Parental Patience and Children's Reading

A Pilot Study of Homeschooled Children

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Conventional educational wisdom holds that children need intensive instruction in reading, beginning at an early age. The present study questions this view. It suggests that many homeschooled children learn to read quite well and develop a love of reading by following their own timetable.

Child-centered writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1974) and John Holt (1990) have urged adults to follow the child's own developmental pace. Many contemporary homeschooling families adhere to this principle in all academic areas, including reading. Rather than requiring their children to read on a prescribed schedule, these parents are likely to say, "He'll read when he's ready." Focusing on the love of reading rather than early reading, these parents are confident that children will eventually learn to read well if parents are responsive to the children's interests and developmental needs.

In contrast, prevailing scholarship has determined that children need early instruction in reading skills; otherwise, the authorities say, most of the children will never catch up (American Federation of Teachers 2004; Torgeson 1998, 2004). The recommended approach is *structured, systematic, and explicit* instruction (Torgeson 1998). In this mainstream view, child-led reading is a disastrous mistake — one that is difficult to correct.

Although many homeschooling parents disagree with the mainstream view, little is known about either their specific approach to reading or whether it is effective. This pilot study attempted to gain information on these topics. On the question of effectiveness, we wanted to see how well homeschooled chil-

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dren read in the "early childhood years," often defined as prior to the age of 8 (see Crain 2005, 142), and whether those who aren't reading at age level before age 8 seem to eventually catch up.

Method

Samples

This study was based on interviews with two samples of parents. Sample 1 consisted of 10 mothers who were homeschooling a total of 19 children between the ages of 9 and 16. (Most of the parents were homeschooling more than one child.) Karen (the first author) interviewed the mothers from among her acquaintances. She didn't know the reading history of any of the children.

Sample 2 consisted of 10 additional mothers whose 11 children learned to read "late," at age 8 or later. Karen recruited these participants by posting a request on Internet discussion groups for homeschooling parents. Her Internet message said that she wanted to learn "how homeschoolers go about learning to read" and was specifically interested in children who "learned to read at age 8 or above." The children in Sample 2 ranged from 9 to 24 years of age.

All the families in Sample 1 lived in New York City. The families in Sample 2, which provided information on late readers only, lived on the East and West Coasts. The families were predominantly middle class, with many parents holding jobs in the arts and the computer industry. Twenty-six of the 40 parents (counting both parents in both samples) had at least a bachelor's degree. Many of the mothers worked as homemakers while raising their children.

No parent in either sample homeschooled her children for religious reasons. Instead, most of the mothers said they wanted their children to learn at their own pace and have the freedom to pursue their individual interests. The parents frequently said such things as school is "too rigid" and they wanted to nurture the child's "inner wisdom" and allow the child to "follow her own bliss." "Education is very individual," one parent added, "It's not a one-size fits all. Schools are misguided."

The Interviews

The interviews followed a schedule but were largely open-ended. Mothers had many opportunities to talk spontaneously about what was important to them about their children's reading. However, the interviews did request specific information on demographics, instructional style, books children read at particular ages, any standardized test scores, and any learning disabilities. The interviews were conducted individually, in person in Sample 1 and by telephone in Sample 2. The interviews averaged 45 minutes.

Reading Levels

Prior to the study, Karen found that parents frequently talked about the age at which children "learned to read," so she asked the mothers in this study what that age was and how they defined the phrase. Their definitions varied somewhat, but they generally spoke of the child's ability to read on her own at a level they perceived as commensurate with general norms. Karen then asked the mothers for examples of the books their children were reading at the age they "learned to read."

A few mothers believed their children weren't reading well at the time of the interview. Karen nevertheless asked for examples of books their children were reading prior to the age of 8 as part of a reading history. In addition, she asked all mothers for examples of books their children were reading at present.

The book examples (which were invariably books that the children freely chose) provided us with our primary measure of children's reading skills. More specifically, we used Scholastic, Inc.'s (2009) standard assessment of reading grade levels for the books and then translated the grade levels to age levels to assess whether the children were actually reading at, above, or below age level at specified ages. In making these assessments, we used the average reading level for the two most difficult books children were reading. A sample of the books the parents cited and corresponding grade and age levels are listed in Table 1 on the following page.

In addition, parents were able to report scores from standardized reading tests (such as the California Achievement Test) for 12 children. In all but two instances, the scores confirmed our assessments based on book examples. In the two exceptions, the test scores gave slightly higher assessments of children's reading levels, and our final judgments were based on the test scores.

