Precocious Reading Ability in a Normed Society

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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Muncie, Indiana
May, 1984
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INTRODUCTION

Reading involves the identification and recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimuli for the recall of meanings built up through past experiences, and further the construction of new meanings through the reader's manipulation of relevant concepts already in his possession. The resulting meanings are organized into thought processes according to the purposes that are operating in the reader. Such organization results in modification of thought and perhaps behavior, or it may even lead to radically new behavior which takes its place in the personal or social development of the individual (Tinker and McCullough, 1975).

Reading, a process which Tinker and McCullough succinctly describe in the preceding paragraph, influences nearly every aspect of one's existence, either by its presence or its absence. Reading either satisfies an inner need, piques an interest, enriches an intellect with its presence, or it stifles curiosity and extinguishes light from lives by its absence.

Surprisingly, at what particular age or time this process can and should begin has proven cause for debate. Despite a prevailing belief that reading can only happen when taught formally in school, "early reading" does exist. There are children who learn to read before structured lessons in schools are presented. Research has shown that children who
are exposed to literature at an early age tend to have developed sophisticated language structures. This language development correlates with reading success. Children exposed to literature accumulate background knowledge and increased interest in learning to read. They often begin to read early or have an easy time learning to read (Chomsky, 1972).

As early as 1931 Davidson was researching the possibility of early reading. The experimental subjects involved ranged in chronological age from three to five years; however, all shared the mental age of four years. The purpose of such research was to discover 1) whether children with a mental age of four years could learn to read and 2) whether bright, average, or dull children, all with equivalent mental ages, would learn to read equally well under the same experimental conditions. The conclusion of four-and-one-half months of instruction was twofold. Children younger than six years of age could be taught to read, and mental age is more important than chronological age with regard to achievement.

Many believe that learning to read is a natural process. Like learning to speak, learning to read is an integral part of daily life learned through use and in meaningful situations—reading labels, following directions, hearing a story (Forester, 1977). This concept, that reading is natural and not artificial or alien has definite educational ramifications. Teaching reading in an unnatural manner is comparable to
making a child master reading as an adult masters a foreign language—\textit{it is never as comfortable as one's own language}. As Lass points out, it is important to differentiate between skills necessary for reading and those required for success in formal reading programs (Lass, 1982).

\textbf{CASE STUDIES}

**Frank**

Frank is six years old. He is happy, healthy, and, like most six-year-olds, possesses a boundless supply of energy. He is just starting the first grade this year after a successful, but rather uneventful year in kindergarten. His kindergarten teacher described him as "socially well-adjusted, plays well with classmates" and left it at that. A recent check-up at the pediatrician's found everything to be in fine condition. The dentist agreed. And a visit to the optometrist showed young Frank to have excellent vision.

Frank's father is a commercial artist. His mother has a degree in accounting, but has left the work force for several years, choosing not to work outside the home until her children are all school-age. Frank has one sister, Cathy, who is two years older than he and a brother who has just turned two years old. Particularly since this youngest sibling has come along, Frank and his sister play together a good deal of the time. As he is two years her junior, Frank often finds himself as the sole pupil in his sister's classroom, with Cathy as the efficient teacher.
Such a school usually takes place in a playroom which the children share. It contains the usual array of toys and games, but also contains a television, a large collection of books including several alphabet books and picture dictionaries, and a large chalkboard along one wall. Cathy achieves well in school, but enjoys demonstrating her superiority by showing her brother how well she can read—even well enough to teach him!

Although a busy man, Frank's father tries to spend some time with his children each evening. Sometimes he can play a quick game of ball before dinner. At other times, just a short bedtime story is all that can be scheduled.

Mom, however, is a different story. She reads a great deal. She also devotes a great deal of time to her children. She reads to them quite often, usually attempting to position herself so that the book's pictures and print are visible to the children. As the children ask questions, she stops to answer and point out the word about which they may have queried.

Frank particularly enjoys the oral language games which are a part of many days' activities. While riding in the car, shopping or running errands, Frank's family often plays word or sound games. Perhaps Mom or Sis begins by naming the first item in a series, "1", for example. Frank continues with, "2", and so on, alternating turns. In this manner, numbers, letters of the alphabet, parts of the body, and other lists are practiced.
A fascination with print is something Frank has demonstrated since before he was even a toddler, according to his mother. When he was only weeks old, Frank would stare at the brightly patterned and printed posters on the walls and even at the printed T-shirts his parents wore. When he was a bit older, Frank watched television—he seemed to concentrate on the screen most when weather reports or commercials flashed large words and numbers across the screen.

Frank's love of books has taken many different manifestations. Certainly he has favorite stories which he enjoys listening to time and time again, especially when he can sit right beside Mom and see both the pictures and the print. Sometimes Frank even memorizes favorite passages or entire books! He enjoys listening to records and tape recordings of stories, while he follows along with a script. Books have been used as playthings as well. Frank has managed to build many structures and mazes using books as blocks and walls.

