



## ARTICLES BY BETTY WARD CAIN

### Kindergarten.....A Most Important Grade

Kindergarten is one of the most misunderstood grades, but a very crucial one. Many adults have the idea that children only play in kindergarten. I once had that opinion myself.....before I became a kindergarten teacher.

As a new teacher, I walked into the classroom with make-a-difference sparkles in my eyes. I was finally a teacher. I was going to change the lives of my students. I would inspire them to great things. Then I looked around the room. It didn't look like the classroom I had envisioned. The teacher's seat was a rocking chair. There were no student desks...only tables and tiny chairs. There was a playhouse area, a block building area, and toys everywhere. What had I gotten myself into? I'm not a babysitter....I am a teacher.

The principal was one of those adults who thought our classroom was only a babysitting area. We made it very obvious he wanted us gone from his school. We were at capacity with 25 students, but what would 2 more matter? He added 2 struggling first graders to our classroom. Oh, they were still classified as first graders, but spent their day with us. This way he wouldn't have to get a state waiver. Then he asked the kindergarten assistant to do lunchroom duty and

sell ice cream to the whole student body during the school lunch periods. Well, after all, we were only babysitters and our grade was unnecessary.

Since all we did was “play,” no one in the system felt kindergarten was important, so we had no need for curriculum materials. When textbooks and materials were ordered for the other grades, kindergarten teachers were given nothing.

Having said all this, you would think I was ready to give up on teaching completely, but the opposite is true. I fell in love with this grade and spent the next thirty years “babysitting” and “playing” all day with these wonderful five-year-olds. Feeling the pressure to really show what these young minds could do, I began trying to think of things I could do or ways to teach while making it fun and interesting. Each year, I wanted this to be the very best year in these kids’ lives. If I could make them fall in love with school, then they would all finish college and make something of themselves. That was my goal.

If my kindergarten students go to first grade already reading, then everyone will know we are more than babysitters.

With nothing to work with except my own imagination, I began to try and think of what I could use to teach them to read. Most programs at the time taught a student to associate a word with the letter such as for the letter *Bb*, they would memorize a picture of a ball, so the sound of the letter *Bb* is ball, right? What a confusing way to teach. There were some teachers who declared their student knew all the letter sounds when they could recite back to them the picture associated with the letter.

I began to try and think of alliterative sentences to associate with each letter such as for *Bb* I used “bad Billy Bear bursts balloons.” I would emphasize the first sounds so they could clearly hear the actual sound and not just the words. Then I would isolate the sound and ask the students to brainstorm and think of other words that begin with that sound. In this way they could associate the sound with the letter and not just a picture. Then I drew some characters to go with

the sentences to give the students visual cues. When all the letters had been introduced, I laminated the character drawings with the sentences written under each. Then I made these into a book and placed it in our reading area in hopes that some of my students would want to “read” it.

During our centers time, I heard someone “reading” the book just as I had, i.e. “This is a *Bb* and the sound of a *Bb* is ‘b’ as in bad Billy bear bursts balloons.” I was delighted. I turned around to see which of my top students was reading the sentences. I almost dropped my teeth. It was a mildly retarded student who was repeating kindergarten. He was actually associating the sounds and not just the pictures. He learned to sound out and read simple words that year.

So where are the naysayers now? By Christmas vacation, most of my students knew the letter sounds and many were already reading. When my students advanced to first grade already reading, their new teachers were delighted. Many came to me and thanked me.

This inspired me to do more with the sentences. What better way to teach, than through music? All kids love music, so I added songs to the sentences. We would add a new letter each day and sing the songs everyday. The students loved them and would sing them as they played.

Student teachers were another story. I loved to see them come into the classroom with starry ideals, only to be set back by the rocking chair and toys. My greatest pleasure was to show them how important our “play” was. Many went on to desire the kindergarten grade.

Lee University gave their cooperating teachers the opportunity to take summer classes in lieu of a stipend. One summer I took a class on how to get published. I thought I could just audit the class and gain some knowledge to boot. The professor had written over 26 books himself and was an inspiration. However, he was the type of professor to get his students involved. Our very first assignment was to turn in something we had written for him to critique. Well, I had nothing except the words to the songs I had written. I felt silly turning them in,

and figured they would be returned with red marks and that would be the end of that. Was I in for a surprise.

Professor Schimmels entered the auditorium and began talking to the class, "I have read your writings and I'm not sure why you are taking this class. Where is Betty Cain?"

At this point I am sliding down in my seat and had thoughts of crawling along the floor to the door, but others pointed to me and my face began to flame. Dr. Schimmels continued talking directly to me, "you should be ashamed of yourself." I am getting ready to be thrown out of his class when he continues, "you should be ashamed of yourself for not sharing your ideas with the world." What? Did he just say what I think he said? I have talent as a writer?

That year, I met with Dr. Schimmels several times and he inspired me to continue working on my curriculum project and to submit it for publication. He even called a few of his friends in the publication field. With his help, I was able to expand the simple songs into stories built around the characters and compile a curriculum guide to teach phonics. It was published by T.S. Denison company and sold in educational bookstores nationwide.

When the company was sold, all the rights to the book reverted back to me.

Now I have taken these stories, illustrated them and made them into video books on DVD. I have added games to play, the songs, and crafts. This *First Phonics* set of video e-books and lessons ensures that a child's first experiences with reading are fun and successful. Each student is given a Learning Pocket which teaches skills they need to learn. Reproducible flashcards of numbers, lowercase and uppercase letters, phonics sound sentences, and a few simple words address a variety of learning levels. In addition, reproducible Picture Charts that emphasize sounds can be enlarged to poster size or passed out individually.

An original poem, video picture story, and vocabulary list accompany each letter, as well as a variety of cooking, creative writing, language arts, craft, and math projects.