The Role of Literacy Experiences in Early Childhood Programs

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Beginning reading instruction has long been a topic of considerable controversy. As beginning reading instruction has been introduced to successively younger groups of students, the debate has become more heated. In most American communities, reading instruction now routinely begins in kindergarten and is becoming increasingly more common in day-care centers and preschools. The introduction of reading instruction to younger children has rekindled many theoretical and practical considerations relevant to these programs. In many instances, skills-based programs designed for the elementary grades have been transplanted into kindergarten classrooms and even preschool settings. This situation has brought a number of early childhood educators into the debate (Gallagher & Sigel,
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Beginning reading instruction has long been a topic of considerable controversy. As beginning reading instruction has been introduced to successively younger groups of students, the debate has become more heated. In most American communities, reading instruction now routinely begins in kindergarten and is becoming increasingly more common in day-care centers and preschools. The introduction of reading instruction to younger children has rekindled many theoretical and practical considerations relevant to these programs. In many instances, skills-based programs designed for the elementary grades have been transplanted into kindergarten classrooms and even preschool settings. This situation has brought a number of early childhood educators into the debate (Gallagher & Sigel, ...
of young children’s literacy abilities have been based primarily on letter naming and letter-sound matching performances. Since these skills were generally thought to be acquired as part of school learning, researchers rarely considered children’s knowledge prior to school entry.

More recently, work in cognitive and developmental psychology has resulted in different and broader conceptualizations of early literacy development. As researchers began to view reading and writing development within the larger context of linguistic and cognitive development, they began to consider literacy development prior to formal instruction. As the field of reading moved from a skills-oriented to a constructive, interactive model of reading, dimensions of literacy development such as the origins of story structure knowledge became of interest. The idea that knowledge about functions (or why and how people use literacy) might be as central to literacy development as knowledge of forms came from research on language development. Children’s attempts to make meaning of written messages and to produce their own meaning through writing became legitimate pursuits of study. A considerable body of research has accumulated on young children’s literacy development, both in relation to skills such as letter naming and to broader aspects of literacy, such as the meaning that children attribute to stories. The emergent literacy view is illustrated best in research on young children’s performances on reading and writing tasks.

Reading

Prior to school entry, some children actually attain what most adults would agree is reading proficiency. Although most preschool children do not achieve this level, their responses to the task of reading the message on a page or sign indicate that they have amassed numerous perceptions and abilities related to reading. Children’s responses to the task of reading a storybook seem like a logical beginning point, because

The Nature of Children’s Literacy Accomplishments Prior to Formal Reading Instruction

Due to the heavy emphasis on phonics that began in the 1960s (Chall, 1967), judgments

1987). These educators argue that young children should not be rushed into developmentally inappropriate learning experiences, such as reading instruction (Elkind, 1987).

When beginning reading is viewed as a set of skills, which is the case in many current kindergarten and preschool settings (Durkin, 1987a; Hiebert, Stacy, & Jordan, 1985), this criticism appears to be legitimate. However, several strands of research during the past 2 decades have contributed to a broader, more dynamic view of beginning reading. This view, usually referred to as the emergent literacy perspective, suggests that beginning reading instruction should build more directly on the literacy experiences that children bring to school. The new perspective takes a broader view of what constitutes literacy and when critical literacy development occurs. Acquisition of the forms of written language (e.g., letter naming) continues to be regarded as integral to learning to read and write. However, the emergent literacy perspective goes beyond such knowledge and considers development of the functions of literacy as well.