Definitely a "pencil and paper" kid, Frank always seems to carry writing utensils with him. He has taken to creating his own calendars and even address books with information about his friends and relatives entered. Frank is certainly a scribbler. He requested so vehemently to be taught how to print, that his mother felt she just could not refuse him. The chalkboard in the playroom has been especially helpful to Frank in supplying writing materials without "wasting" too much paper.
Frank seems to have inherited some measure of his father's artistic talent. He is able to draw sophisticated and detailed pictures with well-controlled motions. Frank has also demonstrated some degree of skill in arts and crafts activities, performing these tasks carefully and thoroughly.

With regard to scores on standardized intelligence tests, Frank has achieved well, at or above his projected level in nearly every category. Two skills in which Frank was found to be particularly strong are visual memory and sound blending.

Before he began attending school, Frank's parents helped him learn to identify written letters and numbers. While he is a friendly and outgoing child, Frank enjoys playing alone from time to time. His parents describe him as intelligent, curious, persistent, and energetic. Another of Frank's most noticeable characteristics is his expansive vocabulary. He understands and often chooses to use highly expressive words and sophisticated sentence syntax.

Fred

Freddie is six years old. He is happy, healthy and boisterous. He is beginning the first grade as well. His kindergarten teacher described him as "socially well-adjusted, a pleasant and active child." Freddie has visited all the medical professionals and received excellent bills of health from them all.

As an engineer with a large corporation, Fred's father is an extremely busy individual. Freddie's mother, who does
not work outside the home, considers herself an extremely busy person as well. What it is, exactly, which consumes so much of her time, however, is rather vague.

Fred has a brother, Paul, who is six years his senior. Fred and Paul play together from time to time, when Paul feels he can spare the time for a pesky little brother. Freddie rather idolizes his big brother and imitates him whenever possible. Fred particularly enjoys those occasions when Paul helps him with sports by playing basketball and tossing the football with him--just like the older boys do!

On family outings, Freddie listens raptly to his father and brother exchange sports trivia. Freddie absorbs much of this information and is able to rattle off dozens of obscure and interesting facts, to the delight and pride of his entire family.

Due to the difference in the brothers' ages, Freddie must frequently find other playmates. He accomplishes this by playing with children in the neighborhood. Fred constantly seeks out company, for he prefers not to play alone.

Sports and games are Freddie's favorite pastimes. He enjoys the outdoors and spends a great deal of his time outside. Freddie also enjoys building things and helping his father with various chores and home repairs. Fred's mother used to read to him rather often; however, she stopped when she discovered that he was memorizing certain parts of books and only wanted the same books read over and over.

Freddie is an intelligent child, scoring at least at
his estimated level on standardized tests. Before he started attending kindergarten his parents helped Fred to identify written letters and numbers. His parents describe him as intelligent, curious, persistent and energetic.

Frank and Fred

Frank and Fred seem to be very similar individuals. Both are certainly "all boy" and are even characterized by their parents with the same descriptors; intelligent, curious, persistent and energetic.

Differences between the two boys do exist, however. For instance, Frank has been reading for over two years, while Freddie will learn this now, in first grade. Frank is an early reader, but Fred is not. Playing together in a school-yard or walking along a street, one could never tell by looking at them that Fred is achieving perfectly on schedule, while Frank is a somewhat unknown quantity!

Exactly when this ability first manifested itself in young Frank is difficult to determine. His parents assert that there was nothing extraordinary in his upbringing and that his reading ability simply seemed to evolve "naturally." By four years of age, Frank read a number of words orally. He showed his ability to read silently by performing whatever action his parents had written on cards, such as "run," "jump" or "kiss."

The most noticeable aspect of Frank's reading growth was his increased sight vocabulary. He seemed to enjoy
learning words in conceptual clumps, rather than haphazardly. Often, the words he chose to learn were quite unusual, yet filled with personal meaning for him. At one time, Frank was most interested in his father's work, and he memorized the color names he found on tubes of paints—lavender, orchid, magenta. Another phase was one during which Frank was only interested in animal names—ostrich, tortoise, panther.

This "natural" ability may prove to be a somewhat mixed blessing. For if young Frank can already recognize each and every letter of the alphabet and is even able to (gasp, can it be so?) read some words, whatever is the first grade teacher to do with him? If she should actually, heaven forbid, hand the young man a book to read, whatever is the second grade teacher to do with him? Why, hand him yet another book, of course! And another and another and another! Not just any books, but interesting, challenging sorts written about every subject imaginable.

Since reading is itself the key to knowledge, this early ability must be fostered and taken advantage of to the greatest extent possible. This condition must be viewed as the blessing it is, without concern for inconvenience or uncertainty.

TOWARD BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE READING PROCESS

What it is, exactly, which makes up the reading process is difficult to define. It is a subject practically without boundaries and thus requires being viewed from many aspects.
Reading represents the capability of the brain to form visual images and interpret their symbolic importance (Stevens and Orem, 1968). Hughes expands upon this notion of interpretation. She proposes that a written word is exactly comparable to a spoken word. A spoken word has meaning, and it is made up of sounds. Each bit/sound alone has no meaning. The word has more than the sum of its parts.

