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Dorothy E. Smith

Joe R. Chapel

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READING READINESS

Dorothy E. Smith and Joe R. Chapel

One of the most difficult tasks facing the kindergarten or first grade teacher is to recognize the degree of readiness to read which her young students have attained by the time they face her on that first September morning. A great deal has been written on the subject of reading readiness, which is as it should be, since it is so important a subject. However, much that has been written is inaccurate, and most of it is incomplete.

There is essential agreement on what is meant by the words, "reading readiness." It might be translated as, "the time at which a child is capable of learning to read." Traditionally, in the United States, we consider that a child is ready to read when he is about six years and six months old. Formal reading instruction is introduced in kindergarten or in the first grade, and since we have rules that govern when a child may start school, it customarily happens to six-year olds. Thus chronological age is made the official gauge of reading readiness.

There are, however, many people who have challenged this timetable. About ten years ago there burgeoned in the land an idea that children could be taught to read when they were still babies. Some parents became aware that their offspring were ready for new experiences and new learning opportunities long before the "average" child was ready. They began trying out new learning experiences on their babies, and they saw that their children not only learned, but that they delighted in the exploration of new territory.

Thus was born the belief that children—even infants—were capable of learning far more than had been asked of them heretofore. Educated parents and interested educators became excited with the possibilities of advanced education for very young children, and a new philosophy was instituted; teach your child to read before his second birthday. They had well-known examples of the possibility of early education in Chopin, who was composing before he was six years old, and Michelangelo who was an accomplished artist before puberty.

Babies *have* been taught to recognize symbols, and they have been taught to match the symbol-clusters with certain verbal stimuli. They have even been able to identify objects symbolized by the printed, written or vocalized stimulus. So far, however, no one has been able to show that a two year old can comprehend, "the blue chair I saw yesterday is softer than the one you are looking at now."

There are others who suggest that a child should not be introduced

to reading until he is eight years old or older. There are countries in Europe which delay the reading process beyond what we in the United States consider the optimal age. And it is true that these children catch up to ours within a couple of years, and often it is impossible to measure the difference between the two groups in reading ability by the time the children are ten or eleven years old.

In any case, in order to decide when reading readiness occurs in a child, we must know what reading is. Is reading the identification of symbols? Is it the ability to reproduce those symbols in some other form, such as pronunciation or cursive writing? Is it the interpretation of the symbols? We can identify and correctly pronounce "slithey in the toves," but can we attach meaning to it?

It seems obvious that reading must be "a purposeful activity in which the individual seeks to identify, interpret, and evaluate the ideas and points of view expressed by the writer." (1)

Here, then is the crux of the matter. Reading readiness is the product of the whole child, not a splinter or a segment of himself. Reading is a process of perceiving symbols, of visual, oral and aural discrimination. It involves the ability to form concepts, and it certainly involves prior experience. If a child has never been introduced to the fact of wetness, or hardness, or even of a cow or a cat, the written or oral stimulation of the word will not evoke any mental image in the child. He will not be able to read those words, no matter how well he can pronounce or reproduce them.

The time in a child's life when he becomes capable of reading involves a manifold readiness Gestalt. He must have reached readiness in four different aspects of growth; physiological, psychological (emotional and intellectual), educational and sociological (cultural and environmental).

A child must be ready physically before he can learn to read. Children ordinarily start out far-sighted, and their eye muscles slowly tighten in their focusing ability. Book publishers are aware of this and accommodate their clients by using large type for little children. Very often we find that poor readers have "double vision" which usually means their focus field is too far out; that they are still far-sighted. Also, auditory acuity is a near-necessity. Reading, talking, and listening are so intertwined as to be almost inseparable. There are Helen Kellers in the world, but they are remarkable exceptions. Physical factors are also important in that a child must have mastered at least a modicum of ability in use of fine—as opposed to gross—muscular control. The *sequence* of growth follows a typical pattern

in humans, but the *rate* of this growth is a highly individual process. The sequence of development is from the head downward, from the center outward, and from gross to refined movements. The grasping of discrimination between “b” and “p” requires fine distinctions, whether the stimulus is visual or oral. A third requirement in physical factors is general good health. If a person has an habitual headache, or he is partially blind, or his feet hurt constantly, he will not be able to concentrate on the intricate process of reading.

Psychological factors are every bit as important as the physical, in determining reading readiness. Educators differ in their evaluation of a person’s “intelligence quotient,” but everyone will undoubtedly agree that there are degrees of mental maturity, and that a child must have attained a certain degree of intellectual functioning before he can assimilate what he reads.

One of the most important factors of all is emotional stability and maturity. A child who is at odds with himself and the world will not be able to concentrate on those black-on-white squiggles on a page. A child who has been taught to be super organized and structured will be unable to venture into the excitement of reading and, conversely, the disorganized, wholly impulsive child will be incapacitated. The paranoid child will not be able to accept the authority of the printed word and the autistic child will refuse to respond in any way. The degree of instability or immaturity of a child has a direct relationship to his reading readiness.

It is interesting to note that there is a typical pattern of development in the human personality, just as there is in the physical growth. “At some ages (C.A. 2, 5, and 10 years) the child tends to be good tempered, cooperative, and well adjusted. These are followed by ages (C.A. 2½, 5½ to 6, and 11 years) when the child seems at odds with himself and others. There are also regular periods of withdrawal and introspection (C.A. 3½, 7, and 13 years) followed by ages at which the child is outgoing, expansive, and adventurous (C.A. 4, 8, and 14 years).” (2)

So far as young children are concerned, the third factor, education, must be considered in conjunction with the child’s sociological background. Aside from any nursery school he may have attended, educational factors are a product of his family’s culture and environment. The type of society the child comes from will have an important bearing on the direction his development takes. Cultural differences have been widely discussed in the past few years and need not be reiterated here.

The educational-environmental factor is influenced by the kind of family the child belongs to. Some of the more important aspects are: the language patterns within the home; the concern and interest of the parents in stimulating the child to explore new ideas and new places; the attitudes parents have toward learning, toward school, and toward books; the model they present to the child; and, the care with which they provide mental content, or experiential background.

Some of the specific things the teacher hopes a child has learned before he enters first grade, which parents might teach their children, are how to hold crayons or pencils, to become familiar with writing implements, the ability to detect likenesses and differences, the ability to rhyme, being able to interpret pictures, also the conventional left to right progression, and hopefully the attention span of the child will be sufficiently lengthened so he can sit still long enough to learn new things.

The teacher who is faced with anywhere from ten to thirty kindergarteners or first-graders cannot expect that they will all be at the same stage in the developmental process. Difficult as it is, it is up to her to recognize the degree of readiness of each of the children. There are many reading readiness tests on the market; however, none of them is comprehensive enough to take into account all of the factors necessary. By means of an appropriate selectivity of standardized tests, informal inventories and observation the teacher can become proficient in recognizing the physiological, psychological, educational, and sociological factors which combine to produce the "compleat" child who is ready to read.

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