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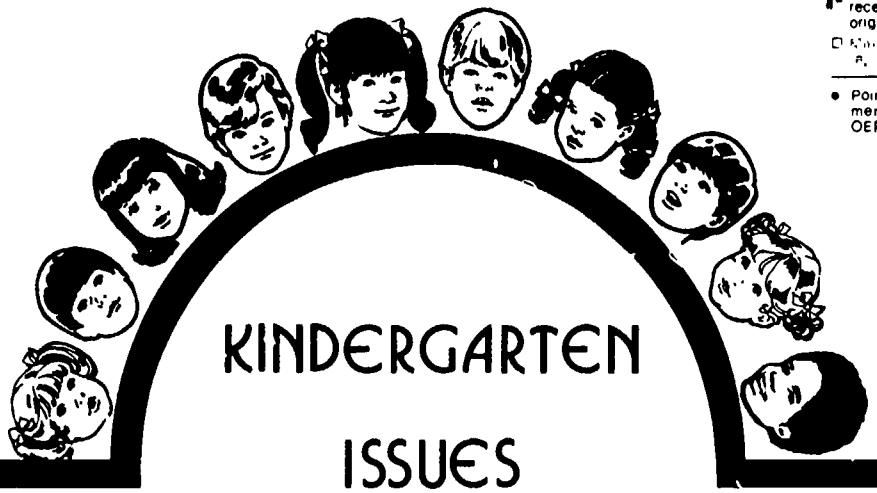
ABSTRACT

This position paper was written to assist teachers and administrators in Oregon in preparing curriculum and setting priorities for kindergarten programs. It begins by asserting that the focus of kindergarten instruction should be on the total development of the child: socioemotional, physical, and intellectual. The need for concrete learning experiences, rather than the use of materials such as workbooks and ditto sheets, is stressed. Play is emphasized as an ideal means of instruction for kindergarten children because it is active and involves the senses. The paper asserts that it is important for children to choose their own activities, and for teachers to limit teacher-directed activities. It then examines the importance of language and literacy development in kindergarten. Guidelines are provided for assessing children's development. Suggestions for fostering children's self-control and autonomy are presented. Finally, the need for teachers to determine developmentally appropriate ways to help children acquire essential learning skills is stressed. (PCB)



KINDERGARTEN ISSUES

A POSITION PAPER

OREGON DEPARTMENT
OF
EDUCATION

VERNE A. DUNCAN
STATE SUPERINTENDENT
OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

All I EVER REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and dance and plan and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup . . . they all die. So do we.

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned; the biggest word of all: LOOK! Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation; ecology and politics and sane living.

Think of what a better world it would be if we all . . . the whole world . . . had cookies and milk about 3 o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

(By Robert Fulghum, Minister Emeritus, Edmonds, Washington Unitarian Church) Reprinted with permission.

KINDERGARTEN ISSUES

A Position Paper

Oregon Department of Education

Verne A. Duncan
State Superintendent
of Public Instruction

May 1987
Second Printing

FOREWORD

The early years of a child's life form the foundation for physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. Educators, health professionals, and social service groups are recognizing the need to improve the quality and quantity of services for young children in order to maximize their development. One of the trends which has resulted is an increasing number of children under the age of six being served in Oregon public schools. In fact, by July of 1989 every school district will be required to offer a kindergarten program.

In response to a survey of elementary school principals, kindergarten teachers and first grade teachers throughout Oregon, the Oregon Department of Education's Early Childhood Advisory Committee recommended that a document describing appropriate programs for kindergarten-age children be developed. According to the committee, it should assist teachers and administrators in preparing curriculum and setting priorities for kindergarten programs. Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper was written to respond to this recommendation.

Information in this report has been drawn from the best research available, as well as from the opinions of early childhood specialists, kindergarten teachers, and elementary principals. The primary author of the work was Dr. Randy Hitz, Early Childhood Specialist for the Oregon Department of Education. Members of the Early Childhood Advisory Committee played an important role in critiquing the document. Committee members included:

Pat Bedore, ECE Specialist
Springfield School District

Jo Ann Brewer, Assistant Professor
Oregon State University

Marilyn Campbell, Principal
Mary Eyre School, Salem

Merrily Haas, Executive Secretary
Oregon Association for the Education of Young Children

Kelly Nash, First Grade Teacher
Ashland School District

Georgiana Peterson, President
Oregon Association for Childhood Education International

Mary Ringer, Kindergarten Teacher
McMinnville School District

Olga Talley, Director of Head Start
Portland Public Schools

Prior to publication, drafts of the paper were reviewed by elementary principals, kindergarten teachers and first grade teachers throughout the state. Therefore, I believe the document represents a true consensus on concepts relevant to the education of young children in our public schools.

Comments and questions regarding the document are appreciated and should be directed to Dr. Hitz at 373-7900.

