Why Not Assume They’re All Gifted Rather Than Handicapped?

The trend toward overtesting and isolated skills-teaching gives young children, who need a supportive environment in which to learn and develop, too much too soon.
t was the city's top-rated nightly news broadcast. Amid the reports of fires and muggings, a parent was expressing concern about her own problem in the corridor outside a school district meeting. "He's just a regular kindergarten kid," she said, slowly into the reporter's microphone. "I don't know what this program is all about." She was standing with her back to the camera to avoid identification as a critic of the school system.

The program she and other parents were unhappy with is one of several that emphasize much testing of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children, isolated skills teaching, and even such bizarre procedures as blindfolding students for group perception lessons. What this mother's child faced was retention in kindergarten, one of seven to be so treated in a class of nineteen children attending school in a rural community made up primarily of solid, lower-middle-class families.

According to the school, the boy had not measured up to expectations for success in sound blending, visual-motor integration, and, in the case of this particular program, cursive handwriting. The situation is not unusual. All over the country there are similar reports of students being retained at the kindergarten level and the creation of pre-first-grade classes for others who cannot be promoted because of specific deficiencies.

The trend has become so much a professional concern that opposition statements have been published regionally (Nebraska State Board of Education 1984) and nationally (International Reading Association 1986) in the form of "Literacy Development and Pre-First-Grade" (see sidebar), sponsored by ASCD and five other educational organizations. The pamphlet cautions against rigid pre-reading programs and concentration on the teaching of isolated skills.

"Deficit" Instruction as a Model

The desire for ever-higher scores on standardized tests is undoubtedly at the root of this emphasis on separate-skills teaching of young children, but the approach itself grows out of behaviorist programs for the handicapped in which the test-teach-test pattern predominates. Such instruction is based on the "deficit" model: find out what is "wrong" with the learners and "fix" it by teaching them what they do not know. Too often the terms used have become accepted as defining quality teaching—the "building blocks of learning," "diagnostic prescriptive procedures," and "skill mastery."

Pre-First-Grade Literacy Development

Objectives for a Pre-First-Grade Reading Program

Literacy learning begins in infancy. Reading and writing experiences at school should permit children to build upon their already existing knowledge of oral and written language. Learning should take place in a supportive environment where children can build a positive attitude toward themselves and toward language and literacy. For optimal learning, teachers should involve children actively in many meaningful, functional language experiences, including speaking, listening, writing, and reading. Teachers of young children should be prepared in ways that acknowledge differences in language and cultural backgrounds and emphasize reading as an integral part of the language arts as well as of the total curriculum.

What Young Children Know about Oral and Written Language Before They Come to School

1. Children have had many experiences from which they are building ideas about the functions and uses of oral language and written language.
2. Children have a command of language, have internalized many of its rules, and have conceptualized processes for learning and using language.
3. Many children can differentiate between drawing and writing.
4. Many children are reading environmental print, such as road signs, grocery labels, and fast-food signs.
5. Many children associate books with reading.
6. Children's knowledge about language and communication systems is influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds.
7. Many children expect that reading and writing will be sense-making activities.

Concerns

1. Many pre-first-grade children are subjected to rigid, formal pre-reading programs with inappropriate expectations and experiences for their levels of development.
2. Little attention is given to individual development or individual learning styles.
3. The pressures of accelerated programs do not allow children to be risk-takers as they experiment with language and internalize concepts about how language operates.
4. Too much attention is focused upon isolated skill development or abstract parts of the reading process, rather than upon the integration of oral language, writing, and listening with reading.
5. Too little attention is placed upon reading for pleasure; therefore, children often do not associate reading with enjoyment.
6. Decisions related to reading programs are often based on political and economic considerations rather than on knowledge of how young children learn.
7. The pressure to achieve high scores on standardized tests that frequently are not appropriate for the kindergarten child has resulted in changes in the content of programs. Program content often does not attend to the child's social, emotional, and intellectual development. Consequently, inappropriate activities that deny curiosity, critical thinking, and creative expression occur all too frequently. Such activities foster negative attitudes toward communication skills activities.
8. As a result of declining enrollments and reduction in staff, individuals who have little or no knowledge of early childhood education are sometimes assigned to teach young children. Such teachers often select inappropriate methodologies.
9. Teachers of pre-first graders who are conducting individualized programs without depending upon commercial readers and workbooks need to articulate for parents and other members of the public what they are doing and why.
Recommendations
1. Build instruction on what the child already knows about oral language, reading, and writing. Focus on meaningful experiences and meaningful language rather than merely isolated skill development.
2. Respect the language the child brings to school, and use it as a base for language and literacy activities.
3. Ensure feelings of success for all children, helping them see themselves as people who can enjoy exploring oral and written language.
4. Provide reading experiences as an integrated part of the broader communication process, which includes speaking, listening, and writing, as well as other communication systems such as art, math, and music.
5. Encourage children’s first attempts at writing without concern for the proper formation of letters or correct conventional spelling.
6. Encourage risk-taking in first attempts at reading and writing and accept what appear to be errors as part of children’s natural patterns of growth and development.
7. Use materials for instruction that are familiar, such as well-known stories, because they provide the child with a sense of control and confidence.
8. Present a model for students to emulate. In the classroom, teachers should use language appropriately, listen and respond to children’s talk, and engage in their own reading and writing.
9. Take time regularly to read to children from a wide variety of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.
10. Provide time regularly for children’s independent reading and writing.
11. Foster children’s affective and cognitive development by providing opportunities to communicate what they know, think, and feel.
12. Use evaluative procedures that are developmentally and culturally appropriate for the children being assessed. The selection of evaluative measures should be based on the objectives of the instructional program and should consider each child’s total development and its effect on reading performance.
13. Make parents aware of the reasons for a total language program at school and provide them with ideas for activities to carry out at home.
14. Alert parents to the limitations of formal assessments and standardized tests of pre-first graders’ reading and writing skills.
15. Encourage children to be active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of knowledge, by using activities that allow for experimentation with talking, listening, writing, and reading. This joint Statement of Concerns about Present Practices in Pre-First-Grade Reading Instruction and Recommendations for Improvement was prepared for:
- Association for Childhood Education International
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- International Reading Association
- National Association for the Education of Young Children
- National Association for Elementary School Principals
- National Council of Teachers of English