Table 1. Grade and Age Levels of Sample Books

Book	Scholastic, Inc. Grade Level	Age Level*
Twilight (Meyer)	4.4	9.5
Oliver Twist (Dickens)	9	14
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (Rowling)	6.5	11.5
Cat in the Hat (Seuss)	1.2	6
The Tempest (Shakespeare)	11.5	16.5

* Age level estimated from grade level.

Findings

We will first describe the parents' general approach to reading, and then summarize our data on its effectiveness.

Parents' Approach

In the interviews, four themes emerged with considerable consistency.

The parents' major goal was a love of reading. "I just wanted her to love to read. That's all I cared about," explained one mother. Almost all the mothers in both samples expressed similar sentiments: "I wanted most of all for reading to be pleasurable. What would life be if he didn't love reading?" "Love of written language, love of story, and inner quiet — those are the most important values."

The parents read a great deal to their children. All the parents reported reading aloud to their children, which we had expected, but we were surprised by the sheer amount of "read alouds." The parents commonly read up to 1 hour at bedtime and a total of 3 to 4 hours each day. One mother said she read to her child up to 8 hours a day! A few parents continued to read aloud, often together as a family, even after the children had become accomplished independent readers.

Often the books the parents read to their children were of high quality. One mother remembered that she had read to her daughter "the canonical Jane Austens before she was 10." Parents made abundant books available to their children at home and made frequent trips to the library (often weekly).

Placing a premium on books, the parents kept TV and video games to a minimum. Several families didn't own a TV set. Most parents also said that they are avid readers themselves, obviously providing a model for reading.

An overwhelming majority of parents in the two samples spoke about following their children's own reading readiness. "I wanted my children to learn at their own pace," one mother said. Others said things such as, "I trusted that if she were able to do what she wanted, and I facilitated her, then she would blossom and learn and grow." Some parents felt outside pressure to get their children reading earlier, and some had their own worries about their children's progress, but they also wanted their children, as one parent put it, "to be in charge of their own education."

The parents sometimes provided some instruction, but they tried to respect their children's responses to it. In Sample 1, which was our general sample of children whose reading histories were initially unknown to us, half the parents provided either no instruction or just minimal help. Examples of parental help included reciting the alphabet or sounding out some letters, and the help lasted only a week or so.

In the other half of Sample 1, the parents typically used instructional books or materials, off and on, for about a year. Even so, the parents almost always responded to their children's cues. If the child took to the instruction, the parent used it; if it became frustrating for the child, the parent abandoned it.

The formal instructional materials included Engelmann's *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*, *Headsprout* (an online program), *Hooked on Phonics*, *Apple Phonics*, and lessons from Avko Educational Research Foundation.

In Sample 2, which specifically targeted late readers, the parents provided more instruction. Three of the 11 children received minimal or no instruction; 4 received instruction off and on for a year; and 4 received instruction off and on for 2 to 6 years. The greater amount of instruction in this sample was to be expected, for none of the children were reading at age level prior to age 8. Even the most patient parents were tempted to try something. In four cases, the parents suspected the children had dyslexia or visual problems, and the parents had difficulty sticking with their child-centered philosophy. But all the parents in Sample, 2, as in Sample 1, abandoned instruc-

tion, at least temporarily, whenever it became too frustrating for the children.

One child (who later attended Harvard and now works in Harlem for Teach for America) resisted the instruction the mother offered at age 6. So the mother stopped it. "It was ruining our relationship," the mother recalled. The child then taught herself to read by age 10. When the mother asked the child at age 10 how she learned to read, the child said, "First I needed to figure out that letters meant a sound. Then I had to rest." "For how long did you rest?," the mother asked. "For a couple years."

Parents' Approach to Reading

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- The parents read a great deal to their children.
- An overwhelming majority of parents spoke about following their children's own reading readiness.
- The parents sometimes provided some instruction, but they tried to respect their children's responses to it.

All in all, then, the parents tried to follow a child-led approach to reading. Although many parents offered instruction, the parents were sensitive to the children's responses to it, and it was never close to the amount that children receive in conventional schools.

How Effective Was the Parents' Approach?

Sample 1 provides preliminary data on the parents' effectiveness. For 18 of the 19 children in this sample, the mothers were able to give sufficient information for us to make a judgment on the child's reading progress. Twelve of these 18 children (two-thirds) were reading at or above age level by age 8.