Verne A. Duncan
State Superintendent
of Public Instruction

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INTRODUCTION

The Need for a Position Paper on Kindergarten Curriculum

Kindergartens have been in existence in the United States since 1856 and the first public school kindergarten was established in 1874. The acceptance of kindergarten as an important part of the educational system has been most rapid in the last two decades. As late as 1965, only 47% of the five-year-olds in the United States attended kindergarten. Today over 94% of the five-year-olds attend some kind of kindergarten. Over 88% of those children attend public school kindergartens (Schweinhart, 1985). In Oregon a somewhat lower percentage (67% in 1986-87) of the five-year-olds attend public kindergarten. However, that percentage will increase dramatically in 1989 when all school districts will be required by statute to offer kindergarten.

Any time a new program is instituted, some confusion about the purpose and nature of the program is inevitable. Such is the case with kindergartens. Educators and the general public seem to agree that kindergarten is valuable but there is less consensus on the nature of the kindergarten program. For example, some would argue that the purpose of kindergarten is primarily to "bridge the gap between the home and school" and to promote the child's ability to function in groups within the culture of the school. Others would say that this purpose is no longer valid since a majority of five-year-olds have had some "school" or group care experience prior to their enrollment in kindergarten. They would argue, therefore, that kindergarten should "get children ready" for the formal academic demands of later grades. Other people say that children are more "worldly" and more mature than they used to be. Television, travel, and improvements in communication in general have contributed to the child's greater understanding of the world. Therefore, kindergarten should be much like first grade was 15 or 20 years ago because children are "ready" for the increased stimulation and challenge of formal academic instruction. Still others argue that kindergarten children are too young to benefit from "academic" instruction and that the kindergarten program should focus primarily on social development. Finally, as a result of the research demonstrating the positive effects of preschool programs on academic achievement, delinquency prevention, and long term costs to society (*Lasting effects after preschool: summary report*, 1979; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1980), many policymakers are showing interest in kindergarten as a means of preventing crime, poverty, and other social problems.

Of course there is some truth in all of these perspectives on the purpose of kindergarten. However, they all fail to address the primary purpose which is simply to foster each child's socioemotional, physical, and intellectual development. They also seem to assume that the primary focus of kindergarten instruction should be on either socioemotional or intellectual development and that the two are somehow unrelated. In fact, all areas of development are related and the focus of instruction in the kindergarten should be on the total development of the child. This paper is designed to assist teachers in determining HOW to best do that.

In order to clarify the purpose and nature of kindergarten, a number of organizations have written position papers. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children published a paper in September of 1986 (NAEYC, 1986) on appropriate educational practices for four- and five-year-old children. The Board of Education for the State of Nebraska published a position paper in 1984 (Nebraska, 1985) on kindergarten.

This position paper serves to further clarify issues in kindergarten education in Oregon and assist teachers and administrators in their efforts to improve kindergarten curriculum. It should also help in explaining the nature and purpose of kindergarten to the general public. The paper is organized in short sections with specific topics addressed in each. This should give teachers and administrators the short, concise answers to questions commonly asked by parents and other people in the community. In fact, the sections may be used in the present form for classroom or school newsletters or reports to school boards. Each section also includes references so that professionals can follow up with further study.

By July of 1989 all districts will be required to offer kindergarten. The increase in the number of kindergartens will inevitably lead to more questions and calls for accountability. Therefore, it is important that professionals in the field be able to clearly articulate theory and practice.

■ All areas of development are related and the focus of instruction in the kindergarten should be on the total development of the child. This paper is designed to assist teachers in determining HOW to best do that.

THE KINDERGARTEN CHILD

Quality kindergarten programs focus on all aspects of the child's development: socioemotional, intellectual, and physical. Furthermore, teachers must take into account individual levels of development for each child when planning ways to foster development. Therefore, it is of primary importance for kindergarten teachers to understand the developmental characteristics of five-year-olds.

Socioemotional Development

Kindergarten-age children are becoming increasingly independent of their families and developing peer relationships. They are learning the effect of their actions on others and are becoming increasingly aware of other's needs and expectations. Sharp emotions are still close to the surface and children need help learning to express them in socially acceptable ways. Typically, five-year-olds have a great amount of curiosity and an eagerness to explore and to learn. When involved in a project they have chosen, they have a long attention span, but the span may be very short for an activity imposed by others. Children in this age group are usually eager to please adults and will take pride in learning the rules but may need many reminders to follow the rules.

Intellectual Development

Five-year-olds generally take what they see to be true as the truth. Even when taught the "correct" answer, no amount of reasoning will convince them otherwise. For example, children this age often break their cookies into small parts in order to get "more" cookie. It is impossible for adults to convince the children that their perception of getting more cookie by breaking a large one is wrong. While teacher-provided information can be useful, (e.g., this is hot or this is dangerous) knowledge and true understanding are not transmitted directly from the teacher to the children.

While the majority of kindergarteners have mastered most of the syntax of their language, there are certain forms they have yet to learn. Passive voice, or certain usages such as, "Do you mind if...?" are unfamiliar and not understood. The extent of their vocabularies will depend on the amount and kind of experiences they have had. The same is true of their print awareness. Many are unable to make the distinction between a letter and a word. Most are beginning to see that print is another form of communication and moving gradually toward seeing that words are made up of letters arranged in a prescribed order.

Physical Development

Kindergarten children have a high activity level but not great amounts of stamina. They are moving from jerky movement with a minimum of spatial awareness toward smoother, more precise movements. Differentiating between left and right has not been clearly established. Control of writing implements has yet to be learned for most and some may not yet have a hand preference.

