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ABSTRACT

The issue of high standards and high expectations for public school students has even reached the kindergarten level of instruction. The paper suggests that the informal readiness approach can be used with a more formal curriculum in order to prepare students for state mandated testing to ensure readiness for first grade. Many educators believe that children are able to move beyond the traditional kindergarten readiness program to a more formal subject centered curriculum, such as developmentally appropriate activities for kindergarten children that introduce phonics and early reading skills, and several ways of assessing the achievement of early reading objectives. If state mandated objectives are formulated in terms of a psychological sequence in which each student acquires the background needed for success, then assessment of kindergarten students' progress is possible. (SLD)

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Assessing Kindergarten Education

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ASSESSING KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

High standards and high expectations for public school students has come down to the kindergarten level of instruction. High stakes testing has even been emphasized whereby a young learner needs to pass a state mandated test in order to be promoted to first grade. Kindergarten basically has been perceived as providing readiness for pupils so that they have adequate background information to benefit from first grade instruction. These readiness experiences have been rather informal, whereas state mandated testing stresses formal situations for young learners. Might the informal readiness approach in teaching be harmonized with a more formal curriculum, suitable for state mandated testing?

An Informal Readiness Kindergarten Curriculum

Too frequently, the informal curriculum has been criticized in terms of stressing only

- 1. coloring and pasting.**
- 2. playing aimlessly with objects at the play center.**
- 3. socializing freely with others during each school day.**
- 4. emphasizing good manners to the detriment of learning solid subject matter.**
- 5. stressing frills and fads and not the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic.**

There is much misunderstanding when defining a kindergarten readiness program in terms of the five enumerated items above. A philosophy of readiness for kindergarten pupils is based on the child leaving home, initially away from parents, for an entire school day. A transition is then involved which bridges the gap between the home and first grade. That gap then may need to stress an informal setting, in degrees, such as exists in most homes, with a more formal set of experiences being provided in school. Kindergarten then provides socialization experiences for the child as well as initial subject matter content to be acquired. The latter may receive emphasis through

- 1. the teacher reading selected library books aloud to pupils. The content in the library books might well come from diverse academic disciplines with a multi-cultural emphasis. A variety of genres/titles provide topics for these reading activities (Ediger and Rao, 2000).**
- 2. the teacher having pupils work in small groups (interpersonal development) as well as individually (intrapersonal endeavors). Multiple Intelligences Theory emphasizes both forms of intelligence to be used in pupil developmental activities (Gardner, 1993). Being able to work**

harmoniously with others as well as by the self is important presently in the public schools as well as at the future work place.

3. the teacher emphasizing learning opportunities which implement a balance among kinesthetic, visual, and auditory methods of teaching and learning (See Searson and Dunn, 2001).

4. the teacher providing adequate background information in order that each pupil may benefit from the new learning opportunities (Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter Fifteen).

5. the teacher scaffolding concepts and generalizations where needed so that each pupil may be successful in achievement after background information has been provided, and yet this is not adequate to achieve an objective. The scaffold then takes care of the gap between the background information and the new objective to be achieved (Vygotsky, 1978).

6. the teacher working with pupils to develop a healthy emotional climate in the classroom setting (See Goleman, 1995). Acceptance of each other and a climate of caring for others is vital in the kindergarten curriculum.

7. the teacher assisting pupils in making choices as to what to learn. Different learning centers in the classroom are based on the philosophy of learners choosing what to learn and the sequence of involvement in these kinds of activities. The teacher may develop each center with its tasks for pupils to participate in. The young learner may also plan with the teacher a purposeful experience for active involvement. (Ediger and Rao, 1996, Chapter Thirteen).

8. the teacher emphasizing a developmentally orientated curriculum for kindergartners. A developmentally based curriculum has as its philosophy/psychology that the pupil is the focal point in curriculum development. Thus, the teacher and the pupil view the objectives to be achieved to harmonize with the present abilities, interests, and purposes of the learner. Thus, outside experts such as the state department of education or legislators/governors are viewed as being removed in time and space from decision making in teaching and learning situations in the local classroom setting.

