CHANGE

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It is easy to center on the changes we view as problems while other changes go unnoticed. After attempting to develop a balance sheet of changes over my adult life, I believe that the positive changes overwhelm the negative changes in most areas. However, in one area that we deal with on a daily basis in our offices - the changes in the lives and education of children - some of these changes are decidedly negative. Many of these changes are inherent in our dynamic society and culture, such as an accelerating rate of change and the increasing potpourri of noise and over stimulation. We cannot selectively ignore or reverse these changes. We and our children need to be able to adapt, cope, and hopefully prosper in this evolving environment.

But there are other changes, not completely unrelated, that are due to decisions on the part of policy-makers in education. I propose that these changes should be reconsidered in light of how they are affecting young people and the current educational outcomes. The decisions made to meet goals (educational, social, ethical, psychological, and physical) should not be based on generalized assumptions. These may seem logical, but, nevertheless are inaccurate. As I am writing this, a feature article in TIME magazine is about universal standards for education. Stepping outside this debate, I fear that advocates on both sides assume a more important role for standards in achieving outcomes than these standards deserve. It reminds me of one of my favorite aphorisms, “You can’t fatten a hog by weighing it” (or by setting a goal). Standards are analogous to a Mission Statement for organizations. They are starting points, and the actions specified by the accompanying goals and objectives need to be realistic with evidence-based programs and the potential to be actualized.

In the 1st issue of this year’s Journal of Behavioral Optometry, Dr. Rebecca Hutchins wrote an article questioning if “sooner was always better.” Education is known for pendulum swings in its philosophies and policies. Since no educational method will ever work as well as the ideal, perhaps this is inevitable, but children get caught in these swings and these swings may affect their lives significantly and permanently. Many children will thrive regardless, but I perceive that many of them are having problems and for these, the changing policies are significant. The pendulum in education at this time seems to be close to one end by virtue of the following policies:

- The importance of child development is de-emphasized;
- It is assumed that testing will enhance learning;
- Acceleration is valued more highly than enrichment;
- It is not necessary for children to learn to a mastery level;
- Moving what has been the more advanced curriculum into lower grades will better meet educational goals by graduation, create life-long learners, and enhance our workforce; and
- That teaching equates with learning.

The parents of the elementary school children who we are currently examining in our offices were considered successful when they were learning their letters and numbers in kindergarten. At present, their children are expected to know their letters and numbers when they enter kindergarten and to be reading and performing basic arithmetic operations by the middle of the school year. The “push to read” is being emphasized in an English-speaking country, with a language that is easier to learn to speak than some, but is one of the hardest languages to learn to read because it is the least orthographically transparent. I suggest that these curricular accelerations have not been demonstrated to produce better readers, with increased interest in reading, or to produce better arithmetic skills.

We can help many of these children with lenses, vision therapy, and developmental guidance, but can we do more? Some of the children I examine would be doing fine had they been born a generation earlier. Some of the children for whom I may prescribe vision therapy are already so overwhelmed (as are their families) that I hesitate to place additional stress on the child and her family. How much can we help a child in vision therapy if nothing changes in the school (or home)? Can we enhance accommodative/binocular skills if children continue to have three hours of homework each night? Can we alleviate eye fatigue and build visual-verbal fluency if the child continues to read material at their frustration level and must stop every fourth word to stare and decode (or resort to guessing)? Can we help address their learned helplessness if they are expected to take notes when they haven’t developed the ability to write letters without concentration? What errors will they make when they are victims of task overload? Can we expect them not to be overwhelmed if their working memory is not adequate for the multiple demands of a task which has not become automatic?

Some teachers and parents recognize the problem, but are powerless to change the system, as are the local administrators. However, as optometrists there are actions Continued to page 66
mechanisms of action behind the effects of RP. Nevertheless, this study suggests that it can produce substantial supplemental gains. Furthermore, analysis of the Visagraph data demonstrated that measures of ocular efficiency were significant predictors of changes in reading skills. These results, taken in total, suggest that the model of reading improvement utilized may be important for educators.

The authors have no financial or other interest in the instruments or tests listed herein.

Sources


References


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Date accepted for publication
June 1, 2009