

1-1-1979

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Recommended Citation

Davis, M. D., & Muia, J. A. (1979). Children Get Ready to Read. *Reading Horizons, 19* (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol19/iss2/4

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CHILDREN GET READY TO READ

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One of the major concerns of early childhood education has been, and will continue to be, the development of an optimal readiness program for children. (Almy, 1967). It will need to be one that will allow all young children the opportunity to build skills, knowledge and understanding that can serve as a strong foundation for the development of later reading abilities. At present, the emphasis on readiness seems to focus on academic, skill oriented programs which use workbooks and basal readers for teaching these skills. The use of these materials has become so widespread that in most readiness programs the basal workbook provides the core of instruction (Wilson and Hall, 1972). Durkin (1970) points out that even various kindergarten programs have begun to adopt the basal workbook materials. And she emphasized that . . .

. . . It is just this kind of wholesale, unimaginative swing that has engendered opposition to reading during the kindergarten year - oppositions it must be added which rarely distinguish between a method that might be inappropriate and a timing that might be just right, at least for some kindergarteners.

In addition, the misuse and overindulgence of formalized readiness programs have assisted in furthering the misconceptions about reading readiness. Schickedanz (1977), points out that the emphasis on "reading kits and workbooks" in the first grade has led early childhood educators to believe that a discussion of reading instruction in the preschool means . . . "structured skill instruction." Schickedanz indicates that the present reading materials and practices are not totally related to some early childhood educators' thoughts about "*how* children learn and *what* makes children *want to learn*."

The alternative to formalized, skill-oriented programs seems to be based in an experientially based approach to readiness. While an experientially oriented program would certainly be acceptable to many early childhood educators, the authors believe that reading educators would not disagree with the importance of these experiences.

If reading readiness programs are to assist children in getting ready for the reading process, it will be necessary to view children as continuously seeking, acquiring, organizing, retrieving and using information from their environment. It is this interaction with their world that makes it necessary to view the development of readiness for reading as beginning from birth. This paper will focus on the child as constantly involved in information processing. A viewpoint that relates directly to Piaget's theory where learning is conceived structurally as schemes or representations of ex-

periences which become more highly differentiated as learning progresses. (Piaget, 1963).

Recent developments in the field of reading suggest that the pendulum may be already swinging toward an approach that will allow children to learn from real world experiences. In the April, 1977, volume of the *Reading Teacher* a statement on reading readiness was published by a joint committee* of experts in reading and early childhood education. Their concern was voiced for an integrated real-experience orientation to reading readiness programs.

This concern for an experiential based approach to getting children ready to read is not a new one. Edmund Burke Huey in the *Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* stated

“It is believed that much that is now strenuously struggled for and methodized over in these early years of primary reading will come of themselves with growth, and when the child’s sense organs and nervous systems are stronger; and that in the meantime, he should be acquiring own experiences and developing wants that will in time make reading a natural demand and a meaningful process with form and book always secondary to thought.”

Since Huey’s statement was first published in 1908, we have some evidence that experts in reading have long been concerned with a child’s own experience.

Further review of the literature provides a wealth of information supporting early experiences as a viable readiness program. Berry (1967) indicates that there has been a growing belief that the acquisition of the basic skills early in the child’s development is important for success in school. He further states that:

Intelligence and academic achievement are founded upon well-developed information processing systems; that is, a child’s ability to read, write, and spell depends upon his abilities to see, hear, feel, speak, and move.

Ploghoft (1959) conducted a study of 56 kindergarten children, half of whom were given training in reading readiness workbooks. The others received training in sequence related activities. The results of the study showed that students using reading readiness workbooks were not more ready to read than the students trained with experiential activities. The author indicates that:

“. . . Teachers should not trust to a book or a workbook the job of bringing together the many activities and materials that may be used to provide a complete readiness program for all children.”

Similar results were found in Blakely and Shadle’s (1961) study of two

groups of kindergarten students. The control group received training in the Scott Foresman "We Read Practice Book" while the experimental group took part in activities which interested the children, (i.e., finger plays; telling a story; displaying pictures; show and tell). The results showed that for the boys in the sample, the experiential approach produced greater readiness for reading than they did the basal, and the basal approach did not increase the girls' readiness for reading.