9. the teacher perceives constructivism in the educational arena to be paramount. Constructivists advocate that pupils do

a) create their very own knowledge and skills since each learner is different from the others in the classroom setting.

b) order their very own experiences in terms of a psychological, not a logical sequence. Thus with teacher guidance, it is the pupil who helps sequence his/her own learning activities.

c) desire to be actively involved, not a passive recipient, in deciding upon what to learn, be it knowledge or skills.

10. the teacher perceives kindergarten education as related to play in providing learning opportunities for pupils. Friedrich Froebel (1782-

1852), the father of kindergarten education, also stressed play as the major way of learning for young pupils (Ediger, 1974, Chapter Two).

With a large number of pupils attending pre-school, there are educators who believe that kindergarten pupils are increasingly ready to move beyond the traditional kindergarten readiness program toward a more formal subject centered curriculum.

High Stakes Testing

High stakes testing is emphasized by many states in that secondary school students need to pass an exit test in order to graduate. Tests from different states may be written at a very complex level whereby low numbers of students receive passing marks.

In an article entitled, "A Quiet Crisis: Unprepared for High Stakes," (Education Week, April 18, 2001), the following quote appeared:

Despite the intensive push, bringing all Putnam, Massachusetts tenth graders who took the exam last year, 94% failed the English section, 95% failed in mathematics, and 91% fell short on the science test.

Similar scenarios are playing out all around the country, as the drive to hold secondary students to more rigorous academic standards and tests reveal a quiet crisis. A large proportion of students who are already in high school are not yet ready to do high-school level work.

The above quote refers to test results from the Massachusetts Assessment of Comprehensive Skills. These students are caught in the transition when moving from the traditional standards for high school graduation to the new state mandated test. Allen (2001) wrote:

The pressure is on: The accountability movement in education has finally reached kindergarten. The year that once marked a transition from home to school with cutting and pasting, learning the alphabet, and overcoming fears about negotiating the dizzying height of the play ground's big slide has seen an influx of enriched curricula designed to have students reading by 1st grade, counting to 100, and exploring the environment with probing questions, predictions, and a search for answers. Accordingly, schools are scrambling to align their early childhood goals with state standards in order to give kindergarten students the mental tools and knowledge they'll need as they march toward the inevitable state mandated large-scale assessment, which can begin in 3rd grade, if not earlier. Some educators are wary of the prospect of more formal instruction in kindergarten, although each school district seems to be handling the pressure in a different way.

There are numerous methods of reading instruction, for example, which may be used in teaching pupils on the kindergarten level. Each has its place for kindergartners based on preceding readiness

experiences provided by the teacher to enhance pupil motivation for reading. These include the following developmentally appropriate activities

1. the experience chart. Here, pupils may look at a set of objects on an interest center and then provide content for the teacher to record on the chalkboard or in a word processor for all to see clearly. Learners may then read aloud the ideas with teacher guidance. Thus, the teacher reads aloud together with the pupils as the former points to words and phrases being read. Pupils may see talk written down and they may read aloud what has been recorded. The listening, speaking, reading, and writing vocabularies are integrated in content composed by these kindergartners with teacher assistance. The experience chart may be read aloud as often as desired and new ones developed. Pupils should master a core of reading words in an experience curriculum.

2. the Big Book Approach. A large book is used whereby each pupil can clearly see the illustrations, letters and words in the story. The teacher may motivate pupil reading by discussing the illustrations in the Big Book. This provides background information to kindergartners. The teacher may then read aloud to pupils as he/she points to the words and phrases being read. The second time read aloud should involve pupils. Pupils need to be attentive to the words/phrases being pointed to by the teacher as the oral reading activity progresses. In this way, kindergartners are developing a basic sight vocabulary. Rereading may be done by pupils with teacher guidance or by the learner himself/herself as often as interest and desire are there. Big Books chosen can have predictable content which should ease the difficulty of reading for involved kindergarten pupils.

