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**THE EARLY READER GOES TO SCHOOL:  
DELIGHT OR DILEMMA**

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In the spring of 1983 a group of researchers at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, embarked upon a research project that had an immediate goal of identifying a sample of three, four, and five year old children who were reading before beginning formal reading instruction. The long term goal of the research project is to longitudinally investigate these subjects, especially their academic progress and instructional treatment in their formal educational environments. With the aforementioned goals in mind, the authors of this article conducted a pilot study to look at kindergarten teachers' responses to questions concerned with their instructional interaction with early readers. A general profile of the subjects who have been identified as early readers, and a summary of the responses to a questionnaire given to 16 kindergarten teachers are included in this article. Although no precise data are available

on the number of children who are coming to school already knowing how to read, most educators agree that the number of children beginning formal education with some degree of reading proficiency has increased in recent years and will probably continue to increase (Forester, 1977; Cassidy and Vakilich; Lass, 1982). If this trend continues the kindergarten teachers' instructional relationship with early readers will develop into an important aspect of teacher training for colleges of education.

Teacher effectiveness research has affirmed that effective teachers diagnose student needs and plan instruction based on their findings (Blair, 1984). Thus, the increased number of preschool readers and the need to differentiate their instruction poses a potential problem for early childhood educators. The relative ease of identifying a sample of early readers convinced the researchers that kindergarten teachers in the Beaumont area were in fact receiving children with reading skills.

Questions such as, "Were the teachers differentiating instruction and, if so, to what degree was instruction being differentiated," were the questions the researchers attempted to answer in the pilot study. For the purposes of this research project, differentiated reading instruction is defined as "... small group and individual instruction to meet the needs of students of different levels of reading (or readiness) competence" (Harris and Hodges, 1981). The assumptions by the authors are that it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide differentiated reading instruction and that only through differentiated instruction can the full capacity of early readers be developed. The latter hypothesis will be tested in subsequent research.

Table 1 provides a profile of the 37 three, four, and five year old subjects who have been identified as early readers. These subjects were each given a reading test, the *Test of Early Reading Ability* (TERA) and an intelligence test, the *Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children* (K-ABC). The percentile scores on both the reading and intelligence tests are reported for the 37 subjects identified as early readers. Any subject who scored 80th percentile or above on the TERA was identified as an early reader.

Information about kindergarten instruction for early readers originated from 16 kindergarten teachers who were asked twelve questions about their work with early readers (See appendix A for teacher questionnaire). The questions pertained to what teachers did about screening, readiness testing, readiness training, grouping, enrichment, as well as whether or not they believed the number of children beginning formal education with some degree of reading proficiency had increased in recent years. Most information about the kindergarten teachers' instructional strategies was obtained through a structured telephone interview. Four teacher questionnaires were filled out by the teachers without a formal interview. Interviews took approximately 15 minutes. The sample of teachers selected for this study represented six school systems in the Southeast Texas area. The teachers represented both rural and urban school systems.

The teachers who were interviewed during the pilot study were not the teachers of the early readers who have been identified in the research project. The kindergarten teachers of the early reading subjects in the study were purposely omitted until all the data from the pilot study has been examined carefully

by the researchers. This will allow the researchers to ascertain if the questions and procedures used to collect the data are appropriate for subsequent use with the teachers who are actually teaching the early readers in our study.

The primary finding in the pilot study was that the majority of kindergarten teachers provided little differentiated instruction for any students. When asked if children were grouped by reading (readiness) level in the classroom, 25 percent of the kindergarten teachers reported children were not grouped. Thirty-one percent reported grouping occurred, however, instruction was not differentiated. Differentiated instruction did occur according to 37 percent of the kindergarten teachers approximately three months before school dismissal. In only one instance did a kindergarten teacher report that differential instruction occurred at the beginning of the school year. These responses were cross-validated with responses to questions four, five, seven, and eight where most of the kindergarten teachers suggested that they seldomly to never accelerated early reader to higher instructional levels. Also, early readers were seldomly to never taught on levels that differed from their classmates. This was especially true during the first three-quarters of the school year.

A consistent claim among the kindergarten teachers was that all children must participate in readiness training. Ninety-three percent of the kindergarten teachers expressed the necessity for all the children to know the reading prerequisites. According to the teachers, the prerequisites involved letter recognition, knowing consonant sounds, comprehending positional terms, developing appropriate auditory/visual discrimination skills, and using proper oral language.

