Reading in the Kindergarten: a Comparative Study of Opposing Views

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READING IN THE KINDERGARTEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OPPOSING VIEWS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
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CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

The subject of reading and the kindergarten child is attracting much attention. There is a difference of opinion and steadily growing pressures to consider the possible merits of teaching reading to certain children before the first grade. It is toward this matter that the present study is directed.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study to attempt to bring together differing opinions and research concerning the teaching of formal reading skills to children of kindergarten age. In order to establish evidence relevant to the problem, the following question was considered: Should the teaching of formal reading skills be a part of the kindergarten curriculum?

In view of the question, this paper attempted to study from the literature whether formal reading skills should be taught to children in kindergarten classes.

Importance of the study. We are living in an age of pressure characterized by speed and power. This pressure has caused many trends in the field of education. One of the trends resulting from the pressure on education is
earlier introduction of learning tasks, with earlier formal reading occupying a significant place among these trends.

On the one hand are those who believe formal reading instruction should be given to kindergarten children. On the other hand is a group just as vocal in denouncing the introduction of formal reading instruction to kindergarten children.

Harris (17:1-7) reminds us that reading, which is considered the basic subject taught in the elementary school, has always played a prominent part in curriculum planning. So important is the subject of reading that elementary schools spend more money on reading materials than any other type of school supplies. More time and effort is devoted to the teaching of reading in the primary grades than any other phase of the program.

The question arising among many educators and parents is whether we are wasting valuable time in a child's life by not teaching him to read earlier in his school career.

Those who object to having reading taught in the kindergarten believe it marks the inevitable entrance to a formal program. Formal program can mean the use of workbooks, seatwork that involves printed directions, instruction which is group centered and rigid, and one where movement and choice of an activity are not possible. They believe the program should be one where the child engages in
group and individual activities, where new ideas and concepts should be introduced through a varied and rich experiential background, and language growth stimulated through listening to stories, conversation, poetry, dramatizations, and discussion of experiences (19:Ch. V; 14: Ch. X; 20:32-38; 24:32-36).

In 1957 when Dolores Durkin announced plans to do research in early reading for children, she was met with little enthusiasm and response. She says, "It was as if to think about the possibilities of earlier reading instruction was to encourage a return to the era of child labor abuses" (11:3).

Recently Brzeinski (7), Hillerich (21), Sutton (36), Bruner (6), and others have become interested in reading for the young child.

Durrell and Nicholson have this comment to make about early reading:

There appears to be objection on the part of some teachers of young children to the idea of providing systematic instruction in letters, sounds, and words. Both "systematic" and "instruction" are sometimes considered unacceptable words in preschool and kindergarten. One may "provide opportunity" informally. One may "lead and encourage" but one must not "teach." The general idea seems to be that any program of teaching is necessary to force children to learn letters or sounds within spoken words. There are many opportunities for awakening interest in letters . . . .

The beginnings of reading and writing need not be a chore for children. In every aspect of the program
interest should be kept high, meaning emphasized, and delight in learning encouraged (12:267-69).

It is toward these two groups, those who do not want formal reading instruction in kindergarten and those who see a need for early reading for some children, that this paper has been directed.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

For purposes of this study the following definitions were used:

Reading. Reading is a complex process which involves the principle of association learning. A child perceives the printed form through sensations picked up by the eyes and transmitted to the brain. Here the association of the printed form to past experience is made. From these associations, meanings, appreciation, critical reactions, and utilization are formed.

Readiness. That stage in a child's total development which makes it possible for him to learn to read with success and satisfaction. This implies a combination of personal factions, namely, physiological, psychological, mental, social, and emotional.

Formal reading instruction. This refers to situations where children have a period set aside each day with
the teacher or an adult present to give systematic instruction in reading and related skills. A meaningful interpretation of verbal symbols is expected.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Today, as never before, pressure is great to teach young children to read. The pressure comes from such varied sources as the press, teachers, commercial firms, and parents of both precocious and normal children.

From the discussions, articles, and research on the most desirable time to begin reading instruction, it is evident there is considerable disagreement among the experts. Much of the material that has been written about reading at the kindergarten level has been against the teaching of reading, and not until the past decade has much been published in its favor.

Durkin (11:3-7), Hillerich (21:1-7) Brzeinski (7:16-21, and Kelley (23:58) have been among those who in the last ten years have maintained there are children ready to go much further than the traditional kindergarten program has allowed them to go. They advocate a curriculum which would recognize individual differences, thus giving opportunity to some children to learn to read.

