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The Five-Year-Old in the High School

by A. BERON

IN 1951, when the first five-year-olds were admitted into the schools of the Transvaal, there were many teachers, principals and even Inspectors of Education who expressed doubts as to the wisdom of such early admissions. Today most of these original Grade One children are in Form Three in the high schools. Though many appear to be holding their own academically, neither primary nor high school principals can say that they are really happy with the situation. Too many of the children are not geared mentally, emotionally and physically to the tasks demanded of them, and undue pressure is needed at all stages to maintain even a moderate level of performance. As it is, few high schools escape the need for extra lessons, and with a younger and generally less mature group reaching the upper forms one can anticipate that the need for outside help will increase. Staffing difficulties and poor teachers are partly to blame, but even in the better schools, where the standard of teaching is adequate, teachers find that the demands made upon them and their pupils are not commensurate with the results achieved.

Has there been a general deterioration in the standard of work in our schools? Experienced teachers find that they have to spend valuable time in revising fundamental techniques in their high school classes, Universities complain vehemently about our untutored matriculants, and, in industry and commerce, employers despair of the woeful lack of initiative, drive and general knowledge in their young employees. Never has the demand for admission into private tutorial colleges and "cram schools" been so high. Children are said to be less dependable, less responsible, and generally lacking in self-confidence, initiative and acumen. The incidence of emotional disturbance, with the need for psychological and remedial treatment, is constantly on the increase.

Principals attribute these disturbing tendencies less to the fact that children are younger on admission than to factors such as easy promotions not based on an adequate attainment, promotion on age, lack of interest and responsibility by the parents, weakening of parental control, working mothers, over-crowded classes and, by no means least, differentiation, poor teaching and staffing problems.

Has the admission of five-year-olds contributed in any measure to this falling off in application and in adjustment to the normal class situation?

When the five-year-old children were first admitted, the only concession made to their lower age group was the instruction that formal teaching was not to be introduced during the first school term. This meant that the five-year-olds were required to do in nine months what their six-year-old predecessors had done in twelve months. What was originally designed for normal six-year-old children with a mean I.Q. of 100 and a mental age of six years has been demanded from five-year-olds with a mean mental age of five years. For a normal five-year-old to perform on the same level as a normal six-year-old he must have a mental age of six years and an I.Q. of 120. As less than $\frac{5}{8}$% of the population fall into this I.Q. category, it would appear that the performance required from the five-year-old group is inconsistent with that expected from a normal population sample. Consequently, right from the inception of the scheme, pressure has been brought to bear on the children in order to adjust them to the syllabus and now, ten years later, the child is still the puppet and the syllabus calls the tune.

Assuming that a 60% level of attainment in reading and number-work or arithmetic is required for promotion to Grade Two, how many of our Grade One children competently achieve this simple level? Unfortunately in many of our Inspectorial circuits only 50% is required for promotion — a woefully inadequate criterion. At all events it is not percentage but honest-to-goodness ability and promise which should be the criteria. Unfortunately we are guided by the marks on our very precious schedules, documents which show nothing of human values such as character, personality, potential, application and moral integrity.

In order to ascertain whether the five-year-olds could cope with the requirements of the sylla-

bus. the writer carried out a comprehensive series of tests involving some 500 children in eight schools of different socio-economic levels. (For a comprehensive analysis of the tests see the writer's unpublished Ph.D. Thesis — "The Five-Year-Old Child".) After ascertaining their mental ages, the children were set carefully designed tests in reading and mechanical arithmetic. These tests fulfilled the requirements of the syllabus. and were briefly as follows:—

Reading:

a) A test in word recognition, in which a fair number of the words lying within the experience of the child were used, as well as some words which would demand a certain ability in word analysis and synthesis. For this test the Detroit Word Recognition Test was used.

b) A test based specifically upon the 100 words occurring most frequently in the Readers used in the selected schools.

It was intended that these tests would show the ability of the children

a) to recognise and read words and phrases with some of which they had had no class-room acquaintance during the year. and

b) to recognise and read words and sentences consisting of words within their experience, and which had been read and practised during the year.

Mental Arithmetic:

For this, a test which has proved to be a reliable measure of Grade One ability in number work, and which satisfied all the requirements of the syllabus, was given at the end of the school year.

