Children learning to read

Not quite so simple!

The following article was written by Donna Broadhurst and Susan Krieg in response to Mimi Wellisch's article, Should we teach young children to read? which appeared in Every Child Summer 2000 (Vol. 6 No. 4).

In the Summer 2000 issue of Every Child (Vol. 6, No. 4), Mimi Wellisch called for the teaching of literacy to young children to begin earlier. Wellisch begins her article by asking a question that is at the heart of education. Why do many children never learn to read well? This question and others like it have baffled committed and reflective educators for years and prompted much research. Wellisch proposes a simple solution—one that seems to take little account of the wealth of literacy research into this question. Her response expresses her opinion that three taboos, assumed to be widely held by early childhood educators, are responsible for the failure of children learning to read successfully. We suggest that the view presented by Wellisch does not take account of macro factors impacting on children's literacy development.

Is her definition broad enough to include Donny's culture, where both mum and dad could not read?

Wellisch suggests 'in our culture, one important adult activity is reading'. Whose culture is defined as 'ours'? Is her definition broad enough to include Donny's culture, where both mum and dad could not read (Purcell-Gates, 1995)? Does it include Sean's culture, where the need to read is overwhelmed by the need for him to cope with emotional disruption at home, or Reena's culture, where Indigenous people's treatment at the hands of dominant institutions and subsequent mistrust of those institutions means attendance at school is not a priority (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid, 1998)? Has Wellisch fallen into the trap of assuming her cultural practices are the norm—whatever that might be? Research has shown that the literacy practices in some homes are similar to school practices, but others are widely divergent (Hearth, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995). Some children therefore may find school complementary to their early experience, while others do not experience such congruence, and consequently may find their skills under-recognised.

The Bristol study (Wells, 1986) demonstrated that prior to school, there was a range of literacy experiences that children were exposed to in their homes. Once they began school, children who grew up in homes where they were read to, who saw adults reading and writing and where adults owned more books, were advantaged when they began school. Making the connections between children's existing knowledge and experiences and the relevance of literacy for their own purposes is an important motivator for children's literacy achievements at school (Purcell-Gates, 1995).

Learning a language is a different process from learning to read

Wellisch confuses learning to speak with learning to read and suggests there is a 'window of opportunity' for language acquisition and hence learning to read. Learning a language however, is a qualitatively different process from learning to read. We agree with Wellisch that some analogies can be drawn between the two processes; however, they are not synonymous. They don't occur together and this is evidenced worldwide across many cultures. Learning to talk does appear to have a critical period, as the famous case of Genie (Curtiss, 1977) illustrates so well.

However, is there evidence of such a critical period for learning to read? In Denmark, children do not start 'school' until age seven. Prior to that time their education is focused on the social and aesthetic aspects of development and avoids formal cognitive and linguistic training, including formal early reading instruction (Lundberg, Frost & Petersen, 1988). Phillip Gammage, Chair of Early Childhood at the de Lissa Institute in South Australia, notes that in Finland, many children do not begin school until age seven, but by age nine are amongst the highest achievers in literacy internationally.

Paulo Freire's (1972) work in South America, teaching illiterate adults to read, demonstrates that there is not a critical period for learning to read. He taught adults to read in a short time—implying that the skill was easily acquired.
It is therefore not age that seems to be important in learning to read; rather it is the purpose that is a motivating factor, and context provides a motivation. The context of learning is important for young children.

Wellisch suggests there is a resistance to teaching academic subjects in early childhood. We would argue that the opposite is the case. Early childhood educators embrace the teaching of literacy in their programs, but in ways that engage children in relevant, contextualised learning. Numerous studies indicate that multiple factors influence reading acquisition. Learning to read involves a hierarchy of skills, including phonological awareness, letter knowledge, print and book concepts, and reading for meaning. This is supported by a large body of research (e.g. Adams, 1990; Badian, 1995; Lazo & Pumfrey, 1996; Lundberg et al., 1988; Snider, 1997; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 1992). Early childhood educators recognise this and work to support children’s literacy development by providing opportunities to build up this set of skills and understandings.

We have not taken issue with all the points raised by Wellisch. There are many more we could address; however, in this brief response we have tried to indicate the importance of practice being informed by quality research. By systematically acquainting ourselves with the knowledge-base on a topic, we are in a position to present an informed opinion. In the past 30 years there has been prolific production of various literacy programs, packages, and marketable products, and early childhood educators have used these in the hope of addressing children’s literacy learning. However, these successive curriculum reforms seem to compensate for society (Bernstein, 1971), which we take to mean that education cannot go on a topic, rather it is the changing roles of letter naming, phonological awareness and orthographic processing. Anvatas of Dyslexia, 45, 79-96.

References