From whether the kindergarten curriculum should continue with the traditional readiness program or whether it should offer systematic instruction in reading emerges the diverse ideas present among educators and in the schools today.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND AUTHORITATIVE OPINION FOR THE TEACHING OF READING IN KINDERGARTEN

For those who are concerned about starting some children to read earlier than first grade the psychologists are creating added interest. The trend in child psychology in recent years has been influential in that it has caused a second look at the traditional program being offered to children of kindergarten age. There may be some five-year-old children who are ready for systematic instruction.

Harold Stevenson, in the introduction to the Sixty-Second Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, has this to say:

Child psychology of the past decade differs greatly from that of earlier years. Longitudinal studies, observational methods, and a developmental orientation have largely been replaced or supplemented by short-term experimental studies of the effects of particular variable on child behavior. The "variable" approach has played an increasingly significant role in research in general psychology, and its impact on child psychology has been strongly felt during the past decade (35:2).

Some recent research, in particular the work of the psychologist Jerome S. Bruner of Harvard, has awakened interest in earlier reading by its suggestion "... there is no reason to believe that any subject cannot be taught to any child at virtually any age in some form" (6:47). This concept has been amply proven in New Haven, Connecticut, where Dr. Omar Khayyam Moore of Yale has taught two- and three-
year-olds to read, write, and type (30:206). As early as 1937 Gates (15:497-508) found that children could learn to read at four or five years of age. In his study he makes the point that no single level of intelligence is required for beginning reading.

Although most research has dealt with phases of kindergarten education other than the optimum time for learning to read, there are some recent studies which are of significance.

In the Denver Public Schools a longitudinal research study to determine the effectiveness of beginning the teaching of reading in kindergarten was started in 1960. At the writing of this paper statistics were not available on this study since the 5,000 pupils are to be studied through fifth grade. However, at the end of the first year of study the data indicated the program of systematic instruction to be more effective in the development of reading skills than the regular traditional program which provided incidental opportunity for developing reading readiness. Children with a mental age of at least four and a half years could be taught certain beginning skills (7:16-21, 34:84-87).

In a parallel study the Denver Public Schools involved parents by use of television to provide early educational experiences for their preschool children in an experimental prereading program. Final evaluation must wait
the end of the research project.

Interim results, however, appear to indicate that  
(1) parents can help their children begin to read,  
(2) many boys and girls in a large public school  
system can be taught beginning reading successfully,  
and (3) such early reading instruction has a measurable,  
positive, continuing effect" (7:21).

An experiment conducted in New Hampshire based on  
the Denver project where approximately 200 parents partici-  
pated in helping preschool children with prereading skills  
was termed successful. The findings, according to McManus,  

. . . gave unquestionable assurance that the program  
was worthwhile for parents in working with preschool  
children. The children made considerable gains in  
letter-name and letter-sound knowledge, in simple  
alphabet and phonic ability, in sight-word recogni-  
tion, and in ability to identify words by using the  
beginning sound and context (25:22).

In Muncie, Indiana, Sutton (37:234-239) reports on a  
kindergarten program which was offered during the full school  
term. The teacher watched for any special interest in read-  
ing and writing. To start the program, pre-primers and  
other easy reading books were placed in the room for the  
children to discover. The children started reading at var-  
ious times during the year and were given approximately fif-  
ten minutes of instruction a day. By the end of the year  
when they were tested with Gates Primary Reading Tests, 46  
of the 134 children in the class achieved a reading level of  
at least the third month of first grade. Sutton (36:300)  
believes the apparent reading potential of many young chil-  
dren has been underestimated and if we strive to meet
individual needs of children at other grade levels we should do so at the kindergarten level instead of offering the same program to all.

The Appleton study (3:248-252) done at the University Elementary School of the University of California reports similar results to that of Sutton. By taking advantage of physical facilities and using two adjoining rooms and two teachers, a team teaching approach, they were able to offer opportunity for reading to kindergarten children. One room was equipped with material conducive to quiet play but also reading materials. The other classroom was used for more active play and projects. For most of the day the children could choose their own activities. During the summer session, prior to entrance in first grade, of the twenty-six who participated, all but three children learned to read with some reading as many as nine beginning books. Satisfactory progress in reading ability determined by teacher appraisal and test scores from the Survey of Primary Reading Development were used in judging the success of the study.

