Working with families as partners in early literacy

Dorothy S. Strickland

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for its children.

John Dewey

The link between supportive parental involvement and children’s early literacy development is well established. Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) and others have shown that children from homes where parents model the uses of literacy and engage children in activities that promote basic understandings about literacy and its uses are better prepared for school.

Parent education is an integral component of virtually all early childhood programs. However, its effectiveness varies widely. More and better research is needed to help us understand what kinds of parent involvement programs are most effective for target populations and what level of treatment intensity, training of providers, and attention to other program components is required (Barnett, 1998; St. Pierre & Layzer, 1998). The following are some considerations for planning the content and implementation of successful early childhood parent education programs.

Literacy learning starts early

Learning to read and write is an ongoing process. Contrary to popular belief, it does not suddenly begin in kindergarten or first grade. From the earliest years, everything that adults do to support children’s language and literacy counts (Hart & Risley, 1995). Those who care for and educate young children should know the following. First, oral language and literacy develop together. What children learn from listening and talking contributes to their ability to read and write, and vice versa. For example, young children’s ability to identify and make oral rhymes and to manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words is an important indicator of their potential success learning to read. Phonological awareness begins early with rhyming games and chants, often on a parent’s knee. Second, children who fall behind in oral language and literacy development are less likely to be successful beginning readers, and their achievement lag is likely to persist throughout the primary grades and beyond (Juel, 1988). Third, it is not enough to simply teach early literacy skills in isolation. Teaching children to apply the skills they learn has a significantly greater effect on their ability to read (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Young children learn the uses of print in their lives as they observe adults read, make lists, and make use of literacy as they go about their everyday lives.
Key implications for parents and educators

- Know that a child’s capacity for learning is not determined at birth and there is a great deal parents and educators can do about it (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).
- Be aware that there are many informal and enjoyable ways that language and literacy skills can be developed in the home.
- Provide opportunities for children to use what they know about language and literacy in order to help them transfer what they know to new situations.

Oral language is the foundation for literacy development

Listening and speaking provide children with a sense of words and sentences, build sensitivity to the sound system so that children can acquire phonological awareness and phonics, and are the means by which children demonstrate their understandings of words and written materials. Those who care for and educate young children should know the following three things. First, children reared in families where parents provide rich language and literacy do better in school than those who do not. Language-poor families are likely to use fewer “different” words in their everyday conversations, and the language environment is more likely to be controlling and punitive (Hart & Risely, 1995). Second, exposure to less common, more sophisticated vocabulary (i.e., rare words) at home relates directly to children’s vocabulary acquisition (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Third, there is a strong relationship between vocabulary development and reading achievement.

Key implications for parents and educators

- Take time to listen and respond to children.
- Talk to and with children not at them.
- Engage children in extended conversations about events, storybooks, and a variety of other print media.
- Explain things to children.
- Use sophisticated and unusual words in everyday talk with children, when it is appropriate to the conversation.

Experiences with the world and with print influence comprehension

True reading involves understanding. What children bring to a text, whether oral or written, influences the understandings they take away. Those who care for and educate young children should know the following. First, the more limited a child’s experiences, the more likely it is that he or she will have difficulty with reading. Second, there are two kinds of experiences that are highly influential to literacy development: background knowledge about the world and background knowledge about print and books. Both can and should be provided in the home (Neuman, 2001).

Key implications for parents and educators

- Keep in mind that interesting concepts and vocabulary do not emerge from a vacuum.
- Help provide interesting content to think and talk about.
- Involve children in trips to local points of interest and talk with them about what they see and do.
- Establish a habit of raising and responding to children’s questions about things that occur at home or on local trips.
- Provide time for reading to children and talking with them about what is read.
- Share a variety of literature, including lots of informational books. Books stimulate conversations about ideas and concepts beyond everyday experiences.
- Make books accessible for children to return to on their own—to pretend read and reenact the read-aloud experience.

Connecting with families to promote children’s literacy development

Successful parent education programs are sustained and consistent over time. They go well beyond specific program activities to include strong parent outreach in every aspect of home-school
relations. Successful programs include parents and the entire staff in an effort to connect home and school. Everyone benefits from the sharing of information and an atmosphere of shared purpose.