Nine of these 12 "on-time" readers learned to read with little or no instruction. Three of them learned to read very early — by the age of 4. To their parents' surprise, two of the children just started reading on their own. The third child, at 2½ years, was clearly trying to puzzle out the coding system of reading. He asked his parents to read specific words and whole books forward and backward, to read the same story repeatedly, and to sing out books and words. His parents did what he requested, but nothing more. By age 3 he was reading fluently. Recently, at the age of 15, he scored 600 on the Verbal SAT.

What about the late readers? Did they catch up?

In Sample 1, 6 of the 18 children were late readers, i.e., not reading at age level prior to age 8. To get a fuller picture of late readers' catch-up rates, we combined the 6 late readers in Sample 1 with the 11 late readers in Sample 2 (which specifically targeted late readers), producing a total of 17 late readers. At the time of interviews, 12 of these 17 late readers had caught up; they were reading at or above age level. All 12 had caught up by age 11, most at ages 8 or 9. The 5 lagging readers scored 1.5, 1.5, 0.8, 1.5, and 4.5 years behind age level at ages 9, 10, 11, 13, and 18, respectively.

Four of our 5 oldest late readers (whose current ages ranged from 14 to 24) became accomplished readers. For example, one majored in English literature at a prestigious college; another scored 750 on the verbal SAT.

In assessing the effectiveness of the parents' approach, it is important to consider the parents' own goals. None of the homeschooling parents said their top goal was reading proficiency or high scores on reading achievement tests. (Some of their children tested at high levels, but this wasn't the parents' goal.) Instead, the parents wanted their children to love reading and to become lifetime readers.

According to the parents, this goal was overwhelmingly met in the lives of the children so far. The parents spontaneously made comments such as, "He loves reading. He keeps a book by his bed and reads first thing in the morning and at the end of the day." "He absolutely loves reading. He wakes up excited to read." Some parents used words like "voracious" and "avid" to describe their children's reading habits. Of the 30 children in our samples combined, two were clear exceptions to these glowing reports. These two children both enjoyed hearing stories, and they read alone, but they were struggling with the task. The mothers believed these children suffered from dyslexia.

Discussion

Educational scholars have generally concluded that successful reading requires intensive formal instruction and that it must begin at an early age. The scholars say that if children aren't making considerable progress at age 6, they rarely catch up. As a 2004 American Federation of Teachers report put it, "Late bloomers usually just wilt."

Such conclusions might be correct with respect to children attending conventional schools, but our results suggest that the conclusions are not universal. We found that many homeschooled children received little or no formal instruction, yet they learned to read at or above age level by the time they were 8. Moreover, when we turned our attention to our samples of late readers — those children who hadn't been reading at age level before age 8 — we found that 12 of the 17 had caught up by age 11. Most of the other 5 (whose ages ranged from 9 to 18 at the time of the interviews) didn't seem to be lagging very far; they were about a year and a half behind.

What's more, almost all the children in our samples — whether they were reading below, at, or above age levels — seemed to be fulfilling their parents' main goal with respect to reading: they enjoyed reading very much.

Our samples were, of course, limited. They were small samples restricted to middle class families. They were gathered informally, rather than through systematic sampling methods. In addition, our assessment of children's reading levels were limited to parents' reports. It will be important to see if our results hold up when children's reading levels and attitudes are assessed by the direct study of children themselves. But our pilot study does suggest that there are viable alternatives to the intense, formal reading instruction usually recommended.

In educational theory, our findings support the developmental or child-centered model (Crain 2005, 376). This model emphasizes the child's intrinsic, spontaneous growth. Child-centered theorists believe that adults, instead of trying to constantly teach and direct children, should set the stage for learning; they should provide positive environments and then leave the actual learning in the hands of the child. With respect to reading, many homeschooling parents try to follow this approach by creating an environment rich in books and stories — with a great deal of reading aloud — and then leaving it up to the child to determine when he or she wants to learn to read. In this way, children are given a chance to learn to read much as they learn to talk. Not all the parents in our study, to be sure, implemented this child-centered approach in a pure way. Some did provide a certain amount of instruction. Even so, most tried their best to be responsive to the child's reactions to the instruction, and postponed it when the child did not take to it. In this sense, reading progress was in the hands of the child.

Educational scholars have generally concluded that successful reading requires intensive formal instruction, but we found that many homeschooled children received little or no formal instruction, yet they learned to read at or above age level by the time they were 8.

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