A careful analysis of the results of these tests indicated that whereas some 75% of the children admitted into Grade One find no great difficulty in coping with the formalities of reading and arithmetic, almost 25% of them do find some difficulty in understanding the work and accommodating themselves to the class milieu. Of the latter group 10% to 15% remain totally immature, and by the end of the year are mentally still unready to accept or understand the simplest concepts in word-recognition and number.

In 1953, 1955 and 1957 the Transvaal Provincial schools had 31,286, 30,836 and 31,169 children respectively in Grade One. and in each of these years just over 90% of the children were promoted to Grade Two. Assuming that on an average there have been 30,000 children in our Grade One classes annually since 1951, and accepting that by the end of the year 75% of them are perfectly ready and equipped for the next stage, we find that some 7,500 children are not quite ready for promotion. Of these, approximately 3,000 are completely incapable of coping with the work at Grade One level and they are retained in that grade, but what of the other 4,500 children who have barely reached the halfway mark and need to apply themselves still longer to the work? How many of these borderline children have been moved on to flounder in a morass of uncertainty and frustration, only to become steadily more bewildered and lost? And when one considers that there have been over 40,000 of these fledglings thrust into the maw of the promotion machine since 1951, the consequences are frightening.

Gertrude Hildreth (Readiness for School Beginners), in discussing readiness to begin formal work, says that in a typical first grade class mental ages will range from $4\frac{1}{2}$ years to $8\frac{1}{2}$ years, and fully a fifth of the class will have a mental age of less than six years at the time of entry. If the group tends to be slow, a third or more may be under six years mentally when the school begins. It is from this group of 20-35% of the children with limited learning capacity that the large bulk of reading disability and problem cases originate. Hildreth mentions the work of William Kottmeyer and Russell and Hill, whose investigations also indicated that at least one-third of the beginners tested were unready for systematic instruction. The median ages of these children on admission was $5\frac{1}{2}$ years. In the case of the 500 children in our schools tested by the writer, the median chronological age on admission was 5 years 7 months, and the median mental age 5 years 8 months.

Educational philosophers and psychologists are universally agreed that besides mental health, a state of mental readiness is essential before formal learning can be introduced profitably. Opinions differ as to the mental age at which young children respond most happily and spontaneously to direct teaching, but the majority regard a mental age of six years as a minimum requirement.

Investigations carried out by Professor Schmidt of Natal University, and by the writer, and the results in our own schools. have clearly shown

that children with a mental age of 5 years 9 months and over rarely cause any concern, but it has also been proved that children with lower mental ages can be taught without undue pressure but with patience and understanding. S. Roslow (Reading Readiness and Reading Achievement in the First Grade) supports this view, his main conclusion being that, with an appropriate programme of reading instruction, children with mental ages below six years and I.Q.'s below 100 and with a degree of immaturity for reading can be taught to read in the first grade. Below a mental age of five years, however, children respond very slowly and need a great deal more time in getting to the necessary stage of readiness for the understanding of their work.

The period between five and six years brings with it physical, mental and emotional changes, and at six years the child is better prepared to accept the responsibilities of the school. A mentally mature six-year-old readily adapts himself, but a mentally immature six-year-old merely remains an older four- or five-year-old, too unformed to profit by instruction and unable to follow a step-by-step intellectual exercise. Mental maturity does not merely mean the arrival at a chronological six years of age. It also involves the capacity for wanting to know things, for learning, thinking, reasoning and remembering, and it needs the ability to do all these on a six-year level of understanding. "If a child's maturation in mental traits is below the average for his age, or if he is too young to have achieved sufficient maturity, mere drill will not produce the requisite development." (Hildreth). In recent years prominent educational thinkers such as Susan Isaacs, Charlotte Bühler, Waterink, Piaget, Schonell, Burt, Highfield, Goodenough, Wall and Gesell, and before them teachers as far back as the earliest of the great architects, Quintilian, are all agreed that it is futile to give children more than their stage of progress warrants. Forcing a child to learn before he is ready is not only stupidly wasteful, but the resulting failure builds up in him adverse attitudes and frustrations and actually delays subsequent learning.

And what are we doing in our schools? How many of the half-ready children, known to have an exceedingly unsure foundation, are inconsiderately pushed up in the hope that a miracle will take place in the next grade? There are no miracles in education, and a child forced from a situation for which it is ill-equipped and unready into a still more difficult situation is a child doomed to be hurt mentally and emotionally. Here one of the fundamental problems leading to so much unhappiness is quite clearly created.