Durkin (10:145-46, 8:80, 9:16), who has conducted longitudinal studies in New York and California public schools, has made these observations as a result of her research: (1) early readers come from varied backgrounds, (2) preschool reading does not necessarily lead to problems
for school reading, (3) preschool help with reading does not cause problems in reading instruction at school, (4) an earlier start in reading can result in greater achievement in later years, (5) most "bright" preschoolers with comparable intelligence achieve higher reading in five years of school than do non-early readers with six years of instruction, (6) children with lower intelligence appear to have profited from their early start, and (7) the lower the child's I.Q., the greater seems to be the advantage of starting early.

In New Zealand, Sheppard (31:40-43) reports she has been successful in teaching five-year-olds to read. In her class of forty-one children, thirty-three were taught to read by a writing method she describes as "talk written down."

A kindergarten teacher, Lucille Mayne (26:406-408), describes what she did to advance the reading ability of two bright kindergartners discovered to be already reading. She describes their progress by the end of the year at which time the two children were promoted into second grade. Their reading achievement at the end of grade two is also described. All of the data show achievement that is above grade-level expectations.

Hillerich (21:1-7), Austin (4:57), Kelley (23:58), Durkin (11:3-7), and others have expressed opinions, while
not always based on specific research, that they believe young children are not the same today as they were thirty years ago. They come to school with larger vocabularies and broader experience; they have traveled more; they have seen and listened to television; and they have profited from parents whose education and standard of living is higher than was true in 1930. Because of this background they believe we need a change in the kindergarten curriculum so children who are ready to read can receive proper instruction.

Not only are children growing up in a society of rich experiences that in the past were limited to a few, but as Harris (17:61-62) has indicated, with the combination of the improvement of beginning reading materials and with the improved methods of instruction, it probably makes delays in starting systematic instruction less necessary than twenty years ago.

The indications of the need of more individualized instruction is evident. Smith (33:14) makes reference to Dr. Willard Olson's theory of seeking, self-selection, and pacing. In this child-psychology oriented plan the child seeks that which stimulates him, selects the book he desires to read, and proceeds at his own rate. This plan is being used in certain school systems but is still too new for research reports to be in published summaries. The studies
reviewed earlier of Appleton, Sutton, Mayne, Denver Schools, all show the results of individualized help.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND AUTHORITATIVE OPINION AGAINST THE TEACHING OF READING IN KINDERGARTEN

Those who oppose the teaching of reading skills at the kindergarten level believe it is not a question of can they be taught to read but should they be taught to read. There are doubts that most young children are sufficiently mature physically and emotionally at five years of age to withstand systematic instruction without harmful results. There are also doubts that teaching reading skills at this level makes the best use of age five.

Kindergarten can contribute to success in reading even though it does not teach reading formally. Through an exploratory program which has been traditional in most kindergartens, rich experiences in learning can be offered where there is time to discover and nurture creative gifts of young children and yet remain flexible and informal. Such a program affords children natural opportunity for language development, manipulating materials, sensing meanings and relationships, developing work habits, and attaining social maturity. A curriculum which follows the exploratory program will be contributing to reading growth, or
reading readiness, even though there is no systematic instruction given in reading (5:24, 18:6-7, 28:22, 14:154).

Most writers agree that there is no one particular trait or quality necessary to begin reading. Rather it is a composite of physiological, psychological, social, emotional, and mental factors. Each has influence upon the other directly or indirectly in a child's reading growth pattern.

In the studies and discussion which follow on growth factors which contribute to reading maturation there are some indications of the complexity of the process necessary to undertake systematic reading instruction.

Physical growth as related to reading success has been the subject of much investigation. That there is a relationship between physical immaturity and reading development, especially during the initial stages of reading, is evident in studies of Anderson and Hughes and Eames. Anderson and Hughes (2:65-68) compared the average growth ages of boys and girls having the same I.Q. in the first grade who learned to read early and late. It was found that boys and girls who begin reading late tend to be physically less mature than boys and girls who begin reading early. Eames's (13:506-508) study of 80 pupils in the first six grades, found the correlation nearly five times as great among the reading failures with birth weights being less
than five pounds as among the reading failures with birth
weights over five pounds.

Mental age is one of the major growths which contrib-
utes to success in beginning reading. The Raybold study of
1929 that is referred to in The Encyclopedia of Educational
Research (16:1115), "found that children with a mental age
of 76 months made more rapid progress in learning to read
than those who were less mature."

Morphett and Washburne's (27:53-57) study of 1931
compared the progress of first-grade children of different
chronological and mental ages in various phases of reading
progress. They concluded that a mental age of 6.5 years is
the optimum time at which to begin reading, but that some
children with mental ages between 6.0 and 6.5 years make
satisfactory progress.