Correspondingly, a written word has meaning and is a collection of shapes. Each bit is without meaning. The symbol/word is meaningful because of what it represents (Hughes, 1971).

Humans gather a collection of sounds and arbitrarily designate it to take on a particular meaning, thereby becoming a symbol. A symbol is meaningless unto itself. It is meaningful only because of what it represents; it is not inherently so.

Commonly agreed upon definitions may require additional explanation. Literacy is reading and writing. Literacy is absolutely not a set of abstract skills to be learned sequentially before it can be used (Mass, 1982). Stevens and Orem contrast school success versus learning to read. "In general, it has been noted that the very young student who gets off to a bad start will tend to have problems throughout his school career; but one must observe that this research, while purportedly discussing reading, is actually considering two interrelated factors: reading achievement and school adjustment. There is strong evidence that the child under six is
not ready for the formal school situation (at least as it exists in our typical schools.) But when the educational theorists identify starting school with learning to read, they are confusing intellectual and adjustmental aspects of human development. Though, obviously, starting school and learning to read are often concurrent experiences, they are in many respects quite distinct. Specifically, beginning school is a psychological and social process, while learning to read is a perceptual and cognitive task." (Stevens and Crem, 1968, page 93).

In summary, the reading process is an intellectual pursuit which can exist with or without the elementary school experience. It must be noted that children may well "break the code" of written language without formal schooling.

HARD FACTS ABOUT EARLY READING

Perhaps the most thorough researcher of this topic, Dolores Durkin, has produced more hard facts on the subject of early reading than can be applied in any one theme. Her amazing longitudinal studies were "designed to examine early reading achievement in a somewhat general way. With practically no prior research to serve as a guideline, this initial study could best be described as exploratory. Central questions to be addressed were:

1. How many children learn to read at home, and, as a result, enter first grade already reading?
2. What is the effect of this early ability on a child's future achievement in reading?
3. What kinds of factors promote early reading, and do they have implications for school instruction in reading?" (Durkin, 1966, 13).

After literally years of testing, interviewing and synthesizing information, Durkin produced some deceptively simple conclusions. She proposed that early readers and children who do not read before entering school possess remarkably similar personality traits and characteristics, in tests, parental interviews, teacher interviews. "Perhaps nothing more than common sense... early readers are not some unique species capable of being identified and sorted by tests. Rather, it would seem, their preschool achievement in reading is the combined expression of themselves, their parents, and the kinds of environment these parents provided." (Durkin, 1966, 110).

But identified and sorted these children were, through the use of countless tests of every possible ability or skill. The results were nearly always the same. The Bender Gestalt Test is a visual-motor test requiring the child to copy nine figures. There is no time limit for completing the aforementioned task, and the actual results of the test and the observations during the test are equally important. Early readers and non-early readers performed quite similarly. Torrance's Minnesota Tests of Creative Thinking includes two non-verbal tests, as well as two verbal tests. Once again the results of the two groups proved to be very similar.
Evans and Smith found only two tests on which early readers consistently scored well above the average, the subtest for Visual Memory on the Detroit Tests of Learning Aptitude and the scaled scores on the Sound Blending subtest of the ITPA (Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities). It must be noted, however, that a relationship between precocious reading and sound blending and visual memory does not necessarily provide for any kind of a correlation with general physical development, age, or general intellectual development, I.Q. (Evans and Smith, 1976).

Not only do examinations consistently demonstrate similarities between the two groups of children, early readers and those who learn to read on a more traditional timetable, but parents of all the children used almost the same wide range of adjectives to describe their youngsters. Teachers of test groups reinforce a finding that has pervaded studies; namely, that except for achievement in reading and for certain family differences, early readers and non-early readers appear to be very similar (Durkin, 1966).

Durkin's interviews with dozens of parents serve to enlighten even further concerning general similarities and more specific differences. More early readers were described by their parents as being adept in activities that could be characterized as "quiet." Fewer early readers played with toys, when playmates were unavailable. More early readers, when playing with other children participated in quiet games. In fact, more early readers enjoy playing alone. More early
readers showed preschool interest in learning to read and write than their non-reading counterparts. Fewer early readers were described as interested in first grade and its activities. With both groups of children, alphabet books played an especially important role in stimulating early interest in letter names. Most early readers have been found to be "early scribblers," as well. Almost always, the starting point of curiosity about written language was displayed through an interest in scribbling and drawing which, in turn, developed into an interest in copying objects and letters of the alphabet, which, in turn, lead to the customary request, "Show me my name." (Durkin, 1966).

Two often cited stimulants for queries about the identity of particular words are frequent exposure to these words on signs, television commercials, calendars, cars and trucks, records, food packages and the like, and the experience of being read to, especially when one story is read over and over (Durkin, 1966).