Two important questions arise as a result of a discussion of early experience. First, what actually happens when the children interact with their environment during these experiences? Secondly, why does this interaction have relevance to the reading process? To answer both of these questions it is important to view the child as constantly acquiring information, and using his memory system to store the information. Further, we must view the child as using the acquired information to construct a model of the world. It is this model which is a compendium of all earlier experiences which serves as a foundation for all future activity. Smith (1971) attempts to clarify this interaction with the world. He indicates that

"Man's appetite for information can be regarded as a constant search for regularities in external events — regularities that both explain the past and predict the future. The regularities economize on mental effort because they humanize experience and minimize the necessity to remember a multitude of individual events; they provide the basis for rules for decoding when two events should be regarded as similar or different."

In essence, the cognitive viewpoint outlined by Smith identified human beings as capable of attending, selecting and organizing information. The important point, however, is that the information which is attended to, selected and organized is that which has the greatest potential for confirming their purposes. Learning, according to Smith, involves the learner generating a hypothesis on the basis of modifications made to his cognitive structure; testing the hypothesis; evaluating the feedback and finally confirming or rejecting the modification of his cognitive structure. An important aspect of this model is that the learner goes beyond present information to hypothesize about the nature of future information. In order to do this effectively he must make use of the knowledge he has learned about his world through his experiences with it.

In approaching an answer to the first question, then, it is necessary to view experiences as aiding the child in developing a theory of his world: a theory which enables the child to predict things about his world. It is these experiences that aid the child in formulating general rules from specific instances in order to predict how events will occur in the future.

What the authors have so far attempted to do is to present a cognitive view of learning. This requires the child to establish categories in his cognitive structure, to develop associations among categories, and define and refine the rules which will assist him in placing events into the ap-

propriate categories. Smith points out that this is done primarily through the child's ability to find the significant differences or the rules that will allow him to assign that event to the category. The differentiation of one category from another is done through the child's establishment of a property list. The property list for the category then becomes the rule.

With any attempt at the acquisition of knowledge there is always a loss of information. This is a result of memory limitations as well as the child's attentional system that is often overloaded. Hopefully, only the least important information would be eliminated by the individual during processing. It is important that the individual be very selective with the information that is processed through his memory system into long term memory. This is because the child's knowledge of the world is contained within the long term memory and any attempt at categorizing new events is highly dependent upon this knowledge.

The model of cognition dealing with the acquisition of knowledge described previously can be directly applied to the reading process. Divesta (1974) strongly proposes that a rich cognitive structure is essential for meaningful reading. He states that

"Since the young child is an efficient assimilator of information around him, he asks questions, explores, translates; he likes to listen to stories and to look at pictures. We can channel his interests during this period of the child's life to help the child build rich cognitive structure."

Divesta suggests that, in the early school years, "structured, rich and varied experiences" which foster the growth of cognitive structures should be emphasized and more formal instructional reading practice postponed until later in first grade.

Divesta's point is well taken. It is these experiences which aid the child in creating organization in his world through the information he receives. It is this information that is organized into categories and relationships which are expressed as rules. The rules aid the child in identifying, interpreting, and predicting. An important aspect of this rule generation is that the rules are related to the significant differences among experiences.

A psycholinguistic model was discussed in detail by Smith. In developing this model he shows that the proficient reader is one who seeks to reduce uncertainty through the application of rules which enables him to assign events (letters, words, meanings) to particular categories. Smith indicates that "the more difficulty a reader has with reading, the more he relies on visual information." He points out that the difficulty is the child's "inability to make full use of Syntactic and Semantic redundancy of non-visual sources of information." The point is that visual items can be identified with a minimal amount of information provided that the child has acquired the knowledge of the redundancy of written language. The redundancy is a result of previous experiences and a knowledge of his language. This redundancy enables him to generate predictions in order to

make identifications during the reading process. In addition to knowing the redundancy in language, Smith indicates that

“A child has to discover the distinctive features of written material, the significant differences by which alternative letters, words and meanings can be differentiated. And the only way he can get this information is to be shown what the alternatives are.”

In summary, early experiences give children an opportunity to generate rules about their world and how it goes together. These rule generations are the forerunners of latter language rule generations that the child will have to make in order to read.

Choosing Experiences

The case for the importance of early experience leads into a further question for teachers to answer: “Of all possible experiences for children, which ones do we provide for them?” Choosing experiences that allow for the individual differences in children requires the teacher to provide broad, diverse and flexible activities in planning programs. There is a wealth of ideas in the literature that can help teachers make these decisions. One such piece of information regarding children’s ability to represent their world has been advanced by Weikart (1971).

