Literacy Education in Kindergarten Classrooms

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A survey of literature regarding contemporary thought in early literacy acquisition reveals a strong focus upon emergent literacy. Emergent literacy theory asserts that literacy concepts are being developed at virtually all ages. Knowledge of communication functions and forms are being learned as an individual listens and speaks, and makes transactions with print. Life experiences, as well, affect the ways in which we will interpret communicative episodes. All of these are developing as an individual experiences life. No longer do early literacy theorists associate the onset of literacy learning with an age or stage (Raines and Canady, 1990). Literacy acquisition is a lifelong endeavor, emerging as early as when a child first comes into contact with printed forms (Teale and Sulzby, 1989).

Early childhood literacy programs are thought to be effective when they immerse children in authentic transactions with print. Teale and Sulzby (1989) have written:

The early childhood literacy program must adopt as its foundation functional, meaningful activities that involve reading and writing in a wide variety of ways. A priority for the early childhood curriculum should be ensuring that all children become capable and willing participants in the literate society of the classroom, home, and community. Even before children can read
and write conventionally, the curriculum can foster these knowledges and attitudes. Overall skill in reading and writing grows from this kind of start (p. 6).

However, this author's observations in numerous early childhood education settings, particularly kindergarten, over the past eight years revealed that although many teachers did, indeed, practice the principles of emergent literacy, many more involved their children in activities quite removed from the principles and practices of emergent literacy or applied them in a haphazard manner. What was particularly interesting was that three different programmatic patterns in the treatment of literacy development soon became evident.

The following descriptive study is based upon eight years of observing in early childhood education settings in eastern and central Washington state and the Puget Sound region of Washington state. A total of 37 kindergarten classrooms were observed. The purpose of this paper is to describe the discerned categories of literacy programs and provide a perceived rationale for their existence.

**Maturationist teachers**

The term *maturationist* is used here to describe one group of kindergarten teachers who continue to practice the traditional conceptualization of reading readiness. The concept of reading readiness evolved from the developmental theories of G. Stanley Hall and Arnold Gesell (Durkin, 1993). In essence, young children were thought to be not "ready" to read due to a lack of maturity. The solution was to postpone reading instruction until a time when children were "ready" to read. Washburne (1936), based upon one collaborative research study (Morphett and Washburne, 1931), summarized the essence of the reading readiness movement:
Nowadays each first grade teacher in Winnetka has a chart showing when each of her children will be mentally six and a half, and is careful to avoid any effort to get a child to read before he has reached this stage of mental growth (p. 127).

As maturationists before them, current maturationists observed in this study avoided reading-specific activities. Children's play was thought to be central to learning. Many social, cognitive, and linguistic activities were offered to their students in a classroom typically organized by learning centers. Typically, these teachers included the following centers in their classrooms: houseliving, block, manipulative, music, art, and book. Children learned developmental concepts through interaction with the environment with the teacher acting as environmental arranger and labeler/communicator. Children's cognitive development was facilitated by their physical manipulation of classroom materials while the teacher labeled objects, discussed relationships, and generally communicated with children. In many of the centers, children were learning about social relationships as cooperation was necessary in sharing classroom materials and in cooperative play.

Literacy development was not ignored, but was simply not a conscious focus. As mentioned above, teachers did encourage communication by allowing children to interact verbally and by the teacher communicating, describing, and labeling. Listening and speaking opportunities were consciously supported.

These teachers typically read to their children at least once a day. The objectives of their readings seemed to be enjoyment and physical and spatial concept development. Metalinguistic concepts such as book, letter, word, or author
were not emphasized. Activities constructed to facilitate word identification were absent. The typical teacher housed a number of children's books in a comfortable book corner where children perused materials. Occasionally a parent volunteer or university student read a favorite story.

Traditional reading readiness exercises were often offered in the typical maturationist's classroom. Children colored, cut, visually discriminated between geometric forms and pictures, and participated in activities requiring gross auditory discrimination of environmental sounds to ready children for reading instruction in first grade.

Although the percentage of teachers adhering to a maturationist position was relatively small (approximately 20 percent), it was surprising to see that many of these readiness-type activities persisted despite the evidence questioning their usefulness in actually establishing a foundation for reading success (Brewer, 1992; Durkin, 1993; Sippola, 1985; Stewart, 1985).

**Basal teachers**

Not surprisingly, teachers using commercial basal programs to develop kindergarten literacy outnumbered all of the other categories combined (55 percent). Although classroom environments varied dramatically, the thread tying this group together was the basal program. Basal reader programs have monopolized American reading education since the 1920s (Davis, 1988). Basal reader programs have traditionally assumed a sub-skills orientation to the teaching of reading (Robinson, 1984). Early reading readiness basal workbooks typically attempted to teach children to perform non-reading specific tasks such as color identification, shape discrimination, patterning, and discerning differences in environmental sounds (Durkin, 1989; Sippola, 1985). These
skills and abilities were thought to be prerequisites for success in beginning reading (a thought shared by many maturationists). In addition to such activities, kindergartners eventually completed exercises on letter identification, phoneme discrimination, sound-symbol relationships, rhyming, and sight words thought to be essential to success in reading pre-primers.

Basal programs published in the late 1980s and early 1990s typically reflect a similar bottom-up theoretical foundation found in their predecessors, although numerous improvements can be identified (e.g., use of Big Books, story tapes, literature-based stories). Additionally, most of these contemporary basal programs have eliminated such dubious practices as having children discriminate between shapes, colors, and environmental sounds, but retain a letters and sounds first orientation.

