The Influence of an Affective Curriculum on the Cognitive Performance of Four and Five Year Olds

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ABSTRACT: Forty-eight four and five year old children enrolled in the Honey Tree Child Developmental Center, Spartanburg, South Carolina, were divided into two groups of 24 Ss each based upon pre-treatment ABC Inventory test scores using a matched pairs procedure. Experimental Ss were given a special program of affective training experiences known as the Magic Circle Preschool/Kindergarten curriculum. The structured affective training procedure took place for three months duration, 20 minutes each day. The control subjects also had a 20 minute daily break from their usual routine but the break was spent in doing informal, unstructured activities. Except for the special 20 minute daily period the children were given no differential treatment and did not function as separate groups. A post-test of the ABC inventory was administered. Statistical analyses revealed that both groups significantly improved over time, but also that the experimental group was clearly superior to the control group in achievement.

There has been a long standing controversy in early education regarding the influence of affective factors on cognitive achievement. Those who espouse the conservative or traditionalist extreme offer the view that affective classroom techniques are not only a waste of time but may be detrimental to the child (Divoky, 1976). Those who represent the liberal or progressive point of view feel that affective training may be very worthwhile both in providing a child’s self-concept and cognitive achievement (Rogers, 1948, 1969).

In much of the literature which discusses these opposing views (Fantini, 1970), the proposed solution is to offer parents a choice of schools consistent with the parents’ values and lifestyles. On the other hand, Kahn and Weiss (1973), in a major review, concluded that the relationship between affective and academic growth was probably reciprocal. They advocated a combination as opposed to a dichotomous approach, a view supported also by Brophy and Good (1973) among others.

The effects of self-concept as related to cognitive performance has been researched and reviewed extensively. Purkey (1970), in an excellent review of the related literature, concluded that research clearly showed a persistent significant relationship between self-concept and scholastic success. In contrast to the wealth of studies on self-concept,
there is a paucity of investigation concerning the interaction of affective programs with cognitive achievement. The present authors, using an Eric Computer Search, found only a few such affective/cognitive type studies. Of these in which control groups were used, three found increased achievement attributable to the affective experiences (Hess, 1964; Michael, 1968; & Moulin, 1968). However, Fenstermacher (1972) found no such positive relationship in his results. He assessed the possibility of increased reading achievement following 12 weeks of special attention to the affective domain. The Magic Circle (Bessell & Polomares, 1970) as a specific affective program is now fairly well known and has received some recent research attention. When compared with other affective programs such as Developmental Guidance (Darrigrand & Gum, 1973), Rational Emotive Education (Harris, 1970), Transactional Analysis (Edmondson, 1976), results have varied with no indications that any one affective technique is clearly superior to the other.

In the present study, the Magic Circle program was chosen because of its structure and specific application to young pre-school children. Although a number of studies have related the Magic Circle program to increased self-esteem, only four have directly assessed the effects of this technique to cognitive achievement as a dependent variable. Of four studies reviewed (McGee, 1971; Brett, 1973; Mestler, 1974; & Delaporte, 1976), only two were related to pre-school children which was our present research focus. Of these two, only in the study by Brett (1973) was a control group used so that normal maturational achievement could be controlled. McGee (1971) found positive results using the Magic Circle but failed to use a control group.

Thus, it may be concluded that there exist many opinions but a paucity of controlled research regarding the relationship between affective training programs and academic type cognitive achievement in pre-school children. The present research is focused upon this question of a possible relationship of these two seemingly different orientations. Specifically, the purposes of the present investigation were:

1. To ascertain if children who are given an affective curriculum will perform better from pre-to post-test on a test of cognitive performance than those who do not have the affective experiences.
2. To ascertain if there are significant changes in both groups over time on a test of cognitive performance from pre- to post-test.
3. To ascertain if males who are given an affective curriculum will perform better on a test of cognitive performance than females.