Closely related to mental ability is the child's
experiential enrichment of background information and con-
cepts. A study made by Witty and Kopel, as reported in The
Encyclopedia of Educational Research, following a critical
analysis of 93 scientific studies, articles, and reports,
concluded,

... that reading should be delayed until children's
background of experience and mental growth enable them
to find meaning in the tasks presented to them; and
until this progress of maturation has engendered a
condition in which reversals are few and perception of
words and other meaningful units is possible (16:1115).
Two other studies of importance concerning background experiences are those of Hillard and Troxell (22:255) and Almy (1:48-52). The former found that children with rich backgrounds exceeded meager background children in test results of reading. Almy's study found that "a significant, positive relationship exists between success in beginning reading and the child's responses to opportunities for reading prior to first grade."

Smith (32:4) makes reference to three Master's theses which point out the value of good background experiences in relation to reading growth:

McDowell experimented in providing an 'enriched curriculum' for kindergarten children and found that this was an effective way of preparing for beginning reading.

Stallings compared pre-school experiences and reading success of urban and rural children and concluded that the varied experiences of pre-school children are factors bearing in direct proportion to their reading readiness scores.

McWhorter enriched the experiences of children with meager backgrounds and found that this enrichment resulted in substantial gains in reading.

Although there is no research available on the government-sponsored Project Head Start of 1965, it was with this idea of overcoming meager backgrounds and cultural deprivation that this program was dedicated.

Emotional and social maturity as related to reading success involves the ability and desire to help oneself, to participate cooperatively in a group, to adjust to new
situations, and to show initiative. The study of Saunders (29:59-65) shows a relationship between emotional maturity and reading success. He reported that children who did not learn to read were not aggressive, that they developed behavior problems, and that they were emotionally dependent upon their parents. In a study conducted by Tulchin (38:443-54), he found that the experience a child has during his first few reading lessons may become so charged emotionally as to effect all subsequent reactions and determine his resistance to reading.

Visual perception as related to reading success shows a close relationship to reading growth. While it is evident that normal children of five and six, in terms of mental age, can perceive simple forms without great difficulty, it is less certain to what extent they can remember accurately small differences between a number of different shapes. Vernon (39), in her book Backwardness in Reading, cites the research of Kendall and Gates in this regard.

In the area of auditory perception and its relation to reading, Sheldon (30:15-17) summarized the research of Fletcher, Kennedy, Bennett, Horn, Agnew, and others. He concluded that auditory perception of word sounds and their association with printed shapes presents difficulty to the young child. They may not hear or enunciate words clearly
and accurately, nor may they be certain of the meaning and be capable of using them correctly.

For those opposing the teaching of reading skills to kindergarten children, the following statement by Sheldon may answer the question: **Should** kindergarten children be taught to read?

The work of Piaget and others related to the education of five-year-olds seems to indicate that, at this stage in his life, each child needs individual attention. This cannot be accomplished in a rigid atmosphere wherein children are grouped together for formal instruction . . . . From the research which is pertinent, . . . there seems to be little or no justification for introducing reading into the curriculum at the kindergarten or five-year-old stage (30:17).

Although many of the studies against the teaching of reading skills to kindergarten children were done in the 30's and 40's, until other research can either refute or contradict this research, it remains as the best evidence of what the kindergarten should teach.

Controversy is a natural constituent of any field as extensive as reading. After comparing the two views as to whether reading should or should not be offered before entering first grade, one realizes the importance of careful consideration pertaining to this preschool experience for our many eligible children.
CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

**Purpose of study.** It was the purpose of this study to consider the research and opinions, both pro and con, pertaining to the teaching of formal reading skills to children in kindergarten classes.

Those who administer the public educational program should be informed of the research relating to the teaching of reading in kindergarten so they can better explain the program used in their school to administrators, teachers, parents, and other interested persons.

**Summary.** From authorities who advocate reading for some children in kindergarten, the following points were found in their research:

1. There are children who can and do learn to read before entrance to first grade.
2. No single level of intelligence is required for beginning reading.
3. Television has shown promise of being a good medium for instructing parents in methods to use in helping their children to begin reading at home before entrance to first grade.
4. Individual needs of kindergarten children can be more adequately met if opportunity to read from
books is made available and instruction is given to those who show interest.

5. Early readers come from varied backgrounds.

6. Preschool reading does not necessarily lead to problems for school reading.

7. An earlier start in reading can result in greater achievement in later years.

8. Most "bright" preschoolers with comparable intelligence achieve higher reading in five years of school than do non-early readers with six years of instruction.

