

“The Fallacy of Early Reading”. Submitted to the Taos News “Your Turn”. By Gary M. Atias, 575-770-7669

We all want our children to succeed in school. However, there is widespread disagreement on how best to achieve this. I believe that we have the greatest chance of success when we incorporate research-based best practices into schools. The current state of American education is the direct result of our reliance on conventional wisdom and myths to guide our educational practices. We have no chance at success until we listen to what scientists have now determined.

The most pernicious myth about education is that earlier is always better in regards to formal instruction. Nowhere is this myth more prevalent than with formal reading instruction. About 30 years ago, most schools moved the introduction of formal reading instruction from first grade into kindergarten. The results have been disastrous.

Reading readiness used to be open to debate. Thanks to MRI studies of children’s brains, we can now say with certainty when children are ready to learn to read efficiently and without undue stress. Five neural structures in the brain must fully develop for this to occur. Fortunately, we can determine this development from behavioral cues rather than performing an MRI. Brain researchers have determined that the typical age range for this development is between four and eight years of age. Some children are ready to read at age four or five. Other children, just as typical, will not be ready to read until ages six, seven, or eight. By insisting that all children begin formal reading instruction at age five, we are dooming millions of children to academic disengagement and school failure.

Research shows that very few people will persist in any activity that makes them feel stupid. When we force formal reading instruction on children whose brains are not ready, we create a mental association within them between reading and feeling stupid. Most of these children will eventually become fluent readers, but the damage will be already done; these children will forever associate school and reading with feelings of failure.

There is no relationship between early reading and school success. Some of history’s smartest people including Albert Einstein were late readers. There is a strong relationship between the love of books and school achievement. Instead of focusing on how early we can get children to read, we need to focus on their life-long positive orientation towards books and education.

Finland has the highest average academic achievement among developed countries. They do not teach their children to read until age seven. In fact, countries starting formal reading instruction after age six have higher academic achievement than countries starting at age five. This is no accident.

The pioneers of Western educational thought including Rousseau, Pestalozzi and John Dewey all argued against early reading. They believed that the human brain must first master concrete

learning before moving into abstract learning. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf Education, stated bluntly that premature formal reading instruction would make children materialistic and disengaged from their own educations. I bet this sounds familiar to parents who have grown children living in their basements playing video games.

My own published research found that in grades four through seven, children who began their formal reading instruction after kindergarten had significantly higher reading motivation than children who began reading instruction in kindergarten. Research scientist Martha Bridge Denckla has reached a similar conclusion. She now supports the idea that many children diagnosed with dyslexia before age eight are simply late-bloomers and that premature formal reading instruction is taking an emotional toll on these children. If children truly have dyslexia, addressing it at age eight is most appropriate. In the meanwhile, they and our late bloomers can engage in appropriate language activities known to support later reading.

I do not wish to prevent any child from reading who is neurologically ready and wants to learn. What I recommend is flexible curriculum that groups children by interest and readiness rather than by chronological age. Every child develops in his or her own unique way and time. Our educational practices need to reflect this reality.

Our understanding of the neuro-physiology of reading has made great progress. We can now look at an MRI of a child with dyslexia and know which type of remedial reading program will work best. Let's put this knowledge to use. A wise person once said that when your horse dies, get off. Instead of sitting on the carcass of early formal reading instruction and yelling "giddy-up", we should structure schools and curriculum for individual success.

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