

# Pre-First Grade Starts in Reading: Where Do We Stand?



Dolores Durkin

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*Reading instruction can begin in kindergarten—but conditions must be right.*

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Recently, a mother of four children expressed bewilderment about school practices related to the timing of beginning reading instruction. She commented, "My oldest child, who happens to be the brightest of our children, was not taught to read until about the second month of first grade. The youngest is now in kindergarten, and reading instruction has already begun. Why the difference?"

Those who think that the difference can be explained with carefully documented facts had better take another look at the research literature. If they do and are patient enough to examine relevant publications from about 1920 to the present, they will be forced to reach the following conclusion: Acceptance of proposals for the timing of beginning instruction in reading depends less on their quality than on when they are made.

With a few details, let me explain why this disquieting conclusion just happens to be correct.

From approximately 1900 until the late 1950s, notions about child growth and development were overwhelmingly influenced first by G. Stanley Hall and then by his student, Arnold Gesell (Durkin, 1968). Because of their prominence and prolific publications, the two were able to convince the educational world for a very long time that hereditary and maturational factors determine when and how quickly children reach and pass through developmental stages.

## Readiness for Reading

Initial ideas about readiness for beginning reading, which were proposed in the 1920s, fit in perfectly with this view of development. They

were quickly accepted even though facts to support them were missing. Essentially, this first interpretation saw readiness as something that occurred automatically at a given stage of development, which was later defined as a mental age of about 6.5 years (Morphett and Washburne, 1931). Although research by Arthur Gates in the 1930s (Gates, 1937; Gates and Bond, 1936) repeatedly showed that initial success with reading is affected more by the quality of instruction than by mental age, the first interpretation of readiness continued to enjoy unquestioning acceptance. Why?

The facts uncovered by Gates did not fit in with the stream of popular thought, which is why they were frequently quoted in the 1960s, not the 1930s.

### Effects of Sputnik

What was popular in the 1960s was clearly linked to the dramatic effects of the launching of Sputnik I by the Russians in 1957. Among the more apparent effects was national insecurity followed by the push not only to do everything better in our schools, but also to do it sooner. "Doing it sooner" attracted attention to quite different theories about development—for example, the theories found in Hunt's *Intelligence and Experience* (1961), and in Bloom's *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics* (1964). Both books emphasized not only the importance of experiences for development, but also their unique importance during the pre-first-grade years.

If publications like these had appeared at another time, only graduate students would have known of their existence. Their appearance in the 1960s, however, made them so widely attractive that nobody seemed to notice or care that they offered only hypotheses to be tested, not facts to be implemented. And so the rush was on to teach everything sooner—including reading.

### Current Kindergarten Practices

It is unfortunate that educators who made decisions to start teaching reading in kindergarten rather than in first grade overlooked the details of Gates' research. As was mentioned, his studies

showed that a child's success with beginning reading is largely determined by the quality of the instruction made available. However, because it has been the timing rather than the quality of beginning instruction that has won attention, it is now exceedingly common to find kindergarten reading programs being rooted in whole class drill on phonics.

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Why such an unfortunate practice is common can be explained by a number of factors, the most important of which is the kindergarten teacher's lack of preparation to teach reading. Unprepared teachers who are put in the position of *having* to teach it find great comfort in workbooks and ditto sheets, many of which focus on phonics. The large number of children typically found in kindergartens makes it very tempting to use these materials with an entire class; and so we have whole class drill on phonics. Seeing the drill tempts one to say, "No reading in the kindergarten—please!" However, certain facts suggest that this is not the best response.

One such fact is that many five-year-olds are more than ready to read; some, indeed, have already begun (Durkin, 1966, 1974-75). Another important fact is that individual kindergarten teachers are able to demonstrate year after year that five's can be taught to read in ways that are not only productive, but also enjoyable for the children. Since space does not allow for detailed descriptions of what they do, let me just outline what is essential for any reading program designed for young children.

### Essentials of Suitable Programs

Underlying the essentials to be described here is a basic assumption; namely, that it is im-

possible to know whether any given child is ready to read until he/she is given an opportunity to learn. Since children arrive in kindergarten with different abilities and interests, it follows that learning opportunities ought to be characterized by variety in methodology. At the start, whole words of special interest can be featured. Later, opportunities for the children to learn to print should be available, because research indicates that some pre-first graders are more interested in printing than in reading and, in fact, become readers through their efforts with printing and spelling (Durkin, 1966).

