

CE100 Unit 8

Historical Events and Movements

In the Early Childhood Field

Historical events, trends and social movements impact society in many ways, and this holds true for the field of early childhood development as well. Sometimes the changes are obvious and immediate and other times the changes may be slight and have an indirect effect, but it's important to consider how historical events can have an impact in the field.

Shifts in society such as women's rights, economic development and early childhood services in public schools result in expanded need for early childhood professionals. Likewise, the rise of state-supported programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start also affect enrollments. Research in brain development and the importance of early childhood experiences has also resulted in an increased demand for quality early childhood programs and better educated early childhood teachers. These are just a few of the societal events that have impacted the field.

Historical Events

Believe it or not, organized child care traces its roots back to World War II when women were called to the war effort and child care became necessary. Parents in the workforce are one of the most obvious factors for an increase in childcare. Between 1976 and 1998 the number of households where both parents were working nearly doubled.

The number of single-parent households has also increased over the years, which led to an increased need for childcare. Another historical event was the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 that increased the demand requiring welfare parents to work and increased funding for childcare for welfare families as well as bonus funds to states that provided high quality, accessible and affordable child care.

Other forms of child care also became increasingly in demand as specialized programs such as child care for on campus college students, children in crisis who are removed from families by social services and those living in homeless or women's shelters were provided for. Additionally, children with

special needs, and those of parents serving in the military also raised demands.

Some other noticeable trends in early childhood include the rising number of children of color and Hispanic origin and the demand for early childhood programs that support early education, as opposed to simply care and supervision. This results in an increased demand for better programs and more highly educated and qualified early childhood educators.

Likewise, as the demand for educational reform and improvement continues to grow, government subsidies for programs with exceptional early childhood educational components and highly qualified teachers will increase as many believe the problems with K-12 education should be addressed earlier in life.

Brain Research

The amount of research on brain development and the importance of the early childhood years on later academic and cognitive success has also had an impact on the early childhood field. Strengthening the brain's neural networks in the early years of life can have profound impacts on motor skills, cognitive and language development, self-esteem and the use of all the senses. This critical period for brain development is impacted by high quality early childhood experiences. This is another reason why more and more attention and demands for exceptional early childhood experiences increase.

Early Childhood Theorists

Another historical impact on the early childhood field was the many different researchers and theorists who contributed the growing body of knowledge on how best to support young children's development. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Henrich Pestalozzi stressed the importance of encouraging children to learn in their own unique time and to encourage autonomy and use of hands-on learning.

Friedrich Froebel was known as the "Father of Kindergarten" as he introduced the term in 1800's Germany. His approach emphasized the need to nurture and protect children and provide them with the opportunity to "blossom" on their own. He created hands-on learning materials (called "gifts") and specific activities to help facilitate fine motor skills and cognitive development.

Maria Montessori's approach to early childhood education is still popular in many places today with core concepts of a prepared learning environment, individualized learning and daily routine activities to teach skills in an ordered and disciplined way.

Other important contributors to the early childhood field included Jean Piaget (constructivist stage theory), Lev Vygotsky (sociocultural theory and the zone of proximal development), Rudolf Steiner (creator of the Waldorf approach) and Erik Erikson (known for his development of psycho-social stages). American contributors to the field include John Dewey (progressive education), Arnold Gesell (maturation theory) and B.F. Skinner (behaviorism).

Educational/Legal Movements

Still other historical events that impacted education included the landmark court case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, that determined racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional and started a stream of equality issues for special needs children and non-English speaking children. All these events led to more specialized training of educators to support children of all backgrounds.

When project Head Start (1965) was created to support children with disabilities, low income children and encourage parental involvement, training and support for early childhood educators to support this project was needed.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 was derived from previous court cases and laws that required all children, regardless of any disabilities, be provided with access to free education and the necessary supports to access education in public school settings. Once again, the call for trained and qualified early childhood professionals was necessary to support these children.

These are just a few of the many examples of how historical shifts in society (social, educational, legal, etc.) have led to an increased demand for early childhood programs (and as a result early childhood professionals) and have also required an increased level of competence, training and qualifications of these professionals.