■ Quality kindergarten programs focus on all aspects of the child's development: socioemotional, intellectual, and physical.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

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CONCRETE EXPERIENCES

Historically, one common characteristic of approaches to early childhood education was that abundant manipulative materials and ample time for the children to interact directly with them were seen as vital spurs to the children's cognitive development. It was not until the late sixties that some early childhood programs began to focus on "readiness skills" such as premath and prereading and to use workbooks and other materials commonly used with older children (Williams, 1987).

The work of Piaget and others has made it clear that young children cannot learn from abstract materials the way adults do. Adults and children alike must see relationships in order to understand concepts. However, while adults are capable of mentally manipulating ideas in order to see new relationships and develop new concepts, children must physically manipulate materials in order to learn.

In other words, in order for kindergarten children to learn, they need concrete experiences. If they are to learn about plants, they must observe, touch, and care for plants. If they are to learn number concepts, they must have opportunities to touch, manipulate, and count real objects. If they are to learn about reading, they need opportunities to label their constructions, manipulate magnetic letters, compose their own rhymes and so on. If they are to learn to be responsible, they need opportunities to make choices and experience the consequences of their choices.

Adults often overestimate the learning of children. For example, it is not unusual for parents to proudly claim that their two-year-old knows how to count to 10 or recite the alphabet when in fact the child has no understanding of number concepts or what a letter is. Children can learn to count to 10 at a very early age. They learn by rote and this can be useful, but it must never be confused with a child's UNDERSTANDING of numbers. In order for children to acquire an understanding of numbers, they need many opportunities to manipulate materials and see, for example, six items in relation to the symbol "6" and so on. Similarly, in order for children to understand concepts such as "up" or "down" they need opportunities to experience "up" in relation to "down" and visa versa.

Workbooks, ditto sheets, and other similarly abstract materials have very limited value in kindergarten classrooms. Children learn much more from playing with blocks, puzzles, sand, and other materials which can be part of concrete learning activities. This means the curriculum flows out of a rich physical environment, not texts or paper and pencil activities.

- In order for kindergarten children to learn, they need concrete experiences.
- Workbooks, ditto sheets, and other similarly abstract materials have very limited value in kindergarten classrooms.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

THE ROLE OF PLAY

Play vs. Work

Unfortunately, in our society a distinction is often made between work and play. Work is highly regarded while play is something that is "acceptable" when work is completed. Adults frequently tell children that they may play, "when their work is finished." Or, adults make statements such as, "the children are ONLY playing." Parents often ask kindergarten and preschool teachers, "Do the children in your class LEARN or do they JUST PLAY?"

Some adults are troubled when they are not controlling every aspec of children's activities. Torrance's studies of creativity indicate that even teachers tend to see creative children as more of a problem than other children (Torrance, 1962). Therefore, it is likely that these same teachers feel burdened by the spontaneous nature of play. The dullness in our schools reported by Goodlad (1984) is further evidence that many teachers have difficulty appreciating the value of play.

Value of Play

In spite of negative attitudes about play, there is considerable evidence that it is very valuable in fostering child development. Erikson's and Piaget's theories give different but important reasons for including play in early childhood classrooms (Erikson, 1976; Piaget, 1962). Erikson understood socioemotional development as proceeding through the resolution of a series of conflicts. He felt that young children work through these conflicts by reconstructing them in symbolic play. Piaget discusses play as assimilation, the driving force behind learning. Research indicates that play influences cognition and problem solving (Fromberg, 1987). In fact, Pepler (1986) reports that there is widespread belief among developmental psychologists and educators that play is a primary medium through which children develop cognitive skills, "particularly those related to creativity or divergent thinking" (p. 143). Play contributes to a balanced school curriculum by encouraging divergent as well as convergent ways of thinking. It is associated with improvements in children's ability to organize and remember information, consider the perspective of others, and gain control over their own impulses (Fein, 1986; p. 141). Some researchers have even found that children's early reading and writing efforts often resemble play (Frost and Sunderland, 1985; p. 17).

Play is difficult to define. However, there is general agreement that play involves activities which are intrinsically motivating and are controlled by the players themselves. Therefore, learning in play occurs on the player's terms. Through play, children construct their own learning. Moreover, since play is active and involves the senses it is an ideal means of instruction for kindergarten children.

Early childhood educators generally agree that much of the time children spend in kindergarten should be devoted to play activities. They believe that, "children acquire knowledge about the physical and social worlds in which they live through playful interaction with objects and people" (NAEYC, 1986). Therefore, children in good kindergarten programs spend much of their time engaged in play activities and they learn at the same time. In fact, kindergarten children learn basic academic skills best through play.

> For young children, play in school, like anywhere else, is a way to strengthen worthwhile meaningful learning and cooperation with others rather than merely acquiring facts alone.... As a moral issue, the role of play as a part of early education touches the development of competence, a sense of self-worth and efficacy, creative potential,

problem-solving skills, social learning, cognitive learning, linguistic development, and the sheer joy of living fully. (Fromberg, 1987; p. 64)

The kindergarten teacher's role is to provide time, space, and materials for play. This includes play with blocks, playdough, dress-up clothes, water, sand, language, and so on. The teacher also must create an atmosphere which communicates to children that play is accepted and valued, and provide a rich environment which children are encouraged to explore.

