

Emergent Literacy:

How Young Children Learn to Read

New insights into how children learn to read and write are changing—dramatically—the teaching of literacy.



Artwork courtesy of Fairfax County Public Schools. Photographs by Randy Wyant, courtesy of Fairfax County Public Schools.

and Write

Judy, aged 4, and Mikey, aged 5, are huddled close together looking at a picture storybook. Mikey begins to "read" to Judy. He is self-assured as he turns each page, his face displaying the knowledge of someone very familiar with the text. Although the words he utters are not always exactly those appearing in the written text, his rendering is an extraordinarily close approximation. Moreover, the meanings conveyed by Mikey are consistently appropriate, as are his intonation and style of storybook reading.

Judy notices that Mikey's attention seems rooted to the pictures and asks, "Mikey, what are all those black marks at the bottom of the page for?"

With unwavering confidence, Mikey answers, "Oh, those are for people who can't read the story from the pictures."

Anecdotes such as this one have been told many times, most often as cute vignettes describing a child's view of the world. However, recent research on young children's literacy development has shed new meaning on these stories. Researchers investigating children's explorations into reading and writing now regard stories like this one of reading "imitation" as highly significant demonstrations of literacy learning. Although early childhood educators have always been aware that young children enter school with a remarkable knowledge of oral language, it is only recently that awareness of their written language has received serious attention.

Current investigations build on the work of John and Evelyn Dewey (1915/1962), who contrasted the functional, meaning-driven learning that children engage in before they enter school with "the practices of the schools where it is largely an adornment, a superfluity and even an unwelcome imposition" (p.2). More recently, the

work of Marie Clay (1982) has provided the foundation for new ways of studying and thinking about early literacy. Teale and Sulzby (1989) outlined the distinctive dimensions of the new research. Among its chief characteristics, they found:

- The age range studied has been extended to include children 14 months and younger;

- Literacy is no longer regarded as simply a cognitive skill but as a complex activity with social, linguistic, and psychological aspects;

- Literacy learning is perceived as multidimensional and tied to the child's natural surroundings, so it is studied in both home and school environments.

New Perspectives

The study of literacy learning from the child's point of view has given us new insights into how young children learn to read and write.

Learning to read and write begins early in life and is ongoing. When two-year-old Josh rushed to his Mom with the newspaper in his hands and shouted, "Peanut, peanut," she was puzzled at first. After noticing the advertisement for his favorite brand of peanut butter, she was both surprised and pleased at the connections he was making. Young children who live in a "print-rich" environment are constantly observing and learning about written language. Most of their learning occurs as a natural part of their daily lives, not as something rare or mysterious.

Learning to read and write are interrelated processes that develop in concert with oral language. The old belief that children must be orally fluent before being introduced to

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reading and writing has been replaced with the view that the language processes—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—develop in an interdependent manner. Each informs and supports the other. Recognizing the value of informal activities with books and other print materials, one teacher in an urban program for four-year-olds sets aside a short period of time each day especially for “book browsing.” Children are encouraged to find a book they like and a comfortable place to read. They may read alone or with a friend. Book browsing usually follows a read-aloud session. The teacher uses this time to observe children as they recreate renderings of stories read to them. Children discuss and argue about their favorite pictures and characters. The teacher is amazed at how these children, most of whom have rarely been read to at home, have become so absorbed with literature. They constantly make connections between the content in books and related discoveries inside and outside the classroom. And, not surprisingly, the books that have been read to them are also their favorites for independent browsing.

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Learning to read and write requires active participation in activities that have meaning in the child's daily life. Participating in listing all of the items needed to prepare a particular recipe, for example, can be an important literacy event for a young child. Helping to check off each item as it is purchased and then used in the recipe makes oral and written language come together through an activity that has current meaning for the child. This immediacy makes the activity much more meaningful than one that serves merely as preparation for something to be learned in the future.

Learning to read and write involves interaction with responsive others. As parents, caregivers, and teachers become increasingly aware of the importance of young children's attempts to write, they take time to listen to the stories and messages evoked by scribbling, which may be intelligible only to the writer. One kindergarten teacher shared her amusement as she recalled how an eager writer confidently began to share a story elicited from an entire page of scribbling. After a few minutes of reading, the youngster stopped abruptly and in an apologetic tone exclaimed, “Oops, I wrote that twice!”

Learning to read and write is particularly enhanced by shared book experiences. Family storybook reading plays a special role in young children's literacy development, and researchers have learned much through observations of this familiar ritual. Sharing books with young children has long been recognized as a crucial aid to their language and literacy development and as a socializing process within families. Teachers and caregivers can further support this process when they use “big books” to encourage children to participate in reading. These allow children to see the print as the story is being read to them at school in much the same way they do when being read to at home. The highly predictable language and storylines of these picture storybooks permit groups of youngsters to “read along.” Saying aloud the repeated refrains and rhymes with the reader helps give them a sense of what it means to be a reader.