Make special activities as specific as possible, focusing on one concept at a time with plenty of practical suggestions. Revisit key ideas and enlist input about parents’ personal application of those ideas. Keep in mind that change takes time. Initially, some parents may not get the “big” picture. Little steps are important.

Make parent education highly accessible. Combine it with other services, such as health and social services, whenever possible. Many families are overwhelmed with the stress of balancing the daily demands of work and childrearing with limited resources. Be patient and flexible and keep in mind that parents have a great deal to contribute. Be sure to draw on their experience and background knowledge.

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Developmentally Appropriate Practice in early literacy instruction

Lesley Mandel Morrow

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) has been associated with early childhood education (preschool through grade 2) for many years. DAP emphasizes the concurrent development of social, emotional, physical, and intellectual growth. DAP means that learning can happen spontaneously and that teachers deliberately plan for teaching literacy skills (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

Developmentally Appropriate Practice should include intentional teaching of literacy in appropriate ways. The ability to read and write will develop with careful planning and instruction. Children need regular and active interactions with print at a very early age. This interpretation of DAP does not mean extensive whole-group instruction, intensive drilling, practicing skills in isolation, and high-stakes testing. DAP means making academic content meaningful. It builds on what children know and then provides additional knowledge. Reading is complex, and we need a variety of instructional approaches to meet the needs of our diverse population. The acquisition of reading is an active process between children and adults and other children. Teachers offer explicit instruction when they model activities. They provide guided practice when children try out what was taught and provide scaffolding when necessary. Finally, children engage in independent practice when they work on their own. DAP acknowledges that children have their own time schedule when it comes to acquiring skills (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

What does DAP look like?

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in early literacy instruction means that literacy development is evident throughout the school day. Teachers provide literacy instruction when spontaneous situations arise. For example, some children were anxious to talk about the hurricane that just happened in their community. The teacher took the opportunity to discuss the meaning of the word hurricane and compared it to the word storm. She made two webs on the chalkboard and put the word hurricane in one center circle and the word storm in the other. Then the class helped her list words that defined each. The words storm and hurricane were also added to the classroom word wall.

DAP includes thematic instruction when literacy and content information are integrated (Morrow, in press). If a class is studying winter, for example, activities are about information related to winter, and literacy skills are embedded in the activities. The following is a plan for teaching literacy skills using a winter theme.

- Monday—Literacy skills development: vocabulary and listening. Activity: Read Ezra Jack Keats’s The Snowy Day (1996, Viking). Before reading ask the children to listen for the things Peter does in the snow. Write the snow activities on a winter word chart.
• Tuesday—Literacy skills development: reading pictures and identifying details. Activity: Share three different illustrations with the children that provide information about winter. Discuss each illustration and write down the information the children generate.

• Wednesday—Literacy skills development: clapping syllables and listening for rhyming words. Activity: Sing a song about the world in winter. Clap the syllables in the words as you sing. List rhyming words in the song.

• Thursday—Literacy skills development: vocabulary and following directions. Activity: Provide children with dark blue construction paper, bits of silver foil, and white doilies, cotton balls, tissue paper, and chalk. Ask the children to create winter pictures with the materials. Encourage them to talk about the materials and their pictures while creating them.

• Friday—Literacy skills development: hypothesizing, predicting, enhancing vocabulary development, and observing the teacher writing. Activity: Carry out an experiment about freezing water and melting ice. Begin the conversation with a pan full of water. What does the water look like, how does it feel, what does the water do? Predict what the pan full of water might look and feel like when frozen. Put the water in the freezer or outside if it is cold enough for it to freeze. When it is frozen discuss what it looks like and how it feels. Allow the ice to melt and discuss freezing and melting again.

In the activities described, children are involved in experiences that enhance reading, vocabulary, oral language, writing, following directions, and knowledge about winter.

According to Developmentally Appropriate Practice, when children are learning in the early childhood grades, sometimes they need to be playful. We want them to interact with teachers and peers as they sing, listen to stories, and engage in creative art and play. As they do so they will learn vocabulary, acquire information, and learn concepts about print and writing. Paper and pencil in play areas encourage children to write or draw as part of their play. Set up these areas to include reading and writing opportunities (e.g., a veterinarian’s office with appointment slips, history and physical exam forms, and books for browsing in the waiting room). In DAP, teachers make sure that there is a balance between explicit, thematic, spontaneous, and playful instruction (Morrow & Gambrell, 2004; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Vukelich, 1994). When teaching young children with DAP, we prepare activities that have a purpose, help to teach skills, are engaging, and foster the joy of learning.