9. Children with lower intelligence appear to have profited from their early start.

10. The lower the child's I.Q., the greater seems to be the advantage of starting early.

The following opposing facts of teaching reading skills to kindergarten children were noted in the research read:

1. A good curriculum at the kindergarten level, based on exploration in all areas, can remain flexible and informal, thus offering the wide background necessary for reading growth. The curriculum does not need to offer specific instruction in reading skills.
2. Physical immaturity is related to reading development during the initial stages of reading.

3. Mental age contributes to success in reading in that more rapid progress in learning to read can be expected from children whose mental age is at least 6.0 or 6.5.

4. A child's background of information and concepts shows a positive relationship to success in beginning reading.

5. Emotional and social experiences help substantially when the child undertakes the formal reading process.

6. The visual and auditory perception necessary in reading demands accuracy which may present difficulty to the young child.

7. There is no one particular trait or quality necessary to begin reading. It is a composite of physiological, psychological, social, emotional, and mental factors.

Conclusions. In the studies presented it appears that most research still finds it undesirable to start formalized reading instruction before first grade. However, educators cannot have a closed mind to recent research, but neither can they disregard the research of the past.
The studies and discussions presented on the growth factors, physical, mental, emotional, and social, which contribute to reading maturation, offer some indication of the complexity of the process necessary to undertake systematic instruction. The lack of any one of these factors may cause failure to learn to read.

The research of the last decade shows what a few kindergarten children can do when opportunity and help are given in the teaching of reading skills, but as yet it has not been extensive enough to warrant complete acceptance. It is questionable that even the advanced five-year-old receives enough value from reading instruction to compensate for the effort of both child and teacher when it is compared to the values received from other activities. It is also doubtful that the success of a few should have the effect of changing what has proven to be good learning experiences for other children.

Even the children who have learned to read before kindergarten entrance need to participate in activities which stimulate them intellectually, extend language development, and help them to work cooperatively with other children. A good readiness program will have something to offer to these children.

Research needs to be more extensive in regard to the possible side-effects of teaching formal reading to children.
at an early age. Studies might include the side-effects of early reading on the child physically and emotionally or whether children might develop antagonistic attitudes toward and a distaste for reading.

Research needs to be broader, longer, deeper, and take into consideration more variables. Comparative studies should involve large groups of children, carefully equated, who started to read at different ages, and should follow them for several years. This would be necessary to give conclusive evidence for an ideal stage of maturity at which to begin reading. The need for highly trained researchers is urgent if quantitative and qualitative results are wanted. The problems are far too vast and important to be left to the individual efforts of part-time researchers.

**Recommendations or implications.** The findings from these readings suggest the following:

1. Kindergarten children need abundant informal, functional contacts with reading. The teacher should be alert to opportunities to expose children to reading symbols. The children should frequently see their own words flow into printed symbols as they are written on the board or on large sheets of paper by the teacher.
2. Formal systematic instruction to whole classes of children is not recommended. It is quite possible a child may come to kindergarten knowing how to read or during the year may show intense interest in reading from books. If the child wants to read and asks for help, the kindergarten teacher should encourage him in reading and give the requested assistance.

3. In order that each child can receive the individual help which he needs, the number of children assigned to each teacher should be such that it would enable her to help each child advance at a pace appropriate for his ability.

4. For the immature child, who might profit from another year of growth before entering kindergarten, some method of testing might be devised which would take into consideration the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth, thereby offering encouragement to parents to wait before starting the child in kindergarten. Chronological age is a convenient but very inaccurate way of determining when to start reading.

5. School people need to help parents define more specifically their role as educators of the preschool
child. Schools might offer workshops and counseling services to parents which would help them to realize their role in one of the prerequisites for reading, namely, language training.

In conclusion, the following recommendations for further research are offered:

1. Studies that show the benefits of learning to read at an early age should be of great importance to those advocating early reading.

2. A study that would indicate the best methods to use for accurate identification of children who may be ready to read in the kindergarten would be an aid to the teacher in giving individual guidance.

3. Longitudinal studies covering several years of experimentation and comparison with methods and materials of instruction that would be most effective for teaching reading to preschool children should prove beneficial.

4. Studies which show how formal instruction at an early age affects children physically and psychologically would be important to the future of the school curriculum.

5. Investigation should be made to determine the time at which reading ability will be of more general, social, and educational value than other activities
which could be pursued if reading were not taught.

6. More research needs to be done in the area of language development and how it effects the child through parental contacts, through the child-teacher relationship, and through the child-to-child contact at school.

7. Finally, studies are needed that would show what special experiences contribute to better intellectual processes and personal adjustment for the culturally under-privileged child.
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