

Education Reform

March 2009

Literacy Practices in Early Childhood

Reporters continue to cover the demands that No Child Left Behind and state accountability systems place on teachers, writing stories about how art and music get squeezed out for more time on reading and math, and how children spend class time preparing for standardized tests.

But those demands are being felt by teachers and students even before kindergarten, leading some preschool teachers to expect more from their students than the experts say is appropriate. One of the most obvious examples of this is in the area of reading and language arts.

While it's true that some children do leave preschool with beginning reading skills, does that mean all should? What literacy activities should preschoolers engage in during class time, and how can reporters tell whether the curriculum is in keeping with research recommendations or whether it's pushing young children too far?

Pre-Reading Wars?

One complicating factor is that there have long been strong and diverse opinions about the best way to teach reading. The debate over phonics vs. whole language hasn't been confined to the elementary grades.

Phonics teaches children the connections between letter symbols and their sounds, while whole language, a popular approach in the 1980s and '90s, countered that learning to read is a natural phenomenon and that

Reading List

"Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children" 1998 Catherine E. Snow, M. Susan Burns and Peg Griffin, editors. National Research Council
http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=6023

"Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children" 1998 National Association for the Education of Young Children and the International Reading Association
<http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSREAD98.PDF>

"Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel" 2008 National Early Literacy Panel
<http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf>

"Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation" 2003 National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education
<http://naecs.crc.uiuc.edu/position/p scape.html>

decoding words as a separate skill doesn't teach children the meaning of words or the various uses of language.

In the preschool field, this debate might resemble some educators arguing that 3- and 4-year-olds should receive explicit instruction in letter sounds and others saying that this knowledge should develop as a natural part of being read to and having conversations.

Literacy experts from organizations such as the International Reading Association and the National Research Council, as well as early childhood education groups such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children are in agreement that the preschool years are not too early to begin teaching children to identify letter sounds and recognize the sounds that make up words-known as phonological awareness.

In fact, an emphasis on these skills-which include identifying the sound at the beginning or ending of a word, or naming words that start with the same sound-is especially necessary for children in poverty, who are less likely to have a strong literacy environment at home.

In 1998, the National Research Council's report "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children," concluded children who are at risk for future reading difficulties due to economic disadvantage benefited both from instruction in beginning and ending sounds as well as training in letters and letter-sound associa-

Education Reform

Literacy Practices in Early Childhood

Classroom Strategies That Contribute to Strong Pre-Reading Skills: A Checklist for Reporters

The Environment: Posting labels throughout the classroom, functional signs on the walls, charts, and captions for pictures are a few of the ways teachers create a print-rich environment in preschool. Sources of printed information should not be confined to a book corner but should be available in all areas-cookbooks in the play kitchen, phonebooks with toy phones, restaurant menus and play money in the dramatic play area.

Dialogue and Reading: This is much more than just reading a story to a child or a group of children. Teachers share the book in a way that allows the child to become the storyteller, to point out and discuss what's happening on the page. The adult responds to the child, expanding even more on the information the child has provided. The exchange continues so teachers can make sure the child understands.

Dramatic Play: More than just playing dress-up and pretending to be different characters, dramatic play areas encourage language and conversation, both between children and with adults as they ask children questions.

Writing Opportunities: Many classrooms now offer writing centers with paper, pencils, and crayons for children to practice writing, drawing, or making other symbols. But these activities don't have to be confined to one area. Writing materials-including notepads, envelopes, poster board, address labels markers, stamp pads, stencils, etc.-can be made available as props throughout the classroom to encourage children to experiment with writing and language throughout their school day.

Inviting Places to Read: A book corner can be one of the most coveted spaces in the classroom. Stocked with cozy chairs, pillows and even stuffed animals, a reading area should always make children feel welcome and interested in reading alone or with classmates.

Print Concepts: Skills such as knowing how to hold a book, knowing which way the print reads, and understanding the difference between an author and an illustrator are not as predictive of later reading success as a large vocabulary and letter knowledge. But "print awareness" should still be part of children's early experiences with books.

Meal Times: Lunch and snack times can be prime opportunities for one-on-one and small group conversation, to ask children open-ended questions about their families, what they enjoy, what they do after school, and other topics. Teaching assistants can be trained to use this time to develop language.