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The effect of print-rich classroom environments on early literacy growth

Susan B. Neuman

“Xavier is reading, and I don’t know what to do,” a mother announced to the director of a prekindergarten center in a desperately poor neighborhood I was visiting. Far from boasting, her voice showed great concern: “Other kids run around and play with friends—all Xavier wants to do is sit and read.” She questioned whether such behavior was “normal” and worried that her son might become bored later on in school or, worse, be chasised by his teacher for learning to read the “wrong” way.

Some might think this mother was overly anxious. But it was not so long ago that Durkin (1966) asked these same questions in her landmark study of the long-term success of early readers. Examining over 9,500 U.S. first graders in Oakland, California, and New York City, she found that approximately 2% of the population was already reading. At the same time, Durkin reported a serendipitous finding: Although the median IQ of early readers was high, there was tremendous variation, suggesting that factors other than intelligence must have accounted for
The study of precocious early readers

In 2000 (Neuman & Celano, 2004), we screened over 4,050 children (ages 3–4) from four high-poverty neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, following a two-step process. Using a preprimer word list (Johns, 1997), research assistants asked each child individually to identify words as a screening device. Children who read more than five words were then asked to read connected text (i.e., Margaret Wise Brown’s The Runaway Bunny, 1991, HarperFestival). If they were able to read lines from text, they were identified as early readers. A total of 43 precocious early readers were identified (26 girls, 17 boys; 30 African Americans, 13 Caucasians), approximately similar to what Durkin (1966) reported in her study.

Following screening, the 43 children were given selected assessments to examine their overall reading profile. Assessments included the following: the 1981 Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised, the 1981 Expressive One-Word Vocabulary Test, the 1990 K-Bit Brief Intelligence Test, letter-name knowledge—uppercase and lowercase letters (Waterford Early Reading Institute, 1998), concepts of print (adapted from Clay, 1979, as cited in Neuman, 1999), rhyming (MacLean, Bryant, & Bradley, 1987), phonemic awareness of initial sounds (Waterford Early Reading Institute), and ending sounds (Waterford Early Reading Institute). At the same time, we randomly selected children to be tested who were not identified as readers but were similar in all other demographic characteristics.

We made a striking discovery. Children’s ability to read was related to skill development, not aptitude. In each skill category, there were significant differences between precocious early readers and their peers who were not yet reading. But there were no differences between groups in intelligence. These young, precocious readers had somehow acquired the critical components of early literacy through their daily activities and involvement with peers and interested adults.

How did these children learn to read?

We can only hypothesize how these 3- to 4-year-olds learned how to read. But interviews with families and detailed observations of child-care settings provide some suggestive findings.

Unlike Durkin (1966), we found that parent involvement in poor communities varied dramatically. Some families living in especially harsh circumstances had few resources, such as access to books and opportunities for involvement. Other parents, even though poor economically, had rich kinship networks and could draw from family relationships to help their children. Sometimes these kin would help the child regularly visit the library for story hour. Other times, an older sibling would become the “designated” reader for the child and help as he or she was trying to read alone. In no instance, however, did we find a concerted effort on the part of the parent or caregiver to teach the child to read.
Rather, in contrast to Durkin (1966), we found that the child-care center made an enormous contribution to the child’s interest and curiosity about learning to read. One-hour observations, two times throughout the year, of activities in these centers revealed print-rich environments and contexts with lively conversation. Often located in church basements, storefronts, or rooms in old factories, caregivers supported early literacy in many ways.

- **Print-rich environments.** Centers included writing tables, functional signs, and symbols that stimulated children to use literacy. Signs that had meaning for children (not mere decoration) helped to communicate the important message that literacy was an integral part of daily activity.

- **A “Cozy Corner” library nook.** Each center had a place where children could sit in cozy, small spaces and read together. Often these spaces included soft things, such as stuffed animals, pillows, and dolls, so that even a child alone could feel welcome to read.

