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READY OR NOT SHOULD THEY BE TAUGHT

Vern L. Farrow

One quiet afternoon recently as I was pondering an article advocating early reading instruction, I could hear my children playing hide-and-seek. They were shouting, "Ready or not you shall be caught!" I could not help drawing an analogy between the meaning of their childish rhyme and my feeling toward the growing tempo and insistence of demands to plunge preschool children indiscriminately into formalized reading activities. Unconsciously I paraphrased the rhyme, "Ready or not you SHALL be TAUGHT!" It had an ominous connotation smacking of pursuit, capture, and force and I began considering the problem in earnest.

Anyone who has been sensitive to the increasing pressure to include reading instruction in the kindergarten curriculum cannot help but be concerned. This focus upon the preschool child has tended to equate him with some kind of strategic commodity or a secret weapon with all of the ugly overtones of exploitation. And, what is more serious, it has served to cloud the fundamental issue of what is best for young children. It has resulted in confusion over the true ends of education and the nature and needs of preschool children.

The advocates of early reading instruction support their claims with research and there appears to be abundant evidence that very young children have been taught to read. For example, Fowler (2) has recently reported success in teaching the alphabet, both upper and lower case, as well as a number of isolated words to his two-year-old daughter. He also reported some evidence of psycho-social disturbance but he was unwilling to attribute it to the reading instruction. Moore (3) of Rutgers University reported that he has taught more than 100 children between the ages of two and five years not only to read but also to write, typewrite, and to take dictation. I have had an opportunity to view motion pictures of some of his children in action and the evidence of tension and anxiety among them was disturbingly apparent. Bonnema (1) obtained successful reading results with kindergarten children using a phonetic alphabet which she devised. Along this same line, Downing (4, 5) has been employing the Augmented Roman Alphabet since 1960 with striking results in teaching four and five year olds to read in England and Scotland. In

addition, there are literally dozens of similar experiments currently under way throughout the United States and England whose subjects are three, four, and five year old youngsters, all presumably meeting with success. And yet, for all of this research activity, I continue to experience nagging reservations.

It seems to me that thoughtful educators must resist being swept up in a premature groundswell by reports of precocious achievements without more evidence than is now available. We must objectively ask whether such achievements represent typical performance; whether they can safely be interpreted as evidence of intellectual maturity; whether early reading instruction is producing the crucial factor of "reading comprehension;" whether the physical, psychological, and attitudinal concomitants are beneficial. Current research tells us little with respect to these questions.

It is true that today's preschool children appear to be more sophisticated than were children of a generation ago. However, we must ask whether this apparent superiority constitutes a basic change in child nature as we have known it; whether this apparent earlier maturity makes obsolete our understanding of child growth and development; whether, indeed, it relegates to the scrap heap, the concept of readiness upon which we have operated for so long. Certainly systematic early reading instruction disregards our present beliefs with respect to readiness.

It is my personal feeling that the sophistication we see is more apparent than real. For example, can we assume that because three, four, and five year olds incorporate references to rockets; space capsules; liquid-oxygen propellents; and other equally exotic terminology within their vocabularies and play activities that they deeply or even vaguely understand these matters? Or can we assume that because they memorize literally hundreds of television commercials dealing with micronite filters, analgesics, decongestants, and fluoride toothpastes, that they possess adequate concepts to match their erudite pronouncements? I believe that such assumptions are unwarranted. What we are more likely witnessing are the most accomplished verbalizers in history.

It is my considered judgement that the likenesses between today's children and those of a generation ago are infinitely greater than are the differences. There is no reason to believe that anything has occurred in our streamlined, pressurized age which has changed the basic nature of children, altered the way in which children learn, or abrogated the

fundamental readiness characteristics which have been abundantly identified through research as constituting a sound foundation for successful beginning reading progress. Therefore, I am still convinced that children need to develop or acquire these traits, skills, or stages of maturity before they are confronted with systematic, formalized reading instruction. Let me review briefly for you these readiness components. (1) Good general physical and mental health; (2) visual acuity and discriminatory powers adequate to deal with our complex system of printed language symbols; (3) auditory acuity and discrimination adequate to deal with the intricate nuances of sound in our spoken language; (4) a rather high degree of language development and fluency; (5) emotional stability sufficient to permit the child to focus sustained listening attention and concentration upon the learning task; (6) social maturity adequate to insure effective group participation; and lastly, two factors of crucial importance, (7) a broad experiential background providing a rich store of concepts; and (8) a vital desire to read as evidenced by seeking behavior. You will note that I have said nothing about mental age per se. This is because there is no real agreement concerning an optimum mental age for beginning reading, and furthermore I believe that adequate intellectual maturity is implicit within the factors listed above.

What implications should all of this have for educators whose prime responsibility is the welfare and educational development of children? I would suggest the following: (1) that we must keep abreast of research dealing with early reading instruction, evaluate it objectively and be willing to implement such programs if they should prove sound; (2) that we must provide for a continuing evaluation of our preschools to assure that children are being brought to a state of reading readiness as efficiently as possible within the framework of the principles of child growth and development; (3) that we must make provisions to identify genuinely precocious children and furnish them with early reading opportunities; and finally that we must actively interpret to the community the essential nature of the preschool program, with respect to reading, as a time of broad unstructured experiences in language aimed at clarifying and building concepts, developing skills of speaking and listening, and promoting the creative use of language as children explore and learn to control the world around them.

Remember that the desire to read and write flows naturally from a felt need to communicate ideas, and that such a need cannot arise

out of an experiential vacuum. To paraphrase an old familiar saying, "It takes a heap of living before words become your own." I believe our preschool programs should provide for that "heap of living" unencumbered by formalized reading instruction.

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