

Making Education History on the Internet

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During the school year of 2002–2003 I joined a Yahoo Groups education listserv and recruited a number of "whole language" teachers to help test Maria Montessori's 1912 postulate that making young children "expert" at writing the alphabet would make them "spontaneous" readers.

To my delight, there turned out to be a very strong correlation between how many letters of the alphabet first-graders could write in a 20-second period of time and how good their reading skills were. . However, some whole language teachers did not believe in "setting specific achievement goals", and I was asked to unsubscribe from the list.

In the following school year (2003–2004) I created my own Yahoo Groups listserv and recruited another group of five kindergarten teachers willing to submit correlation data of alphabet-letter writing fluency and reading skills. Children were identified by ID numbers, rather than by names, to keep the study ethical.

There had been 94 students in the whole language "control" group, and I got a total of 106 student correlations from the five "experimental" kindergarten teachers, all of whom had also gotten very strong correlations between writing fluency and reading skill.

I immediately emailed the editorial offices of over a dozen well-known education journals, asking if they would be interested in me submitting a write-up of our study for possible publication. I got only two responses: one said, "That couldn't possibly be true", but the editor of the *Harvard Educational Review* enthusiastically invited my submission. I wrote up our study and sent in three days later (in March, 2004). A few months later I received a standard letter of rejection from them.

Since then I have emailed copies of "my manuscript" to HUNDREDS of educational psychologists, journalists, education professors, politicians and school superintendents. Though I

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received a few informal polite replies, no one seemed to take my idea seriously.

During the second half of the 2008–2009 school year I recruited a number of different kindergarten and first-grade teachers to my listserv. All who participated again saw positive correlations, but it was decided to wait until this present (2009–2010) school year to repeat the study and see if we could get enough data to publish a meaningful meta-analysis on the Internet.

So far (5/5/10) we have data from three first-grade teachers at a Catholic private school in an upper middle-class Midwestern city. The data from these three teachers involve a total of 60 first-graders. Not only is there a correlation between alphabet-writing fluency and literacy, BUT EVERY ONE OF THESE CHILDREN IS NOW ABLE TO READ. (We got baseline data last year from a first-grade in one of the most affluent and academically successful elementary schools in the state of Pennsylvania. NOT ALL of their first graders were readers, though there was indeed a correlation between writing fluency and reading skill).

At this Catholic school Teacher #1 wrote she had the children practice writing the alphabet three days a week. (We had recommended five minutes each school day). Her class's writing fluency rates ranged between 63 and 123 letters-per-minute (LPM), and her median student wrote at a rate of 72 LPM. Teacher #2's median rate was 75 LPM, and the median rate for Teacher #3 was 84 LPM.

A kindergarten teacher in our study wishes to be identified as "Mary Jane from rural South Carolina". She tells us that 93% of the children in her school receive subsidized lunches, and as of early May, 2010, only two of the children in her kindergarten are not yet readers. The principal of a highly successful elementary school in Atlanta had once told me on the telephone that children should learn to read in kindergarten, not in the first-grade.

Some years ago the retired archivist of the Calvert School (a private elementary school in Baltimore, Maryland), sent me a copy of a privately published booklet published in 1996, the centennial of the founding of the school. The original headmaster, G. Vernon Hillyer, wrote that, "If you teach children to write, you needn't bother teaching them to read". In his first-grade (the school had no kindergarten), children simply learned to write the sentence, "I see a tree". Thereafter they learned to write, "The tree is green". After about three months, all the children were literate, and then began to study a formal curriculum and to write meaningful essays. Twenty years later, he wrote that the school had never failed to teach a normal child to read and write.

In traditional Russia, children were taught literacy at home before they began school. In Russian, as in English, various letters are pronounced differently in normal colloquial speech than they are written. As a matter of fact, there is not word for "to spell" in Russian. Instead, if one wishes to ask how a word is written, one just asks, "How is that written by syllables". For example, the word "govorit" (he speaks) is colloquially pronounced "guvareet". When asked how it is written, one answers: "Goh-Voh-REET".

In other words, one basically doesn't learn to read in Russian, one learns simply to write. And anyone can read anything that one can successfully write! (I studied Russian for three years in college, and this way of learning to write in Russia is confirmed by several people educated in Russia whom I have known in the past.)

We appreciate this May 1st, 2010 data from Ardis, which we'll consider "end-of-the-year" data, even though a nice lady at the Michigan Board of Education just told me on the telephone that the children in Macomb County, Michigan, adjacent to Detroit, will actually probably be attending school into sometime in June.

In the past Ardis, a kindergarten teacher, has told us her school has a high number of children of immigrants in her class. Ardis included two interesting remarks in her report. One is "I have to admit I haven't kept up with the fluency training during this second semester as much as I did last year." The other important comment is "Every single person (i.e., kindergartner) is a reader – there are no struggling- or non-readers this year".

At any rate, Ardis' data of May first indicate there were 26 kids in her kindergarten. One has moved away, and of the remaining:

Four students wrote the alphabet more rapidly than 40 LPM. Their reading levels were, respectively, high, average, high and high.

Eight students wrote at between 30 and 39 LPM. In descending LPM order, their reading levels were high, high, high, high, very high [3rd grade level], low average, low average and average.

Eleven students scored between 21 and 27 LPM. Again, in decreasing order of LPM, their reading levels were: medium, high, high, low average, low average, medium, average, low average, high, very very high [3rd grade level; autistic], (this student's LPM was 21) and average.

Two students scored only 18 LPM. Their reading levels were high and low average.

Nancy, an Ed.D. kindergarten teacher, also from Macomb County, just provided us with the following data:

Two of our 26 students scored better than 40 LPM and both rated as "above grade level" in reading skill.

Two students scored 39 LPM, and are also "above grade level".

Five students scored between 30 and 36 LPM. In decreasing order of LPM rates, they were rated "above grade level", "below grade level", "above grade level", "above grade level" and "at grade level".

Eight students wrote at between 21 and 27 LPM. Each of these eight were rated as "at grade level" in my opinion of their reading ability.

Five students wrote at 15 LPM. Of these, one was "at grade level" and the other four were "below grade level".

In the fall of 2009 the average LPM rate in my class was 7 LPM. At present it is 28 LPM.

Historically, many authorities on the subject of literacy instruction have stressed the importance of adequate practice in printing alphabet letters. The first-century Roman writer and rhetorician, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (ca A.D. 35–98?) wrote that with regard to becoming literate, "Too slow a hand impedes the mind".

In 1912, Maria Montessori wrote, in effect, that teaching young children to print letters is easy, that it is easy to teach children to read after they have practiced printing alphabet letters, but that it is difficult to teach children to read if they have not practiced writing them.

Marilyn Jager Adams noted that prior to the onset of the twentieth century the "spelling drill" was the principal means of inducing literacy for several millennia.

I believe that the cumulative suggestion of our repeated on-line meta-analyses supports the idea that making children fluent at writing the alphabet during the first two years of school will be an important advance in the teaching of literacy throughout the world. We hope this summary will be relayed to K-1 teachers everywhere via the Internet.

I think the importance of our findings is not in the strength of this on-line research. To be scientifically valid, studies must not only be reproducible, but reproducible by different experimenters.

The most outstanding result of our research is having found no one, in spite of vast sums being spent on "literacy research", doing and publishing a study to see if Maria Montessori's postulate holds true for Anglophone children, or whether it does not!