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Curriculum Dilemma: The Early Reader
"Mom, I never READ in school"

Sarah L. Dowhower

"My child read before he started kindergarten. Now he only reads at home at night, because they don't do much reading in school, just letters and sounds. It is very discouraging for him and me." These are the words of a frustrated parent. Could it be that teachers are ignoring the literacy knowledge children bring to school?

A kindergarten teacher readily talked about the problem: "I had three readers begin the school year. I was required by the district to put the children in Alpha-Time letter instruction. It is mandated that all children have to go through the same set kindergarten curriculum. By November the parents of the three students were complaining — and I don't blame them! Besides I don't really know what to do with these kids anyway. I have very little material and I can't use the basals since the reading specialist and the upper grade teachers get upset."

In this paper evidence will be presented that validates these comments. Dilemmas and constraints faced by today's kindergarten teachers in trying to bridge home and school learning will be explored, and some possible resolutions to these dilemmas will be suggested.

Evidence of the dilemmas

Results from a recent research study supported the dilemma of the early reader in our schools. The literacy
environments of two experienced teachers' kindergartens were investigated during the first month of school. Several questions were addressed in the study: What reading and writing opportunities were available to the students the first few weeks of school? Did the teachers provide multiple opportunities for development of various types of written language skills that many researchers (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984; Mason and Au, 1986; Schickedanz, 1986) claim are critical? Did the curriculum build on what the children already knew about language?

Each teacher was videotaped four half days. In total, eight kindergarten sessions (approximately two and one-half hours long), were filmed. (The teachers had two split kindergarten sessions — one group in the morning and another in the afternoon. Each teacher repeated the same morning activities with the afternoon children.) Data collection began the first day of school and continued once a week for the next three weeks. Instructional activities, called events, were identified and counted for each of the eight sessions. Specific literacy events (defined as activities involving reading, writing, or listening to text) were identified as a subset of the total events and counted. Literacy events were divided into those involving single words and those involving sentences or continuous text.

Several consistent findings were evident across the videotaped sessions:

1) Each teacher provided 18 literacy events during the four sessions, averaging 4.5 literacy events per half-day session (Table 1). Sixty-one percent of these events involved working with children's names or single words. As for exposure to continuous texts, teacher read-alouds were the most popular activity. Teacher A had a free choice library time in two
sessions and Teacher B had a large group one-sentence daily message, such as "We are the Red Apple Gang," for three sessions. Thirty-nine percent of all the literacy events in both classrooms were at the sentence level or above.

Table 1
Reading/Writing Events in Two Kindergarten Classrooms
Four Half-Day Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Names/Words/Labels</th>
<th>Sentences/Continuous Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher B</th>
<th>Names/Words/Labels</th>
<th>Sentences/Continuous Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) There were no student writing activities in either of the two classrooms other than children writing their names on papers.

3) For each teacher, the literacy events averaged approximately one-fifth of the children’s classroom activities over the four days. (See Table 2.)

4) There was no evidence of grouping for reading ability. All instruction was done in large groups and followed the curriculum content required by the district.

After each videotaped session, the teacher was interviewed for approximately an hour. In these interviews the teacher and researcher reviewed the tapes and discussed
the rationales for the activities that were chosen and also the reading skills of the children. The district did not attempt to assess reading ability of the students before entrance to kindergarten. Children were tested for traditional readiness skills, but these tests involved no words or continuous text. Thus teachers had no information on the first day of school as to students' reading abilities and could not identify the reading levels of children entering their classes that fall.

By the end of the first month of school, the two teachers were only able to estimate which children had reading skills and only in vague ways such as "I think ________ might be reading." Both teachers did individual student testing during that month; however, the tests were traditional readiness surveys involving knowledge of colors, numbers and letters, cutting ability, etc.
At the end of the first month of school, all students in Teacher A’s and Teacher B’s classes (N=101) were surveyed as to the number of words that they could write independently (Dowhower and Frager, 1988). Ten percent of the children could write and spell correctly 15 or more words as assessed by the Test of Writing Vocabulary (Clay, 1979). Another 15% could spell 10 to 14 words correctly. In other words, approximately one-quarter of the students could read to some extent.

