LITERACY FOR ALL CHILDREN

Early literacy: What does "developmentally appropriate" mean?

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This department will focus on children who find learning to read difficult. These children have been tagged with a variety of diagnostic and categorical labels. We are quite certain that these labels are not very useful—too often obscuring children's potential. We will attempt to explore the conventional wisdom that has enveloped our responses to these children and suggest alternative ways for thinking about the challenges these children face in our schools. We believe that all children can become literate with their peers but that attaining this will require us to reformulate literacy instruction. We hope this department will prove useful in this regard and move us closer to meeting the challenge of achieving literacy for all children.

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A year or so ago I attended a reunion of women who, like me, had been legislative fellows sponsored by the Center for Women in Government at the State University of New York at Albany. All of these women are deeply committed to supporting policies that will improve the lives of women and children. I was engaged in a lively debate about the benefits of Federal legislation (U.S. PL 99-457) to increase the participation of "at-risk" 3- to 5-year-old children in early intervention programs for the handicapped. Such children are said to be developmentally "behind" their peers because of social, emotional, language, or cognitive factors, although their "handicap" may not be precisely identified at this early age. When I said that I didn't believe in identifying children as disabled before they had even experienced whatever it was they were supposed to learn, I was asked: "Aren't you a developmentalist?" The question gave me pause.

Would a developmentalist isolate children who already know a lot about written language and literacy from those who do not? Does a developmentalist believe that early school programs can be powerful equalizers of children's literacy experiences so that all children achieve with their peers? Or does a developmentalist believe that there has to be a "bottom" group and children who fail because they're "not ready"?

As it turns out, *developmental learning* or *developmentally appropriate instruction* are the new buzz words for educating young (and not so young) children. Like all buzz words, "developmentally appropriate instruction" can have multiple interpretations.

There are few who would quibble with the argument that children differ from each other in important ways. As research studies have demonstrated again and again, children differ in language use and social competence, children differ in their memory for what we as teachers view as important, and children differ in the attention they are willing to invest in the tasks we present as our literacy curriculum. Most important, I would argue that children differ in the personal literacy histories they bring to school and families differ in the resources they have to promote the educational well-being of their children.

In her book, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print,* psychologist Marilyn Adams (1990) tells us that middle-class children typically come to school with thousands of hours of guidance about print—storybook reading, message writing, letter identification, and so on—from parents, preschool teachers, educational toys, and television, whereas less advantaged children may have no such experiences. Nonetheless, all parents—regardless of social class—value education for their children. The sociologist Annette Lareau (1989), for example, suggests in her book that the "home advantage" enjoyed by children of the middle and upper classes is not money per se, but rather parents' knowledge of how schools work. Like middle-class parents, working-class parents expect their young children to learn to read in first grade. However, working-class parents usually are not able to compensate at home when the first-grade curriculum turns out to be weak or their children have trouble keeping up.

In short, there are real differences in the development and histories of children. If we want to personalize our instruction, engage children, and make

them feel valued, these differences *must* inform what we do and say in our interactions with children. Yet these differences should not become the rationale for not teaching all children whatever it is they need to know to participate fully in the literate culture of our schools.

A trap for poor children?

I believe there is a trap in the concept of *developmental appropriateness*. Not long ago, the National Association for the Education of Young Children broadly defined *developmental appropriateness* as a concept related to both "predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in [most] children during the first 9 years of life" and to the "individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as individual personality, learning style, and family background" (1986, p. 5). In practice, however, developmental appropriateness has been interpreted to mean that reading and writing are "academic skills" that do not belong in child-centered early childhood programs and that there is no role for adult modeling or teaching in so-called "active" learning environments. Artificial dichotomies that pit academic learning against social learning, direct-instruction versus activity-based models, and academics versus child development have been set up. As the early childhood researcher Susan Robinson (1990) found, preschool teachers are reluctant to display print, read extended stories, or allow children to write because they are not sure these trappings of our literate culture are appropriate for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. Unfortunately for poor children, the restrictions of such developmentally appropriate practices are most burdensome for them. Private nursery schools and other early childhood programs can and do teach whatever they please, often providing instruction in not only written English but also, say, some Spanish or French, and perhaps the Hebrew alphabet or a few Chinese words as well. By contrast, in many publicly funded early childhood programs for poor children it is considered developmentally inappropriate to display the letters of the English alphabet or even to sing the alphabet song. One African-American teacher told me that Head Start doesn't believe in teaching kids to write:

> The goal is self-esteem. Maybe 25 years ago when they started the program children were so delayed they needed a whole year of social skills. That's not the case now. The program assumes the children are stupid.... There's no money for books and paper...circle time is not supposed to last longer than 10 minutes...and they are not supposed to do whole group activities.