- **Literacy-related play areas.** Props, such as memo pads, recipes, and cookbooks, helped children incorporate print in a very natural way.

- **Interactive circle times.** In contrast to being read to, children could actively participate in reading aloud. Teachers would stop, ask questions, encourage discussion of ideas, raise new questions based on children’s comments, and generate a participatory role in reading with children.

- **Interactive meal times.** Teachers sat with children and engaged them in conversation during meals and snack times. Often this time became an opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with children, to hear about their daily activities outside of the center, and to connect their home and center worlds.

- **Small-group activities.** Teachers would engage children in reading, writing, handwriting, or math activities in small groups.

Observing our young, precocious, early readers in centers like these revealed a number of important findings for literacy researchers and practitioners. First, based on our observations, it was clear that these children took advantage of the environment and their caregiver’s support. Interest and curiosity about reading led children to choose to play in the literacy-related centers and to choose to read by themselves. Second, high-quality centers, even in poor physical conditions, reflected similar types of stimulating activities that were reported by Durkin (1966) in home settings. These centers, therefore, provided a critical safety net for children who might otherwise not have access to print and opportunities for engagement. And third, our study led us to recognize that the link between low income and poor achievement may be vastly overestimated. Poverty is not a monolithic construct or a life sentence. Rather, it encourages us to focus on the individual child and the talents and gifts that every child brings to the learning event.

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**Early literacy assessment—Thoughtful, sensible, and good**

**Kathleen Roskos**

My first encounter with early literacy assessment occurred in the early 1980s when our Title I (a federally funded program for at-risk students) team organized a screening for all incoming kindergartners in a small, rural U.S. school district. We set up “centers” in the school gym to assess what we thought were basic readiness skills of our young entrants. In a game-like fashion, we probed them: Can you write your name? What letter is this? Tell me about this [a toy car]. Count the tiny plastic bears. Hop on one foot, now the other. Walk the balance beam.

In total, it took about 20 minutes to gather information about each child’s oral language, alphabet knowledge, one-to-one correspondence, and motor skills, not to mention a general willingness
to participate at all. We conducted these screenings for several years in a row, but they were not without dilemmas and controversies as to their purpose, appropriateness, and usefulness.

That was a long time ago, and our knowledge of early literacy and assessment has grown considerably in the intervening years, although it has certainly not been free of dilemmas and controversies.

**Why is early literacy assessment important?**

The building blocks of high-quality early literacy education include strong standards, appropriate and fair assessments, well-built curricula, and research-based instruction. There are two reasons, one leading the other, why assessment in the United States is becoming more important with every passing day.

The primary reason is the tremendous progress in understanding the developmental foundations of early literacy (National Research Council, 2001; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 2000; Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000). Research syntheses indicate four developmental “drivers” of early literacy linked to later reading achievement: oral language comprehension (including vocabulary), phonological awareness, print knowledge, and print motivation (Lonigan, 2004). Children’s growth in these areas is critical not only to their learning to read but also to their general cognitive capacity to learn more, and more complex, content (National Research Council, 2000, 2001; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). Assessment is the necessary means for systematically collecting and analyzing information on children’s literacy development in these areas. Engaging in this practice (as an integral part of our professional work) contributes directly to improvements in the educational services provided to children and their families.

The other key reason is the accountability that comes with an enlightened emphasis on early literacy in early childhood. Solid evidence of the effect of high-quality early education on children’s later academic achievement has created a strong push for early learning standards and assessments that interface with K–12 education (National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2002, 2003; National Institute for Early Education Research, 2003; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). Pressure is especially intense in the early literacy-learning domain where U.S. federal and state funding is tied to evidence of the scientific research base in curricula and evaluations of program effectiveness (e.g., Early Reading First; Good Start, Grow Smart; Head Start Child Outcomes Framework). Documenting results and demonstrating improvements in children’s literacy achievement in the early grades rest on quality assessment information from preschool through grade 3. Thus, the need for “good” assessment data is rapidly growing. Policymakers want data to determine what works and to identify gaps in children’s early learning experiences. Parents and teachers want information to monitor children’s progress and to make instructional decisions. Early childhood programs and elementary schools want accurate data to establish a baseline of children’s strengths and weaknesses, to manage instructional goals, and to evaluate their overall effectiveness. Satisfying these many “wants” responsibly elevates the importance of early literacy assessment during the early years of preschool and primary education.