This article provides an overview of the research on emergent literacy and what it means for beginning reading programs. These aims are accomplished by describing: (1) the nature of children’s literacy accomplishments prior to formal reading instruction, (2) the mechanisms for literacy acquisition prior to formal reading instruction, (3) the nature of literacy experiences in early childhood settings—both in conventional programs and those implementing emergent literacy ideas, and (4) the ways of strengthening the match between young children’s emergent literacy and instructional experiences.
the ultimate goal of reading instruction is
to develop the ability to read connected dis-
course.
Sulzby (1985) identified a develop-
mental progression in children's responses
to the task of reading a familiar storybook. When they were asked to "read" a familiar storybook, children from ages 3 to 6 pro-
duced speech that was closer to the formal
language of books than to conversational
speech. While all children's responses had
an element of formality, distinct differences
were evident among age groups in the de-
gree to which children's responses paral-
leled the book's contents. The youngest
children's responses consisted primarily of
labeling and commenting on pictures in the
book. A stage between this early labeling
stage and that of attending to and decoding
the printed message—a pattern character-
istic of the oldest subjects—was to use the
pictures to tell a story with the cadence and
structure of written language. As Pappas and
Brown (1987) conclude from an examina-
tion similar to Sulzby's, young children de-
velop a register for the language in books
that differs from language in conversation.
Even young children whose home en-
vironments rarely include experiences with
books have frequent opportunities to see
written language since it appears on food
containers, television commercials, and
countless other places. Children's re-
sponses, when they are asked to read a fa-
miliar word such as the word "stop" on a
sign, indicate that they are attempting to
make meaning from print. Rarely do chil-
dren give phrases or unrelated words when
asked to name the word on a sign or con-
tainer (Hiebert, 1978; McGee, Lomax, &
Head, 1984). Rather, they give words that
are either similar in meaning or graphic
characteristics. However, without encour-
agement and guidance in connecting
knowledge of letters and sounds to this fa-
miliar print, many young children rely
mainly on the environmental context to give
familiar print meaning (Masonheimer,
Drum, & Ehri, 1984).

While young children are acquiring con-
cepts about the functions of written lan-
guage in books and familiar contexts, they
are learning about the forms of written lan-
guage. For example, Hiebert and Sawyer
(1984) found that entering kindergarten
children from a variety of backgrounds could
name an average of 14 letters. Many ques-
tions have been raised about the relation
between children's knowledge of the forms
of written language and their knowledge of
its functions (Dickson & Snow, 1987).
The most comprehensive answer to date
on this issue comes from Lomax and McGee
(1987). Based on research, they established
a model of word reading that was com-
prised of five components. Four of the com-
ponents reiterated the traditional constitu-
te of beginning reading: graphic
awareness, phonemic awareness, gra-
pheme-phoneme awareness, and word
reading. The other component, "concepts
about print," represented aspects of literacy
development that are not conventionally in-
cluded in beginning reading instruction,
such as knowledge of the purposes and pro-
cesses of reading and the ability to recog-
nize print embedded in environmental con-
texts. Lomax and McGee were interested in
developmental patterns of children from
ages 3 to 6 on each of these components
and in interrelations between the compo-
ents. The analysis of developmental pat-
terns showed that some abilities were early-
developing (e.g., concepts about print and
graphic awareness), while others (e.g., word
reading) were only evident among the 5-
and 6-year-olds. The older children, how-
ever, continued to gain proficiency in the
early-developing abilities. The model that
fit the data best was one in which concepts
of print preceded graphic awareness, fol-
lowed by phonemic awareness, grapheme-
phoneme correspondence knowledge, and
finally, word reading. Each of the compo-
nents included in the model had a statisti-
cally significant, positive influence on sub-
sequent components.
Lomax and McGee did not include the storybook reading tasks that Sulzby and others have studied. Nor did they include writing tasks, which many have argued are integrally related to reading development—even preceding it (Chomsky, 1979). Therefore, questions remain about the relations among the more and less conventional dimensions of emergent literacy. However, Lomax and McGee’s analysis does provide a picture of relations between various measures prior to formal reading instruction and at the very beginning stages of reading instruction. Young children acquire knowledge about both the functions and the forms of written language. Even when young children still have much to learn about the functions of written language, a basic understanding of these functions seems to facilitate acquisition of more specific knowledge.

Writing
Writing involves several different components: handwriting, spelling, and composing. It seems entirely possible that each of these components can be acquired separately and in any order. For example, a child can compose without being able to form letters, if an adult takes dictation. Furthermore, letters can be formed without knowledge of spelling or attention to meaning, as is demonstrated by the typical task of beginning handwriting instruction where children copy letters and words. How children combine these elements in generating a written message is the question that is considered next.

