

The Challenge of First Grade Teaching

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What happened when first grade teachers in Wilmington, Delaware, had an opportunity through study, discussion, and organized experimentation to develop an improved program is told by Mary Alice Mitchell, director of elementary education, and Catharine Hultsch, psychologist, Department of Child Development and Guidance.

A MEETING of all first grade teachers was called early in the fall of 1948. The purpose of this meeting was to plan the best possible learning environment for six-year-olds. It was hoped that through study, discussion, and organized experimentation teachers would become increasingly sensitive to the social, personal, physical, intellectual, and emotional needs of the children in their

grades. It was expected that, as a result of such increased sensitivity, each teacher would grow in her ability to plan appropriate experiences for and with children.

Teachers were told of extensive additional equipment made available for their use. The concept of readiness was discussed at length. Various misconceptions of the term "readiness" were



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pointed out. Teachers' responsibility for providing learning experiences to supply readiness was discussed. It was pointed out by several teachers that harm comes to children when formal reading lessons are introduced too early to be effective. This was followed by a realization that teachers have a responsibility to help parents understand the reasons for frequently delaying formal reading lessons.

Providing Time for New Experiences

The difficulties encountered by teachers when some children are given "reading book" lessons and others are not was discussed. These difficulties arise from parent pressure and pressure from children who also want "a reading book" even though experientially unready. Other difficulties are present when teachers try to conduct "formal lessons" for a few children at the same time they are trying to provide others with experiences children must live through in order to build up a meaningful vocabulary, security in a group, and familiarity with ideas, which must be concrete before they can be dealt with symbolically. Although many teachers had been accustomed to writing children's own stories on charts as a basis for first reading experiences, it was felt that the pressure of time prevented many teachers from planning enough trips and visits and activities to form the basis of a supply of children's stories large enough to be significant. Some teachers admitted feelings of guilt when they felt, or feared someone else might feel, that too great a proportion of the school day was spent on activities other than formal reading and writing.

In order to overcome these difficulties and to insure ample time for all children to live through a longer and richer period of readiness activities, it was suggested that no child be given any formal reading lessons from "readers" until January. Time previously spent by teachers in introducing and teaching from "readers" was thus freed for many more trips, more time for children's conversation, more time for social adjustment, more time for listening to stories read aloud, more time for art, music, dramatic play, and building with blocks both in and out of doors.

Although to some this suggestion came as a shock, others felt it challenging enough to try out. A few worried about the children who are always demonstrably ready to learn to read early in the fall. It was pointed out that these children could immediately learn to read and should be encouraged to do so. For them it would simply mean learning to read from the stories dictated by them from their own experiences, rather than learning from stories about children in printed books. Nothing need stop the flow of these ideas from experience into language and on to reading charts. Children are entranced as they see their own talk turn into written language which makes a story. The teachers agreed that if they were to carry out such a program, they themselves would undoubtedly find more time to know their children as individuals. Teachers were asked to be particularly aware of any emotional difficulties encountered and to refer such children to the Department of Child Guidance for more intensive study and recommendations for classroom treatment.

The Program Is Launched

As the discussion developed, more and more teachers seemed anxious to try out the new program. Although a few were not, even they felt that if any teachers delayed formal reading until January, all should. Everyone agreed, then, to carry out the experiment. With the assurance that teachers would be given help in the form of additional supervision, and new equipment and help from the Department of Child Guidance, the program was launched. Everyone looked forward with interest to the city-wide development of the program and to the results of the reading test, which we agreed should be given in May to help evaluate the experiment.

Principals and teachers were asked to invite parents of first grade children to the school to hear a description of the program for their children, the reasons why it had been adopted, and what we hoped would be accomplished.

Tools for Learning

Each teacher was supplied with plenty of news print and lined chart paper as well as a reading easel built like a large book. Children's stories, the basis of first reading experiences, were hung from three large notebook rings centered on the easel. They were also given speed-dry brush pens and a special kind of ink which made possible more easy lettering of the charts and more vivid and clear manuscript for children's eyes. A primer-size typewriter was bought for each school. Captions in the words of children were typed under their paintings and their individual stories were typed. Before many weeks had passed children were the proud

possessors of paper books composed, illustrated, and bound by them. More than that, here were books they could take home and proudly read.

A full set of Carolyn Pratt Project Blocks was bought for each first grade. Although teachers had for years been used to blocks as valuable equipment, never before had they had over a thousand, nor such a variety of shapes and sizes. Hollow blocks were built and used for dramatic play out of doors. These were of four different sizes. Combined with horses and boards they became the basis for constructive play which not only developed firm muscles and physical coordination, but also fostered creativity and, through dramatic play, stimulated language development.