Bonnie Lass credits her summary of characteristics of early readers in part to her personal experience with the topic through her son's preschool achievement. She states that the mean intelligence test scores of early readers are above average, but not necessarily significantly so. They possess good to excellent visual memories and demonstrate special skill at discriminating visual stimuli. As a group, early readers show great interest in identifying letters, numbers and words (Lass, 1982).
The home environments of early readers tend to differ in a number of ways from the households of non-early readers. Perhaps schools should take note of such differences and attempt to incorporate these ideas and approaches into their own reading curriculums. As early as 1908, Huey characterized school reading instruction as unnatural and devoted a whole chapter of his text to a description of the more natural ways in which children could begin to read at home. His comments about the preschool child's "natural everyday activities" sound very modern, although they were made in 1908 (Durkin, 1966). "The child makes endless questionings about the names of things, as every mother knows. He is concerned also about the printed notices, signs, titles, visiting cards, etc., that come in his way, and should be told what these 'say' when he makes an inquiry. It is surprising how large a stock of printed or written words a child will gradually come to recognize in this way." (Huey, 1908).

Durkin employed the use of home interviews with parents of children who read early as well as with parents of children who did not. "The hope was that information about the ways children learn to read at home would suggest more effective ways for teaching reading in the schools." (Durkin, 1966, 44).

Mothers' levels of participation have a heavy impact on early reading achievement. Undoubtedly, one's mother is a very influential person in all early learning. More mothers of early readers judged that they, themselves, read
more often than the average adult. This lends credence to
the supposition that early interest in reading may be caught
as much as taught, with this adult serving as a model (Durkin,
1966). More of Durkin's statistics state that a larger per-
centage of mothers of early readers are college graduates,
and a smaller percentage believe that reading should be
taught by a trained person only. More of these mothers also
agreed that parents should give help with skills like reading
to preschool children, providing that the children are inter-
ested. Interestingly, mothers of early readers tend not to
use the term "busy" to describe themselves.

Other related factors of the home environment include
that more early readers were read to at home, prior to enter-
ing school, by no one person in particular. Almost all par-
ents, of early readers and non-early readers, report that
they gave preschool help with identification of letters and
numbers. Sadly, fewer parents of early readers expressed
satisfaction with the way schools teach reading (Durkin, 1966).

Parents of early readers attribute preschool interest
in reading to a number of factors including the availability
of paper and pencils, reading materials and a chalkboard in
the home, and an interest in the meaning of words. More
parents of precocious readers gave preschool assistance with
printing, the identification of written words, the meaning of
words, spelling and sounds of letters. The three reasons
most commonly cited for such preschool help were to answer
the child's questions and requests for help, to keep the
child occupied and/or to actually teach the child to read (Durkin, 1966).

In her two longitudinal studies, Durkin found a discrepancy with regard to who the most influential person(s) was in promoting reading. In the first study, there was an almost equal influence on the children from mothers and siblings, while the second study showed a much greater influence of mothers and a lesser influence of siblings. To account for this difference, it must be noted that the vast majority of siblings in the first study were older sisters (Durkin, 1966). In fact, sibling help is most likely to be a prominent influence when the older sibling is a girl and the age difference is small. Playing school can be extremely productive.

Concern over the fact that some children learn to read before their formal schooling begins is evident in all parents. Early readers' parents only concern, however, was the possibility that the child would be bored in the first grade; while parents of children who did not read before school had other worries. Often they had been warned that preschool reading would cause complications later in the child's education; it was a topic to be left to the school to take care of, a type of forbidden territory.

There appears to be no simple correlation between early reading and socioeconomic status. "What is much more important, the research data indicated, is the presence of parents who spend time with their children; who read to them;
who answer their questions and their requests for help; and who demonstrate in their own lives that reading is a rich source of relaxation, information and contentment." (Durkin, 1966, 136). Durkin's study also shows a certain amount of confusion and concern on the part of parents regarding what they should and should not do related to preschool help with academic learnings, in general (Durkin, 1966).

Lass sums up the characteristics of a home environment which seems conducive to early reading development. There needs to exist some available and interested adult and/or older sibling. It should be print rich in terms of having not only the television and labels found in every home, but also include educational toys and a wealth of books, regardless of socioeconomic levels or conditions (Lass, 1982).

READY OR NOT

Gould found that the goals and ideals of Maria Montessori's work merited greater attention. Montessori determined that young children enjoy learning to read, write and do arithmetic. Children gain tremendous satisfaction from achievement in an intellectual area. If children are free to choose, they often prefer work to play, partly because they enjoy the challenge of a purposeful, structured task. Gould takes this hypothesis one step further in proposing that it is adults who make an arbitrary distinction between learning and playing, while children do not (Gould, 1976).
According to Stevens and Orem, Montessori's studies indicate that the child in the process of development passes through a series of what she termed "sensitive periods"—times of special receptivity to certain learnings. Correspondingly, the first five years constitute the sensitive period for language development (Stevens and Orem, 1968).