The above approaches are whole language procedures in reading instruction. Thus, the contents in the entire story are read/reread aloud as well as silently by pupils. Word analysis (phonics) may be emphasized when pupils voluntarily provide ideas such as the following:

1. I see two words which begin alike -- toy and table.
2. I see two words which end alike -- boat and cat.
3. I see two words which have the same middle letters -- dog and log (Ediger, 2001, 22- 26).

Increasingly, phonics may be stressed with the use of carefully chosen basal readers. Here, the teacher first discusses the illustrations related directly to the story to be read. The involved discussion should be a motivator for pupils to become interested in wanting to read the ensuing story. Background information is needed to understand the contents of the story. The new words contained in the story are then printed in neat manuscript style on the chalkboard or with the use of the word processor for all pupils to see clearly. The teacher goes over the words with pupils by pointing to each as it is being pronounced and its

meaning established. This is a crucial part of the lesson since abstract words are being introduced to learners. Hopefully, pupils will attach meaning to each word as it will be used in the story context while reading orally or silently. Prior to oral/silent reading, there are purposes or questions for pupils to answer as they do the actual reading. These questions/purposes provide a structure for reading whereby there are definite things to look for in the reading activity. Following the reading of the story, the questions may be discussed to check pupil comprehension. The assessment of comprehension should increase, not destroy, interest in reading.

The above model for kindergarten reading can become quite abstract in that

1. pupils see the abstract words in print on the chalkboard and are to transfer these learnings to the actual reading of the story which follows. Essential phonics may be stressed here as the teacher selects certain words to analyze which have common elements such as words which follow the consonant, vowel, consonant, silent "e" pattern, such as bone, home, and same. Problems in phonics instruction do arise such as in changing the letter "b" to the letter "d" as in "bone" to "done," whereby the long vowel sound "o" no longer holds true. Up to a point, phonics instruction has merit to assist pupils to identify the unknown. Many consonant letters hold true between symbol and sound such as the letter "m" with its many consistencies.

2. meaning needs to be established through a discussion of each new word to be encountered by learners. Hopefully, the pupil will be able to use an appropriate meaning in context when reading the story content.

3. learners need to raise questions about the illustrations discussed prior to the reading experience. These questions may then provide the framework for pupils in finding related answers during the actual reading activity.

Assessment of reading achievement may be done in terms of how many words pupils identify correctly during the ensuing reading activity. There should be a 90 to 95% rate of correctly identifying words in print for quality comprehension to accrue. Answers to identified questions should have a 75% correct rate to ascertain if pupils attach meaning to the ongoing learning experience. These per cents are approximate.

There is no reason that a basal may not be read in the same manner as was true of the experience chart and the Big Book. Thus, the teacher may guide pupils to read the contents together. First, the teacher reads aloud the contents initially to learners. Then together, the pupils and teacher read the contents together, followed by the learners reading the ideas on their own. If each pupil has a basal with no big book, then it becomes more difficult for the teacher to monitor if pupils are following

along in their readers. The commercial company which published the basal may have a Big Book so that all can see the words in print together with the illustrations (See Ediger, 2000, 20-29).

In Summary

The kindergarten curriculum is changing with the impact of the high standards and high stakes testing movement. Teachers need to exert caution in guiding kindergarten pupils achievement whereby

1. all can be successful learners. Learnings presented are not excessively difficult whereby many pupils fail to achieve. Nor, are they too easy in which boredom may come about.

2. state mandated standards are taught in terms of a psychological sequence in which each pupil may possess the background experiences to succeed. Scaffolding may be used by the teacher to bridge the gap between the background experiences possessed by learners and the new expectations for kindergarten pupils to achieve (See Vygotsky 1978).

3. meaning, interest, and purpose are involved in achieving viable objectives of kindergarten instruction.

It is only wise and good to quote Omar Kayyam (1941), a famous Persian philosopher and thinker of the 11th century:

The moving finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy plety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.

Thus, what is done in teaching and learning situations by the pupil, parents, and teachers, among others, is there and has been completed. What needs to be corrected in sequence will involve diagnosis and remediation.

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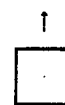
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