

7-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Fagan, W. T. (1987). Emergent Literacy: Avoiding the Plateau Effect. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 27 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol27/iss4/1

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EMERGENT LITERACY: AVOIDING THE PLATEAU EFFECT

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The topic of emergent literacy has been quite prominent in the field of reading within the past few years. There is no doubt that literacy begins to emerge within the home; in fact, many children come to school already readers (Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1982; Lass, 1982). The literature is also replete with information regarding how this literacy takes place (Cockran-Smith, 1984; Doake, 1981; Ninio and Bruner, 1978; Snow, 1983; Teale, 1981). A significant literacy event in the home is story reading. However, the significance of this event as a factor in literacy development is not due to its existence but to how the event is actualized (Doake, 1981; Hayden, 1985; Teale, 1981).

Research on children who could read and write at the time of school entrance has provided much information on the nature of the environment in which this knowledge was acquired. A summary of this research is as follows:

1. The preschool child is immersed in a literacy oriented environment. As Cohn (1981) described it, "My children's environment is alive with spoken language and print" (p. 549).
2. Children are read to at a very early age, as early as age two (Durkin, 1961), before their first birthday (Hayden, 1985), or as early as six months (Cohn, 1981).
3. There is a wide range of books and related literacy materials in the home. Among those books are favorite books, which the children want read again and again (Doak, 1981). There is also a continuous addition of new books, which often are obtained from the public library and which these children frequent with their parents (Brailsford, 1985; Clarke, 1976).
4. The children are interested in books as playthings and as a source of enjoyment with others. Cohn (1981) described her daughter, age three, who set up dolls in a semicircle

and "read" aloud to them, occasionally turning the books to face the dolls so that they could see the pictures. Lass (1982) speaks of her son who turns pages in books and used this activity to engage the attention of those present.

5. These children initiate literacy events in the course of ongoing, day-to-day activities. Since these events grow out of the children's lifeworld, they are endowed with meaning (Juliebo, 1985).

6. Parents (or others) respond to the children's requests for literacy experiences. Durkin (1961) speaks of their patience in answering questions. Clark (1976) describes these adults as "willing to provide such instant encouragement and also to take part in play with their children even at the expense of delaying other activities" (p. 43).

7. Parents, however, are not usually aware of their children's developing literacy skills. As Clark (1976) states "Few of the parents have consciously attempted to teach their children to read and indeed some were embarrassed at their child's rapid progress" (p. 102).

8. Literacy development did not develop by transmission but by interaction. As Doake (1981) states, books were read to and with children. Parents clarify, elaborate, relate, and encourage involvement, all within an accepting environment. As Schickedanz and Sullivan (1984) indicate, literacy development does not occur naturally but occurs because of what parents do.

9. The young readers are able to plan, take responsibility, and control their behavior. Such behavior is related to the children's ability to engage in effective monologue and dialogue (Cox and Sulzby, 1982).

10. Children perceive themselves as readers (Lass, 1982) or as readers-in-progress (Brailsford, 1985).

Even those children who do not come to school as readers have begun to develop some form of literacy awareness, even by recognizing the MacDonald's "M". Perhaps a more significant point is that regardless of their position on the scale of literacy development, they have not experienced failure in this venture before coming to school.

Why is it that within school, literacy development does not continue to emerge for all children but sometimes

plateaus? There are obviously many factors to be considered in response to this question but one that is often overlooked is the relationship between the child's learning at home and at school.

Literacy development at home is somewhat similar to learning oral language. The term "acquisition" has been used to describe this general process (Krashen, 1978). According to McLaughlin (1978), acquisition occurs "through meaningful interaction in a natural communication setting. Speakers (readers) are not concerned with form but with meaning. Nor is there explicit concern with error detection and correction" (p. 310). Most of this acquisition goes on at a subconscious level and is often marked by spontaneity in terms of the child's desire to know and to use. The term "learning" is often used to describe the school based process. Learning tends to be an explicit, conscious process where the focus is on structure, rules, boundaries, and memory. Learning often makes sense to the learner only within the context of the school. The students often do not see its relevance in a larger context. They learn for the teacher.

However, as Snow (1985) indicates, the term "learning" is a general one and using it only for the school type interaction may lead to confusion. She proposes instead the terms intentional and incidental learning. There are also problems with these since incidental learning may occur within a highly structured intentional learning situation. Perhaps the distinction is best made between the focus of the "teaching" that goes on in the home and in the school. Teaching in the home tends to be warm, sensitive, opportune, accepting, extending, and clarifying. It is loosely structured in the sense that there are no set bounds, the "teacher" and the child share in initiating and controlling the progression of the learning activity. At school, on the other hand, teaching tends to be preplanned where the focus is on work to be covered and the desired outcomes. In fact, Juliebo (1985) found that when parents adopted a "teacher" role modelled on their perception of the school (workbooks, focus on learning letter sounds) their children tended to do less well than the children of parents who adopted a more indirect teaching role.

What are the implications for teachers? Teachers must understand that all children entering school are at

some point on the literacy development scale. The grade one class may be the most heterogeneous class within the school. Consequently teachers must be prepared to provide a wide range of learning activities. Many children will need to be immersed in books, and writing, and talking, and story reading, and will need time to ask questions and make comments. Other children who are readers already will need opportunities to read and to develop more complex reading skills. Sometimes the learning will need more structure and direction. The challenge is neither to move children too slowly nor too quickly. If moved too quickly, children will begin to focus on the "form" of reading and writing and will use their cognitive capacity to memorize rules and procedures and to ignore meaning. If moved too slowly, children will lose interest, become bored and seek outlets elsewhere for their needs. Either of these course of action may result in a plateau effect; both readers and emergent readers may go on hold. The grade one teacher has a tremendous responsibility. Shulman's (1984) contention that the task environment of the classroom is more complex than that faced by a physician in a diagnostic examination is certainly true for the grade one teacher.

An implication for preservice and inservice educators is that teachers need to be made aware of successful teaching interactions within the home and how these can be integrated into the sometimes more formal interaction of classroom teaching. Teachers will need to understand the functions of incidental and more structured learning; whether the focus is more on the incidental or the structure will depend on the goals to be achieved.

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