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Question plan for pre-reading skills

As a reading professional I was distressed but not shocked by President Bush's recent pronouncements concerning Head Start pre-reading skills. Since this administration has consistently emphasized phonics as the panacea for the nation's reading problems, this latest emphasis on "letter recognition" for preschoolers is not surprising. My question is: Why?

Why, of all the activities the president might have focused on, did he choose letter recognition? Why not highlight the critical importance of teachers reading aloud many times throughout the day? Or emphasize the importance of shared reading using "big books" to teach concepts of print? Or promote the importance of developing children's oral language, advancing preschoolers' listening and speaking skills, building children's responsiveness to classroom teaching, or creating print-rich environments?

Part of the reason is that literacy has become a lucrative and unduly complex political issue. The phonics movement receives significant support from the big business of textbooks and testing and the profits these companies can bring to bear in shaping policy, and support or lack of support for certain types of reading research. The federal government's current reliance on scientifically based reading re-search, often experimental in nature and divorced from the reality of classroom life, serves the "letter recognition for preschoolers camp" beautifully. This is a case of market forces pushing what they consider to be the best way to teach in order to increase future profits. While a phonics approach does make for easier testing, as well as neat and tidy experimental re-search studies, programs stressing letter/sound recognition and phonics skills often ignore or crowd out time for critical aspects of reading and thinking skills, the intellectual, imaginative and creative dimensions of literacy that cannot be easily tested.

Learning the alphabet, in this case, isolated letter recognition, is perhaps one of the least essential pre-reading skills for preschoolers. Furthermore, stress on letter recognition when children's vision is not fully developed, often creates anxiety and feelings of failure. Young children are acutely aware of teacher expectations. Failure to meet them can be devastating, affecting children's subsequent reading progress, engagement and motivation. And, make no mistake about it — if we're asking the "letter recognition questions" in order to complete teacher checklists, children will know they've failed us.

If Head Start teachers begin to stress letter recognition as tantamount, we will do a great deal of harm to the population of students who can least afford it. Drill and practice on letter recognition will rob preschoolers of the precious time they need to play, listen to stories, talk, sing, chant poetry and familiar tales, act out stories, create, build and otherwise participate in the social worlds of school.

Certainly Laura Bush and our president have done a wonderful job promoting the importance of reading to children. And I applaud President Bush for his interest in the education of our youngest citizens, but there are so many other things he could and should have emphasized. Ultimately, the ap-proach championed by our president will result in an educational setback for America's kids.

If the Bush White House wants a "checklist assessment" for preschoolers, there are many more important skills to observe and "check off." Much more valuable in predicting reading success would be: obtaining evidence about children's small and large motor skills development; monitoring their ability to sequence, predict and draw conclusions about everyday events and stories; observing children's growing awareness of concepts about print — the idea that books tell stories, books have parts — covers, pages, pictures and text; noting the development of oral language and social skills — their ability to work cooperatively and use language to mediate interactions.

By focusing on letter recognition, we waste valuable "language experience time" while widening the literacy gap for our

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nation's neediest children. Children who come to school already reading — or ready to read — often come from print-rich, literate households where they have been read thousands of books by the time they are 3, 4 and 5. Where does that leave children from homes where there are few or no books and little or no literate activity?

What about thousands of children from other cultures or children for whom English is a second language? These children need access to thousands of hours of literate English and the language of books if they are to be full participants in what educational psychologist Frank Smith calls “the Literacy Club” of the K-5 classroom.

Preschool programs must work very hard to ensure all children have access to many print- and language-rich experiences during these critical years. If the approach promoted by the White House becomes mandated, preschools may feel compelled to implement programs characterized by drill and practice in visual discrimination of letters, thereby robbing time for more intellectual pursuits — listening and responding to literature, talking, playing, creating, building. To spend time practicing letter recognition at the expense of real literate activities would be a grave disservice to our kids, and to our country's future.

At the moment, President Bush has the mandate of the people behind him to initiate positive change on many levels. His policy should stress literate-rich environments for young children. He should use his enormous popularity to promote early educational environments that really do develop oral language, experience with written language and stories — as opposed to pushing a very narrow skills approach that may not be appropriate for children that age.

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