When children write in noninstructional settings, they do so because they have a message to communicate. Children begin writing messages even before they can form letters. This communicative intent in children’s early writing efforts has been observed by a number of researchers (e.g., Clay, 1975). Initially, messages are written without the correct form, resembling a scribble or even a drawing. Gradually, the forms of written language develop to enhance communication of the message.

Typically, children’s earliest writing efforts are hardly recognizable as such. It has been hypothesized that young children see both writing and drawing as ways to symbolize objects and that they lack the realization that writing is not a graphic representation of an object but rather a graphic representation of speech (Dyson, 1982; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Consequently, children’s earliest messages and stories may consist of drawings or figure-like forms. Even when young children realize that the bases of drawing and writing are different, they move through several steps on their way to conventional writing (Sulzby, 1985; Sulzby, Barnhart, & Hieshima, in press; Sulzby & Teale, 1985). Early on, children’s messages consist of scribbles. Slowly their scribbling takes on the characteristics of the writing system, such as linearity. Scribbling is superseded by letter-like forms, which, in turn, are replaced by letters, generally familiar ones such as those in children’s own names. As children learn to form letters, their productions may move from a letter or two representing a word (generally the most prominent consonants) to representation of all the sounded consonants in the word, next to an attempt to represent vowels with the consonants, and finally to conventional spelling (Read, 1986). These efforts of young children to write according to their hypotheses about letter-sound correspondences have come to be called “invented spelling.”

At any one point, children seem to employ a number of writing strategies (Sulzby, 1985). On a common task like writing their names, young children may use conventional spelling and handwriting. On a less familiar task, like writing a story, children may use drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, familiar letters (e.g., the first letter of their name), and invented spelling.

As this review illustrates, young children are acquiring concepts and skills related to reading and writing long before they
have experienced formal school instruction. They participate in reading and writing even before they have acquired conventional forms. Indeed, the research on the mechanisms of acquisition suggests that the forms of reading and writing reflect participation in the functions of reading and writing.

**Mechanisms for Literacy Acquisition Prior to Formal Reading Instruction**

Knowledge about the manner in which children acquire literacy behaviors before school entry can provide valuable information for the design of school literacy programs. This information should make the transition to school learning relatively continuous by creating school experiences that build upon children’s existing knowledge and acquisition processes.

One characteristic of the preschool environments in which children acquire literacy concepts and skills is the opportunity to see adults using literacy for work and pleasure (Hiebert, 1980). When adults involve children in the use of literacy, children come to understand the functions of reading and writing and experience the enjoyment that reading and writing bring (Taylor, 1983).

These interactions do not take the form of a parent sitting down with the child, workbook in hand, and drilling the child on the ABCs. Although some parents may take this approach, encouraging parents to participate in such activities with their young children has not been successful (Brzeinski, 1964). Efforts by parents to convey information about the functions and forms of literacy as part of everyday occurrences have been more successful (Taylor, 1983). For example, a child’s question of “What does that say?” as he or she points to the words on a gas pump creates an opportunity to relay information about written language. Such opportunities in day-to-day interaction are endless in homes, regardless of socioeconomic levels (Anderson & Stokes, 1984). In the contexts of entertainment (e.g., mar- ques at the movies or commercials in television programs) and religion (e.g., words in songbooks), among others, adults demonstrate the uses of written language to young children.

Parents may use some contexts quite consistently to create routines that involve written language. For example, parent and child may have a routine of playing word-rhyming games on car trips. Tobin (1981) identified the presence of games that focused on word patterns and word rhyming as one of two factors (out of 85 factors) that distinguished the home environments of young children who were reading when they entered kindergarten from those who were not. Tobin’s other factor, directing children’s attention to the relation between spoken and written words, also speaks to the importance of parent-child interactions regarding literacy.

