a good deal of media coverage, so that when our book came out in 1966 many people already had their own opinions about what we were doing.

The book itself was written as a practical guide for teachers, and so it has always been disappointing to find it receiving the bulk of

scholarly attention, whereas other publications presenting rationale and evidence have received much less. The rationale of our approach was simple: In order to catch up, disadvantaged children have to learn at a faster than normal rate and the only reasonable hope for doing this involves paring instruction down to what is most essential for school success.¹ Ignoring the commonsense rationale of this direct instructional approach, commentators have persisted in seeing it as rooted in behaviorism, the only evidence being our suggestion of some uses of food rewards in the early stages of teaching. A more alarming misinterpretation has been that we were condemning Black English as an inferior dialect. The book said next to nothing about this, and in fact dismissed the issue as irrelevant (p. 39), but it did make what may be interpreted today as an unsupportably strong claim for the necessity of basic language training for disadvantaged preschoolers. The teacher audience of the 1960s that we were writing for, however, was being influenced by claims that poor children were suffering sensory deficits and personality impairments and that what they needed most was nonverbal sensorimotor activity and massive ego repair. I think few contemporary child developmentalists would disagree with our judgment that this was a recipe for inferior education.

Although our experimental program produced striking results,² we claimed nothing more than that it would help disadvantaged children start school on a better footing. Since then there have been follow-up studies that claim long-term achievement benefits for preschool programs,³ but these claims have not been tested against the more widely supported explanation that children who start off better in school receive better education from then on. In the meantime, more evidence has accumulated that sociocultural background does not just have global effects but that it also teaches children things specifically relevant to how they will function as students.⁴ A serious effort to design compensatory preschool education today would have a much firmer basis than we had for identifying what disadvantaged children need to learn, but I think that the basic premise of our approach would still apply.

1. Bereiter C. A nonpsychological approach to early compensatory education. (Deutsch M, Katz I & Jensen A, eds.) *Social class, race, and intelligence*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968. p. 337-46.
2. Englemann S. The effectiveness of direct instruction on IQ performance and achievement in reading and arithmetic. (Hellmuth J, ed.) *Disadvantaged child. Volume 3. Compensatory education: a national debate*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1970. p. 339-61.
3. Lazar I, Darlington R, Murray H, Royce J & Snipper A. The lasting effects of early education: a report from the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies. *Monogr. Soc. Res. Child Develop.* 47:R9-151, 1982. (Cited 85 times.)
4. Heath S B. *Ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983. 421 p. (Cited 100 times.)