In addition to establishing appropriate environments for play, teachers observe children at play in order to respond to individual interests and needs and to expand the child's knowledge and skills. They enhance and extend children's play by adding props, asking thought-provoking questions, modeling, encouraging children to reflect on their activities, recording their ideas and conversations, or at times participating actively in the play (Severeide and Pizzini, 1984).

■ Since play is active and involves the senses it is an ideal means of instruction for kindergarten children.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

INTEGRATING ALL SUBJECTS

In traditional high schoo' settings, subjects are taught separately. Students study math one hour, social studies another, literature still another and so on. In kindergarten, however, instruction in each subject is less distinct. For example, when children engage in painting at the easel, they are obviously involved in art. But, at the same time, they may be experimenting with mixing colors or using different textures of paint. In this case science concepts are being explored. The children may be drawing various shapes and learning about math concepts. They may talk about their painting with teachers and other students and this fosters language development. Frequently social studies concepts are discussed as children talk about and paint pictures of family members and things in their neighborhoods.

Cooking experiences provide another example of how various subjects can be addressed through a single activity. Observing food items change form once they are heated, cooled, or mixed, helps children learn science concepts. As they discuss values of various foods, they learn about nutrition and health. During cooking experiences, children take turns and interact with other children. Kindergarten teachers often write simple recipes for children to "read" from large charts and this fosters literacy development. Of course, cooking always involves measuring, sorting, classifying, and counting so math concepts are naturally integrated into the process.

The primary focus for any given activity may center on one subject or another. For example, a teacher may want to especially emphasize science concepts as she talks about melting snow. However, good kindergarten teachers know that they must be alert to the potential for teaching concepts other than those for which an activity was primarily designed to take advantage of a "teachable moment." In fact, Schiller and Townsend (1985) argue that the most effective science program is one that is integrated into the total curriculum.

Teachers should have clear goals for teaching in the various content areas but it is not necessary or even appropriate for teachers to attempt to devote fixed percentages of time to each content area. The Oregon Department of Education's suggested K-8 curriculum balance (art, 7%; language arts, 40%; mathematics, 15%; etc.) can be helpful in providing guidance to teachers as they prepare goals and set priorities. The suggested guidelines do NOT indicate, for example, that 7% of each day should be devoted specifically to art education. Rather, the 7% indicates that art should be considered an important part of the curriculum. Good kindergarten teachers realize that art may be used to enhance learning in many other areas and, therefore, the children may actually spend much more than 7% of their time engaged in art activities.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

CHILD-SELECTED ACTIVITIES

The term "teach" often implies telling or giving information. However, in early childhood classrooms the term means much more than that. There are times, of course, when giving children information is appropriate. For example, when a child asks how to write his/her name, the teacher can certainly show the child how to do so. And it is appropriate for teachers to tell children about classroom procedures--such as "we wash hands before eating snack."

However, lecturing or giving facts must NOT be the primary means of instruction in the kindergarten classroom. Rather, kindergarten teachers should spend most of their time facilitating learning by setting up environments that encourage children to explore and to interact with materials and other people. In addition, the teachers observe children, keep records of their behavior and provide challenges in order to expand the children's knowledge and curiosity.

This means that much of the kindergarten day is devoted to CHILD-SELECTED activities. That is, the teachers set up various stimulating activities designed to foster children's development and the children choose from among them. It is important for children to choose their own activities because they (1) are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage in the activities, (2) will most often choose activities that are stimulating or which give them needed opportunities to practice, and (3) can feel in control of their own learning.

It is much better for children to choose their own activities than to be coerced into doing things they don't understand or have no interest in. For example, children who engage in writing activities because they WANT to are more likely to learn to write than children who do so because they have been promised a reward for writing or threatened with a punishment if they do not write. Moreover, children who engage in writing because of some intrinsic desire are more likely to develop the DISPOSITION to write. Fostering a positive disposition for writing is just as important as teaching the writing skills themselves for, after all, it is of little value for a person to know HOW to write if s/he does not have the disposition to do so. Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack (1986) write, "Knowledge that is not the outcome of intrinsic motivation is very fragile." They further state that, "All complex learning that requires concentrated effort over time depends on intrinsic motivation" (p. 419).

If a given child never chooses to engage in certain activities, such as art, the teacher's task is to find some way to make art activities so interesting to the child that s/he WILL choose art. Or, if a child seems to always choose block play, the teacher must use the child's interest in blocks to motivate him/her toward other activities. For example, after the child has built something with blocks the teacher may invite him/her to dictate a story about the block structure or explain its components for labeling.

The teacher's primary task is to establish a rich, stimulating environment which will foster each child's development. The teacher's role does not become less important or easier because children select their own activities. It simply changes from that of an "imparter of information" to one of "facilitator of learning."

