

# Forcing Works for Flowers, But Not for Children

A number of years ago, a young mother called me to ask how her daughter could skip kindergarten and enter directly into first grade. She asserted that her child was reading and that kindergarten would be a waste of time. She invited me to visit the child's nursery school and observe her, which I did. The director led me into a classroom and pointed out the child. She was sitting at a table, holding a workbook in front of her. As I approached, I could hear her sounding out letters, sputtering like a little tea kettle. I drew up a small chair and sat next to her as she finished the page. "I can read," she announced to me. "So I see," I replied. "Tell me, what were you reading about?" "Oh, I don't know that," she replied.

I was reminded of Paley's (1979) writings on the fallacy of introducing pseudo-skills to young children.

Kenny revealed something one day that made me collect all my old mimeographed task sheets and throw them out. I had given him a ruler and a ditto sheet that had on it squares and rectangles to be measured. I showed him how to use the ruler to measure the shapes and even held the ruler steady for him. He could not do it. He frowned and squirmed and kept looking all around. His fingers stuck together and he squeaked as though in pain. I told him, never mind, go back and play. Later in the morning I saw Kenny at the workbench. He was making a garage for one of his tiny cars. He took a piece of wood and measured it with a piece of string. Then he cut the string to match the width of the wood. He used the string to find two more pieces of wood that almost fit the size of the first piece. They were both too long so he made a line where the string ended and sawed off the extra wood.

I said to Kenny, "You measured and cut the wood so all the sides are the same." "Oh, sure. I know how to do that. I bin knowin' that."

These two vignettes illustrate appropriate and inappropriate practices in childhood education: in the case of the little girl whose classroom I visited,

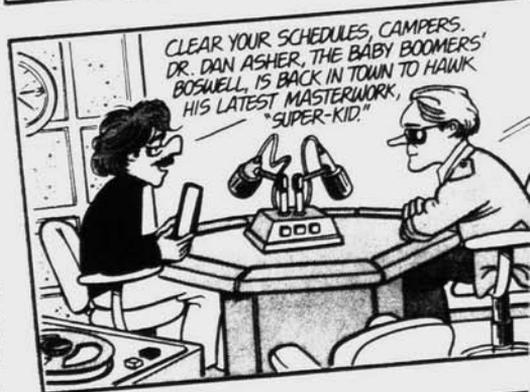
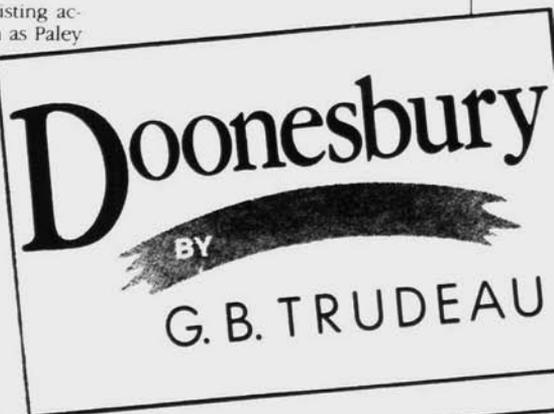
well-meaning adults were foisting activity on a young child, much as Paley initially tried to do. However, Paley was sensitive to Kenny's signals of distress and freed him to get on with tasks that were meaningful for him. In contrast, unfortunately, no one in the little girl's classroom realized that she was spending quite a bit of time on an apparently meaningless task.

## When Sooner Is Not Better

Each year in early autumn I plant tulip bulbs in my garden. Falling leaves, snow, thaw, and spring sunshine must all occur in their appointed seasons as the young tulips develop, mature, and finally bloom in early April. No skillful gardeners attempt to rush this cycle.

Like the nine-month gestation period for human infants, accomplishments of talking, walking, and toilet training are also pretty much pegged to time. Yet, when the young child and school come together, the child is forced into a Procrustean bed of school activities, with seemingly little regard for physical or mental readiness. If reading and writing are the stuff of school activities, five- or six-year-old children—ready or not—will read and write.

Rudolph and Cohen (1984) urge that children be allowed to learn first from life, then from books. Regrettably, the prevalent belief today is that



Programs for young children are often inappropriate because the parents and educators involved do not understand child development.



## Whatever Happened to Kindergarten?

The traditional kindergarten, that poetic and mystical garden planted by Frederick Froebel, has vanished. In its place is a serious, academic bootcamp where the recruits learn the three Rs in formal groups according to a rigid daily schedule interrupted once a week by specialists offering arts, crafts, and physical education. The message our little campers get is clear: "It's a hard, cruel world out there, so if you want to get to Harvard, you gotta start now, kid!" Something is very wrong here.

For one thing, children do not learn how to learn, an important goal of kindergarten and, indeed, of all schooling. Instead, children learn that reading is the main avenue to learning, a notion that negates the validity of other powerful avenues, such as sensory learning, experience, and intuition.

Learning by reading is inefficient for the preoperational learner who has not yet progressed from concrete to abstract thinking (Piaget 1970). This child understands, learns, and remembers only what he has experienced. When directed in his phonics lesson to make the sound a cat makes, little Tommy replied, "I can't. We don't have a cat."

