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Early Childhood

By JOAN ALMON

Reading at five: why?

Kindergarten and preschool education in the U.S. have changed radically since the 1970s when I began teaching young children. The play-based, experiential programs of the past are rarely seen in kindergartens and are even disappearing from preschools now. Instead, hours are devoted each day to teaching young children reading, writing, and arithmetic and giving tests or preparing children for tests. Little if any time is given for play or other free choice activities.

When these changes first began to appear, I asked many kindergarten teachers why they were changing their curriculum. The most common answer was that parents wanted their children to read in kindergarten. Today this goal is strongly supported by many policy makers and school leaders and preschools are under pressure to prepare their children to be able to read in kindergarten.

For 40 years I have searched without success for studies that support the notion that reading at five is a helpful step for long-term success in school. A recent doctoral thesis confirmed the absence of such evidence. Sebastian Suggate, studying in New Zealand, did an extensive search for quantitative, controlled studies that showed long-term gains for children who learned to read at five compared to those who learned at six or seven. He found one methodologically weak study from 1974 but could find no others. Thus, a major shift in American education has taken place without any evidence to support it. Nor have NAEP scores — Department of Education tests that are often called the nation's report card — over the past 20 years increased enough to indicate that we are making strong gains, especially when one considers the problems that accompany the current focus on cognitive learning in kindergartens and in preschools.

Many experts in child development are very concerned about the current approaches. For example, Stephen Hinshaw at the University of California at Berkeley, an expert in hyperactive disorders, spoke of the need for a broad-based kindergarten approach. He was quoted in Time magazine in 2003, saying, "Even more vital than early reading is the learning of play skills, which form the foundation of cognitive skills." He pointed out that in Europe children are often not taught to read until age seven. "Insisting that



they read at five,” he said, “puts undue pressure on a child.” This pressure has continued to mount in the 10 years since he was quoted, and there is no end in sight, although many parents, teachers, and school leaders speak about the problems they are seeing as a result of current practices.

In addressing the question of why children should read in kindergarten it is necessary to recognize the important goal that children should read proficiently by the end of third grade. The Casey Foundation describes this goal in its report, “EARLY WARNING! Why Reading at the End of Third Grade Matters,” which states that reading proficiently by the end of third grade can be a make-or-break experience for children. Until then children are learning to read. After that they are reading to learn, and it is hard to master subjects beginning in fourth grade if one cannot read at least at age-appropriate levels. The report cites a Yale study that found that three quarters of students who were poor readers in third grade remained poor readers in high school.

Third grade reading is a clear goal, and for most children an age-appropriate one. What do preschool and kindergarten children need to know to achieve that goal? Bank Street College, a leading institution for early childhood education, has developed an on-line guide for early literacy development. It identifies three main stages for developing strong reading skills.

- In preK to first grade children are typically emergent readers and writers.
- In first and second grades they are early readers.
- In second and third they are early fluent/fluent readers.

Bank Street describes a number of typical achievements for emergent readers/writers. Among their examples are being able to understand that written language conveys messages and pretending to read and write. Children may know some letter names and some letter-sound associations; and they can write some letters, usually those in their own names.

These goals are more appropriate than most standards I have seen. Speaking with teachers, I’ve learned that while some children in their kindergarten classes can do the work required by the standards, many simply are not ready. There is nothing developmentally wrong with the children. It is the expectations that are not developmentally appropriate. What happens then to children who are consistently asked to do more than they can do? Or are required to sit still and pay attention for long periods while the class works to meet the standards?

The outcomes of the standards movement, including its social-emotional impact on young children, are rarely discussed. It seems that everyone in education is to be held accountable except those who develop the standards. There is growing concern that current standards and practices are a factor in rising rates of aggression and serious misbehavior in preschools and kindergartens.

For example, Connecticut schools suspended or expelled 901 kindergartners for aggressive behavior in 2002, twice as many as in 2000. One New Haven school official attributed the spike in violence among kindergarten children to the increasing emphasis on standardized testing and the elimination of time for recess, gym and other chances to play.

Preschools are also coping with more difficult behaviors in children than were previously seen. In 2005 a study of nearly 4000 public preschools by Walter Gilliam of the Child Study Center at the Yale School of Medicine found that expulsion rates were three times higher in preschools than in K-12 classrooms. Among the children expelled, 4.5 times more boys were expelled than girls, and the rate was especially high for older preschoolers and for African American children.

Gilliam identified a number of factors contributing to these high expulsion rates, including child-teacher ratios, class sizes, number of hours children were in the programs, and the self-reported stress levels of teachers. But he also looked at the relationship between giving children time to play and expulsion rates. He found that programs that gave children time for dramatic play every day had a much lower expulsion rate than those that gave time to play only once a month or never — nine percent compared to 25 percent.

All of this leads to the urgent question of whether it makes sense to expect kindergarten children and preschool children to spend long hours preparing for reading, trying to master skills that come much more easily a year or two later. Given that there is no evidence of long-term gains, coupled with growing concern about losses, it is time for a change. Unfortunately, with standards set in place it is not so easy to change them to meet the needs of children. But one can be creative in how to meet them through experiential education and play.

For example, many of the literacy standards can be integrated with each other in lessons that may focus on books but which include artistic expression, acting out of stories, or engaging in hands-on activities related to themes from the books. Children love engaging with stories in multiple ways, and they then begin seeing literacy as part of a rich and creative life, not as an isolated activity. The same is true of meeting the math standards, or any other standards.

What do the Common Core kindergarten standards require in reading? Fortunately, the specific standard for reading is written vaguely enough to leave much room for interpretation. It says, “Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.” What are emergent reader texts? No one seems quite clear, but some say they contain pictorial sentences where words are replaced with pictures or symbols, such as “2” for two, or a drawing of a horse for that word. Children only need to know a few words to read a sentence. They can master this and still have plenty of time for exploratory learning and creative play.

One of the sad outcomes of the current standards movement is that the Common Core standards were designed to help graduates be prepared for college and the workforce, but they make it very difficult for early childhood teachers to foster creativity, curiosity, and imagination, qualities much prized by the workforce. An IBM study of 1500 CEOs worldwide, for instance, found that the quality they most prized in their employees was creativity. Yet a study of creativity by Kyung Hee Kim at William and Mary College found that creativity levels in this country had begun to drop in 1990 after several decades of rising. She found the problem was especially great among children in K-5. Business schools have turned to her asking for help in developing creative thinking in college students, which is ironical when we are inadvertently — or even systematically — diminishing it in young children.

Similarly, young children are deeply curious and learn a great deal through self-directed exploration. High school science teachers now speak of the need for more inquiry-based learning, which is exactly the way young children learn if encouraged to do so.

In short, there is no evidence that pressuring children to read at five improves their later reading, and much concern that it is damaging. There is now a call for more rigorous education for young children. This implies additional hours of didactic instruction and testing. What we really need is a more vigorous education that meets young children’s needs and prepares them for the 21st century, which is often described as a century of imagination and creativity. The children are ready. Are we?

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