A Word on Class Size

Class size research clearly indicates that there should be 20 or fewer children in early childhood classrooms (Illinois State Board of Education, 1985). Smaller classes and improved adult/child ratios have positive effects on children's levels of interest, participation and persistence. The recommended group sizes of 18 to 20 with a minimum of two adults per group is consistent with the NAEYC Position

Paper on programs for 4- and 5-year-olds. Moreover, it is highly recommended that every classroom include both a fully certified teacher and a full-time instructional aide in addition to volunteer assistance.

If class size is larger, then teachers may be forced into spending more time in teacher-directed activities. The quality of education is likely to deteriorate as class sizes and teacher-dominated activities increase. In order for teachers to provide opportunities for children to select activities and to individualize instruction, class sizes and adult/child ratios must be kept at manageable levels.

TEACHER-DIRECTED ACTIVITIES

The entire kindergarten day does not need to be devoted to child-selected activities. Many teachers find it useful to have some teacher-directed activities. This is especially true if group activities are connected to individual activities (e.g., one child discovered how to make clay float), past activities (e.g., field trips), or school-wide projects (e.g., Arbor Day). Storytimes, snack, group games, and singing are examples of activities which work well in teacher-directed group experiences. Such experiences are especially valuable if children are encouraged to interact with one another as well as the teacher.

Attempts should be made to involve children actively in group activities. Good storytellers, for example, know how to "bring the children into a story." Appropriate group games and music activities for children keep all children involved throughout the activity (Hitz, 1987). However, it is usually best for teacher-directed activities to be relatively brief, active and interesting.

During teacher-directed activities children will be involved to various degrees. That is, some children will delight in playing a group game, singing or dancing. Others will prefer more passive roles and some will want to "just watch." Experienced kindergarten teachers know that the children who are "just watching" are learning and that in time and with support they too will choose to become actively involved in the activity.

■ It is important for children to choose their own activities because they (1) are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage in the activities, (2) will most often choose activities that are stimulating or which give them needed opportunities to practice, and (3) can feel in control of their own learning.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

A main function of schooling is to create a literate citizenry. Literacy in today's world includes not only the traditional areas of reading and writing, but also oral communication skills and media literacy.

Fostering Literacy

The foundations for literacy are laid very early in children's lives as they learn the language of their environment, are exposed to various media, are read to and observe others reading and writing. There is no clear point in children's lives when they are "ready" to read. Rather, children gradually learn about reading and how to read just as they gradually learn about the usefulness of talking and how to talk. Reading the word "Cheerios" on a cereal box IS reading in the same sense that an infant saying "wawa" for water is talking. Therefore, reading instruction in kindergarten should be considered as part of an on-going process of literacy development (Hitz and Florence, 1986; Schickedanz, 1986). In fact, Fields (1987) contends that the term "reading readiness" is outmoded because, we now know that young children constantly construct important knowledge about written language. They do not just get themselves ready to learn (p. 217). Similarly, oral communication skills develop as students receive instruction and have opportunities to interact with language in a variety of situations.

The term literacy is appropriate because it assumes the integration of instruction in all aspects of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Children do not learn to talk apart from learning to listen. They do not learn to write apart from learning to read. Furthermore, reading and writing instruction should always be connected to the language the child has already acquired.

Children learn to read through many different experiences. They learn to read by being read to. They learn to read when they are given opportunities to label their work or things around the room. They learn to read when they observe the teacher writing a story they dictate.

When children experiment with writing--even if it's "just scribbling"--they are learning about reading (Schickedanz, 1986; Temple, Nathan and Burris, 1982). When they browse through books, they are learning about reading. In short, they become literate by being concretely involved with literacy on a personal level.

Hymes (1965) goes even further by saying that block play, painting and most activities which foster physical development are forms of reading instruction for young children. This is true because direct, first-hand manipulative experiences enhance the development of process skills which include observing, describing, predicting, and communicating. Growth in process skills has a positive correlation with success in beginning reading achievement (Wellman, 1978).

Fostering Literacy in Kindergarten

The major focus of beginning reading and writing instruction should be to help children learn to use print to acquire or impart information. All instruction should be based on the child's language and should be instruction that is responsive to the child's developing understanding of written language. Children should have real reasons to write and to read.

Very early in life children learn to appreciate the information they can obtain by listening to others. For example, it is rewarding to be able to understand a statement such as, "The cookies are on the table." Similarly, children can learn of the usefulness of reading and writing as they acquire new information about people, things, and places.

Learning letter names and sounds should be part of the total process of literacy development. Children come to kindergarten with varying experiences with language and print. Most children already recognize some letters and words. Some can read simple stories. Instruction in letter names and sounds is best done informally and should begin only when the child has an understanding of the basic concepts of words, sentences, letters and the purposes for reading. All instruction should be in a context meaningful to the child and should focus on reading as communication. Receiving information from print is the purpose for reading. Transmitting information through print is the purpose of writing.

Many children enter school viewing themselves as "writers" because they make marks on paper which they later "read." Others do not yet feel empowered to write but are eager to take part in this new communication form. Children's early attempts to write may include pictures, symbols such as a heart for the word "love," and random or phonetic groupings of letters. Furthermore, young children tend to focus on writing as a whole made up of words and ideas rather than parts which are made up of letters and words (Temple, Nathan and Burris, 1982). These efforts to communicate through writing as well as the dictation of stories to an adult are very important steps on the road to literacy.