Undue emphasis on the three Rs takes time away from the whole curriculum, including science, social studies, physical education (whatever happened to *mens sana in corpore sano?*), arts and crafts, and children's literature. The three Rs are only tools for learning those liberal and fine arts, which make us whole, feeling, caring citizens. Teaching children isolated skills fragments the child's sense of wholeness:

I believe we are witnessing a growing emphasis upon the child as a brain; upon the cultivation of narrowly defined cognitive skills and abilities; and above all, upon the creation, through our preschools and schools, of a race of children whose values and progress are judged primarily by their capacity to do well on tests of intelligence, reading readiness, or school achievement.

Although children are whole people—full of fantasies, imagination, artistic capacities, physical grace, social inclinations, cooperation, initiative, industry, love and joy—the overt and, above all, the covert structure of our system of preschooling and schooling largely ignores these other human potentials in order to concentrate on cultivating a narrow form of intellect (Gross and Gross 1977, p. 236).

In the nineteenth century kindergarten—that haven for children to grow, learn how to learn, cooperate, and live together—children held hands and contemplated the unity of God and nature (Froebel 1903). The teacher, or kindergartner, as she was called, was well-educated, cultured, articulate, and highly respected. She taught a half-day session so that she could visit the children's homes in the other half. Alas, that beautiful garden . . . those tender seedlings . . .

What, in contrast, does the twentieth century gardener do? Dig up that garden. Plant the new seedlings in neat, orderly rows. Forget that plants need light, sunshine, rain, and fresh air. Feed daily with the three Rs, and fertilize once a week with music, art, and physical education. Disregard variety, which adds interest and charm; it's too difficult to give individual plants special treatment. Weed out the weaker ones who won't survive, or else send them back to the transitional greenhouse for more time to grow. Measure your plants often to make sure they will compete favorably with the Russian and Japanese varieties. Don't be concerned about the gardener; any one will do (after all, it's only kindergarten). Last, but not least, work with these seedlings all day long.

At issue is not the length, per se, of the school day, but what goes on in the kindergarten program. If extending the kindergarten day means teaching more of the same, I say, "Don't bother!" An all-day, extended-day program should be redesigned to include daily art, music, crafts, movement, physical education, and children's literature. Children should enjoy regular field trips, expanded opportunities for questions and answers, critical thinking, and frequent rest periods. The predominant teaching/learning mode should be play. Throw out the workbooks, worksheets, and flashcards. Bring back experience charts, Cuisenaire rods, and autoharps.

Remember, you're dealing with five-year-olds.

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only "book learning" is worthwhile. Because the young parent I mentioned earlier thought her child was "reading," she assumed that kindergarten could be dispensed with. In fact, the child made no sense out of the "reading" she was doing. A rich kindergarten experience would have been far more appropriate to the needs of this five-year-old. Hothouse forcing may make bright cyclamens bloom for winter holidays, but it's not a wise move in educating children.

## The Limitations of Efficient Schools

Why do schools force children to work beyond their developmental readiness? Probably for two reasons: a drive toward organizational efficiency and a lack of understanding and application of child development principles. In the first place, it is much easier, neater, and more "efficient" to set up a classroom with tidy adult-made bulletin boards and stacks of phonics and number workbooks. On the other hand, large unit blocks that provide excellent opportunities for developing physical dexterity and coordination, as well as presenting delightful challenges to a child's ingenuity, are expensive, bulky, and cumbersome. Likewise, while classroom animals provide a living laboratory dealing with birth and death and everything in between, animal care, feeding, and sanitation cost money and time. Making arrangements to find the animals a home over vacations when the school is cold and dark pose an added burden.

The second reason that the academic curriculum is pushed down to younger and younger children lies in the unfortunate fact that too few adults

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understand the developmental needs of young children. When most people remember their schooling, images of high school experiences, sixth-grade compositions, spelling bees, and homework come to mind. Consequently many parents equate going to school with learning to read and other academic tasks. This lack of understanding of the meaning of school for young children in the public mind is at the root of the "sooner is better" syndrome.

### The Real Reason

At the same time that educational fallacies are infiltrating early childhood education, social and economic conditions impell more children to be in school sooner and to stay there for longer periods each day. In more than half the families with school-age children, both parents work or the single parent with whom children live works.

During the past year I have done an informal survey of the two daily newspapers I read. Frequent articles chronicle the saga of local school districts

considering afterschool programs, extended child care, and a longer kindergarten day. I have noted an interesting pattern in these articles. Public approval is sought for a planning phase and when that is won, board of education approval usually follows quickly. The costs of expanding programs and adding staff are noted, and the typical "district spokesperson" points out how the new programs will benefit children: they will be better prepared for first grade with much of the "readiness" work behind them. Near the end of the article, the spokesperson offers a telling piece of information.

To wit, the increased number of working parents need a place for their children to go. It appears that children are going to be in school longer at a younger age for reasons extrinsic to their needs. Add to this the practices prevalent in school programs, and one concludes that the new directions in early childhood education may be good for parents but not very good for children.

### Ways to Succeed

I am not trying to halt the river. Families do need the assistance of external agencies to care for children, and schools may become worthy of this charge. But first educational leaders must scrutinize what they propose to do with the young children in their extended care and design legitimate programs for them. If they can convince the public that developmental programs are valid, they will halt the disappearance of an endangered time of life: childhood. □

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