Piaget's studies concerning a child's cognitive development conclude that the two- or three-year-old can only react to concrete situations; he cannot reason beyond what he sees. Since this child is not capable of symbolic or abstract thinking, there is no excitement and no active participation in learning when learning consists of merely repeating what an adult has said. Therefore, keeping in mind the findings of both Montessori and Piaget, the sensitive period for language development can include reading if it is made meaningful to the child and does not consist merely of repetitious abstractions.

Children's excitement is "easily aroused and quite contagious" reminds Durkin (Durkin, 1980, 18). It is not equivalent to excitement for an adult and, once sparked, it is not easy to extinguish. Appropriately introduced, reading can cause just such excitement.

The concept of readiness has been widely used to account for poor readers. "Reading readiness is commonly held to be a certain level of physical, psychological, intellectual and social maturity which the child must attain before he can learn to read." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 70).
Of late, however, psychologists and teachers have become somewhat skeptical of this term. Dr. Donald Durrell of Boston University states, "The rate of learning to read seems to relate more closely to background skill than to mental age. The remedy for lack of reading readiness consists of giving the child specific backgrounds for reading rather than 'waiting until he is ready'." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 70).

When is the child ready to read? According to Stevens and Orem, "the answer is clear. Whenever the child's brain responds to language through any one of the major sensory systems, it is ready to respond through all of them. To conclude anything else would be to imply the existence of a 'language center' in the ear drum or some such impossible notion." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 74). Also, "there is no 'reading' readiness in the child, only a 'language' readiness. This language readiness begins to function sometime in the first year of life." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 75). Referring to the size of most common lettering, "In a sense, normal type size for adults is 'whispered' writing for children." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 109).

In order to prepare children to read themselves, Palewicz-Rousseau and Madaras make quite a simple, yet emphatic, suggestion to parents and teachers. Read to them! Not only does this help expand their vocabularies and extend their experiences, but it also teaches them, quite literally, how a book works! Reading vocabularies develop from listening and
speaking vocabularies. Language experience stories help to develop reading vocabularies from both sources simultaneously (Palewicz-Rousseau and Madaras, 1979).

Concepts of literacy develop gradually. "In a natural language environment, saturated with good stories, meaningful conversation and abundant writing materials, this process can begin even before the child goes to school." (Mass, 1982, 670). O'Donnell reported on the beliefs of early childhood educators. These experts seem to object to preschool reading instruction, not because they think children are not ready, or that behavior will develop automatically in due time without any experience, but because reading instruction as it is commonly practiced is not consistent with their knowledge about how children learn or with their values about what is important for children to learn (O'Donnell, 1979).

Gould successfully summarizes the vital facts regarding the "critical period" concept. "Now let us apply this concept of critical period to the field of reading. The peak of interest for some children obviously occurs much earlier than the majority of our schools allow for. There are five-year-old children--and of course these may first show interest at four--who are so curious about 'what words say,' so eager to learn to read, that they cannot wait. There are natural readers, just as there are natural athletes, and you cannot postpone their learning arbitrarily until they have reached a certain chronological age when presumably they are ready to
be taught in school." (Gould, 1976, 248).

PERTINENT (AND IMPERTINENT) QUESTIONS

Now for that burning question: How did Frank become an early reader? And why? Evans and Smith attempt to answer that question in a round-about manner by describing what early readers are not. They found little or no evidence that superior or overachieving readers as a group score significantly above average on standardized tests, nor that as individuals they consistently show superior performance. Furthermore, there appears to be little or no evidence that even average development of any definable skill or isolated ability is a prerequisite to superior reading (Evans and Smith, 1976).

Bonnie Lass cites her own son's early fascination with print as a contributing factor. At two weeks of age, Jed stared at printing on shirts. At ten weeks he appeared to "scan" full-page advertisements complete with a left-to-right progression. She reaffirms that it was never pre-determined to "teach" Jed to read early and that only "incidental" teaching took place in the form of answering questions (Lass, 1982).

A child's first teacher can have a great impact in moving the child toward literacy before formal reading instruction even begins. Mass encourages teachers to notice how sophisticated a child's drawing is with regard to the amount of detail present, whether a child chooses to add a
caption or dictate a story about a given picture he has drawn, as well as the sophistication of the child's writing style when copying from text (Mass, 1982).

Clark suggests that motives for early reading differ in boys and girls. Boys' early achievement is more likely to be associated with other interests; while girls' interest tends to be aimed at extending their reading of stories (Clark, 1976).

Stevens and Orem offer reasons that more children do not learn to read early, and the fault seems not to lie with them. "Whatever secondary factors may be involved, the main reason why children do not master visual symbols is that none of the conditions for learning are presently fulfilled in their environment...Moreover, because most parents have always assumed that children could not read, they have made no effort to explain the 'mysteries' of printed language to the child." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 38).