After approximately four months of school another meeting of first grade teachers was arranged. A collection from all classes of children's group and individual stories, which had been typed by teachers, illustrated and bound by children and used by them as "readers," was exhibited. Also exhibited were many of the large chart stories which described the activities which children had carried on during the four-month period. A portable kiln was displayed as well as some of the children's sculpture and painting. No teacher could miss the important suggestions for activities which were printed as follows on a large sign for all to read.

Have your first grade children

made apple sauce?
learned to pack a good lunch?
made butter?
worked with pulleys?
worked with pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, half dollars, and dollars?
played with magnets?
learned to think arithmetically?

worked with clay and watched it fired?
hammered, sawed to build?
learned to care for a hamster in the room?
learned to care for a guinea pig in the room?
dressed up in old clothes to play stories?
been on the ferry boat?
been on the train?
walked around the school?
seen how the furnace works?
listened to lots of records?
been outdoors enough?

Have your first grade children built with blocks

St. George's Bridge?
Rockford Tower?
St. Anthony's Cathedral?
The Queen Mary?
Acme Market?
The School Bus?

At this meeting a consultant, who had previously visited many of the first grade classes, complimented the teachers on the work they were doing. Her talk served to inspire the teachers as, listening to her, they again realized the challenge of first grade teaching and the vital importance of building the type of program which develops children's initiative, releases their tensions, and prevents problems.

Enthusiastic Results

In January the doubts of some teachers were dispelled as they saw with amazement the ease, fluency, eagerness, and enthusiasm with which most children sped through pre-primers, primers, and first readers. Teachers remarked that the children who, in other years, might have been described as the "slow group," even after long and patient teaching, became more readily fluent in their reading of real books. Children were encouraged to read their books as adults do, right straight through, and fast readers were not held back to a

slow reading of part of a story each day because it was a prescribed dose—a lesson. The amount of time for silent reading was increased for those children who were already readers. Children read aloud to each other in small groups. They read whole stories as individuals to the teacher rather than reading a paragraph at a time as one of a large group reading aloud to the teacher. With enthusiasm they took books home to read.

We were convinced that a broad program aimed at the total development of boys and girls would also be the most effective way of accomplishing a more specific objective, namely, success in reading. To demonstrate this we used the Gates Primary Reading Tests at the year's end (May), Grade 1.85, to measure children's achievement. Table I (next page) gives these results.

Unfortunately, no basis of comparison with these test results and those of former years was possible since reading tests had not previously been administered to first grade children. However, subjective judgment on the part of teachers seems to indicate that these children read better and with more comprehension, pleasure, and satisfaction.

Teacher Satisfaction Results, Too

We were impressed with what seemed to be happening to teachers, themselves, as they lived through the year and observed the excellent programs unfold under their direction and leadership. We were struck with the enthusiasm which came as many gained new insights into how children learned. Because we wanted to discover how teachers felt about their year's work,

TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION OF AVERAGE GRADE SCORE OF GATES PRIMARY READING TESTS

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1.0-1.4.....	210	19%
1.5-1.9.....	567	51%
2.0-2.4.....	229	21%
2.5-2.9.....	72	6.5%
3.0-3.4.....	25	2.3%
3.5-3.9.....	3	.3%

Nineteen percent of the first grade children scored less than grade 1.5, 51% at grade 1.5 to 1.9, 21% at grade 2.0 to 2.4, 6.5% at grade 2.5 to 2.9, 2.3% at grade 3.0 to 3.4, and .3% at grade 3.5 to 3.9. The median score was grade 1.7. Thirty percent of the children scored at or above second grade placement at the time the test was administered.

we sent out a questionnaire to be answered anonymously. This is summarized as follows:

Twenty-six teachers answered "yes" and six answered "no" to the question, "Have you been satisfied with this year's program for first grades?"

Teachers answering "yes" cited the following reactions to the program: "Takes care of bright child and slow child . . . many reading problems prevented . . . absence of fear . . . children have wider interests . . . children are happier, freer, read better . . . slow child does not feel inferior . . . children are more creative . . . helps immature child."

Teachers answering "no" felt that "some children should read books earlier."

All thirty-two teachers who answered considered "excellent and valuable" such additional equipment as the primer-size typewriter, blocks, and lined chart paper. These teachers also felt that the program enabled them to study further the needs, interests, and personalities of individual children.

Twenty-four teachers felt that parents have an understanding and an

appreciation of this year's first grade program.

Fourteen teachers reported that their children "read as well as in other years." Three teachers reported that their children "do not read as well as in other years." Nine teachers reported that their pupils "read better than in other years." Six teachers did not report on children's relative reading ability because they were beginning teachers with no previous experience or teachers who had not previously taught first grade. Thirty-one teachers reported that they feel "stimulated as a result of participating in this kind of experiment."

