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Michael R. Sampson
East Texas State University

L.D. Briggs
East Texas State University

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WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT BEGINNING READING?

Michael R. Sampson and L. D. Briggs

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION
EAST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY, COMMERCE, TEXAS

Reading, mankind's way of conveying thoughts and ideas across time and distance, has long been treasured by a literate society. Reading has become so vital in the American society that often people who do not read face difficulties in social interactions and in securing employment. This has resulted in an all-out effort by parents and teachers to guide children into discovering the process of reading.

Authorities have differing points of view about when reading instruction should begin. Morphet and Washburne (1931) selected the mental age of six years and six months as the "best" time to begin reading instruction. Their study of first graders showed a high correlation between mental age and reading achievement which led them to select the magical age. Weaknesses in their study include a limited population—first-grade in one school in Illinois—and the apparently false assumption that a specific mental age guarantees a certain development level which in turn insures a high degree of reading success.

The theory of the need to delay reading instruction until approximately the middle of the first grade prevailed until the mid-1960s (Chall, 1977). The prevalent philosophy was that the later the children started to school, the better. It was believed that children needed to practice preparatory skills before learning to read. A majority of the reading methods textbooks used in teacher-training institutions before 1965 supported the theory that a lack of reading readiness was a major cause of reading failure.

Durkin has made major contributions to the study of beginning reading. Her work has attacked the notions that a certain age is required for reading and that readiness skills must be taught. She (Durkin, 1966) conducted two longitudinal studies of children who learned to read before receiving school instruction. The first study, involving a sample of forty-nine preschool readers, covered a six-year period beginning in 1958. One hundred and fifty-six preschool readers were the subjects for the second study which began in 1961 and continued until 1964. Her conclusions were that some children could and would read before school instruction and that children differ greatly in potential and achievement. In these studies, Durkin also found that the average achievement of the children who read before entering school was higher than the average achievement of equally intelligent children who were not preschool readers. Since children are individually dif-

ferent and unique, Durkin felt that kindergarten programs should have flexible curriculums.

Durkin (1974-1975) conducted a follow-up study of the children involved in the 1966 study. In the study she followed the children from grade one to grade four and compared these children with a control group not involved in her earlier study, but who had attended kindergartens that dealt with the development of a reading vocabulary, and letter and numeral naming. The reading achievement of the preschool readers exceeded that of the control group in each of the four grades. However, an analysis of covariance indicated statistically significant differences only in first and second grades. When relating reading achievement to chronological age, Durkin found no significant correlation. Durkin hypothesized that even though the students had not made statistically significant gains in grades three and four, the possibility existed that early reading was educationally productive. Thus she claimed that educational importance could only be determined if early reading experiences were utilized in planning subsequent instruction. Observations of the classrooms of the preschool readers convinced Durkin that the teachers had not capitalized upon the early reading experiences of the students.

McAllister (1975) studied a group of children who were taught to read in kindergarten. After the completion of the first grade, these children were ahead of the control group who had not received such kindergarten training. However, the advantage of early reading was not present at the end of the second grade for the control group had caught up with the experimental group in reading achievement.

After working with schools in the United States, Douglass (1969) noted that teachers were very concerned about scholastic failure, especially in beginning reading. In contrast, he found in Norwegian schools an absence of the idea of failure. The Norwegian child starts school at seven years of age and spends only fifteen hours a week in school. The Norwegian educators never consider the possibility that the child would not learn to read. The classrooms were less formal, and social groupings formed the basis for the learning. Douglass listed several practices which he considered advantages in the Norwegian schools; two of the practices were particularly noteworthy: (a) the children had the same teacher for a minimum of four years, and (b) there was no grouping by ability.

Shapiro and Willford (1969) examined the effects of early reading on subsequent reading achievement. The control group received the instruction in kindergarten. At the end of the second grade, a statistically significant difference favored the experimental group.

Laird and Cangemi (1975) addressed the question of early reading by stating that the language experiences of today's four- and five-year-olds are more sophisticated than those of children in past decades. Chall (1977) gave credence to these comments by pointing out the educational contributions of such television shows as "Sesame Street" and "The Elec-

tric Company.” She stated that these television programs give “popular legitimacy” to early reading as parents and teachers observe children being guided into the reading process with “no obvious harmful effects.”

Sutton (1969) made a longitudinal study of the impact of pre first grade reading on children’s later achievement. At the end of the third grade, the experimental subjects who had learned to read in kindergarten scored higher on reading achievement tests than two control groups who had not read in kindergarten.

King and Friesen (1972) identified twenty-seven children who could read when they were in kindergarten. Twenty-eight kindergarten nonreaders were selected to serve as the control group. The results of two reading tests, given at the end of the first grade, indicated that the experimental subjects performed at a higher level of achievement than the members of the control group.

Domain (1964) and Delacato (1966) examined from a neurological maturational viewpoint the question of when reading instruction should begin. They stated that children have a neurological organizational developmental pattern of learning to crawl, to creep, and then to walk. If this sequence is interrupted, they claimed that the child might have trouble learning to read. The last step in neurological development is laterality, and receptive language and expressive language depend upon this development. According to these researchers, children have the potential to learn to read when they have developed strong laterality.

Smethurst (1975) studied early readers and found no evidence of negative effects on children who learned to read early. In fact, indications were that early reading was beneficial to both the child’s mental development and general achievement.

Furth and Wachs (1974) and Elkind, Larson, and Doorninck (1965) opposed an early start in reading. Furth and Wachs stated that early reading could be harmful to cognitive growth. Elkind, Larson, and Doorninck believed that attempting to teach reading before the first grade is useless because children do not have the cognitive development required for reading.

Chall (1977) stated that in the last ten years the question has changed from *is early reading beneficial* to *who should teach it*. In 1967, educators felt that reading instruction should be provided only by a professional teacher in the school. Today, the parents are being accepted as teachers, and the home has become a classroom. In addition, parents are now serving as paraprofessionals in many schools across the country.

In a majority of the studies discussed thus far, the educators have perceived reading to be a process which must be taught to youngsters. This is a very narrow definition of reading. Goodman and Goodman believed that reading actually begins when children “respond to meaningful printed symbols in a situational contest with which they are familiar” (1976, p. 12). Smith echoed this idea by stating that children

“probably begin to read from the moment they become aware of print in any meaningful way” (1976, p. 297). These views hold that children learn language and reading naturally, and that they learn to read the same way and for the same reasons that they learn to speak and listen (Goodman & Goodman, 1976). The implications are that educators should not ask when to teach children reading because, in fact, children learn to read naturally on their own as they encounter print and have a need for understanding it.

SUMMARY

A review of the literature indicated that educators have differing opinions concerning the optimum time to begin reading instruction. The majority of the studies held that learning to read before school is an asset to children because this lead in achievement is maintained through the first two years of school. Durkin stated that if kindergarten teachers capitalize on the reading abilities when the children enter school, the achievement advantage will be maintained beyond the second grade.

The Goodman and Goodman study indicated that the teacher need not ask when to teach children to read because children become aware of print in their environment and proceed to the stage where they obtain meaning from print in a total reading context. Therefore, learning to read is as natural as learning to understand speech. When children enter school, the teacher should base the curriculum on the reading abilities of the children. In other words, the teacher should base instruction on the child's level of maturation and should not force all children through the same educational sequence. To place every child into the same instructional mold would cause the children who come to school knowing how to read to be held back and to become frustrated. Also, the role of the teacher should be that of a master of language and a helper of children. The teacher should provide this help by setting up learning situations which motivate children. Instruction which does not build on the child's natural learning ability will serve only as interference and will be counterproductive.

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