**What are the vexing issues?**

The issues surrounding early literacy assessment are not new to the field of assessment, although they are accentuated in the early childhood context because the children are so young and because the link between assessment and accountability is a new and scary notion. Purpose is one of the more problematic issues.

Assessments can serve varied purposes from instructional decision making and identifying children with special needs to program monitoring and accountability evaluations. Dangers lurk, however, in the mismatch of purpose and tool and the misuse of assessment results. Consider, for example, readiness screening for kindergarten. Its intended purpose is to “flag” children who may need more assistance and further diagnosis upon entry to school (Kame‘enui, 2002). Yet it happens, unfortunately, that screening information can be misused to judge children “unready” for kindergarten or to place them in programs without follow-through as-
essment (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2000). This screening does not help children learn to read and write; it does not help them obtain the instruction they need to make progress; and, sadly, it puts them in harm’s way.

Let me be clear, though, that this issue of purpose does not hinge on whether we should or should not conduct early literacy assessments. We should (and must) conduct them because we possess scientific knowledge about literacy development that can help children. The problem instead is how to ensure clarity of purpose and appropriate, ethical use of assessment information for children’s benefit. Addressing this issue in early literacy assessment requires a “strong hand” on our part to decide what structures and strategies must be in place in early childhood programs and schools so as to first do no harm (Jones, 2004). In this situation professional development is pivotal. Administrators and teachers need opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills to design and implement sound early literacy assessment systems that meet the needs of the families and children they serve. They need real, tangible, everyday support from knowledgeable reading professionals.

Another issue involves the complexities of assessing young children. Granted, the literacy assessment of any age learner is a complicated business. But it is more so, many argue, when it targets preschoolers and kindergartners (National Education Goals Panel Early Childhood Assessment Group, 1998). This is because their nascent literacy concepts and skills are deeply involved with other developing systems (e.g., physical, cognitive, emotional, language), exceedingly unstable, and thus more difficult to locate by means of traditional standardized measures. To assess young children’s literacy requires evidence gathered from multiple methods over time in order to “see” emerging skills and forming concepts. Moreover, it’s much easier for young children to show what they know (e.g., in play) than to talk, much less write, about what they know and can do. Consequently, assessments should be embedded in activities young children do or, at the very least, closely resemble them. Furthermore, unlike school-age children with built-up classroom experience, young children come to assessment activities with widely divergent learning experiences—some having been in family or home care, others at day care, and still others in public preschools. Their participation in assessment activity, therefore, is colored by their prior experience with school-like settings. Some children have far more familiarity with such settings than others.

The issue is made more complex by the design and selection of early literacy assessment instruments. Not only should such tools be psychometrically sound (e.g., reliable, valid), but they should also be of clear purpose, age appropriate, culturally and linguistically sensitive, and fair. Growing concern about the assessment of young children has led to several published position statements and guidelines that include early literacy assessment (e.g., National Education Goals Panel Early Childhood Assessment Group, 1998). In our professional work we need to be alert to these concerns and positions so as to inform and influence local early childhood programs and schools increasingly faced with the challenge of selecting early literacy assessment instruments.

A third and no less complicated issue involves assessment procedures and how they are carried out in classrooms. This issue is all about logistics: Who? When? For how long? Where? At what cost? Early literacy assessments have a variety of requirements for data collection. Some require a specialist trained to use the measure and interpret results (e.g., the 1981 Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised), while others can be administered by teachers with appropriate training (e.g., Get Ready to Read!, Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Some need quiet conditions where adult and child work alone (e.g., rapid picture naming), while others can be handled in daily activities (e.g., concepts of print). Some are short; others are long and require extended time to collect information. Some are more expensive than others. Considerable thought is needed to ensure a realistic match between the requirements for collecting early literacy assessment information and the setting’s capability to meet them.

