

Who wants to live on Sesame Street?

The masterwork . . . is the open sesame to every portal, the great equalizer in the world, the true philosopher's stone which transmutes all the base metal of humanity into gold.
Sir William Osler, 1903

Is Sesame Street such a masterwork? Many viewers and educators think it is. Since its inception this daily hour-long television program (brainchild of the Children's Television Workshop in New York) has been hailed as an exciting, colorful and innovative combination of television and education. Some parents complain that children learn to eat like the Cookie Monster, but many more excitedly announce that their preschoolers are learning to count and even read with the help of the Sesame Street Muppets. So, a great huzza was raised because Sesame Street was more than another inane children's program and more than another humdrum educational program. For the first time educational TV was something children (and some parents) wanted to watch.

With an educational content and an enjoyable format that could attract children from all segments of society, the producers of Sesame Street saw the possibility of exploiting the potential of television not only as an educator but as a social equalizer. The research department of CTW hypothesized that Sesame Street could help prepare poverty children for first grade and help narrow the achievement gap that exists between poor and middle-class children.

An attractive program package with worthwhile aims offers little grounds for criticism. But at least one researcher feels that the aims of CTW are not being met and that Sesame Street may be harming rather than helping poverty children. Herbert A. Sprigle, director of the Learning to Learn School in Jacksonville, Fla., first voiced this criticism in 1970. He had reviewed data from tests given to test the effectiveness of Sesame Street. An experimental group of 24 poverty children was exposed, in a kindergarten setting, to the Sesame Street program. Teachers and parents followed up every day with activities suggested by CTW. A similar group of poverty children was not exposed to Sesame Street, but was provided with learning experiences in a game format along with equal or more emphasis on emotional and social development. When the children entered first grade (four months after completion of 130 Sesame Street programs) they were tested. Results showed no significant difference between the groups. When compared with children from families above the poverty level, the scores of the Sesame Street gradu-



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Sprigle contends Big Bird and the gang sacrifice education for entertainment.

ates were lower on all measures.

Sprigle's findings were not widely accepted and some educators questioned the predictive validity of the test used. To answer this criticism, Sprigle reviewed test data taken at the end of first grade. The results of these tests were published in the December 1972 *YOUNG CHILDREN*. Sprigle reports that the Sesame Street graduates' performance was much lower than that of their non-poverty classmates. These children, teachers observed, did not seem to know what school was all about and did not seem to have the social and cognitive tools to cope with a first-grade classroom. When the experimental group was again compared with the original control group, the results indicated no difference in academic achievement. Both groups were behind the middle-class children. Therefore, says Sprigle, Sesame Street had no long-term impact on poverty children and did not accomplish the goals set. He believes better prepared children will advance at a faster rate and the achievement gap will become wider. The attendant effects on motivation, interest and social status will further widen this gap, Sprigle predicts.

In addition to academic achievement, Sprigle attacks Sesame Street on philosophical grounds. He believes the activity is too structured and discourages open and spontaneous expression of ideas and personal observations. When adults are on the screen, he notes, they talk 90 percent of the time and tend to stifle the children. Sprigle says, "The child in front of the television sees and hears that thinking, reasoning, generating ideas, imagination and creativity are things which are adult-initiated, adult-controlled and adult-guided."

Naturally, the producers of Sesame Street disagree with Sprigle. Says Edward L. Palmer, vice president of research at CTW, "Sprigle misconstrues and misinterprets Sesame Street's man-

date and objectives." He considers the design and reporting of Sprigle's experiment so flawed that the results are "virtually meaningless and therefore invalid."

Palmer says Sesame Street was not designed to compete with a comprehensive program of classroom instruction. CTW president Joan Ganz Cooney has stated, "We have never thought of Sesame Street or programs like it serving to replace the classroom." Palmer further suggests that many of the children in the control group almost certainly viewed Sesame Street. In Jacksonville, where the experiment was conducted, Sesame Street is aired during the early evening hours, on Saturdays and during the summer. Palmer also mentions that Sprigle's study focused on five- and six-year-olds. Sesame Street was designed primarily for four-year-olds.

Palmer admits that an achievement gap remains even though CTW has made efforts to direct the program to poverty children. But no program, he says, can realistically hope to make a very substantial contribution toward narrowing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children, particularly when the program is available to all children.

Palmer also admits that adults on the show talk more than children. But he says the CTW research group hopes to overcome the scripted feeling by constantly making changes and seeking improved ways of dealing with children.

Finally, Palmer notes the findings of two extensive nationwide surveys made by the Educational Testing Service (an independent organization). These surveys showed that regular Sesame Street viewers registered substantial gains over non-viewers. "Nowhere in his article," says Palmer, "does Sprigle make reference to this evidence." Sprigle does, however, intend to answer Palmer's criticism of his criticism. □