Later, as reading vocabularies begin to grow, known words can be used to help children understand the alphabetic nature of our writing system. However, only if children demonstrate the ability to understand and remember letter-sound relationships should phonics instruction be pursued. To do otherwise is to foster negative attitudes toward reading, and perhaps toward school itself.

Since oral language is the foundation of ability in reading, every kindergarten—whether it does anything with reading or not—is obligated to do everything possible to enhance that. Among other things, interesting experiences should allow for acquisition of knowledge, for concept development, and for enlarged listening-speaking vocabularies.

All this can be summarized by saying that the best of kindergarten programs will have a language arts orientation.<sup>1</sup>

### **Expectations for Kindergarten Programs**

Because of the great differences found in any group of five's, preestablished expectations about how much all should learn are indefensible. Ideally, a kindergarten language arts program will neither impede a child's progress nor will it make unrealistic demands. Consequently, when the ideal is achieved, different children can be expected to have different kinds and amounts of abilities by the end of the year.

This suggests another important point—the need for kindergarten and first-grade teachers to be in close communication. In fact, it is only when first-grade teachers are both willing and able to build on what is accomplished in the kindergarten

that it makes any sense to even consider the possibility of starting reading earlier.

### **Preparation of Kindergarten Teachers**

Clearly, what has been described as an appropriate way to ease kindergartners into reading is not for the amateur teacher. Yet, even today, many who are attempting to teach reading at that level have had no preparation to do so. Unfortunately, some who seek help in a reading methods course often find that what is available on college and university campuses covers the entire elementary school. While the broad focus provides perspective, it does not allow for the detailed attention to the beginning level that kindergarten teachers require. So we have another need if the best of programs is to be assembled: reading methods courses that are designed especially for nursery school, kindergarten, and first-grade teachers.

### **New Goals Require New Settings**

Even expertly prepared kindergarten teachers cannot put what they know into practice when the class is too big. Although it may have made sense in days gone by to assign as many as 25 children to a kindergarten in the morning and another 25 in the afternoon, changed expectations demand something different. Fewer children in each group is one needed change. The assistance of an aide is another, once a teacher has both the knowledge and the motivation required for a really good program. Admittedly, both changes will add to school budgets that are already too small. However, if expectations for teaching reading in the kindergarten continue, it is unfair to provide kindergarten teachers with settings that only allow for babysitting. Besides, the kind of program that has been briefly sketched is one possible way to reduce the high cost of remedial instruction later on.

As has been pointed out, the decision to teach reading in the kindergarten should not be taken lightly. Nor should it be made without regard for the fundamental importance of oral language.

<sup>1</sup> How these recommendations can be implemented is described in detail in one of the references (Durkin, 1976) listed at the end of the article.

While the readiness of a particular group of five's must always be considered, so too must the readiness of the kindergarten faculty to teach reading.

If taught well, kindergarten reading will have a positive effect on five-year-olds not only in terms of their abilities, but also in the way they feel about themselves and about going to school. If taught well, kindergarten reading should also have an immediate impact on the first-grade program and an eventual one on all other grades. Without such a ripple effect, kindergarten reading becomes little more than an isolated event—perhaps not worth the effort it takes. *[FL]*

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# National Curriculum Study Institutes

## Winter 1979

### Teacher Evaluation

January 15-16, 1979, Phoenix, Arizona  
(Del Webb's TowneHouse)

Supervisors, principals, and college administrators often participate in the process of teacher evaluation. Their judgments are important elements in helping teachers improve their professional capabilities, and in making tenure/promotion decisions. This institute is designed to provide school practitioners with an update on the state of the art, a look at current practices, and some proposals for improving procedures in meeting teacher evaluation responsibilities.

Consultants: *Donald M. Medley*, Chairman and Professor, Department of Research Methodology, School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; *Charles Santelli*, New York State United Teachers, Albany, New York; *Philip L. Hosford* (Institute Director) Professor of Education, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces; *William E. Spreen*, Superintendent, Finneytown Local School District, Cincinnati, Ohio; *Richard Manatt*, Professor of Education, Iowa State University, Ames; *Michael Patton*, University of Minnesota Center for Social Research, Minneapolis.

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### Teacher Education: Exploring New Directions in a Time of Crisis

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Consultants: *Vincent Rogers*, University of Connecticut, Storrs; *Geraldine Clifford*, Associate Dean, School of Education, University of California, Berkeley; *Dean Corrigan*, Dean, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park; *Judy Lanier*, Director, Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University, East Lansing; *Robert Anderson*, Dean, College of Education, Texas Tech University, Lubbock; *Paul Nash*, School of Education, Boston University, Boston.

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