Yet this same teacher noted that children were screened both in preschool and in kindergarten for developmental benchmarks such as being able to retell stories and print some letters of the alphabet. When children perform poorly, it is attributed to their delayed development or disability, rather than to the paucity of experiences and opportunities to explore written language and literary understandings.

Developmental metaphors: Flowers or scaffolds?

For some Piagetian psychologists or Gesell developmentalists, children's development is biologically fixed and the timetable cannot be influenced by instruction. Teachers may be admonished not to tamper with the unfolding maturation of the child. For those who hold this view, to say that development may be accelerated is to propose the unthinkable.

In fact, the contemporary "hothouse" metaphors of the late 1980s and early 1990s not only espouse this position, but they are indeed reminiscent of much earlier times. Amariah Brigham, an influential 19th-century physician, and many of his turn-of-the-century peers believed that "cultivating intellectual faculties of children before they are six or seven" would harm body and soul:

> Early mental excitement will serve only to bring forth beautiful but premature flowers, which are destined soon to wither away, without producing fruit. (cited in Kaestle & Vinovskis, 1980, p. 59)

According to these doctors, more than an hour of school for children under 8 years old would induce the "morbid condition of precocity," which could lead to "imbecility or premature old age." Arnold Gesell, an influential physician of the next century, related human development to "neural ripening," and a prominent progressive educator of the same time period, Carleton Washburne, identified the mental age of 6½ years as the optimal time to begin to teach reading. Over the years, these theories have persisted within certain school communities even though no credible evidence supports them. As late as 1988, David Elkind, early childhood educator and author of several books on the "hurried child" and "miseducation" of children, cited Washburne's 1930s work as testimony to the wisdom of teaching children to read at 7 or 8 years old, rather than at younger ages.

Unfortunately, in our culture, a child who is 8 years old and not a reader is a child in deep trouble at school. The irony of it all is that no child needs to be in that kind of trouble. We are so much smarter now than we were in the 1800s and the early 1900s about how children come to literacy. We know now that reading instruction does not start in preschool, or kindergarten, or first grade. We learn to read, as Frank Smith says, from "the company we keep," and children are in the company of adults from the moment they are born.

Literacy for All Children is a column focusing on children who find learning to read difficult. Send questions, comments, or suggestions about the column to **Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen, Department of Reading, State University of New York at Albany, Education 333, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222, USA.**

Vygotskian psychologists, also developmentalists, would agree with Smith. They believe that instruction should move ahead of development and pull it along. By talking with grownups and capable peers as they go about doing the kinds of things literate people do, children are able to construct meanings for tasks that they could not understand on their own. This modeling or scaffolding enables children to perform tasks that they could not otherwise do. But such instruction actually *transforms* the child's development so that tomorrow the child is able to independently do what he could do *only with assistance* today.

Believing in ourselves as teachers

The interaction between *instruction* and *development* is complex, and an uncontested definition of the relationship does not exist. Nonetheless, our own beliefs about the relationship are extremely important. As researchers Mary Lee Smith and Lorrie Shepard (1988) discovered, teachers who hold a nativist view (the flower metaphor) do not believe that they can accelerate development of children who arrive unready for kindergarten. Such teachers urge parents to give children the "gift of time" by holding them out of school for an extra year or by placing them in developmental kindergartens or other transitional-grade classrooms. These teachers retain children deemed unready to go on and classify them as developmentally delayed and in need of special education services. The nativist perspective might preclude reading to children who prefer to spend all of their time at the sandbox. Children who claim that they cannot write a story or their names might not be invited to explore with paper and pens if we believe that children's thinking passes through invariant stages regardless of how we support their learning.

On the other hand, teachers who hold remedial or interactionist views of development (the scaffold metaphor) revise their instruction, not their expectations for learning, when children are not progressing. These teachers believe in themselves as able to "bring children along." The noted New Zealand educator, Marie Clay, spoke recently in Columbus, Ohio, about the results of early intervention in reading instruction in her country. Clay expressed amazement that between 98 and 99% of all children were able to achieve at the expected level for first grade, and in New Zealand children with learning disabilities and other mild handicaps were not separated from their peers. Trained as a developmental psychologist in the Piagetian tradition, Clay said that she was unprepared for the dramatic way that *appropriate instruction* in reading *accelerated development.*

We should not look at development as something that *limits* what children can accomplish as learners and what we can accomplish as teachers. Rather, the individual and variable development of children is an opportunity to personalize our instruction. As teachers we must celebrate and affirm, but also *extend and elaborate* each child's developing knowledge of written language.

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