Another parent-child activity that has been substantiated repeatedly as facilitating literacy acquisition is storybook reading (Snow & Ninio, 1986; White, 1982). Parents’ behaviors while storybook reading influence the efficacy of the activity. One characteristic associated with effective storybook reading by parents is connecting story content with what children already know (Flood, 1977). Other characteristics of effective parent-child reading include asking children questions during reading, encouraging children to ask questions, and responding to children’s questions (Shanahan & Hogan, 1983).

Young children also acquire literacy concepts and skills through toys and materials. Although the effectiveness of toys such as stuffed animals who “read” to children is unclear, some of the simpler toys and materials of earlier generations have proven their worth. In a study done several decades ago, chalkboards were found in the homes of early readers and not in the homes of matched nonreading counterparts (Durkin, 1966).

Although children may play with materials independently or with peers, both the
presence of materials and children's understanding of their use typically depend on parents. Parents also create routines for the use of toys and materials. In the homes of children who were avid readers, for example, Fielding, Wilson, and Anderson (1986) found a designated time for reading independently, such as prior to bedtime or dinner.

Young children appear to acquire emergent literacy concepts and skills most efficaciously in contexts where they are involved in using written language. As the following discussion shows, the conventional contexts of formal reading instruction differ from the contexts of preschool literacy acquisition in that the forms of literacy are emphasized more than the functions.

Literacy Experiences in Early Childhood Settings

There has been much discussion about basing initial reading experiences on the emergent literacy perspective. Before describing such efforts, current early childhood practices are examined.

Conventional Programs

In kindergartens of several decades ago, story reading by the teacher was a favored activity. Unfortunately, as demands for accelerated curriculum have increased, the traditional goals of the nursery school and kindergarten have been supplanted by the elementary curriculum. At present, many kindergarten teachers read extensively to children and write stories dictated by children. However, available evidence indicates that the majority of kindergarten children's school reading experiences are more likely to consist of practicing letter naming and letter-sound matching on worksheets than of listening to stories and writing messages. This evidence comes from two sources: analyses of textbook materials and observations of classrooms.

Since kindergarten teachers, like their counterparts in grades 1 through 6, rely heavily on basal reading materials (Educational Research Service, 1986), Hiebert and McWhorter (1987) reasoned that an analysis of current kindergarten and readiness books of basal reading series would provide a fairly accurate view of beginning reading instruction. They analyzed the kindergarten and readiness books of four different series, two representing each of the primary approaches in American reading instruction—meaning and phonics (Chall, 1967).

The categories of auditory discrimination, which included letter-sound matching, and visual discrimination, which included letter naming, together consumed approximately one-half of the activities in students' books across series. The remaining textbook pages were allocated to listening comprehension and a cluster of activities called readiness, which included identification of colors, numbers, and shapes. Little attention was devoted to reading words and none to reading stories.

A recent observational study of kindergarten classrooms in Illinois supports the findings of the textbook review. In the 42 kindergarten classrooms Durkin (1987a) observed, approximately 22% of the school day was spent on reading (e.g., letter naming, auditory discrimination) and reading-related (e.g., teacher reading to children, forming letters, learning alphabetical order) activities. When compared with the basal reading materials, the distribution of activities in these classrooms was skewed even more toward instruction of letters and sounds than to other activities, including storybook reading. Seventy-one percent of the total time devoted to reading or reading-related instruction was spent on learning letters and sounds.