For early literacy assessment to be “good” (i.e., to benefit children, their families, and their teachers), reading educators need to come to grips with procedural issues at a practical level. They need to ask detail-oriented questions like these: How will this assessment measure work in the school or classroom setting? Is it affordable in terms of cost,
time, and professional development? How well does it contribute to a comprehensive picture of a child’s early literacy development and growth? What are the accommodations for children with disabilities? The answers to such questions then need to be carefully considered to implement effective and efficient assessment procedures that produce high-quality information.

What is an early literacy assessment system?

The growing need for norm-referenced screening and progress monitoring measures to identify children at risk for reading failure and to track growth in relation to instructional approaches argues for the design and implementation of an early literacy assessment system. The outcome measures of such a system must indicate whether an early literacy program is helping children learn essential literacy concepts and skills. The fundamental complexity of a multipurpose assessment system is that no one purpose can function in isolation from the others. Rather, the different purposes of early literacy assessment must forge a linked system that is comprehensive, integrated, and trustworthy (McConnell, 2000). This goal calls for the thoughtful consideration of several factors.

- The extent to which assessment measures and procedures complement one another across the entire system is important. Screenings need to mesh with diagnostics that inform instruction and intervention. These, in turn, must include formal and informal tools for monitoring children’s growth, and the salient goals of these assessments must be adequately captured in outcome measures to judge child achievement and program results.
- Measures and procedures that can be used to directly and repeatedly monitor progress toward desired long-term reading outcomes are important (Fuchs & Deno, 1990). Instruction needs to rest on more than the monitoring of curriculum-based literacy concepts and skills of a specific literacy program. It also needs to be grounded in normative information about children’s progress in essential areas of the early literacy learning domain (i.e., oral language; phonological processing; orthographic processing; fluency; vocabulary; and reading comprehension, including early print awareness). Teachers need to know, in short, where children stand relative to their peers and in relation to general outcomes in order to plan effectively and to judge responsibly. Valid, reliable, multiple measures are therefore critical in a linked assessment system.

Yet, the system must be efficient and parsimonious in its use of resources (e.g., time). Not all of the children need to be assessed all of the time. Rather, a sampling system can be used (i.e., some of the children some of the time) to obtain assessment information for different purposes.

- An overarching theory of action for decision making across the system is very important to pull together assessment information gathered from multiple sources, settings, and occasions. Without it, an assessment system can easily slip into a fragmented set of activities—assessment bits and pieces that are difficult to manage and use. A theory of action includes principles that “balance the need for information with concern for children”; adheres to the “best practices” of early literacy assessment (e.g., information collected from more than one source); and ensures assessment safeguards related to informed consent, confidentiality, sampling, and information management (Scott-Little & Niemeyer, 2003, p. 10, p. 26). Reading educators need to take a leadership role in helping to map a theory of action for early literacy assessment on the basis of strong principles, best assessment practices, and safeguards. They need to help their colleagues determine what early literacy assessment information is needed and why, to weigh the options in a given situation, and to plan for measures and practices grounded in literacy development research and the professional knowledge of early childhood.

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A framework and suggested guidelines for prekindergarten content standards

Judith A. Schickedanz

The standards movement in the United States was launched in the early 1990s in response to The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners (National Education Goals Panel, 1991). Virtually every state has preschool content guidelines or standards, at least in draft form. The development of content guidelines or standards at the prekindergarten (pre-K) level is an indication of the seriousness with which educators have recently begun to view preschool education. As several elementary school principals have said to me, “We will never be able to meet the benchmark (testing) targets, if we can’t get children in school by the age of 4. They are already too far behind when they come to us for kindergarten.” Suddenly, it matters whether we make preschool programs available to children and also what we provide in the way of educational programming once children are enrolled.

The first rung on the reading ladder

It is not surprising that many states view preschool education as the first rung on the educational ladder. As a consequence, many sets of pre-K standards for language and literacy, like the K–3 standards for language and literacy from which they have typically been derived, are heavy on literacy skills and fairly light on language skills. As scientifically based research interacts with state standards, it is increasingly clear that this “first rung” view of preschool will not serve us well. While it is true that lower levels of oral vocabulary and poorer overall language skills do not directly compromise a child’s learning to read (Snow, 2002; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002) and that literacy skills (i.e., letter-name knowledge, phonological awareness, and print awareness) do, low oral vocabulary and poorer overall language skills begin to exact a heavy toll on reading achievement by grade 3, when text demands increase (Storch & Whitehurst). Once behind in oral language, it is difficult for children to catch up (Hart & Risley, 1995).