Before drawing conclusions from this study, several caveats are in order. The two teachers in the study are excellent kindergarten teachers, highly regarded by parents and staff in the district. They each have many years of teaching experience. The classroom dilemmas described in the next section do not result from poor teaching, but from district policies, higher literacy levels of the entering students, perpetuation of an outdated view of readiness, and lack of a pre-first grade instructional model.

The findings suggest three conclusions: 1) the teachers are following a curriculum that exposes the children to very little print or the chance to interact with print; 2) many children may engage in reading and writing more often at home than at school; and 3) children’s reading and writing skills are being virtually ignored in the first month of school. Those who already are emerging readers and writers are given the message that their reading and writing competence is not valued. There is little opportunity in the classroom to build on the wealth of language knowledge brought from home.

Early reading dilemmas

Several dilemmas are implicit in the parent and teacher comments presented at the beginning of this article and the findings in this study: tension between district policies and
children's needs; conflict between current readiness and emergent literacy positions; and a clash between two approaches to early reading instruction.

• **District policies vs. student needs**
  
  The National Association for the Education of Young Children recently published a position statement on developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood emphasizing the importance of meeting the wide range of needs in the classroom. The statement notes that “it is the responsibility of the educational system to adjust to the developmental needs and levels of the children it services; children should not be expected to adapt to an *inappropriate system*” (Bredekamp, 1986, p. 13). By requiring that all children be put through the same curriculum (as in the case of the teacher required to teach Alpha-Time), many children are being asked to adapt to an *inappropriate system* and teachers are being told by district administratives to choose content over students. Children are the losers in this choice, especially our early readers. Could it be that some children learn to read *in spite* of the school and its curriculum?

  Connected with this dilemma is another. As we become a more literate society, our children will be exposed to many opportunities to develop reading and writing skills before entering kindergarten. Two decades ago, Durkin (1966), in her early reader studies suggested that about one percent of entering first graders could read. In 1980, according to a study by Tobin and Pikulski (1987) one percent of entering kindergarteners could read. Data from the study reported here suggest that one percent might be a conservative figure. Few kindergarten curriculums address the existence or the increasing number of early readers.
Readiness vs. emergent literacy

A second dilemma is the conflict between traditional and more developmental/cognitive theories of early reading instruction. Some reading educators (Kline, 1988; Mason, 1984; Teale, 1982) believe that the traditional view of readiness, including the social, physical, and emotional maturational view, should be replaced with a more powerful developmental view that learning to read is a continuum from infancy to adulthood and that the concept of "readiness in reading" no longer makes sense. Advocates of this emergent literacy perspective suggest that children learn to read by reading and by being read to by good readers. Children do not sit around and get ready to read—just as they do not wait to get ready to talk. Typical readiness skills such as coloring, cutting, learning shapes, numbers, etc. do not facilitate reading as effectively as reading-specific tasks.

The theoretical rationale behind the building of print-rich classroom environments in which there is an abundance of writing and reading materials and literacy events is not something we have traditionally emphasized in training our kindergarten and preschool teachers. Potter (1986) suggests that the unfortunate famine of wide literacy experiences before first grade is based on the beliefs that literacy experiences do not occur before that time—a notion that is dramatically changing.