How children were instructed varied little in most programs. Most often, teachers used whole group instruction on specific skills using skills charts. Practice was done by the use of workbook pages typically worked upon by the children at desks or tables. Although the basal series used changed from district to district, the organization used for instruction remained fairly similar. The similarities may be due to the bottom-up nature of these programs. In spite of the claims of many basal programs to be whole language-like, their materials and objectives do not reflect this at the kindergarten level. Typically, students begin by identifying letters and sounds, move up to learning a few sight words, and eventually begin reading rebus sentences.

Some recent basal programs do include a number of activities requiring top-down processing. The teacher will read a story (typically from the manual) to the children followed by
guided discussion and extension activities. Several contemporary basal programs also incorporate shared reading activities where children are able to listen to and choral read an authentic children’s book. Additionally, some basal programs encourage teachers to involve their kindergartners in language experiences and beginning writing.

**Emergent literacy teachers**

Emergent literacy theory holds that individuals evolve in literacy sophistication as they mature, beginning with their communicative transactions. In this investigation, emergent literacy kindergarten teachers (about 25 percent of those observed) shared a number of pragmatic interpretations of emergent literacy.

Like their maturationist counterparts, whole language teachers provided an environment of learning centers inviting active learning. The learning centers provided were similar to those offered by maturationists with a number of significant additions. A writing center housing paper, pencils, crayons, marking pens, paste, magazines, hole punches, a stapler, construction paper, and a variety of posters was added. Children drew pictures and wrote using invented spelling. These children also used their language experience word banks to aid in their writing.

Emergent literacy teachers typically included a larger and more varied collection of books than did maturationists. Picture books, fairy tales, fables, informational books, magazines, and poetry books were housed in a comfortable, inviting book center. The book center also contained individually published and experience stories dictated by the children. Many emergent literacy teachers placed letter and word games in their book corner for children to play. Emergent literacy teachers also typically provided a listening center for their
children. Commercial and teacher-made story tapes were placed in this center. Many teachers encouraged their students to follow along with the print in the books.

Children were engaged in authentic, purposeful language activities that were provided for enjoyment and "finding out." Children listened to stories frequently. As they participated in shared reading experiences teachers often pointed out and discussed metalinguistic concepts such as word, letter, left-to-right, top-to-bottom, page, author, and illustrator. Language experience activities were provided on a group and individual basis. Childrens' stories were read and re-read frequently and adorned the walls of the classrooms.

Most emergent literacy teachers involved their children in the systematic study of particular themes. Children would listen to, speak about, read, and write about a selected topic or concept. Many of the activities for classroom learning centers reflected the current topic or concept of focus. Essentially, the practices of emergent literacy teachers could be seen as being developmentally appropriate (Spodek, 1991). These teachers were child-centered and their activities and teaching strategies reflected contemporary knowledge about literacy acquisition (Morrow, 1991).

Discussion

If, indeed, the practices of emergent literacy teachers reflected the best of contemporary knowledge regarding literacy acquisition, why were they a minority? Results of this observational study show that 75 percent of the kindergarten teachers observed were doing something other than what would be perceived as being developmentally appropriate. This was as evident in 1993 as it was in 1985 when the study began. The reading readiness practices of maturationists certainly do not match what is known about literacy acquisition (Stewart, 1985)
nor do the skills and drills of the basal teachers (Morrison, 1991). Several reasons why these questionable practices continue in spite of the evidence can be provided.

One plausible reason for a continuation of outdated practices could be tradition. American schools are difficult to change (Durkin, 1989; Shannon, 1990). For example, the time-honored practice of teaching traditional school grammar remains in place in our schools despite ninety years of research evidence refuting its efficacy (Hillocks and Smith, 1991). Likewise do the reading readiness practices of the maturationists and the skills and drills of basal teachers have a tradition in American education.

Another possible reason for maintaining questionable practices may lie in teachers themselves. There was a tendency for those teachers adhering to a maturationist position to have encountered their teacher training twenty to twenty-five years ago. Teacher educators were discussing reading readiness concepts in this era. Although our knowledge base regarding early literacy acquisition has changed, many long-time teachers have not.

Basal teachers have numbers on their side. A majority (95 percent) of American elementary school teachers still use a basal reader approach to reading instruction (Rubin, 1993). It has been speculated that American educators have a great amount of faith in the publishers of commercial reading programs (Shannon, 1992). It is not unlikely that many kindergarten teachers share a similar faith. If they fail to use the commercial kindergarten materials, their children may not be ready to succeed in first grade. Others may simply use the materials because they are purchased by their schools (Durkin, 1989).
Implications

A number of implications may be drawn from the findings of this study. First, potential kindergarten teachers in preservice training must become aware of the historical antecedents of contemporary kindergarten practices in order to understand how the past affects, both positively and negatively, what we do in classrooms. Professors of early childhood literacy will need to articulate carefully how a developmentally appropriate curriculum can be established and why it is necessary. Second, preservice and new kindergarten teachers need model teachers of emergent literacy in order to provide an example, and also to validate knowledge and beliefs acquired in preservice education. A last implication involves school administrators. Although some larger school districts employ kindergarten supervisors, most kindergarten teachers are supervised by building principals. It is important for building administrators to be aware of contemporary theories and practices of kindergarten education so that they can provide the leadership, evaluative abilities, and reinforcement to encourage kindergarten teachers to use the best practices available.

Perhaps our newer cadre of kindergarten teachers can have an affect on early literacy practices. Teacher educators and supervisors of these teachers need to offer their support for the efforts necessary to change literacy environments. As the authors of Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985) concluded, "America will become a nation of readers when verified practices of the best teachers in the best schools can be introduced throughout the country."

References


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