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# MOVING INTO LITERACY: THEN AND NOW

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How children learn to read has intrigued parents, teachers, and psychologists as well as reading authorities and researchers for many years. The question of when children should learn to read has been debated extensively since the 1930s. The attention to this question may have resulted in a lack of acknowledgement that learning to be literate begins long before the formal introduction to reading in a school setting. In this article prereading and beginning reading are examined from both a historical and a current perspective with emphasis on implications of recent findings on children's literacy learning for instruction.

## A Look Back

The concern with readiness began in the late 1920s as evidence of the high failure rate in first grade accumulated as standardized tests became widely used. Another factor contributing to attention to the readiness concept was the child study movement that stressed individuality in all aspects of development. The "whole child" notion had a number of positive effects such as examining child growth and development and recognizing individual variations in achievement and learning patterns. Concern for a successful start in reading is an old idea that is still full of merit today.

There were, however, some negative results from the considerable attention to readiness. Easy explanations of failure abounded. Statements such as "This child is 'not ready' because he/she is not 'socially adjusted'" or "This child does not have an adequate background of experience" were common. Perceptual problems, cultural disadvantage, nutritional deficiencies, social maladjustment, physical immaturity, and other factors—although certainly concerns to be acknowledged and understood—were too often cited as excuses for children's difficulties in coping with beginning reading. Adjustment of the instructional program to individuals' strengths and weaknesses did not always result from an examination of children's "readiness." Too much stress on prerequisites continued for many years.

In response to the needs of the "not-ready child," reading readiness materials were developed to prepare children for reading. These materials, however, contained little print and did little to develop the written language awareness needed for success in reading (Hall, 1976). The use of readiness materials was often overstressed. This overuse was caused in part by the notion that initial reading instruction should be delayed beyond the beginning of first grade except for those children who scored quite high

on readiness tests. The delay was attributed to the widely publicized finding of the Morphet-Washburne (1931) study that the best time for introducing reading to children was when they had attained a mental age of 6½. The significant finding of Gates (1937) that it was adjustment of the instructional program to individuals and not the mental age that was the key factor for success in beginning reading was largely ignored.

Readiness tests were frequently used as a sole measure of children's readiness. The misuse of these tests was evident in the practice of grouping children entirely according to their test scores and in the labeling of children—even if only in the sense of the self-fulfilling prophecy of teacher expectation. The diagnostic use of the readiness tests to determine strengths and weaknesses was helpful but insightful, observant teachers could determine needs of children without relying on tests.

In the years between 1930 and the late 50s, readiness materials and tests were used widely and revised periodically. Research on readiness factors continued, and a number of studies substantiated the correlation between achievement and such factors as socioeconomic status, sex, language development, and perception. The erroneous assumption that correlation meant a cause-and-effect relationship was often made.

The Russian triumph of Sputnik in 1957 and the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955 along with evidence of the considerable cognitive development in the preschool years resulted in new attention directed to the old questions of when and how children should and do begin to read. Durkin's (1966) longitudinal examinations of children who learned to read at home began in the late 1950s. She followed these studies by one in the 1970s of children who were in a preschool and kindergarten program developed to offer reading to four- and five-year-olds (Durkin, 1974-1975). This work showed once again individual differences among children but that many children can and do learn to read at ages four and five.

The finding that some children learn to read easily in the preschool years was cited by some as evidence that the optimum time for initiating reading instruction was four or five (or even three and younger). Instruction in readiness and beginning reading then became a stressed component of some preschool and kindergarten programs. In contrast to this zeal for early formal reading instruction was the extreme position that kindergarten should be devoid of pencil and paper activities. "Hands off" was the policy in regard to reading and writing in many kindergarten settings since first grade and age six were still the most common time for beginning reading.

Through the 1960s and the 1970s the pressure for early reading in preschool and kindergarten settings accelerated. A major concern about early reading was that the instructional programs were often narrow ones with heavy stress on letter names, sound-letter correspondences, and basic sight words. In a number of early childhood

classrooms, young children were introduced to reading with the beginning basal materials ordinarily considered first-grade level. Yet, the instruction programs for prereading and beginning reading for young children are often lacking the naturalness which characterized the early readers of the studies previously mentioned. The introduction to written language as an integral, functional part of pre-school and kindergarten activities was recommended by authorities but in many instances the classrooms did not offer opportunities for the natural literacy development that can occur through meaningful use of print.