Recent research on learning styles gives further support for the idea that beginning literacy instruction must focus on communication. Marie Carbo (1987) reports that reading styles profiles show most primary age children to be global/tactile/kinesthetic learners. This points to the reason for the effectiveness of holistic methods of instruction such as the language-experience approach or recorded books with young children.

Commercially prepared workbooks are inappropriate for young children for three main reasons. First, all too often they focus on skills to which children cannot relate. So-called "readiness" workbooks tend to teach letters, sounds or sight words apart from meaningful contexts. Second, such materials, by their very nature, cannot use each child's own language as the basis of instruction. Therefore, the language in the "text" will be too advanced for some, not advanced enough for others, and different to some extent from the language of everyone. Third, the commercially prepared materials do not necessarily build upon the concrete experiences or language of the children, the foundations for all literacy learning.

Developing literacy in a kindergarten program means that children should be read to frequently. It means they should be given many opportunities to dictate stories and see their language in print. They also should be given opportunities to "write" and to experiment with writing and "invent" their own spelling. In short, they should be immersed in an environment of print and continue to be immersed in an environment of language as they were when they were infants; where the usefulness of language was made evident to them and they were treated as "conversational partners" (Schickedanz, 1986; p. 3). Instruction of letter names and sounds and recognition of useful, common or interesting words is best taught informally in meaningful contexts and without undue pressure.

■ Children should have real reasons to write and to read.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

By the time children enter kindergarten, they are amazingly competent in using oral language. Most have acquired a vocabulary of over 3000 words, have a working knowledge of most of the rules of grammar, pronounce most sounds correctly and handle language situations in an almost adult manner (Leeper, Witherspoon, and Day, 1984).

The kindergarten teacher's role is to extend the children's vocabulary, assist them in pronunciation, increase their understanding of rules of language--including the exceptions--and foster a general growth in language. Language development is NOT fostered by having children sit quietly and listen to the teacher. On the contrary, children are likely to learn best when teachers provide activities that encourage the use of language (Genishi, 1987). In kindergarten, children are allowed, indeed stimulated, to talk. This means that the children should be engaged in activities that interest them. It also means that children should spend most of their school day in individual or small group activities where they have opportunities to express themselves.

Of course, if children are in small groups most of the time and they are all encouraged to talk, this means that the kindergarten classroom will be busy and noisy. The kindergarten classroom should not be chaotic but it also should not be quiet. Moreover, the children must be encouraged to engage in sociodramatic play on a frequent and regular basis. Research clearly indicates that participation in sociodramatic play builds the language competence of young children (Levy, Schaifer, Phelps, 1986).

Teaching isolated language skills through direct instruction is NOT recommended in the kindergarten. No one has proven the long-term benefits of teaching young children to talk about language forms and learning grammatical terms. However, the teacher's acceptance and encouragement of children's own language forms does lead to greater learning (Cullinan, Jaggar and Strickland, 1974). In time, children construct good grammatical form if they have models who use correct grammar.

In short, according to Genishi (1987) kindergarten teachers provide a "...language 'bath' for children, to such an extent that their language curriculum becomes hard to distinguish--it becomes seamless. Real-life and lesson language blend with music, science, math, art, play and so on, and are truly at the center of classroom life" (p. 93).

- . . . children should spend most of their school day in individual or small group activities where they have opportunities to express themselves.
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Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

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ASSESSING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

In order to meet individual needs and plan appropriate educational experiences, teachers need to know as much about each child as possible. This means that assessment must take place. That is, teachers need to gather data about the children systematically with the purpose of making some kind of appraisal or evaluation of their development.

Assessment techniques can be categorized as INFORMAL or FORMAL. Informal techniques include structured observations through anecdotal records, checklists, time samples, event samples, and sociograms. Collecting pupil products in a systematic way can also be a valuable informal technique for assessing children's progress (Spodek, 1985). Formal assessments are made with commercially prepared and packaged instruments that give a profile of a child's abilities in a number of different areas (Feeney, Christensen, Moravcik, 1983). They include screening tests, achievement or readiness tests, developmental tests, and intelligence tests.

Reliability, validity, and practicality need to be considered when choosing any form of assessment. Also, since assessment techniques allow teachers to merely sample behavior at a given place and time, it is important to remember that the behavior of a kindergarten-age child on any one occasion is subject to extreme variability. Meisels (1986) reminds us that the younger the child, the less reliable tests tend to be.

Many school districts are screening children prior to entry into kindergarten or sometime during the kindergarten year. The screening process often involves both formal and informal assessment techniques. According to Morrison (1984), comprehensive screening can involve:

1. Gathering parent information about health, learning patterns, learning achievements, personal habits, and specific problems.
2. Health screening, including a physical examination, health history, and perhaps even a blood sample for analysis.
3. Vision, hearing and speech screening.
4. Collecting and analyzing data from former programs and teachers, such as preschools and child care programs.
5. Administering a screening instrument. (For more information about screening instruments see Meisels, 1985.)

Formal assessment techniques may be norm-referenced or criterion-referenced. Norm-referenced tests compare an individual's performance on the test to some external norm or reference group. Criterion referenced tests compare the individual's score to a standard of achievement. Most readiness and achievement tests are norm-referenced.

