

Let curiosity stimulate youngsters to learn, says expert

**WILMA BLOKHUIS
Special to The Champion**

There's a mini revolution in primary education.

Dr. Pat Dickinson, a speech and language specialist focusing on developmental delays and learning disorders in a kindergarten children pilot project of the Halton Board of Education, believes children learn better if stimulated by their own curiosities.

"We used to think only a teacher could teach children how to read before we discovered Sesame Street was teaching them, as were their parents through reading to them."

Ms Dickinson was speaking to about 100 early childhood education and kindergarten teachers, and interested parents, at a workshop sponsored by the Halton Association for Young Children (HAYC). She was encouraging kindergarten teachers to continue the child's "natural learning process" which began in the home and continued in a nursery school or child care centre. She also encourages interaction among parents, nursery school and kindergarten teachers to establish what children have already learned.

"There's a mini revolution in early childhood education. Our philosophy is changing as to who we are and our view of the child as the learner," Ms Dickinson told the workshop held last week at the Halton Region headquarters.

1950s' thinking

"This revolution in education started about 30 years ago in the United States and only over the last five years has it become a new focus for parents and early childhood educators."

She said it was known in the 1950s that children were capable of learning more than what they were taught in school, but implementing this new philosophy took years.

Ms Dickinson said her nephew's kindergarten report card of 1955 showed a child was assessed on his ability to keep materials out of his mouth, the correct use of a handkerchief, taking a coat on and off, art expression, interaction, keeping hands to oneself, listening skills, taking responsibility, obedience, interest in storytime and personal cleanliness.

"I consider this to be a narrow view of a child's growth and develop-

ment," said Ms Dickinson of her nephew's early assessment requirements. "We now know that the foundations for early learning and later success are laid down during the first five or six years of a child's life."

Primary school teachers, unaware of the importance of early learning in the home, had told parents and child care workers not to teach children anything before they come to school, thus providing a "clean slate" for the school system to educate. Today, parents reading stories to their children is recognized as one of the "building blocks" of a child's education.

Ms Dickinson is a proponent of interactive reading, where the child is asked to read the last word of a sentence, and eventually be able to read children's books to their parents or teachers. Interaction between parent and child — which teaches children to read simple words, scribble in their attempt to write, and count the fingers and toes — has only recently been accepted as part of early learning, said Ms Dickinson. She said kindergarten teachers can expand on these experiences.

"The real challenge is to interact with children to find out what they

have already learned, what they prefer to learn, what their curiosities are, and what they still need to learn, and how we can encourage them to learn more by taking risks."

She added children will feel more comfortable with taking risks when they have already had some learning experiences in the home.

"We can build on the child's previous experiences in a logical way. The child comes to you (as the teacher) as a learner since conception."

Ms Dickinson said the new philosophy places the onus of learning on the child and away from the teacher who traditionally emphasized corrections.

Role a facilitator

"The teacher's role has become that of a facilitator, instead of the person with all the correct models and answers," she told the group. "We have to teach children to take risks instead of expecting them to give only the right answers."

Ms Dickinson added by encouraging children to take risks in the classroom, even if they don't have the right answers, the teacher can provide feedback to help them un-

derstand what they need to learn. She said a "happy medium" has to be found between the small numbers of children who learn to read, write and do simple arithmetic with ease, and the larger number who are struggling to learn.

"There is a lot of confusion by what we mean as an early start. We don't need the 'fast track' nursery schools, nor should we eliminate the sandbox from children in Kindergarten to Grade Two."

Ms Dickinson said by "inviting children to learn" through interactive reading using oversize books which every child can see, "we can transfer the learning experience to the children from the teacher, instead of the children being just passive participants in the learning process."

She said the philosophy is best explained in a children's book titled *Sarah's Questions* by Harriet Ziefert where a child interacts with her mother to find the answers to such questions as "Why are the clouds so white?" and "Do dogs dream?"

Children should be given the confidence to ask questions and to learn from an adult's responses, instead of children learning as a result of adult initiative, Ms Dickinson said. "The focus is no longer on what the teacher knows, but on what the child has learned."

A recipient of the Children's Services Pin about eight years ago from the Halton branch of the Association for Early Childhood Education in Ontario, Ms Dickinson is well-known locally for her research into how children learn.

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