Literacy experiences in preschools and day-care centers have been documented even less than those in kindergarten programs. The few available indications, however, suggest that day-care or preschool programs attended by the majority of children mirror literacy experiences in typical kindergartens.
In a study of three preschool settings, Hiebert et al. (1985) found discrepancies across programs, but the most common setting promulgated conventional reading-readiness activities with children as young as 3. Hiebert et al. considered the literacy activities in a university laboratory school, a cooperative nursery school where parents took turns assisting the teacher, and a day-care center that was part of a national day-care franchise. In the university preschool and cooperative nursery school, children heard stories regularly from adults and were involved in numerous other literacy activities, such as the labeling of their drawings and paintings. Storybook reading and literacy as part of everyday activities occurred infrequently in the day-care center. In contrast, daily periods were set aside for reading readiness in the day-care setting but not in the university and cooperative nursery settings. During that time, children as young as 3 completed "developmental" worksheets. One of these sessions was observed in a class for 3-year-olds who were learning the capital B. Children marked B’s on a worksheet. They were not allowed playtime until they had correctly identified all of the B’s. This activity is a far cry from the context in which children learn about literacy in home environments, such as a parent pointing out the first letter of a child’s name on a sign. Furthermore, the fine motor skills and attention span required for this activity make it a monumental task for a typical 3-year-old.

This study was preliminary in that it included programs in only one city; the programs examined were limited to three, which scarcely reflect the diverse settings of early childhood education; and only a few periods of observation were conducted at each site. Even so, these findings suggest that children with limited literacy experiences at home, which was more typically the case for children in the day-care franchise than for children in the university or cooperative nursery settings, may receive developmentally inappropriate reading-readiness experiences at early ages. In theoretically sound preschool programs, such as the program reported on by Schweinhart and Weikart (1988, in this issue), a premium is placed on language development and literacy as natural outgrowths of activities. The university laboratory preschool and the cooperative nursery school followed that route. However, the number of children in these two school settings was much less than those in settings like the day-care franchise in the city where Hiebert et al. (1985) conducted their research.

Implementation of Emergent Literacy

The failure of conventional instruction to take into account children’s existing knowledge about written and oral language has prompted some to initiate emergent literacy programs. Several groups are currently studying classrooms in which curriculum and instruction are derived from emergent literacy research (Kawakami-Arakaki, Oshiro, & Farran, in press; Teale & Martinez, in press). Only one of these programs has been described comprehensively to date (Taylor, Blum, & Logsdon, 1986).

Taylor et al. (1986) worked for a year with kindergarten teachers in low-income neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. The research staff presented a series of workshops to teachers and also worked with teachers individually on a monthly basis throughout the year. Even though researchers observed in classrooms, evaluation of program implementation was based on evidence in the physical environments of classrooms, such as stimuli for reading and writing and displays of children’s work. Half of the teachers fully implemented the program, while the other half implemented the program little or not at all. On tests of children’s linguistic awareness and concepts about print, the children in the full-implementation classrooms scored significantly higher than those in the low-implementation classrooms. However, groups did not differ sig-
significantly on a conventional test of reading readiness.

Taylor et al. concentrated on reading and writing as part of classroom routines, such as student "sign-ins" for attendance. The program encouraged teachers to read to students, but this was not the only focus. A number of other researchers have examined different ways to increase the amount of reading in early childhood settings. Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986) considered the effects of increased storybook reading by teachers on children's literacy behaviors. Teachers in low-socioeconomic kindergartens in Israel read to children three times a week for 4 months, while matched control classrooms engaged in group games. Posttests indicated that children who were read to understood stories better, attended to picture clues more, inferred causal relationships better, and told more connected stories.

Another direction of research has been to consider children's independent interactions with books. Morrow and Weinstein (1982) studied the ways in which library design changes (i.e., highlighting book centers) and activities with books influenced kindergarten children's use of books during free play. They concluded that increased attention to literature, whether it occurred through changes in library design or activities, increased children's use of books during free play.

Yet another way of increasing children's independent interactions with reading has been explored by McCormick and Mason (1984). They developed a set of "little books"—books of several pages in length that have a phrase or word per page. The intention was for the children to read the little books independently, after listening to an adult read them. The books have been used in a variety of home and school settings. Their use with a Headstart group resulted in significant differences at the end of the Headstart year and again a year later in kindergarten. Experimental children outperformed controls on story reading, word reading, and also letter-sound knowledge.

