

Is it Time for Another “Great Society” Attempt?

Doris Bergen*

Educational Psychology Emerita, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA

*Corresponding author: Bergen D, Educational Psychology Emerita, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, USA,

Tel: 513-529-6317; E-mail: [bergend\[at\]miamioh.edu](mailto:bergend[at]miamioh.edu)

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Some recently published books have analyzed and critiqued the “Great Society” that was envisioned by Lyndon Johnson and promoted in legislation during the 1960s and early 1970s [9], [14]. This era was when the “Head Start” experiment started [7], [8], [12], attention to the education of children with disabilities was strongly advocated [15], [16], and better treatment of the mentally ill and reduction in institutional experiences was advocated [15]. It was an especially exciting and proactive period for child development specialists, educators, and psychologists because that time seemed to be full of promise for improving the lives of citizens by increasing life-enhancing services to children and families and vastly improving mental health practices.

I began my college faculty career in the next decade and unfortunately witnessed how the promising programs initiated during this earlier socially proactive time began to crumble, leaving only vestiges of their earlier versions. For example, during the late 70’s and early 80’s the federal funding that established many university early childhood education and early childhood special education training programs was abolished [13], federal support for Head Start programs was passed off primarily to state agencies, and initiatives related to special education and mental health lost much of their earlier momentum [5]. I vividly remember being greatly discouraged when a promising comprehensive child development bill designed to give federal support for childcare centers throughout the nation was vetoed by President Nixon. Also, although landmark legislation to provide grants to community mental health centers was signed by President Carter, much of that law was repealed during the Reagan administration.

While it is true that some of these initiatives have continued due to various combinations of Federal, state, and school district initiatives, because political priorities changed after this time and other national goals took precedence., the United States now has a great hodgepodge of care and education programs for young children and a wide range of community mental health services and, depending on what state people live in the programs may differ greatly. The current pandemic has made such programs even more precarious. Stories of the struggle for good day care, for many parents whose job opportunities do not include “working from home” and of women leaving the work force because

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such care is not available at a cost they can afford are presently in the news [6]. There also is a need for improving mental health services due to the current situation [10].

Since the “Great Society” time period there has been great advancement in research on brain development and it is well documented that support for optimum brain development during the prenatal to early elementary age period is of extreme importance [2], [3]. There is also a consistent research stream supporting the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences and pointing out disparities in childcare and educational opportunities for children from certain racial, ethnic, and income level groups [7]. Many children are still not experiencing these enriching early experiences, however. Thus, one important national goal should again focus on supporting the optimum development of all young children in this society with high quality care and education. All families in the US could then have hope that their children’s early experiences would be rich enough to enable them to be successful in future society.

Similarly, although research on mental health and the supports needed by those with mental health problems has been extensive since the earlier “Great Society” time period [1], the disparities between what the advocates of closing mental institutions envisioned and what is now provided in many communities is great. The mental health issues that have been generated by this pandemic also have added another layer to the need for comprehensive and effective services [11]. A high proportion of homeless people have untreated or minimally treated mental health issues and there also continue to be many low income, racial, and ethnic disparities in such services [4]. The time to improve mental health services is also long overdue.

Although many people may say that a proposal for another “Great Society” initiative is unworkable and too costly, I do not agree. In fact, the present situation is what is too costly because so many children, especially those from varied ethnic, economic, and cultural backgrounds, do not get the start in life that would enable them to be highly productive citizens and many individuals with mental health problems are not getting the help that they need. At this time our society seems to be coming apart because of its many contentious factions, but I think that the next few years could be the ideal period for initiating a new and vastly better comprehensive approach to these problems. There should be excellent care and education for every young child and an effective and comprehensive mental health support system for every citizen needing such help. Perhaps then we can have a country that finally does enable all our citizens to reach for and achieve the American Dream, whatever that may be for them. This pandemic has made it clear to all of us that it is time for our “Really Great Society” to begin!

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