Educational Preschool Programming: An Ecological and Evolutionary Story

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ABSTRACT
We propose that three groundbreaking shows (Sesame Street, Blue’s Clues, and Dora the Explorer) have contributed to the present wealth of quality television options for American preschoolers. These shows are groundbreaking due to four factors:

- Environment
- Format
- Curriculum
- Research

INTRODUCTION
This is a historical, ecological, and evolutionary analysis of educational preschool programming in the United States.

- A show’s educational value is largely based on how it is developed and produced. Approaches to the creation of educational preschool programming vary as to their incorporation of research into the production process, the role of program goals in episode creation, and the involvement of consultants in the creative process.

FORMAT
- Shows look and feel a certain way.
- Production elements such as writing, visuals, pacing, layout and narrative components contribute to the show’s format.

CURRICULUM
- Educational preschool programs are created with learning goals in mind.
- Goals can be cognitive, social, and behavioral and involve content areas that are implicit/explicit.

RESEARCH
- Research for preschool programming can take place at all pre-production plans, production, and/or post-production, and ranges greatly with respect to goals and frequency.
- Choice of methodology and the extent to which research is integrated can vary.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING
- Every preschool program is developed in a certain time and place. Preschool programming develops in the context of an overarching socio-cultural-political environment.
- Civil Rights movement.
- President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society (high levels of government funding in education).
- 1961 Declaration that television offered a “vast wasteland.”
- Increased attention to early education as an avenue for later success (eg. Head Start).
- Launch of the Public Broadcasting Service.
- Airs November 1969.

- Educational programming options are slim due to deregulatory policies of the 1990’s under President Ronald Reagan.
- Nick Jr. introduces curriculum-driven alternatives to Sesame Street and PBS before the FCC’s 1996 rule enforcing broadcasters to provide educational and informational programming.
- Airs September 1996.

- Latino population is underrepresented in television even though it is the fastest growing in the United States.
- Lead forskumahave also been consistently underrepresented in preschool programming.

- React to the contemporary socio-political and technological environment.
- Examples: environmental protection, global citizenship, activism, the economy, health.

- Support problem-solving skills; encourage and reinforce emerging cognitive skills; increase appreciation and awareness of Latino culture, introduce Spanish language; enhance appreciation for communicating in another language; increase familiarity with computers.
- Uses seven different types of intelligence: visual/spatial, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, bodily/kinaesthetic, musical/auditory, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

- Develop a fundamentally new set of curricular goals to educate children on more complex issues across platforms.

- Test elements of the show throughout the creation of an episode in three phases: concept evaluation, video evaluation, and content analysis.
- Storybook testing: script re-written and re-tested.
- Final testing informed changes to be incorporated into future or other in-production episodes.

- Each episode is tested at three phases of development:
  - Storybook: story concept testing.
  - Rough animation: informs changes to improve attention and interactions.
  - Full-color animation: informs changes to be incorporated into future episodes.

- All of these changes to the format and curriculum would require a new research paradigm.