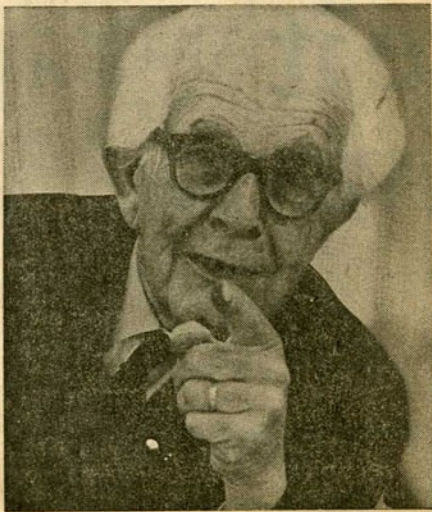


Grand guru of education tells it with deceptive simplicity



Tribune/Hardy Wieting

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget makes a point.

By Ruth Moss

"AS EXCITING AS a football game," a coed at the University of Illinois Circle campus exclaimed as she watched the crowds gather to see and hear the great Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget.

The overflowing audience gave a standing ovation to the grand old man, the new guru in education circles, as he received his latest honor, a doctorate of humane letters.

They heard the 77-year-old University of Geneva professor praised for his special contributions to the Chicago institution, inspiring the scholarly curiosity of two Circle faculty members, Constance Kamii and Rheta De Vries, who now are implementing his ideas in nursery schools and day care centers.

THEN THE 1,500 students, educators, parents, and professionals sat respectfully at the feet of the master who spoke a language few knew. His lecture in French was layered in English by his talented former student, Eleanor Duckworth, who flew in from Halifax to translate.

Such is the intellectual power and personal magnetism of the man whose 50 years of research into how children learn have built a new science with far-reaching implications for educational reform.

The appealing stories Piaget tells have a deceptive simplicity. His theories, tho, about the development of thinking are enormously complex. In addition, he has developed his own definitions of words like "structure" and "operation."

THESE ARE BEST understood by those who appreciate Piaget's propositions:

- Much of knowledge comes from within the child, not from without.
- Children not only reason differently from adults but have quite different views of the world.
- And children who learn autonomously have the best chance to construct their intelligence, personality, and their own system of lasting moral values.

Basic, too, is Piaget's theory that intelligence develops in stages related to age. The stages appear in the same order for all children. What differs is the age at which they develop.

The child's native endowment and physical and social environment may determine the pace at which he learns, but no matter how fast the pace, all children must pass thru the same four stages:

THE FIRST stage, from birth to approximately 2 years, is the sensory-motor period, when the baby busily fills his brain with stimuli he acquires thru his senses and his own actions.

Between 2 and 7, in the preoperational stage, the child, thru repeated play and experiences, develops an understanding of symbols and acquires language.

The period from 7 to 11 is the age of concrete operations, or operational thinking, when the child learns to deal with relationships among classes of things. The child learns to think abstractly.

In the final stage of formal operations, from 12 to 15 years,

children become capable of thinking hypothetically. Their mental processes now are analogous to adult thinking.

MANY IN THE audience brought this background. Many brought along, too, copies of his books—he's published 30 in all—or of books others have written, another 30 or so, to explain, interpret, or adapt his theories.

Piaget spoke on "Development of Notions of Causality in Children."

"In their search for explanations which begins very early in life, children begin asking 'why' questions," he began, "often about phenomena for which we have few answers."

WHEN A LITTLE boy in Geneva asked of the Saleve, the double humped mass that dominates the city, "Why are there two mountains?" Piaget turned the question back to the boy who answered, "The little one is for little walks and the big one is for big walks."

Tho childish, the reply was very interesting, an explanation related to the child's own actions. Later, his explanations will be based on the child's own operations, and his answers will become richer as he moves thru the total operational structure.

"His first very simple explanation is highly egocentric," Piaget said, "but his answers will become more complicated as he moves thru the different stages of operations."

"The child's explanation is not simply cute and amusing, but an essential beginning if the child is to develop into a person capable of explanations by means of operations at a more sophisticated level."

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