In many instances, so as not to overload classes or to make room for other children coming in, principals are forced to promote, knowing that they are doing the child and his teacher a critical disservice. Too often, however, snob values and the '100% pass complex' are the deciding criteria, or, in order to pacify influential or vociferous parents, a principal will give way against his own judgement. Surely there is no stigma in retardation at any level, and more particularly in the first grade, where the admission of the five-year-old is a privilege and not a right. The shame of being kept back is an adult creation, and this is insidiously passed on to the child. Research constantly re-establishes that for almost every child there is a stage at which he is insufficiently mature to learn certain techniques, and, until he has learned them, it is futile to proceed. How much more important then is it, that, until a child has mastered the first and most fundamental techniques, he should not be saddled with further abstractions? Children easily lose confidence in themselves and, when this is followed by psychological and emotional disturbances brought on by inability to understand the work, it is high time to call a halt.

Unfortunately we have in our schools no simple mechanism for testing children on admission to school. The Stanford-Binet and Raven Matrices Tests are excellent media for testing young children, but time and the size of the classes make such individual testing very difficult. Even reliable group tests such as the Pintner-Cunningham and, shortly, our own South African Group Test need time and special qualifications for proper administration. At all events, until such time as children are only admitted on a minimum mental age requirement, schools must accept all applicants for whom there is room. This does not mean, however, that every child admitted will be quite ready for promotion at the end of the year.

In a normal Grade One class we can anticipate that there will be children whose I.Q.'s range from 80+ to 120+. In terms of mental ages this means that in an average class of five-year-olds with a mean chronological age of 5½ years on admission, we have children whose mental ages range from 4½ years to over 6 years. Can one expect that every one of these children will

be ready for formal work at the same time? To get some idea of the inordinate difficulty confronting the grades teacher, let us look at the position from another angle. Assuming that a child must have a mental age of 5 years 9 months before formal teaching becomes meaningful, those children with I.Q.s between 80 and 90 only become ready between the ages of 6½ years and 7 years 2 months. If a mental age of 6 years is the accepted stage of mental development necessary to benefit from regular teaching, then the situation is still worse. One must accept the fact that in every ungraded class there are children who are slow and of lesser mental ability than the average. These children respond generously to an understanding teacher, and to an extra period of training, but they lose heart rapidly and withdraw if they are relentlessly harried and intimidated by over-anxious parents and teachers whose zeal outweighs their understanding.

A child of normal ability who, in the first grade, has not yet reached the stage where he can read and do his sums with a fair degree of ease and assurance is not yet ready to go on to the next stage. Which is worse for a normally intelligent child — the so-called stigma of a retardation which gives him the opportunity to consolidate his foundation, or the glorious freedom of a promotion which brings in its wake frustration, rebellion and mental demoralisation?

Is it to be wondered at that so many of our children in school today are lacking in spirit, initiative and the inner wish to search and find for themselves, when we in our enlightened ignorance do so much to stultify and negate any such questing desire? When we take away their tools, how can we expect good work in return? We are ourselves creating a chain of lazy-minded and ill-conditioned children. True, there are those in whom ambition still glows warmly, but they are all too few, because we offer mental poverty as a substitute for stability, security and creative ability. Can we blame the pupil because, in directing his efforts towards a syllabus, we cram his mind but leave his understanding and conscience empty? We are far too busy analysing mythical complexes and condoning inefficiency to study causes and apply the therapeutic heavy hand where necessary. Mental hygiene does not suggest that such treatment is entirely without reason if intelligently applied.

Our educational values are pathetically wrong and need investigation. Distinctions in matric are nationally applauded, but character goes abegging. We join in the righteous chorus of condemnation of our youth, our ducktails, beatniks and 'halb-menschen', but do we ourselves do anything at all about them? Do we devote even a few minutes of our time to teach the pleasant things and sweet courtesies of life? Today children with gracious manners, respect and an awareness of the rights of others stand out like beacons in a lonely desert.

No, neither the five-year-old group nor any other group of children is to blame for our immature and irresponsible educational product. We have to go deeper than general accusations — we have to put our teachers, our curricula and our promotion system under the microscope, and, having done that, we should start afresh, using as our guide the child and his potential and not the syllabus.

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