While the kind of instruction was not found to be differentiated among most of the kindergarten teachers, the quantity of instruction was. Each kindergarten teacher indicated that enrichment activities were provided for early readers. The enrichment activities usually included additional materials such as center activities, language experience stories, library books, and teacher made games. The kindergarten teachers worked with the nonreaders, while the early readers worked independently on the extra enrichment activities.

### Summary

There has been an increasing amount of literature about early readers during the approximate 20 years since Durkin's noted study (Durkin, 1966). Although most educators believe that there is an increase in the numbers of children who begin school with reading skills, there appears to be no established pattern of instructional behavior that teachers follow for these children. Continued longitudinal research should help establish the best means of instructing early readers. According to the present findings, however, kindergarten teachers appear to be doing little adaptive or differentiated instruction for children who enter school knowing how to read.

### REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT PRECOCIOUS READERS

1. What do you do about screening for reading in your classroom?
2. What do you do about readiness testing for reading in your classroom? If readiness tests are given, what kinds are administered and when are they given?
3. Do early readers go through readiness training in your classroom?
4. What readiness training do the early readers in your classroom go through?
5. Are children grouped by reading (readiness) level in your classroom? If so, how are children grouped according to reading (readiness)?
6. Do you ever accelerate early readers to the next grade?  
Always Frequently Occasionally Seldomly Never
7. Do you ever accelerate early readers to higher instructional levels?  
Always Frequently Occasionally Seldomly Never
8. Do you teach early readers on the same level as their classmates?  
Always Frequently Occasionally Seldomly Never
9. Do you provide enrichment activities for early readers?
10. What kind(s) of enrichment activities do you provide for your early readers?
11. Have you seen a substantial increase in the number of children who are entering school with some reading skills?
12. What reading skills do you see in your children compared to previous years?

TABLE 1

READING AND INTELLECTUAL PROFILES OF THE EARLY READERS

				Kaufman-ABC Percentiles				
Subject	CA	Sex	TERA Percentiles		1983		1984	
			1983	1984	MPC*	ACH*	MPC*	ACH*
**003	5-5/6-5	M	99+	91	79	99	94	95
**004	5-6/6-6	M	96	83	81	97	66	92
**005	4-10/5-10	F	83	71	95	97	97	86

**006	3-9/4-8	F	98	97	96	96	94	91
**009	5-2/6-2	F	81	98	96	97	90	96
**010	4-6/5-7	M	97	98	99.6	99.7	95	98
**011	5-3/6-3	F	83	99	99.4	94	99.6	93
**012	5-4/6-4	M	97	97	94	99	99	99
**014	5-3/6-3	M	97	93	32	73	25	82
*015	5-5/	M	97+		81	97		
**017	4-4/5-4	F	85	87+	88	66	68	82
**018	5-1/6-1	M	97	83	86	97	66	87
*019	6-3/	F	93		66	84		
**021	5-9/6-8	F	99	99	99	97	99	98
*022	4-6/	M	94			99	96	
**023	5-4/6-5	F	83	86	91	81	90	79
024	6-0/	M	96		84	86		
**025	3-5/4-4	F	97	98	90	96	99.6	99.6
*027	5-5/	F	97		96	98		
**028	4-8/5-7	F	86	87	50	87	81	97
**029	5-8/6-8	F	97	95	96	92	99	97
*030	3-5/	F	95		82	90		
*032	/4-5	F		96			98	95
**033	/5-8	F		98			94	95
*034	/6-0	M		98			99.6	95
*037	/5-0	M		96			92	99.7
*038	/4-4	M		90			95	96
*039	/4-10	M		97			90	97
*041	/4-11	M		96			99	66
*043	/4-2	M		95			98	95
*044	/4-9	F		88			95	86
*045	/4-11	M		97			88	93
*049	/4-6	F		94			91	94
*056	/5-5	F		93			88	96
*057	/4-4	F		98			99	99.6
*058	/6-5	M		92			94	86
*059	/3-11	M		88			97	73

\*Precocious Reader  
 \*\*Precocious Reader tested in 1983 & 1984  
 MPC\* Mental Processing Composite  
 ACH\* Achievement