Conversations with adults: Reporters should observe the frequency with which teachers interact with young children. Some studies have shown very little one-on-one or small group contact between teachers and students in most early-childhood settings.

Education Reform

Literacy Practices in Early Childhood

tions. They said: “Children who enter school with these competencies will be better prepared to benefit from formal reading instruction.”

The recently released report from the National Early Literacy Panel lays out what it calls “precursor skills” that have either medium or large correlations with later conventional literacy skills, such as decoding, spelling, and reading orally with fluency.

These precursor skills, which can be developed during the years before kindergarten, include alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapidly naming random letters or numbers in a sequence, rapidly naming objects or colors, and writing letters or writing one’s own name.

The panel also reviewed dozens of studies to determine which types or programs or early childhood interventions contribute to building these skills. Programs focused on helping young children to crack the alphabetic code were the most likely to lead to precursor or conventional literacy skills. That doesn’t mean however that other efforts, such as preschool programs, and reading to children might not also build early literacy skills. In many cases, the original study just didn’t measure those specific outcomes.

Still, the panel’s report “provides educators and policymakers with important information about the early skills that are implicated in later literacy learning, as well as information about the type of instruction that can enhance these skills,”

the authors write.

These conventional or precursor literacy skills, however, should not be taught in isolation, caution experts such as Susan Neuman, an education professor at the University of Michigan and the former assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education in the Bush Administration.

“Although specific skills like alphabet knowledge are important to literacy development,” she wrote in a 2005 paper for *Young Children*, a journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, “children must acquire these skills in coordination and interaction with meaningful experiences.”

She and other experts say that pre-reading ability should instead be fostered through engaging conversation, a language-rich classroom environment, and a stimulating curriculum that builds content knowledge.

Meaningful experiences, not specific sounds and letters, motivate children to interact with books and print, they say. Preschoolers are also capable of developing a list of sight words that they can immediately recognize, which will give them a good start when more formal instruction begins.

Classrooms in which children spend lengthy periods in “circle time” reciting letter sounds and rhyming words or filling in worksheets—even if they feature pictures of cute characters—are probably missing the point. For children who have had no exposure to books at home, memorizing sounds and letters would likely have no meaning.

Key Sources

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Education Reform

Literacy Practices in Early Childhood

“This type of instruction may inevitably consign children to a narrow, limited view of reading that is antithetical to their long-term success,” Ms. Neuman writes.

At the other end the spectrum, those who argue that young children will naturally learn to read as they mature and say it’s inappropriate to spend time on alphabet knowledge or offer opportunities to write have also misinterpreted the research. Neuman, NAEYC and others argue that literacy skills should be presented in a child-friendly, engaging way, but that should not be interpreted as no skills taught at all.

Early Reading Policy

Preschool’s potential to help poor children catch up to their peers has contributed to a strong focus on developing learning guidelines for preschool programs and raising classroom quality in both public and private preschool programs. Most states now have standards that include expectations for young children, and even infants and toddlers, in the area of language and literacy. These documents can give reporters an idea of what teachers are aiming for in their classrooms.

Experts Sharon Lynn Kagan and Catherine Scott-Little say these standards or guidelines should be research-based, clearly written, and should focus on “big ideas.” They should also apply to a variety of early-childhood settings, and given that many programs are only half-

day, states should also avoid long lists of standards.

Good examples include: uses complete sentences, identifies words that rhyme, and identifies letters out of sequence. Reviews of state standards, however, show that some states have done a good job while others have too many standards that are vague, wordy, or hard to measure.

The federal government has funded Early Reading First to improve pre-reading skills among disadvantaged preschoolers. Since 2002, about 150 school districts and early-childhood programs, have received about \$450 million in grants for the program.

A 2007 evaluation by Decision Information Resources and Mathematics Policy Research showed that the program had helped providers improve the literacy environment in their classrooms, which experts say is one key to contributing to young children’s early reading skills. Teaching practices had also improved, and teachers were receiving more professional development. But no effects were found on other areas measured, including oral language skills and phonological awareness.

-Linda Jacobson is an education writer in Los Angeles

Early Learning Sources

National Association for the Education of Young Children
www.naeyc.org

National Institute for Early Education Research
www.nieer.org

Pre-K Now
www.preknow.org

For a full listing of all early childhood briefs, go to www.ewa.org and click on Resource Center. This reform brief was made possible by a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The statements cited in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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