Anecdotal accounts of other treatments from the emergent literacy research exist. For example, Chomsky (1979) describes invented spelling as an incentive for children's reading, and Hiebert (1986) suggests familiar print from the environment as a means for guiding children into word identification. While the effects of these applications have not yet been systematically documented, the available findings of general programs such as that of Taylor et al. (1986), as well as those with more specific treatments such as storybook reading (Feitelson et al., 1986), attest to the effectiveness of programs that involve young children with literacy in a variety of functional means.

Strengthening the Match between Young Children's Emergent Literacy and Instructional Experiences

Even though most young children cannot formally read by the time they enter school, many have acquired a variety of concepts and skills about reading and writing. The analyses of conventional programs, although limited in number, also have a consistent message (Durkin, 1987a; Hiebert & McWhorter, 1987): young children's emergent literacy abilities are not built upon or developed in much of conventional beginning reading instruction. The typical mode of instruction has been to teach letters and letter-sound correspondences in isolation from familiar print such as stories or signs. When young children are unable to draw upon their reservoir of written language knowledge gained from seeing print on signs and in storybooks, they appear unknowledgeable about reading and writing. The match between young children's emergent literacy and the typical experiences of beginning reading instruction is not great.

There are, of course, many exceptions to this statement. In some communities, a long tradition exists of initiating children into school reading instruction through favorite
books and writing stories. These programs and recent implementations of emergent literacy findings in classrooms suggest that a better match can be achieved between children's emergent literacy and beginning reading instruction. These programs are characterized by a variety of reading and writing activities in which children participate. For example, upon entry into these programs, children read along with their teachers in easy-to-follow books that have predictable patterns (Bridge, 1986; Holdaway, 1979). Words in these books and ones from the stories that children dictate and write are used to guide children into independent word reading (Bridge, 1986).

These programs achieve a balance between the functions that some have touted as the only necessary component for reading acquisition (Goodman & Goodman, 1979) and the skills that now seem to dominate beginning reading instruction. Good and Biddle (in press) outline the perils of swinging from a philosophy at one end of the spectrum to the other. The tendency in education to swing back and forth from one panacea (e.g., phonics) to another (e.g., whole word or whole language) has been most evident in reading instruction, where the consequences of failure are high. When one Zeitgeist is replaced by another, systematic programs are not developed. The perspective of emergent literacy suggests a balance between meaning and decoding—the two sides of the debate as seen by Chall (1967)—or between function and form, as the debate has been conceptualized more recently (Goodman & Goodman, 1979).

If teachers are to create such a balance in their beginning reading programs, they must have materials and tests that support the emergent literacy view. Even a change as simple as bringing in familiar print to teach initial consonants may require teachers to adapt routines. Without considerable support, as Karweit (1988, in this issue) points out, such requirements may be insurmountable to some teachers. Changes that support the emergent literacy perspective, such as the inclusion of predictable books and opportunities for children to write, must occur in the beginning materials of commercial reading programs since many teachers depend on such programs for guidance.

Changes in beginning reading instruction also depend on the tests that are used for district and state evaluations. Although standardized tests were not integral to kindergarten programs in earlier decades, the kindergarten curriculum is now being encroached upon by tests (Durkin, 1987b). Those beginning reading tests most frequently used—the Stanford Early Achievement Test and the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test—focus on letter naming and auditory and visual discrimination skills. However, as indicated by the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test's addition of a preliteracy inventory that assesses concepts and functions of print (Nurss & McGavran, 1986), changes in tests are occurring that support the emergent literacy perspective. In addition, as Teale (1988, in this issue) argues, all teachers have ready access to a battery of informal assessment techniques like observation, discussion, and sampling children's behaviors. Such data should be central to the evaluation of early childhood literacy programs.

**Conclusion**

The debate regarding early literacy experiences should not be conceptualized as "either literacy or no literacy." The critical issue is, What types of literacy experiences are appropriate for young children? Research on emergent literacy shows that young children avidly learn about written language in their home environments. They can also learn about written language in school environments, provided that experiences build on what children already know about written language, and activities simulate the ways in which young children learn best. Literacy activities, just like oral language ones, can permeate early childhood programs in a way that furthers lifelong
participation and interest in reading and writing.

References