Content of interest and importance to children is the basis for learning language, learning through language, and learning about language.

Traditional Perspectives

Traditionally held views about reading and writing differ fundamentally from the concept of emergent literacy. Although learning to speak is accepted as a natural part of the maturation process that doesn't require formal instruction, the mastery of reading and writing has been considered an arduous learning task, requiring a period of intense readiness. Only after children were thoroughly primed with the necessary prereading skills was “real” reading instruction begun. “Getting them ready” consisted largely of direct instruction in learning letter names, letter-sound relationships, and a variety of visual-perceptual tasks. The task of learning to write waited until reading was well underway. Children were considered literate only after their reading and writing began to approximate adult models.

In contrast, an emergent literacy curriculum emphasizes the ongoing development of skill in reading and writing and stresses participation in literacy activities that are meaningful and functional from the child's point of view. In operation, here is how the two viewpoints might look in a kindergarten classroom.

Old Ways Versus New

Teacher A has spent considerable time planning a program that will ensure her students are ready for the 1st grade curriculum. Preparing them for the reading program is of particular interest to her, since that is a high priority of the parents and of the 1st grade teachers. The entire year has been blocked out so that each letter of the alphabet is given equal time for in-depth study.

Using a workbook as her guide, she teaches the children the names of the letters of the alphabet, their corresponding sounds, and how to trace them in upper and lower case. The children play numerous games and engage in a variety of activities based on each letter. *All* of the children go through *all* of the activities in the order prescribed by the workbook, regardless of their previous knowledge. Reading instruction takes place during a specified time each day, and except for occasionally reading a story aloud, the teacher does very little to make literacy connections beyond that time.

Since kindergarten children are thought to be incapable of and uninterested in writing, the teacher makes no provision for it in the curriculum. She gives workbook unit tests periodically. These closely resemble the nationally normed readiness test that will be given at the end of the year. The tests help Teacher A to identify those children who may be falling behind. Although she tries to give these children extra help, the very nature of the program allows little differentiation of instruction.

Thus, children who fail to catch on early keep falling farther and farther behind. By the end of the year, they either repeat kindergarten or are assigned to transition classes. Even those children who do well on the standardized test must often repeat the phonics program in 1st grade—this is a consequence that has baffled both Teacher A and the 1st grade teachers.

Teacher B relies heavily on the classroom environment to prompt student involvement with literacy. There is an inviting reading center filled with books within reach of the children.

Most of the titles are familiar, since the books have already been read aloud. A writing center is also available with plenty of writing tools, paper, magnetic letters, and an alphabet chart at the eye level of the children. Children are encouraged to use these centers daily. Printed materials are everywhere. There is a message board where they record important news and reminders each day, and personal mailboxes made of milk cartons encourage note writing. Teacher B values scribbles, pictures, and beginning attempts at spelling as engagement in the writing process.

Adorning the walls are numerous charts depicting graphs, poems, lists, and other important information related to the theme currently under study. Read-aloud time occurs at least twice each day. Stories, poems, and informational books are shared. Books with highly predictable language and storylines are stressed, since they encourage group participation and independent re-reading in the reading center.

Although Teacher B has definite goals regarding the concepts and skills she wishes to foster, she sees no need to organize them hierarchically or to introduce them in isolation. Rather, the print environment and related activities are carefully orchestrated to allow children to build on what they already know about literacy, refine it, and use it for further learning. Although a unit of study about bugs might lead to a poem about a busy buzzy bumblebee and an opportunity to discuss the letter *b*, the emphasis is not placed on merely matching letter to sound but on helping children gain an understanding of a pattern in their language—that certain letters and sounds are often related.

Teacher B looks for evidence of these understandings and assesses learning through observation and analysis of children's independent reading and writing and through their participation during storytime. She is distressed when what she has documented about a child's knowledge is not always revealed on a standardized test.

In this classroom, literacy learning is not relegated to a specific time of day. Rather, it is integrated into everything

that occurs throughout the day. Most important, content of interest and importance to children is the basis for learning language, learning through language, and learning about language.

It is important to recognize that both Teacher A and Teacher B are caring, concerned professionals. Each is a fine example of the theoretical framework from which she operates. Teacher A operates from a traditional readiness framework, in which the teacher is both keeper and dispenser of knowledge. Her lesson plans are segmented and preorganized into what are thought to be manageable bits and pieces, dispensed in small increments over a specified time. All children receive the same instruction, and little use is made of the knowledge about language that children bring with them to school.

