

“Ready to Learn” = Easier to Educate (##)

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By Alfie Kohn

The phrase “ready to learn,” frequently applied to young children, is rather odd when you stop to think about it, because the implication is that some kids aren’t. Have you ever met a child who wasn’t ready to learn – or, for that matter, already learning like crazy? The term must mean something much more specific – namely, that some children aren’t yet able (or willing) to learn certain things or learn them in a certain way.

Specifically, it seems to be code for “prepared for traditional instruction.” And yes, we’d have to concede that some kids are not ready to memorize their letters, numbers, and colors, or to practice academic skills on command. In fact, some children continue to resist for years since they’d rather be doing other kinds of learning. Can you blame them?

Then there’s the question of when we expect children to be ready. Even if we narrow the notion of readiness to the acquisition of “phonemic awareness” as a prerequisite to reading in kindergarten or first grade, the concept is still iffy, but for different reasons. For one thing, researcher Stephen Krashen points out that “about three-quarters of

children who test low in P.A. [phonemic awareness] appear to have no serious problems in learning to read.”[1] For another thing, the premise that one must be ready to start by a certain age is contradicted by evidence that children who don’t learn to read until age 7 or even later tend to make rapid progress and are soon indistinguishable from those who learned earlier.[2]

Thus, “readiness to learn” may have more to do with a schedule that’s convenient for others – or, worse, with preparation for standardized testing – than with what is necessary or even desirable for a given child. Perhaps the phrase is an attempt to put a positive spin on what is really just developmentally inappropriate practice. In any case, I fear the effect is to set up children (or their parents) for blame when certain goals aren’t reached. “Well, what did you expect? This child arrived in our classroom not ready to learn.”

Sometimes, though, readiness is invoked not as a justification for premature instruction but as a criterion for admission to a selective school or program. Only those certified as “ready to learn” are deemed eligible. For the moment, let’s ignore the moral implications of making 4- or 5-year-olds compete for access to an elite educational setting. When the demand exceeds the (artificially scarce) supply, the decision is usually made to choose the most advanced children, the “smartest,” the readiest.

But why?

Presumably because they will be the easiest to teach.

Martin Haberman, who coined the phrase “pedagogy of poverty,” related a conversation he had with his grandson’s kindergarten teacher at a selective school. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to admit the children who don’t know their shapes and colors, and teach them these things?” he asked. The

teacher looked at him as if he were “leftover mashed potatoes,” but he persisted:

Next year my grandson, who is already testing in your top half, will have had the added benefit of being in your class for a whole year. Won't he learn a lot more and be even further ahead of the 4-year-olds who failed your admission exam and who have to spend this year at home, or in daycare, without the benefit of your kindergarten? Will the 4-year-old rejects ever catch up?

This question did even less to endear him to the teacher, but Haberman by now had realized what was going on more generally, and he summarized his epiphany as follows: “The children we teach best are those who need us least.”[3]

As it happens, I had stumbled across this truth while thinking about education for a very different age group. Some years ago I was weighing the relative predictive power of high school grade-point average against that of the SAT or ACT. Some critics emphasize (correctly) that these exams are much less useful than grades at predicting college performance, but I was at pains to point out that grades have their own problems and in any case it would be more sensible to lump them together into a compound variable called “gradesandtests”, which fails to predict anything other than future gradesandtests; it tells us nothing about who will be creative or a deep thinker or excited about learning or happy or successful in his or her career.

But even this reframing of the discussion failed to challenge the premise that I, too, seemed to share with more conventional participants in the colloquy about college admission. The eminent psychologist David McClelland, known for his theory of achievement motivation, delivered a public lecture at the Educational Testing Service in 1971. This talk was devoted primarily to raising pointed questions about the value of intelligence tests (Do such tests predict “who will

get ahead in a number of prestige jobs where credentials are important”? he asked rhetorically. Sure. And so does “white skin.”)

In an almost offhand way, McClelland then issued what struck me as a truly provocative and profound challenge. Why, he asked, do we spend time trying to figure out which criteria best predict success in higher education? Why are colleges looking for the most qualified students? “One would think that the purpose of education is precisely to improve the performance of those who are not doing very well,” he mused. “If the colleges were interested in proving that they could educate people, high-scoring students might be poor bets because they would be less likely to show improvement in performance.”[4]

Of course that’s not how most colleges see the purpose of education. Like other institutions that get to choose whom to admit, they’re looking for the applicants they think are ready to succeed. When you boil it down, that means excluding those who most need what they have to offer.

It’s one thing to admit this guiltily, and something else again to build an admissions industry – from kindergarten to graduate school – around an unapologetic attempt to find the students who will be easiest to educate.

Notes

1. Stephen Krashen, “Low P.A. Can Read O.K.,” *Practically Primary*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2001: 17-20.
2. Stephen Krashen and Jeff McQuillan, “The Case for Late Intervention,” *Educational Leadership*, October 2007: 68-73.
3. Martin Haberman, *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (W. Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1995), p. 80.
4. David C. McClelland, “Testing for Competence Rather Than for ‘Intelligence,’” *American Psychologist*, January 1973,

pp. 6, 2.

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