According to Weikart, a child’s ability to use symbols as a tool for thinking follows a stage theory that he refers to as the “Levels of Representation.” The four levels of object, index, symbol and sign follow a hierarchal order with the sign being the most abstract in terms of the representation of an idea.

At the object level the child is dealing with real experience and is actively manipulating objects. At the index level the child is familiar enough with the object to recall what he knows about it when he sees only a part of the object. The part serves as a clue to the whole object.

When children are operating on the symbol level they are able to recall the object without having the object or a part of it present. The child can use a symbol to represent the object (i.e., a box becomes a dog). As the child moves through the symbolic level his representation becomes more abstract until he is dealing with two-dimensional drawings or paintings as representation of objects. At the sign level the child is able to use written or spoken words as representation of ideas. This is the most abstract level because the sign bears no resemblance to the idea it represents. If we accept Weikart’s ideas on the levels of representation it is apparent that experiences are critical in helping a child prepare for the reading act.

The levels of representation indicate that teachers should provide opportunities for children to represent their world through various media. Dramatic play, painting, sculpture, dance, block building as well as experiences in the real world allow children to grow according to their own needs.

Schickedanz (1977) suggests that providing children with symbolic props

in their dramatic play can help in fostering reading. Symbolic props are materials that contain words or invite children to create their own words. Signs for buildings, traffic signs, menus, etc., all bring words to the dramatic play of children. Teachers providing props for children can enhance the children's play and stimulate their use of language.

Raths (1971) has suggested criteria for designing "Worthwhile Activities." Two of his criteria, allowing children to make choices and allowing them to share their findings, seems particularly important for advancing readiness. A child who is able to choose from varied activities in a room is more likely to have his needs met than a child who is constantly responding to directions from a teacher. He will draw information from the activities that will be most useful to him.

Children who are given the opportunity to share what they've done will need to find new words to describe their experiences and representation and then foster their development of language. In addition, this sharing serves to build self-concept because a child will recognize that the teacher and his classmates value his work.

The teacher's role with young children is not one of presenting a total new readiness program but, rather, according to Heilman (1972), an attempt to synthesize new experience with the previous experience children have had. Teachers have to make judgments about what each individual child needs to get ready to read. To do this a teacher needs to be aware not only of the attributes of a child who is ready to read, but also the activities in her class that will best further those attributes.

Each child makes sense of activities in a more or less sophisticated fashion depending on the prior learning he brought to the situation. It's not important that they all do an activity to the same degree of sophistication, as long as they provide each child a chance to become more proficient. In a good kindergarten most of the activities that take place during the day help a child to develop his readiness for reading.

In order for teachers to choose wisely in providing readiness experiences for children, it is probably necessary for them to switch from a view of teaching young children to one of helping children to learn. This switch will serve to focus teacher decisions that are based on what children need on a day to day basis rather than on preconceived notions about what will be taught on a daily basis without regard to children's needs.

Fortunately many good Early Childhood programs have for years been focused on meeting individual needs. Unfortunately, many people in Early Childhood have not fully understood how the experiences help children form the basis for later reading instruction. This lack of understanding has hindered teachers of young children because of their propensity for the formalized, structured, skill-oriented programs that are finding their way into nursery and kindergarten classrooms. In many areas the quest for excellence in skills has overshadowed children's basic needs and in fact have ignored those needs.

A good Early Childhood curriculum where children are actively involved in their learning is the most complete readiness program for each

child because it is personalized for the child rather than being designed for a whole group. There may be times when certain children can benefit from some of the skills presented in a specific formal program, then, it may be appropriate to have that child do more exercises or activities. But placing all children in a formal readiness program ignores the wealth of knowledge, skills and understandings that have accumulated before their entry into school.

If we accept the Developmental Levels of children's growth advocated by some experts in the field, it would appear that Karlin's (1975) interpretation of Piaget's views of how to introduce reading to children is extremely valid. He points out that Piaget's work has been used to support the idea that children should not be introduced to activities directly associated with the reading task. However, children should participate in the type of activities advocated in this paper for it is these activities that form the foundation for later success in reading.

The Review of Research supports the notion that providing opportunities for children to develop rich experiences prior to beginning reading is essential. Taken one step further, the research points out definite links between these experiences and the development of cognitive structures which provide the basis for comprehension. It is with this understanding in mind that the authors of this paper advocate that providing a "background of experiences" be viewed not as a cliché, but in a more serious light with the understanding that it is these experiences that enable the child to develop cognitively.

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