Guidelines for Testing

The following guidelines are recommended for testing young children (Hitz, 1986).

1. Readiness (achievement) and screening tests must NOT be used to label children or assign them to diagnostic categories. Only DIAGNOSTIC assessment instruments should be used for this purpose.
2. Readiness and screening tests should NOT be used to deny children services or place them in special classes without the benefit of a complete diagnostic evaluation. If tests are to be used with young children, they should be used to open school doors, not to close them (Meisels, 1986).
3. No tests should be used unless their use leads to improvements in services and instructional outcomes for children.

4. The only standardized tests which should be used are those which meet the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing established by a joint committee of the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education.

5. Children should never be labeled or placed in special education classes on the basis of any SINGLE test score.

6. Test content should NOT determine the school's curriculum. Rather, the school's curriculum should guide teachers and others in the selection and/or development of tests.

Retention and Promotion

Kindergarten teachers are faced with the difficult task of recommending children for promotion or retention. In any kindergarten class, there will be differences in levels of development. Ideally, teachers try to meet individual needs and design curriculum accordingly. However, the idea of schools establishing environments for all children regardless of developmental level is more an ideal than a reality. Needs of children who do not fit the group socially, academically or physically are often not as well accommodated as educators and parents would like. Therefore, kindergarten teachers must work closely with parents and administrators to decide if a certain child will have difficulty in first grade given the nature of the first grade program in their particular building. If a teacher identifies several children in the class who are likely to have difficulty in first grade, it may be that the first grade and/or the kindergarten programs are not developmentally appropriate.

Research indicates that some children can benefit from a second year in kindergarten if the teacher plans appropriately for his or her needs. Specific areas of strength and weakness should be identified and addressed in order to maximize the benefits of repeating kindergarten.

■ Children should never be labeled or placed in special education classes on the basis of any SINGLE test score.

■ In any kindergarten class, there will be differences in levels of development.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

FOSTERING SELF-CONTROL AND AUTONOMY

In a broad sense, the purpose of education is to help each individual become self-controlled and autonomous, comfortable in their own well-being and capable of contributing to the well-being of others. The more competent children become in reading, mathematics and other basic academic skills, the more independent, i.e., autonomous, they become. But academic skills compose only one category of those which children need in order to function autonomously. For example, children also need to learn social skills, to solve problems, and to make good choices for themselves and others. In order to guide children toward greater self-control and autonomy, kindergarten teachers (1) provide developmentally appropriate materials and activities (NAEYC, 1986), (2) establish clear rules and procedures with explanations for them and input from the children (Sterman, 1984; Marion, 1981), and (3) give children opportunities to make choices (Riley, 1984).

Providing Developmentally Appropriate Materials/Activities

Some activities and materials are obviously inappropriate for young children. Anyone who ever bought an electric train for a toddler or a chemistry set for a five-year-old can attest to that. Other activities such as playing with matches or sharp utensils pose obvious dangers to the children.

Still other activities pose less obvious dangers but can cause problems for children and teachers. For example, requiring five-year-olds to write their names neatly between the lines could be so frustrating for some of them that they would behave in negatively aggressive ways such as tearing their writing papers, acting out, or refusing to participate.

Teachers need to provide activities and materials which are stimulating to children without causing frustration. The following are some guidelines for evaluating materials and activities for developmental appropriateness:

1. All materials should be evaluated for their safety. Teachers need to decide if the children could use the materials independently without endangering themselves, others or the environment. If materials cannot be used independently then proper supervision needs to be provided.

2. Teachers must keep in mind that young children have a need for considerable physical activity. Any activity which requires long periods of quiet, sedentary behavior may be difficult for the children to handle.

3. Small muscle activities are often difficult for young children. Requiring detailed work in art, or neat writing is often inappropriate.

4. Young children need concrete experiences in order to learn. This means that teaching techniques such as lecturing or activities such as workbooks are of little value to the children and often cause them to become frustrated or bored.

5. Whenever possible activities should have a wide range of acceptability so that children at different stages of development can feel good about their work.

Establishing Rules and Procedures

Clear, reasonable guidelines help create a safe environment for children and give them the security they need to explore, create and learn. Rules and procedures should be stated clearly and specifically. Vague rules such as "Be in the right place at the right time" must be avoided. Kindergarten teachers expect to take considerable time to explain and remind children of the rules and procedures. Further, children are given opportunities

to rehearse procedures. Effective kindergarten teachers also take the time to give reasons for rules and procedures and allow children some input into making new ones (Emmer, Evertson, and Anderson, 1980).

Giving Children Real Choices

Within the safety of clear guidelines children need freedom to explore, create, and make their own decisions. For example, children in kindergarten do not need total freedom to use paint any way they wish, but they do need freedom to paint anything they wish within given boundaries--like a large piece of paper. Similarly, children should have many opportunities to choose the kinds of activities they wish to engage in from among quality options provided by the teacher. To a large extent children should also determine the time they wish to spend in the activities.