Early readers have consistently been described as "early scribblers," as well. Whether one is the cause of the other or vice versa is less important than the fact that these two interests manifest themselves concurrently (Durkin, 1966).

Durkin reports six main findings to answer how children do learn to read at home. More than fifty per cent of early readers became interested in learning to print before learning to read. Learning to read came as a by-product of writing in what was described as a language arts approach. After learning to print, the first request was, almost without fail,
to "Show me my name." Once an early interest in writing was demonstrated, an interest in spelling would often follow. This commonly lead to a discussion about the sounds of different letters. "Interest binges" occur when children willingly work for hours on a single task which fascinates them. Ironically, school schedules demand quick changes due to children's supposedly short attention spans.

The common plea, "What does this word say?" is caused by many factors. Stories read and reread many times; some television programs, especially commercials, quiz shows and weather reports; outdoor signs; food packages; menus; cars and trucks all produce curiosity that begs for explanation. Once again, two definite approaches were noted with regard to vocabulary, one masculine approach and the other feminine (Durkin, 1966).

What differences really exist between Frank and Fred? When the records of Frank and other early readers are examined, it is found that they are, subsequently, among the most successful students (Stevens and Orem, 1968). One difference is that they have begun learning by themselves or under the casual direction of older siblings or interested adults. All of this has been accomplished in the home environment without the complications of the psychological factor of school adjustment. "Intelligence, while of some importance, does not appear to be the key factor in learning to read, any more than it is the key factor in learning to talk." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 96).
Often, materials found in every home are taken advantage of in the homes of early readers, more so than in other homes. Television, for instance, is an almost endless source of written words. Advertisements show product names printed in large and clear letters. The written word is almost always directly associated with a concrete object. The word name is repeated often with attention-holding tunes and cartoons (Stevens and Orem, 1968). The child who is interested in words or is exposed to them in various other contexts will recognize television as an excellent resource. Gould suggests that this child who is very print-aware would be better labeled a "natural reader" rather than an early reader. The natural reader "notices labels on cereal boxes and canned goods. While driving along the road, he notices highway signs such as 'Yield' and 'Stop.' When being read to, he points to a word in the book and asks, "What does this word say?" Or, 'Does this word say "Mom"?' " (Gould, 1976, 45).

Not every child reads before attending school. Stevens and Orem suggest, "If from the first year the child were surrounded with visual symbols meaningfully related to objects in the child's world, he would come to read these just as he comes to understand the spoken symbols." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 41). Speech, being both a more convenient and a more personal means of communication, is learned first and most naturally in the home.

"While obviously there are significant differences in the intellectual potential of children, these differences
unless profound, are not sufficient to thwart the process of language development. Whatever the importance of I.Q. for school achievement, there is no indication that it is the significant variable operating in the mastery of language by the child." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 11). To reiterate a final time, all children do not learn to read naturally, just as they learn to understand speech, because of a difference within their environment, not one within themselves. "We expose a child to meaningful speech almost without thinking about it." (Hughes, 1971, 25). However, it simply does not occur to most adults to make the special materials required to teach reading, or to even take advantage of those found readily available.

A final, yet critical, question remains. Whose fault is this early reading anyway? Durkin names the culprit specifically. "Early readers are not a special brand of children who can be readily identified and sorted by tests. Rather, it would seem, it is their mothers who play the key role in effecting the early achievement." (Durkin, 1966, 138). The parents' attitude, indeed, the entire family atmosphere, greatly influences this as well. The families of early readers and non-early readers do not tend to be as similar as the children are themselves. One attitude held by many parents of early readers was more of a willingness to help. There is less of a tendency to believe that reading should only be taught by a trained person; additionally, it is thought
that a child's interest in becoming a reader lessens further the need for special training. Another prevalent view is that help should be given in response to children's questions and requests for assistance only (Durkin, 1966).

Surprisingly, approximately one-third of non-early readers studied showed interest in reading sometime before attending school, but received no assistance from their parents. Also, when the parents of non-early readers did help with reading, it was usually the parents' own decision and not the result of the child's curiosity or interest (Durkin, 1966).

**MYTHS**

Myths abound detailing the trials and tribulations early readers must suffer due to their precocious ability. Most such myths are exactly as the name implies, widely accepted fables and fairy tales, concocted to account for an unexplained phenomenon.

The mere idea that reading before the age of five or six years could possibly cause eye damage is enough to send any loving and concerned parent on a book burning rampage. Reading most assuredly, however, will not cause damage to the eyes. By the young age of six months, the infant's eyes are already well-focusing. The child will show preference to a pattern, even one as small as the size of a checkerboard, rather than a blank space. By only three to four years, eye coordination is considered to be very good.
Myopia, nearsightedness, is most definitely not a term synonymous with damage. Myopia is a condition of the eyes. The eyes themselves are not harmed, and this condition is correctable. Furthermore, this condition is not a result of reading, either too much or too early.

