

# 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.

## ENVIRONMENT

- Every preschool program is developed in a certain time and place. Preschool programming develops in the context of an everchanging 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 1980’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 females have also been consistently underrepresented in preschool programming.
- Airs August 2000.

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

## 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.

- One-hour long “Magazine” format: a series of distinct and autonomous vignettes.
- “Edutainment” show: entertaining and educational.

- Half-hour story line: a single, simple narrative developed around three clues, played at a slower pace.
- Interactivity: educate viewers via active audience participation to encourage ownership and content mastery.
- Repetition: air each episode five days a week to facilitate learning.

- Formal linear narrative: show “segments” are not interchangeable. High-stakes adventure in which problem-solving *requires* participation.
- Conventions and icons of computer technology.
- Latino art design and music.

- Develop integrated multimedia format: shift to a more active participant role.

## 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.

- Advance the “school readiness” of 2-5 year olds.
  - Cognitive tools (e.g. numbers and letters)
  - Interpersonally competent (e.g. cooperation and fair play).
- Initial goals: symbolic representation, cognitive processes, the physical environment and the social environment.
- Curriculum expands and evolves season to season.

- “Flexible thinking skills” program uses a “Think along, play along” style which encouraged preschoolers to use cognitive skills in everyday life.
- Thinking skills include: sorting, categorizing differentiating, predicting, ordering, and inferential problem-solving, among others.
- Difficulty level progresses within each episode.

- 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/kinesthetic, musical/auditory, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

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

## RESEARCH

- Research for preschool programming can take place to aid 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.

- Collect formative research, integrate the season’s curriculum and conduct summative evaluations.
- Assess attention, appeal, and comprehension via structured interviews and behavioral observations.

- 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 incorportaed into future episodes.

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