When children choose their own activities, they are more likely to stay with them for long periods of time and they are more likely to learn from the experiences. At the same time, choosing activities gives the child a sense of control over the environment and encourages autonomy. Furthermore, they learn to make good choices for themselves and others. If, on the other hand, children are never given real choices, they will be unprepared to make wise choices when they are older. They will continue to rely on others to make choices for them.

- Children also need to learn social skills, to solve problems, and to make good choices for themselves and others.
- Clear, reasonable guidelines help create a safe environment for children and give them the security they need to explore, create and learn.
- Choosing activities gives the child a sense of control over the environment and encourages autonomy.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

KINDERGARTEN AND THE ESSENTIAL LEARNING SKILLS

Oregon educators identified Essential Learning Skills as part of the "Action Plan for Excellence." Essential Learning Skills are those which are considered basic to all students' learning. All teachers are to provide instruction in these skills. This position paper on kindergarten curriculum is designed to assist districts in their efforts to determine HOW to teach "essential" and other skills. In this section, specific implications of the Essential Learning Skills for kindergarten instruction will be discussed.

The Essential Learning Skills booklet, published in the winter of 1986, lists student outcomes expected by the end of grades 3, 5, 9, and 11. The state will develop tests for children at each of these grade levels to determine the extent to which districts are successful in teaching the Essential Learning Skills. The task of determining HOW to teach the skills at each grade level is left to districts. In fact, a central concept of the Action Plan for Excellence is that, "while the state will determine WHAT must be taught in public schools, the schools will determine HOW it will be taught" (ELS, 1986). Two specific issues, integration and mastery of skills, will be addressed in this paper.

Integration of the Essential Learning Skills

Since Essential Learning Skills are basic to all students' learning, they are taught in all the various subject areas. This assumes that subjects will be integrated to some extent, a process consistent with earlier portions of this position paper. As a matter of fact, this particular aspect of the Essential Learning Skills is perhaps easier for kindergarten teachers to deal with than it is for teachers at higher grade levels. Kindergarten teachers tend to integrate subject matter anyway. It is not until later grades that teachers routinely set aside specific times for different subjects. Furthermore, almost everything the kindergarten student does is essential in that it is part of the foundation for later learning. Consequently, "essential learning skills" ARE the kindergarten curriculum.

A superficial reading of the Essential Learning Skills could lead teachers to segment the curriculum rather than integrate it. For example, the first Essential Learning Skill states that by grade three students should be able to "Use phonetic analysis skills" (ELS 1.1, a). If a teacher took this skill out of context, s/he may think that phonics should be taught as a separate subject in kindergarten and primary classrooms. In fact, while phonics is certainly important, it is probably best taught in meaningful contexts as children "read" and "write" words such as their names and names of familiar objects and people.

A teacher could also get the impression that it would be logical to define each Essential Learning Skill more narrowly for kindergarten and develop an outcome statement such as, "Students will be given opportunities to state the sounds of all consonants." Stating an objective as narrowly as "learning the consonant sounds" encourages teachers to focus on isolated skills, segment the curriculum, and disregard individual differences in understanding and development. Teachers need to think of developmentally appropriate and creative ways to meet objectives rather than narrowly focusing on them. For example, children may learn to meet the objective: Students will be able to identify and sound each of the consonants by recognizing and comparing their own and their classmate's names; watching the teacher write their dictation; using invented spelling, labeling objects in the room; and many other means.

The Essential Learning Skills can be helpful in setting direction for curriculum at various grade levels. Kindergarten teachers should be aware of the skills outlined for grade three. However, kindergarten teachers must determine developmentally appropriate means for fostering the skills. It would NOT be particularly beneficial for school districts to narrowly define skills for kindergarten. Rather, districts should focus on HOW to help students acquire the skills listed.

Essential Learning Skills Mastery

Many of the Essential Learning Skills are listed at several different grade levels. For example the skill of "spelling correctly" as part of editing and revising is listed as an expected outcome in grades 3, 5, and 8 and is implied at grade 11. Children are NOT expected to be able to spell perfectly by grade three or even grade eight. Rather, teachers are expected to focus on spelling instruction and students are expected to show growth in their ability to spell and appreciation for the importance of accuracy in spelling. Listing skills at grade 3 does not imply mastery and mastery is certainly not expected in kindergarten.

In kindergarten, teachers do not insist on correct spelling. In fact, encouraging children to "invent" spelling of words by writing the sounds they hear has been shown to be an effective way to teach reading and writing (Fields, 1987). Kindergarten children can learn about the processes of writing and spelling and, in time, they will learn to spell words correctly.

Again, narrowing the skill to say something like, "Kindergarten children will spell 20 words accurately," would not be helpful. Instead, kindergarten teachers should consider HOW they will help children grow in their ability and appreciation for correct spelling.

In summary, the Essential Learning Skills provide good, clear direction for kindergarten curriculum. The task of kindergarten teachers is to determine developmentally appropriate ways to help children grow toward developing each skill. It would not be helpful or even appropriate for teachers to attempt to narrow the skills for kindergarten since doing so could lead to teaching skills in isolation from meaningful experiences and paying less attention to individual needs.

■ The task of kindergarten teachers is to determine developmentally appropriate ways to help children grow toward developing each essential skill.

Source: Kindergarten Issues: A Position Paper, Oregon Department of Education, May 1987

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