

EULOGY

Jean Piaget - 1896-1980 (84 years)

by

Dr. Eric C. Haughton
Teaching Master, Early Childhood Education Program
Loyalist College, Belleville, Ontario

In September of this year one of the giants of child study died. Piaget's concentrated study provoked discussion, analysis and research into the life experiences of young people. We in the behavioural group found his tactics interesting but outdated. Interested as he was in classical biology, he followed the revered 19th century scientific precepts of detailed, exhaustive dissection and description of youngsters' interactions with their environments.

Despite his monumental personal efforts and huge impact in the field of child psychology, many behaviourists find his formulations and interpretations of behaviour creative, yet baffling. Let me suggest two reasons as the source of this puzzle and our feelings of impatience. Firstly, Piaget asserts that our development relies on highly repetitive and vigorous interactions with our complex environments. In the translator's preface to *The Principles of Genetic Epistemology* (Piaget, 1972), Wolf Mays states:

The hypothesis that Piaget starts from his studies is that at the beginning of mental life the child's world appears as a set of sensory data centred about his own activity. But, even in the most practical activities, such as, for example, sucking reflexes, certain processes of conservation may be discerned which lead to repetition and hence a tendency to persistence, and this introduces a certain permanence in the primitive universe of the child. (Piaget, 1972).

Here he sounds like a behaviourist, insisting on large amounts of repetitive behaviour to establish performance, perspective and conceptualizations. And yet, Piaget failed to study the course of these repetitive acts, dissecting as he did the consequences or outcomes of these repetitions. His failure to record the developmental detail embedded in the thousands of repetitions caused him to construct elegant post hoc caricatures of how young people passed through developmental stages. In a book analysing Piaget's theories, Ginsberg and Opper state:

The child extracts from the objects themselves a knowledge of their physical properties. Physical experience, then, involves sensitivity to the physical properties of things....Piaget himself has given relatively little attention to physical experience, despite his estimate of its importance. (Ginsberg & Opper, 1979).

We behaviourists have much to learn from Piaget's formulations; however, we are gaining deeper awareness and insights into the developmental process due to our interventions and the form of our data. Piaget's lack of interventions designed to develop performance characteristics kept him ignorant of the conditions that develop his topics of interest.

Secondly, Piaget's formulations of stages asks the question "When are youngsters at the same stage of development?" This antiquated question puzzles, while frustrating, those of us who experience the pleasure and joy of analysing the magnificent individualism of each developing person. Many of us ask "How does a person develop skills and knowledge?" The two questions are valid, one being more productive in learning how to support and assist development. No person is ever at the same "stage" in either space or time as another. Although a gross conceptual category such as conservation may descriptively encompass a portion of each youngster's process of development, our individual developmental patterns are unique.

These observations are the result of my studying some of Piaget's work in the past few years. His fascinating book, Genetic Epistemology (Piaget, 1972), and his many articles in our literature stimulate us due to his concentration on behavioural fundamentals. He concentrates on young people's development of skilled performance in such topics as classifying, serializing and enumerating based on their perceptive observation skills. Our commitment is to foster and enhance these skills while developing memory, analysis, operative and communication skills so that youngsters can apply learnings to live full, satisfying lives. Thus we can build on his pioneering efforts.

Thank you, Jean Piaget, for your commitment, diligence and contributions to our understandings of young people. You are certainly a remarkable person to emulate. Rest peacefully Jean; your superb stimulation and influence continue.

REFERENCES

- Ginsberg, H., & Opper, S. Piaget's theory of intellectual development (2nd ed.), Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1979.
- Piaget, J. (trans. Mays, W.). The principles of genetic epistemology. New York: Basic Books, 1972.

BOOKS WORTH READING

- Lovitt, Thomas C. & Haring, Norris G. Classroom application of precision teaching. Special Child Publications, 4535 Union Bay Place N.E., Seattle, Washington 98105.
- White, Owen R. & Haring, Norris G. Exceptional teaching (Second Edition). Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, Ohio 43216.