There is a nutritional aspect that is often mistaken for a short attention span. Proper nutrition enables the eyes to focus for extended periods of time. If eyes wander, it may well be a matter of physical stamina rather than interest or attention span.

"No physical damage to the eye can be caused by early reading; therefore, if interest in print exists, encourage it!" says Dr. Edwin Cy Burkhart, Doctor of Optometry (Burkhart, 1983).

Another all too common myth is the assumption that only geniuses are early readers...and vice versa. In an article addressing just this concern, Cassidy and Vukelich found that a relatively small number of young children identified as gifted learn to read at an early age, even if they possess most readiness skills and are given special help in reading. In fact, only approximately twenty per cent of the gifted population learns to read before kindergarten (Cassidy and Vukelich, 1980).

As early as 1954, Arthur Gates recognized that "there is no evidence that printed words are more difficult to perceive or distinguish than spoken words." (Stevens and Crem, 1968, 27). Today, however, there tends to be some confusion
leading one to believe that speaking and reading are two entirely different and unrelated processes. Both language and reading are essentially functions of human intelligence, processes of the brain. Stevens and Crem question, "If the child can learn to recognize and create the complex patterns of sounds we call speech, why could he not be taught to recognize the patterns of letters we call writing?" (Stevens and Crem, 1968, 27).

Somewhere, adults became certain that very young children have very short attention spans, and therefore, many activities must be planned and changed quickly in order to keep their interest. In fact, just the opposite is closer to the truth! The length of time to be spent on one activity should depend entirely upon the interest and enthusiasm created. Children's attention spans are much larger than they are given credit for. Young children are capable of extended concentration if interest in the topic is sufficient (Stevens and Crem, 1968). All available evidence strongly suggests that the majority of reading problems are not intellectual or cognitive, but rather, perceptual in nature (Stevens and Crem, 1968).

One's attention must be captured in order to assure that one's memory will be motivated. Jerome Bruner suggests that, "An unconnected set of facts has a pitiable half-life in memory. Organizing facts in terms of principles and ideas from which they may be inferred is the only known way of
reducing the quick rate of loss of human memory." (Gould, 1976, 26). Gould summarizes, "We have seen that learning through understanding produces the best learning conditions. It results in transfer and discovery, in an easy and reliable way of reconstructing facts and it gives errors their sensible function of increasing rather than decreasing understanding." (Gould, 1976, 30). When children learn by insight, errors assume a useful function; children are able to learn from their errors.

"No school problems are encountered when children get initial help with reading during their preschool years." (Stevens and Orem, 1968, 97). There is a comforting statement for all the misguided and misinformed members of the population, who, for years, have been spoon-fed the contention that early reading causes problems in subsequent school years. It is of little help, however, for the countless number of eager and willing children who were told sternly to wait until school started to pick up a book or ask a question. Delays such as these served only to intimidate children, assuring them that they could not unlock the mysteries of print.

At the time of Durkin's initial study, 1958, it was generally assumed that an early start at home would cause problems later. Two general predictions evolved. The first declared that beginning earlier would cause boredom later. The second prediction was even more dire, that the child would become confused because his first teacher, usually a parent,
was not trained in the ways and means of teaching reading as a collection of skills. Both predictions proved to be entirely false. Even after six years of school instruction, Durkin found that early readers as a group maintained their lead in achievement over classmates of equivalent mental age (Durkin, 1966). In fact, none of the data found in either of Durkin's longitudinal studies indicate achievement problems for children who read early (Durkin, 1966).

Several more myths can be quickly and effectively dismissed. Occasionally, traditional teachings contradict observed behavior (Durkin, 1980). In such instances, traditions must be adjusted or abandoned entirely, depending upon the merits they retain, despite their obsolescence. For example, with regard to the ancient belief that young children have difficulty relating to more than one adult, children can easily come into contact with any number of qualified adults and gain from each and every experience. Few children cannot adapt to, and indeed enjoy, having several resource individuals at hand. The parent as teacher is the exact embodiment of the term.

The idea that young children require a daily rest period can be declared false. All the evidence required is that this method is usually not effective in producing rest and rarely successful in generating a restful atmosphere. As has been dealt with earlier, the idea that young children have short attention spans has not consistently been proven.
The mere notion of social and emotional development being set as a major goal of school programs for young children is absurd. Surely social and emotional development are life-long tasks! Durkin reminds, "The assumption...is that social and emotional goals are achieved gradually in conjunction with academic goals." (Durkin, 1980, 16). Since social and emotional maturity are life-long goals, it is unreasonable to expect fulfillment in the primary school years or to even set these as short-term goals.

The single most outstanding impression left on Durkin after candid home interviews with parents of early readers was an uneasy concern which these parents felt about their roles as educators of their preschool children in matters like reading and writing (Durkin, 1966). This can be described, in a word, as guilt. The myth is that parents must feel this way!

WHAT GOOD CAN COME OF ALL THIS?

and

WHERE DOES FRANK GO FROM HERE??