—by the Early Childhood and Literacy Development Committee of the International Reading Association. The brochure may be purchased from the International Reading Association in quantities of 100 at a cost of $5.00 per 100, prepaid only. Single copies are free upon request by sending a number 10 self-addressed, stamped envelope to International Reading Association, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139.

Several developments in recent years have contributed to the notion that large numbers of young children should be treated as if they suffer from some handicapping condition. First came DISTAR (Science Research Associates 1969), originally conceived of by special educators for use with poverty-level, often minority, students in compensatory education classes, and then offered for remedial work and even general classroom instruction. The program is based on the presumption that many young children cannot learn from holistic activities but must have very specific teaching of sequentially arranged skills.

The most recent development related to handicapped education has been the introduction of kindergarten screening for the identification of at-risk children when they enter school (New York State Education Department 1982). The result of this testing, now mandatory in many states, has been a focusing of attention on what five-year-olds cannot do rather than on their abilities. Such programs as Early Prevention of School Failure (Werner et al. 1979) emphasize identification of deficiencies and direct teaching of bead-stringing and other skills.

The Hammondsport Program of Assured Readiness (McNis and Curtis 1982) is an example of materials created in direct response to a special education concern, the possibility of a child being learning disabled. The basic assumption here is that, because some students may have difficulty in learning, all children should complete several sets of perceptual training exercises that are thought to be preventive. The handicapped model on which these various procedures are based has credibility with many parents, teachers, and administrators because of its connection with two values very important to most Americans—technology and medicine. The tests define precisely what needs to be done, and then the curative power of appropriate treatments will be brought to bear: This, it would seem, is much to be preferred to blocks, paints, and the conventional early childhood education activities. As the mother who appeared on the television news broadcast found out, however, all is not that simple when the results of classroom implementation are seen firsthand.

Gifted Education as a Model
What occurs when all young children are assumed to be handicapped is not especially attractive. Students unable to demonstrate that they are not disabled receive additional doses of the same treatment. The treatments themselves are narrow and repetitive, often producing poor attitudes toward learning. The child’s first contact with school will sometimes have punitive overtones of negative labeling and failure made public. In addition, there is the growing concern that the entire approach may be wrong-headed, as some special educators are giving up the isolated skills model for a more holistic one (Thurman and Widstrom 1985).

It may seem advantageous, then, to consider adopting a different model, perhaps the one identified with the opposite end of the ability continuum—gifted education. In the teaching
of the gifted there is no reason to concentrate on student deficiencies. Either there are none, or they are inconsequential in view of the individual’s other capacities. Testing is not used as a guide to teaching and often not recommended as a sole means of selection since young children do not respond reliably (Roedell et al. 1980).

Many authorities believe that programs developed for gifted students should be widely used. For example, Maker (1982) emphasizes planning guidelines such as curiosity, creativity, independence, sensitivity, and self-expression. Activities meeting such criteria would be highly unlikely to be limited to perception drills.

If all young children were assumed to be gifted, then their classroom experiences might well consist of free play activities (independence and curiosity), painting and block building (creativity and self-expression), and music and story dramatization (sensitivity). Those familiar with the present environment is all the baby needs and is exactly what will benefit each and every young child, gifted or not, handicapped or not. Intruding too early and too often to do specific teaching results in two problems: wrong things are done and right ones are not.

References

Teaching Thinking Skills

Teaching Thinking Skills presents essays by twelve eminent psychologists, educators, and philosophers that unite classical and modern theories of thought with the latest practical approaches to the learning and teaching of thinking skills.

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