Teacher B sees her role as that of facilitator of children's learning. The classroom environment is structured so that certain events are very likely to occur. Learning stems as much from these incidental literary events that occur by virtue of living within a print-rich environment as from the numerous daily activities planned to involve children in oral and written language. Teacher B expects differences in the

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way children respond to the activities she plans. She carefully monitors their responses and plans accordingly. She emphasizes helping children build on what they already know in order to make connections to new learning.

Issues for Instruction

The move toward full-day kindergartens and programs for four-year-olds has prompted increased concern for developmentally appropriate instruction. Many schools are addressing this concern by implementing programs reflecting an emergent literacy perspective.

Not surprisingly, interest in emergent literacy has brought with it a host of issues. The issues reflect the problems schools face as they attempt to serve a younger population and, at the same time, change perspective on a host of long-held beliefs. Issues that predominate are those related to the place of writing and invented spelling, the development of skills, assessment, and continuity.

Writing and invented spelling. Because the importance of paying attention to young children's writing is a relatively recent concern, teachers and parents often feel uneasy about how they should respond to children's scribbles, strings of letters, and one-



In a print-rich environment, children build on what they already know about literacy, refine it, and use it for further learning. There's no waiting for oral language to be "mastered" before reading and writing can begin—all the language processes develop naturally and interdependently.

letter words. Traditional writing lessons have been associated with neatness, correct spelling, and proper let-

ter formation. Teachers need to learn as much as they can about the early spellings that children produce independently. Encouraging children to scribble and invent their own spellings does not lead them to think that phonetic spelling is systematically being taught; they are aware that their inventions may not conform to adult norms. The children know that, as with other areas of their development, they are simply functioning as young learners moving gradually toward adult standards. Child, teacher, and parent should celebrate each new learning by focusing on what is known rather than what is lacking. Providing daily opportunities for varied experiences with literacy is the best assurance that children will begin to demonstrate what they know about writing and spelling as they compose stories and messages. Spelling errors should never be allowed to interfere with the composing process.

The development of skills. As educators, we must be careful not to give parents the impression that we are anti-skills; we are not. Rather, we need

Resources on Emergent Literacy

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—Dorothy S. Strickland

to help them see the differing ways that skills are developed through an emergent literacy perspective: not as an accumulation of information about a task but embedded within the child's growing ability to actually do the task. For example, children learn letter names and the sounds they represent as a part of the purposeful reading and writing they do, not as a set of meaningless fragments of information. Stress is placed on helping children think with text and helping them to become independent learners. Unfortunately, poor and minority children—who would benefit most from holistic approaches that require them to think with text and encourage them to become independent learners—are often the least likely to get this type of instruction.

Appropriate assessment. Although standardized tests have undergone severe criticism as screening devices and evaluative measures of young children's literacy, they unfortunately continue to be highly regarded by some policy makers as definitive evidence of young children's learning (Chittendon 1989). Challenges regarding the assumptions underlying such tests, particularly the narrowness with which literacy is defined, raise serious questions about their use (Valencia & Pearson 1987). Children's initial explorations with literacy involve a variety of experiences with books and print, which may be used for assessment. Among these are their knowledge of print conventions, their understandings about the relationships between letters and sounds (invented spellings), and their growing interest in listening to and making sense of stories. Standardized tests tap but a few of these. Yet, even as early as kindergarten, standardized test results are used to make important decisions about placement, retention, and promotion.

The integration of assessment and instruction is fundamental to an emergent literacy perspective. Increased reliance on systematic observation, record keeping, and analysis of children's classroom participation and work products and less reliance on standardized tests are the hallmarks

of student evaluation and teacher planning.

The need for continuity. Continuity in the early grades is critical. Children who are supported by an emergent literacy curriculum in the prekindergarten and kindergarten years, only to be faced with a subskills approach in 1st grade, will not only be confused, they will be unable to demonstrate what they do know about literacy. Collaborative curriculum decision making with teachers and administrators within a particular school and with those in the early childhood centers that feed into them is essential. In addition to supporting articulation between schools and grades within a school, educators must help parents understand new approaches to literacy that may be outside their experience. Children benefit from consistency in their lives. They function best when the adults they care about most reflect a comfortable harmony in their expectations and beliefs. □

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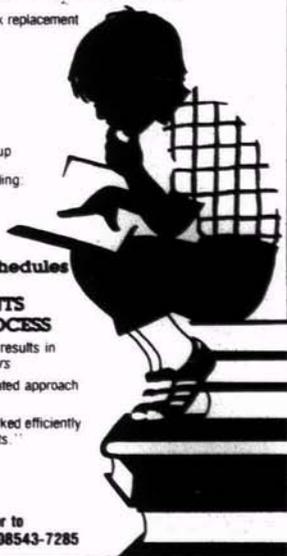
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