A two-act play framework

To develop guidelines for preschool content standards that will serve us well, viewing preschool education as a stage for a two-act play provides a more useful framework than viewing preschool as the first rung on a ladder. The first act in the play is learning to read. The second act is sustaining that progress from grade 3 onward. It is this framework that was used to develop the list of pre-K content standards for language and literacy that appears in Table 1 on pp. 96–97. Although informed substantially by a review of pre-K standards from 13 states, the guidelines offered in Table 1 provide somewhat more balance between oral language and literacy foundations than the pre-K content guidelines adopted by some states. My hope is that they will nudge revisions of state pre-K standards in the direction suggested by research.

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In search of highly qualified early childhood classroom literacy teachers

Carol Vukelich

There is little disagreement that the quality of a teacher affects children’s achievement. The research most often referenced, though not free from controversy, to support this claim is the “value-added” studies of Ted Sanders and his colleagues (e.g., Sanders & Horn, 1994; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). This belief and these studies’ findings beg
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Student indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal expression</strong></td>
<td>Expresses feelings, needs, and ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helps generate and maintain scripts in sociodramatic play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary and background knowledge</td>
<td>Uses new words from books in retellings and in conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understands relationships among objects (e.g., apples and oranges are fruits; socks and dresses are items of clothing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening (attention to and comprehension of talk)</td>
<td>Responds to his or her name when it is called</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attends to stories read aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Takes turns in conversations and relates his or her own comments to topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonological awareness</td>
<td>Learns quickly to recite interesting-sounding words from texts (e.g., “oonga boonga” and “bunka wunka”) and expresses delight in playing with such words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinks of a word that starts with the same sound as a word the adult provides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Segments first sound in a word when a teacher asks, “What’s the first sound we hear in bird?” (Child responds, “/b/.” Or, child says, “Birthday-/b/” when writing that word.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Literacy standard**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Student indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Print awareness</td>
<td>Asks what words in books and in the environment say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print conventions and book handling knowledge</td>
<td>Holds books right side up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knows the cover of book and that title or name of the book is there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter-name knowledge</td>
<td>Names many uppercase letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finds specific letters in words in the environment (e.g., signs, book titles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alphabetic principle</td>
<td>Attempts to sound out print in the environment (i.e., does not simply refer to it and give a message but tracks individual aspects of print and attempts to sound out words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makes statements such as “A is for acorn” or “B is for banana.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of text structures</td>
<td>Names different kinds of texts (e.g., recipes, menus, signs, newspapers, greeting cards, letters, storybooks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generates stories with basic story structure in dramatic play when relating recent past experiences and when dictating fictional stories to an adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeks information from nonfiction texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension of stories</td>
<td>Names main characters when asked, “Who is in this story?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retells some main events when asked, “What happens in this story?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relates book experiences to his or her own life (“I’m going to make angels in the snow, just like Peter.”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
TABLE 1 (continued)
Guidelines for prekindergarten content standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Student indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension of stories</td>
<td>Links basic emotions of characters to their actions in story events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses own experiences to understand characters’ feelings and motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses background knowledge to interpret story events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in books</td>
<td>Chooses to look at books often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Checks out books from classroom lending library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Requests that favorite stories be read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Looks at information books provided in the science or block areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrates sustained and focused engagement for read-alouds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning writing</td>
<td>Writes for many purposes (e.g., signs, labels, stories, messages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses class writing area and writes in block and dramatic play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writes his or her own name using good approximations to letters needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makes mock and actual letters and experiments with letter forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Composes and dictates or writes messages and contributes to class writing projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiments with word making by stringing letters together or by linking sounds in words to specific letter names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizes writing in a linear fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Includes both “big” and “little” letters in writing, even though use is not aligned with conventions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


the question “What are the necessary and sufficient components of an early literacy teacher education program—one designed to produce new teachers who are effective immediately upon their entry into the classroom and know how to ‘leave no child behind’?” Meanwhile, the U.S. government’s key question is “What, in teacher preparation, makes a difference in children’s achievement?”

