

Chapter 3

CURRENT PRACTICES IN EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Lesley Mandel Morrow

Elizabeth Asbury

This chapter will:

- Discuss theory, philosophy, and research that has had an impact on early childhood education and early literacy instruction.
- Discuss federal initiatives that have influenced early literacy development.
- Describe early literacy instruction through a case study demonstrating exemplary practice.
- Discuss an agenda for future research and practice in early literacy.

THEORY AND RESEARCH BASE

Historical Influences on Early Literacy Instruction

Early literacy instruction has been influenced by philosophers and theorists that dealt with child development, early childhood education, and literacy development. Philosophers such as Pestalozzi (Rusk & Scotland 1979) and Froebel (1974) talked about natural environments in which children would unfold through sensory experiences involving learning through touch, smell, taste, size and shape. Play was crucial, as was the social, emotional, and physical development of the child. Intellectual development was important; however, it was no more of a priority than social, emotional, and physical development. John Dewey's (1966) progressive education philosophy had a strong influence on preschool and kindergarten practices from the 1920s throughout the rest of the 20th century. Dewey led us to themed units of study that connect learning to meaning and purpose. He influenced the environments in preschool and kindergarten, with classrooms set up with different content area activity centers. The block corner, music and art centers, dramatic play area, science and social studies displays, and the library corner were the result of Dewey's ideas. A typical day included the following:

1. Circle time to talk about the weather, the calendar, and focus discussion on a science or social studies theme. If the theme were "good health," for example, the class would listen to a story and sing a song in keeping with this theme.
2. Free play took up a long period after circle time, when children painted at the easels, built block structures, engaged in dramatic play with dress-up clothing in the pretend kitchen set up in the classroom. Children explored and experimented with the ma-

terials in social settings, with little direction other than safety precautions.

3. Snack and rest followed free play, because good health and nutrition were emphasized.
4. If weather permitted, the children had outdoor play for large motor development. The day ended with a storybook reading.

There was no attempt at formal lessons; in fact, they were frowned on as inappropriate for the developmental stage of the child; however, teachable moments were used to advantage. There was no place in this program for formal reading instruction.

Montessori (1965) had a strong effect on early childhood and literacy instruction, believing that materials for children needed to serve a purpose for learning. She created manipulative activities to develop skills that focused on getting the right answer. Very few group lessons occur in this program, except to introduce new materials into the classroom. Children work independently at their own pace and level. According to Montessori, young children needed to use their senses to learn; therefore, she created many materials that involved the senses, such as tactile letters and wooden letters with different colors for long and short vowels.

Learning theorists Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) and Vygotsky (1981) also had a strong impact on early childhood and literacy instruction. Both suggested social settings for learning. Those who interpret Piaget's theory of cognitive development for instruction describe a curriculum that encourages exploration of natural environments and learning rather than direct or explicit teaching. Vygotsky described learning in a similar manner to that of Piaget; however, he proposed that adults should scaffold and model behaviors they wanted children to learn.

These theories and philosophies that influenced early childhood education were concerned with the following:

- Prepared and natural environments for learning.
- Equal emphasis on social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development.
- Supportive adults who encourage social interaction for learning to occur.
- A focus on learning rather than teaching.
- Awareness that children must be actively involved to learn.

Reading Readiness and Early Literacy

Morphett and Washburne (1931) believed in postponing formal reading instruction until the child was developmentally "old enough." Their re-

search concluded that children with a mental age of 6 years 6 months made better progress on a test of reading achievement than younger children. Although many educators believed that natural maturation was the precursor to literacy, others grew uncomfortable with simply waiting for children to become ready to read. They did not advocate formal reading instruction in early childhood but did begin to provide experiences that they believed would help children become ready for reading. Instead of waiting for a child's natural maturation to unfold, educators focused on nurturing that maturation by teaching children what they believed to be a set of prerequisite skills for reading, focusing on *auditory discrimination* of familiar sounds, similar sounds, rhyming words, and sounds of letters; *visual discrimination*, including color recognition, shape, and letter identification; left-to-right eye progression; *visual motor* skills, such as cutting on a line with a scissor, and coloring within the lines; and *large motor* abilities, such as skipping, hopping, and walking a straight line.