#### A Current Perspective

The terms reading readiness and prereading are still standard parts of the reading lexicon. Although the readiness concept has been and is still viewed as a broad one with consideration of a number of dimensions of child development and program content, the words readiness and prereading may still denote a marked distinction between readiness and beginning reading. The newer term "emergent reading" (Holdaway, 1979) does not focus on prerequisites for reading but instead on children's gradual acquisition of a "literacy set" through extensive and active experience with books, with immersion in the print present in the environment, and also with their remarkable mastery of oral language. Holdaway reminds us that the emergent literacy behavior is not a set of skills but instead "a formidable range of behaviours indeed" (p. 56). He goes on:

When we apply a term like "pre-reading skills to such behaviours we demean their real status as early literacy skills, for they actually display all the features of mature strategies already achieving sound and satisfying outcomes beyond what could be called embryonic--or pre-anything.

The research on both oral and written language acquisition has substantiated that language learning is intrinsically functional and that the social and situational context is a key influence on the use and learning of language. Halliday's (1973, 1975) research shows "learning how to mean" is the essence of oral language learning. Hiebert's (1981) research showed that the print awareness of three-, four- and five-year-old children was clearly related to the environmental context of the print. Children performed better on visual discrimination tasks and on questions about the purposes of written language when the items were related to familiar print such as that on road signs and commercial packages and labels than when confronted with traditional readiness measures.

Studies of young children's writing efforts (Clay, 1976; Hall, Moretz, & Statom, 1976; Dyson, 1981; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982) coupled with accounts of "natural" early readers (Durkin, 1966; Torrey, 1969; Clark, 1976) have shown that children's awareness of print is acquired through meaning-based experiences with print. Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1982) reported that all the preschool children in their sample "demonstrated an expectation

that written language would make personal sense" (p. 109). Just as the pleasurable experience of having been read to at home helps to create powerful motivation for learning to read, so does early experimentation with writing result in children's continuing interest in producing their own written messages.

A key ingredient in early literacy learning now appears to be written language awareness. This awareness involves both the functions and forms of print. Reid (1966) and Downing (1969) pointed out young children's confusion about such concepts as word, letter, sentence, and sound. Downing claimed that it was the abstract nature of written language that caused children to flounder in beginning reading instruction. Yet, the studies of the natural learners demonstrate how personal and relevant their early experiences with print are. The early writers and readers do apparently understand that print is meaningful. The need then is to have instructional programs that also demonstrate the functions and conventions of written language with personally relevant print.

Another dimension of children's emergent reading behavior is their development of a "sense-of-story" (Applebee, 1978). The acquisition of this schema for stories is developmental as children have continued and numerous experiences in hearing stories both read and told. Hansche (1981) found that good readers had more elaborate story knowledge than did poor readers at the end of first grade. If, however, the reading materials used for beginners are ones that violate the elements of predictable story structure, a base for making reading predictable and meaningful is ignored.

New developments in the evaluation of emergent reading behavior also reflect the significance of written language awareness. The Concepts About Print Test by Clay (1972, 1979) is one example of a measure that uses a reading-type situation to evaluate children's knowledge about conventions of written language such as word, letter, left-to-right order, and punctuation. The work of Evans, Taylor, and Blum (1979) documented that tasks which tap children's understandings about the relationship of oral and written language were the most significant predictors of success in beginning reading. Formal tests need not be employed if teachers are aware of and knowledgeable about children's interactions with written language (in both reading and writing) that indicate children's degree of understanding of both the functions and conventions of written language.

The programs for the introduction of reading should not be the stilted readiness and beginning reading programs that have characterized so many first grades for so long. Readiness materials have had so little written language that their use has not resulted in the development of the written language awareness needed for reading. The basic nature of reading as communication is usually lacking in the beginning reading materials that have rigid vocabulary control, stilted sentences, and skimpy stories.

The place to start with reading and writing instruction is with children's oral language, with their writing, and with mean-

ingful experiences with print in a classroom context with opportunities to interact with print. Taylor and her colleagues at Catholic University (1982) have investigated the factors that influence classroom language learning environments. They reported that at the kindergarten level children of the "high-implementing" teachers outperformed children of "low-implementing" teachers on tests of written language awareness and on conventional measures of readiness. The classrooms of the high-implementers were characterized by numerous and high-quality experiences with written language, relevant situational context for reading and writing, units of language larger than single words, and more child language than teacher language. The language was functional and integrated with on-going classroom activities. These print-rich classrooms had many books and functional display of children's products.

The old concerns of not forcing reading for three-, four- and five-year-olds must be remembered. Offering extensive opportunities for observing print and for encouraging writing must not become sequenced presentations of handwriting lessons or deteriorate into worksheets drilling on letter-sound correspondence and so-called basic words. What is indeed basic is the natural acquisition of literacy in a setting in which both oral and written language are incorporated into all learning.

### Conclusion

In the decade of the 80s the attention to prereading and beginning reading will no doubt continue. The need to develop instructional programs for young children that are congruent with the nature of emergent reading and writing must be addressed. The acquisition of written language awareness exhibited by successful young learners provides clues for school programs that can promote successful literacy learning for all children.

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