The intention of this well-meaning paper is certainly not to recreate the kindergarten classroom as a lecture hall. Nor is it recommending uniform instruction for all, at any grade level. Most importantly, it is not a suggestion to move current first grade instruction to the kindergarten year. What possible good can come from all this rests in the impression it makes and the information it transfers.
Margaret Reinhard's first grade class has shifted formats from one of presenting structured lessons about reading to one based on learning strategies of natural learners (Forester, 1977). The organizational aspects are really quite simple. Children listen to stories and read familiar nursery rhymes from large wall charts. They hear and say sentences and stories that they dictated. Students listen to tape-recordings of books and follow along page-by-page. Children read to each other and put on plays. The above ingredients combine in order to learn three vital facts, to learn the meaning of reading and how pleasurable and useful reading can be. Significantly, there are no lessons about reading.

Implications which Lass has identified from work and observation with her own son can be applied on a broader scale. Most significantly, some behaviors are untaught—scribbling, a desire to know the secret of print, a universal interest in stories about similar children. These are present in most youngsters without systematic instruction. Quite obviously, these factors imply that school learning could and should more closely pattern home-centered learning (Lass, 1982).

Although it is clear that sufficient evidence does exist that children can be taught to read before first grade and that the early learners maintain their lead over comparable youngsters taught at later ages, this knowledge cannot be merely
concedei to and then immediately forgotten (O'Donnell, 1979). Current kindergarten curriculums emphasize very different skills and hold varying objectives. Tasks vary from workbook assignments to stressing oral language development. The effectiveness of this additional knowledge and acceptance of early reading depends upon how well the elementary school adjusts to an early start.

"This clearly means that schools undertaking reading instruction in kindergarten must change their instruction from first grade on so that what is accomplished in the kindergarten can be used and extended in subsequent years," affirms Durkin. "Introducing reading in the kindergarten, therefore, is not an isolated event but, rather, is something that ought to have repercussions throughout the entire school." (O'Donnell, 1979, 248).

Once again, with infinite wisdom, Durkin refers to the complicated changes ahead, "The solution to the kindergarten problem is neither simple nor single. Hopefully, in the years to come, educators will demonstrate that a middle-of-the-road position is not necessarily one that is dominated by compromise—that it may, rather, be characterized by a flexibility which takes its direction from the fact that five-year-olds show great variation in what they already know and in what they can and want to do." (Durkin, 1966, 139).
PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

The ideal reading program is one that is individualized with regard to both interest and ability. Using relatively few organizational tools, this style becomes quite simple to implement. Short-term grouping provides for an individualized program when it meets a specific need. Needs grouping is temporary; the group meets until a common deficiency has been successfully remediated. Interest grouping allows children to pursue a topic of common interest which they have chosen. Research grouping enables children to investigate a topic which the teacher chooses.

Other methods utilized in individualized programs include the ungraded primary plan made up of achievement levels; one is mastered before going on to the next. Learning centers can be self-paced and include both teacher-made and commercial activities (O'Donnell, 1979).

Redesigning the kindergarten and, indeed, reanalyzing the following years provide for some new considerations. O'Donnell makes the following recommendations, "Teachers of pre-first grade need preparation that emphasizes developmentally appropriate language experiences for all pre-first graders--including those ready to read and those already reading.

1. To provide reading experiences as an integral part of the broader communication process.

2. To provide for a range of activities both in scope and in content."
3. To foster children's affective and cognitive development by providing appropriate materials.

4. To use evaluative procedures that are developmentally appropriate for the children being assessed and that reflect the goals and objectives of the instructional program." (O'Donnell, 1979, 248).

The choice of reading material becomes even more critical, as children learn to read at younger ages. Books must revolve around ever more sophisticated plots and characters. As Sylvia Ashton-Warner points out, "The distance between the real life of a child and the life of the characters in primary reading books is frightening. So much feeling is ignoreć and repressed. Perhaps that is why such books are so unbearably boring." (Palewicz-Rousseau and Madaras, 1979, 12). While children's literature in general has vastly improved in recent years, elementary reading texts still have far to go.

Beginning instruction is the key to all later progress, or lack of it. Durkin remarks, "What happens when children make their first efforts to learn to read is uniquely important. If what results is success, as well as an increase in confidence and motivation, future success is almost inevitable." (Durkin, 1980, 2).

CONCLUSION

In order to afford more young children the opportunity to achieve as natural readers, Cohn describes several
advantageous conditions. With these factors present: a stimulating environment, sufficient encouragement and a relaxed adult attitude, the home becomes a place which is conducive to the natural development of reading and writing (Cohn, 1981, 549). Parents and teachers should be as patient and tolerant during the development of children's literacy skills as they are while speech develops.

Concerning the push of commercial materials to teach reading at home, Durkin advises that research indicates that the everyday world of children is replete with opportunity to begin teaching reading (Durkin, 1966). Much more important than any teaching kit is help from parents who are concerned that their children's interests are fueled and their curiosity is sparked.
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