Literacy Research for the Past 35 Years

Research from the 1960s through the 1990s brought to life new information about oral language development, early writing development, emergent reading behaviors, and family literacy. With this new information and the whole language movement, we moved away from the abstract reading readiness activities thought to be the precursors to reading, toward more natural ways of developing reading once again. Although there still was a strong hands-off attitude to teaching early literacy, emergent literacy behavior was better understood and encouraged. Reading good literature to children was recognized as a very important activity, with interaction between the adult and child. Allowing and encouraging scribble writing and invented spelling was a way for children to experience the holistic form of writing. Including the family in literacy development was encouraged. Toward the end of the 1990s, the whole language philosophy was being questioned, with its lack of accountability and emphasis on specific skills development. We have entered a new phase of early literacy instruction in which acquisition of skills has become important, as has accountability for the development of these skills.

Numerous studies have found a positive relationship between reading achievement in early childhood and continued academic success (Adams, 1990; Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998). In a longitudinal study, Juel (1988) found that a child who is having difficulty reading at the end of first grade has a .88 probability of still having the difficulty in the fourth grade. It is apparent, based on this research and other, similar investigations, that it is crucial to have a good

beginning when learning to read, because it can and probably will affect the rest of one's life (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Current Influences on Early Literacy

Publications from the federal government and professional associations, such as *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998), *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices* (International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998), and the National Reading Panel Report (NRP; 2000), all deal with concerns about early literacy instruction and how to improve it. In the spring of 2002, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that includes the No Child Left Behind bill was passed. Although early literacy development has been a focus throughout the years, it is presently in the spotlight more than ever because of these documents.

The NRP (2000) suggests that instruction in early literacy needs to be organized and systematic. It also identifies areas on which to concentrate during instruction. The elements identified are (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) comprehension, (4) vocabulary, and (5) fluency. It is important to know that the Panel selected only some areas related to reading instruction to review. Members of the NRP did not study writing and its connections to reading success, nor did they study motivation. According to the NRP, some areas were omitted because there was not enough available quality research to determine their importance. In addition, they could not study everything related to reading instruction; instead, they reviewed only studies considered to be scientifically based reading research with a quantitative experimental design.

The NRP also highlights the importance of qualified teachers in developing successful readers. In the book, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, Snow et al. (1998) state that the best defense against failure to learn to read fluently is excellent instruction from an exemplary teacher. Investigations into exemplary and effective practice in early literacy instruction attempt to capture as many dimensions of expert performance as possible to describe teaching excellence. Effective and exemplary teachers share the following similar characteristics, which apply to effective practices not specific to literacy:

- Use of varied teaching strategies.
- Have high expectations for student achievement.
- Provide instruction designed to meet individual needs.
- Provide extensive positive feedback to students.
- Treat children with respect.

- Use of varied structures to meet individual needs when teaching, such as whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one instruction.
- Provide opportunities for children to work independently and also in collaboration with peers.
- Have excellent organization and management skills.
- Use of many assessment tools to guide instruction.
- Seek professional development on their own.
- Include parents in their program.
- Collaborate with peers (Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996; Ruddell & Ruddell, 1995; Taylor & Pearson, 2002).

The following list of characteristics applies specifically to literacy instruction used by exemplary teachers.

- Provide a literacy rich environment with accessible materials.
- Try to carry out meaning-based literacy instruction to motivate interest.
- Provide an organized and comprehensive program of skills development in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.
- Use quality children's literature, along with many different materials for teaching reading and writing.
- Attend to individual literacy needs by forming small groups for some guided instruction of skills.
- Literacy instruction takes place during a long, uninterrupted time period and is integrated throughout the school day (Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999; Morrow et al., 1999; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonalds, Block, & Morrow, 2001; Pressley et al., 1996).