To address these questions, teacher educators and policy groups have responded with reviews of the teacher preparation research. Few of the studies in these reviews examined the preparation of literacy teachers, and none focused on the preparation of early childhood teachers of literacy—a sobering finding that identifies a significant research need. Yet, these reviews raise important questions regarding the preparation of highly qualified early childhood literacy teachers.

**Subject matter knowledge**

The U.S. federal government’s perspective is that subject matter knowledge (as demonstrated by earning a major in an academic content area or passing a rigorous test) is the key to defining a highly qualified teacher. Yet, research syntheses report only moderate support for the importance of subject matter knowledge. Furthermore, the research focuses mostly on the teaching of mathematics and science and is inconclusive about whether what’s needed is a major or just some critical number of courses (Allen, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001).

What is the subject matter knowledge needed by early childhood teachers of literacy? Standard 1: Foundational Knowledge and the related elements of the International Reading Association’s *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2003) defined the subject matter that early childhood teachers of literacy must know. The standard’s elements include psychological, sociological, and linguistic foundations of reading and writing processes; language development and reading acquisition and the variations related to culture and linguistic diversity; and the major components of early reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, word identification and phonics, vocabulary and background knowledge, fluency, comprehension,
and motivation). Support for these as the required foundational knowledge elements is drawn from current reading research summaries (e.g., Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

The rubrics accompanying the standards define the level of knowledge needed by the various categories of literacy professionals (i.e., paraprofessional, classroom teacher). What isn’t known empirically is how much this particular content truly adds to early childhood educators’ effectiveness. That is, do the children taught by those early childhood educators who possess such foundational knowledge become more successful readers and writers than children taught by early childhood educators with only a little or none of this knowledge? For each element, what is the “value added” to early childhood educators’ effectiveness?

**Pedagogical knowledge**

Teacher preparation research “lends limited support to the conclusion that coursework in education can contribute to effective teaching” (Allen, 2003, p. 31), although there is a strong belief that some pedagogical knowledge is necessary for effective teaching. This literature, however, does not define the specific pedagogical skills necessary to be an effective teacher, and—as with subject matter knowledge—the subjects in the majority of the studies were high school or middle school mathematics or science teachers.

Though the research base is very modest on the effect teachers’ pedagogical knowledge has on student achievement, teacher educators and teachers strongly believe that teacher education candidates need to have and be able to use various kinds of pedagogical knowledge and skills. Three of the five standards for reading professionals (International Reading Association, 2003) focus on the teaching of literacy knowledge: instructional strategies and curriculum materials; assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation; and creation of a literate environment. For each standard’s elements, the Association describes the kinds of knowledge each category of reading professional must have and be able to use. For example, early educator childhood classroom teachers need to know how to use a wide range of instructional practices, approaches, and methods for young learners from differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Standard 2).

But which instructional strategies, approaches, and methods must teachers of early literacy know and be able to do? Or which “appropriate formal and informal assessments” do early childhood classroom teachers need to be able to administer (International Reading Association, 2003, p. 15)? The Standards for Reading Professionals do not give answers. Teacher educators are left to investigate the latest research and to understand which early literacy instructional practices, approaches, and methods make a difference to young children’s success as readers and writers. The early childhood literature is growing with the identification of the skills young children need to be successful readers and writers (see, for example, Judith Schickedanz’s Table 1 or the list of skills prekindergarten children should demonstrate in Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). However, the literature is less clear on research-based methods for teaching young children the needed literacy skills—particularly if the research is held to the rigorous scientifically based criteria set forth by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (2003). More often than not, the literature suggests the use of “developmentally appropriate” strategies, without reference to the research base supporting the use of such an approach or method in teaching the particular literacy skill.

**What does all this suggest?**

There is a desperate need for more and better research on how to prepare early childhood teachers who can make a difference—specifically a difference in student achievement. In today’s climate, student achievement is what matters most, not changes in teacher candidates’ attitudes or beliefs or in their foundational or pedagogical knowledge. The Standards for Reading Professionals (International Reading Association, 2003) provide a beginning. Now, we must use rigorous scientifically based research procedures to determine the efficacy of these standards and elements in producing early literacy teachers who make a difference in children’s lives as readers and writers.
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References