The Child and His Problems

Space prevents our including the case studies of several children with different problems to demonstrate how their varying needs were cared for by this kind of program. It was to be expected that some children would not and should not be reading by the year's end. Some children, though bright, were emotionally unready for learning to read. These, it was felt, were saved by this program from becoming read-

ing problems and also from developing real personality difficulties.

Teachers' increased sensitivity to children's individual, emotional, social, and academic needs can be attributed in large part to the support given to

a physical or an emotional factor which interfered with learning. It is safe to say that this percentage would have been much greater had not the new program been able to iron out many disturbances of this kind.

SUMMARY OF REFERRALS OF FIRST GRADE CHILDREN

<i>School</i>	<i>No. of Cases</i>	<i>Mentally Unready</i>	<i>Mentally Ready But Not Achieving</i>
A.....	4	2	2
B.....	14	12	2
C.....	9	6	3
D.....	7	4	3
E.....	4	4	..
F.....	1	1	..
G.....	8	6	2
H.....	8	8	..
I.....	6	4	2
J.....	6	6	..
K.....	6	6	..
L.....	8	8	..
TOTAL.....	81	67	14

the program by the Department of Child Guidance and to the help they gave teachers. The summary of referrals above will illustrate the number of cases and amount of help teachers received from this department.

These statistics show that at least 6 percent of all first grade children were not intellectually ready for reading. Had they attended a first grade which insisted upon formal reading activities for successful participation, these children would have been penalized and prevented from gaining needed experiences. From past experience we can safely predict that many of them would have become emotionally maladjusted. Of the 1 percent referred for special study who were mentally ready but not achieving, there was in every case

Of the total number of children enrolled in first grade, 91.5 percent were promoted to second grade. These children in second grade will be closely watched to evaluate further not only their academic achievements but also their total adjustment and personality growth.

Proof of the Program

Our study and work with teachers in the development of this program leads us to offer these conclusions as valid:

- Teachers grew professionally and gained an insight into how children grow and develop
- Teachers learned to use materials and equipment more creatively
- Children learned to read without pressure or torturous drill

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and to write United States about education for the popular magazines and press. They might even look forward to full professorships of popularization when they wrote the Book of the Month!

If I were a superintendent who saw beyond his city limits, I'd communicate the forward-looking practices of my school system not only to my own PTA and local newspaper. Public opinion in the local community largely depends on the opinion-shaping nation-wide mass media. A free-lance journalist might collaborate with me on a magazine article. A radio station might carry into many homes the discussions of a panel of teen-agers from my high school. A documentary film of good practices might pay for itself.

If I were a foundation—it would be an interesting feeling to be a foundation, wouldn't it?—I'd found a magazine on education for the lay public. There are magazines for the general public on hosts of matters—religion, science, sports, mechanics, politics, needlework, intercultural relations, and model railroad building. But where is the popular magazine on education for John Q. Public who isn't a PTA officer or a school board official? My magazine, *American Education*, might be pocket-size, but it would not be a reprint affair. Instead, it would contain skillful popularizations by educa-

tional journalists like the members of the Educational Writers Association and by those educators not yet entirely corrupted by academesque, pedagogue, and gobbledygook. Plenty of pictures. Case studies. Profiles of the nobler Romans among us. Maybe even some of the jokes told at Denver and Atlantic City—but not all.

If I were an executive secretary of an educational organization, I'd never hold a convention in an American city without sponsoring at least one meeting especially for the public. I'd go all out with the newspapers and the school system to get a good audience for my most intelligible members and to get press coverage for the convention. Back in the home office, leads for good stories and scripts on modern educational developments might be fed systematically to journalists, radio stations, aspiring writers.

If I were a professor of education—but wait—I *am* a professor of education. Can this heretical doctrine apply to me too? Must even a professor communicate through such vulgar media as popular magazines, press, radio, rather than exclusively through monographs, yearbooks, and the "little magazines" of education? Give me a bit more time and I feel confident that I will work out an adequate rationalization, exempting me. Even as you, dear reader?

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- Those children who were not able to learn to read in the first grade were not considered failures by themselves or others
- Those children who were able to learn to read quickly were not considered unusual by themselves or others
- Those children who became fluent readers took advantage of the opportunity given to read extensively and widely
- In many cases reading problems were prevented from developing
- In many cases personality problems were resolved or prevented from developing
- Children's creativity was fostered and revealed in their original writings
- Parents gained understanding of how children learned
- Principals indicated their support of the entire program and their intention of continuing it in the future
- School-wide interest in the first grade program on the part of all teachers was noted.

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