A comprehensive approach to early literacy is grounded in a rich model of literacy learning that encompasses both the elegance and the complexity of reading and language arts processes. Such a model acknowledges the importance of both form (phonemic awareness, phonics mechanics, etc.) and function (comprehension, purpose, meaning) of the literacy processes, and recognizes that learning occurs most effectively in a whole-part-whole context. This type of instruction is characterized by meaningful literacy activities that provide children with both the skills and the desire to achieve proficient and lifelong literacy learning (Gambrell & Mazzoni, 1999). Teaching literacy skills and providing opportunities for learning literacy skills are appropriate for young children as long as the teaching methods are appropriate for the child being taught. In such a program, teachers provide numerous literacy experiences that include the integration of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. There are

multiple experience with word study activities; guided, shared, silent, collaborative, independent, and content-connected reading and writing; and oral reading to build fluency. The reading and writing take place in whole-class, small-group, one-on-one, teacher-directed, and social center settings in which children can practice what they have learned. Materials used include instructional texts, manipulatives, and meaningful children's literature. The instruction is spontaneous, authentic, and not only involves students in problem solving, but it is also direct, explicit, and systematic.

Every child is entitled to high-quality early literacy instruction. With that in mind, we describe an exemplary early childhood language arts classroom. We observed several teachers for a year as part of a study on exemplary literacy instruction. This investigation took place in five states in which supervisors nominated exemplary teachers. Teacher selection was based on supervisory observations, achievement of the students over a 5-year period, and the teachers' reputations with colleagues, parents, and children. We present a composite of the teachers' methods, highlighting the physical environment of the classroom, and the content and management of the Language Arts Block. As you read the case study, refer back to the list of exemplary characteristics to determine the degree to which the teacher fits the description.

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE

Danielle's Early Literacy Program

Danielle has been teaching in a suburban, middle-class community that has experienced rapid growth. During the 6 years she has taught in this school, Danielle has attained a master's degree in reading certification and is currently working toward a second master's degree. Her K-1 grade-level class consists of 24 children from the following ethnic backgrounds: 9 Caucasians, 5 Asians, 4 African Americans, 2 Native Americans, and 4 Hispanics. There are 10 girls and 14 boys. In her school, a collaborative atmosphere is apparent among teachers, administrators, and parents. Danielle shares ideas with colleagues whenever possible. At various times during her day, parent volunteers assist with classroom routines.

Teaching Philosophy

When asked to talk about her philosophy of literacy instruction, Danielle responded as follows:

"From the first day of school, I try to create a supportive and accepting environment in my classroom. I do this with the help of parents, other teachers, administrators, and the children. The resulting class-

room community allows all of the children to feel secure as they develop socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. As the children grow, I attend to their individual needs and interests by using thematic instruction that integrates content areas and skills in a meaningful context. I also teach in an explicit manner when necessary. It is through small-group and individual lessons that I am able to address skills needs in a differentiated manner. Along with skills development, I hope to foster a positive attitude toward reading and writing and to make children aware of the important role that literacy will play in their lives. I want my students to be responsible about their work and to become collaborative problem solvers. As a teacher, I believe that is important for me to grow as a professional, just as my students grow as independent learners. Therefore, I always look for research-based practices that will aid me in helping my students to attain their greatest potential. In addition, I go to conferences and take courses I feel I need to stay current.”

The Physical Environment in the Classroom

On entering Danielle’s classroom, one is greeted with the sounds of children’s voices and classical music. As the children engage in their varied activities, the value placed on literacy is very apparent. The literacy-rich environment is adorned with children’s work and a host of environmental prints. An interactive Word Wall serves as a student reference for approximately 70 high-frequency words. In addition to these, which are all written on yellow cards near the top of the chart, there are new vocabulary words found in books the children have shared, and new words from themes they have studied. These words are written on light-blue cards placed under the high-frequency word cards. The children’s names comprise the third group of words on pink cards, under all the rest.

In the Literacy Center are pillows, stuffed animals, a large wicker chair, a child’s rocking chair, and a child-size table and chairs. The wicker chair serves as the “special chair,” where Danielle or a parent reads stories to the class, and where children share their writing and read stories. One wall of the Literacy Center contains a large bulletin board, with materials for various components of the morning meeting, such as a calendar, weather/seasons and days-of-school charts, a daily schedule, daily news, and a monthly countdown. A smaller bulletin board displays materials that each child uses when teaching classmates a chosen lesson during his or her turn as “Tomorrow’s Teacher.” The Literacy Center includes a Reader’s Corner, taped stories with headsets for listening, computers, word study manipulatives, writing materials, and storytelling materials, such as a felt board with story characters, puppets, and a roll movie box.