Formal vs. informal reading instruction

There is at this time no prevailing instructional model for teaching reading in kindergarten. Because of this, teachers are caught in the dilemma of what to do with children who are reading. Often the first grade basal curriculum is moved down to kindergarten or, worse, readers have no opportunity to read.
| Table 3  
Summary of Early Reader Dilemmas and Their Resolutions |

**Dilemma: District policies vs. individual student needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contradictions</th>
<th>Classroom Realities</th>
<th>Resolutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools should meet unique needs but teachers are required to ignore differences because of a set curriculum.</td>
<td>Teachers get little support to meet ER needs from the district. Skills and growth of ERs are ignored. ERs must adapt to an inappropriate system of instruction.</td>
<td>Early literacy workshops/courses need to be given to administrators. More formal and informal tests of reading and writing skills need to be given in kindergarten.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dilemma: Traditional readiness vs. emergent literacy views**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contradictions</th>
<th>Classroom Realities</th>
<th>Resolutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher feels readiness skills (with little or no written language involved) are necessary before reading is learned. Yet some students who have not mastered them are reading.</td>
<td>Students do more reading and writing at home than at school. Competence is discounted and not cultivated at school.</td>
<td>Merge traditional readiness strengths and new evidence of how children learn to read into a workable theory for pre-first grade reading instruction.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dilemma: Informal vs. formal instruction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contradictions</th>
<th>Classroom Realities</th>
<th>Resolutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal reading instruction is to be given in first grade yet many students enter kindergarten already reading and have had no formal instruction.</td>
<td>Kindergarten teachers use first grade reading programs or no reading instruction takes place. Many kindergarten teachers do not know what is appropriate instruction for ERs.</td>
<td>Early literacy workshops and courses on reading methodology and research need to be offered to preservice and inservice teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ERs = Early Readers
We can learn a lot about how to teach early readers from the research findings collected in the last few years. We have evidence that four-and-five-year-old children know far more about reading and writing than we realize (Harste, et al., 1984) and that informal approaches to reading work. We know from observations of early readers with no formal instruction (direct, systematic intervention and intentional teaching of skills) that they grow up in print-rich environments, they are read to by competent readers, they experience high interaction with these readers, they write, and they talk about reading (Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1966; Lass, 1982, 1983; Teale, 1978). More informal naturalistic ideas of instruction are beginning to filter into the kindergarten curriculum of schools, but the trend is not widespread.

In sum, teachers are bound by the constraints of their district curricula and lack of a comprehensive methodology in early reading. Fellow teachers and curricula encourage the old notion of pre-reading readiness skills, and see formal reading instruction as the only way reading can be learned. Teachers are not prepared to identify or teach early readers and their districts give them little help.

Resolutions
Table 3 contains a summary of dilemmas, associated classroom realities, and suggested solutions. Reading educators and researchers have clear challenges in resolving the dilemmas. First, we need to give early childhood teachers a comprehensive theoretical and instructional framework that addresses the early reading process and how it should be taught particularly in kindergarten and preschools. That framework needs to be grounded in research and observation of how children learn best. The growing number of research studies reported and journal articles published on
early reading and writing in the last few years is indicative of this dynamic process of change. We are witnessing and supporting the birth and evolution of the exciting notion of emergent literacy!

A second challenge is the retraining of administrators and teachers. Both district administrators and inservice teachers need to be brought up to date on current research, thinking, and ways to promote early literacy. Teachers need to learn viable and appropriate methods that promote literacy — possibly melding the best aspects of formal and informal instruction.

Finally, attention must be given to the kindergarten curriculum and to testing policies. School districts have the challenge of revising their kindergarten testing procedures to include evaluation of the children's reading and writing achievement. Curriculum supervisors, working together with teachers, need to develop a more appropriate curriculum for kindergarten children — one that builds on the literacy knowledge brought from home.

"Mom, I read a lot in school."

Exciting words to hear from a pre-first grader!

References


Sarah L. Dowhower is a faculty member in the Department of Teacher Education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Requests for further information about the research described in this article should be accompanied by a SASE, and sent to Dr. Sarah L. Dowhower, 301 McGuffey, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056.

With this issue, *Reading Horizons* has added a new feature -- "Expanding Horizons" -- to enable readers to share exciting teaching ideas with one another. Ideas for a parade of book reports, and a pilgrimage for writers, appear on pages 22 and 38.

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