Learning to Read and Write: What is Developmentally Appropriate

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Teachers want to know:

- What is the role of literacy learning in kindergarten
- How they can best support student literacy in order to meet the needs of all students.

The field of education is notorious for pendulum swings. Instead of following the latest “flavour of the month” teachers must base educational decisions on evidence (research) not simply ideology. And, it is what teachers do or don’t do that really makes the difference.

What the Research Tells Us

Literacy learning in kindergarten is extremely important, for school systems have a small window of opportunity (K-2) in which to get students off to a strong start. According to a study by Connie Juel (1988), the probability that a child who is a poor reader at the end of grade 1 will remain a poor reader at the end of grade 4 is 88% (Allington R., 1998).

In an Australian study it was found that even by third grade, the learning gap was so large that for low achieving students, catching up with their peers (in reading) was virtually impossible (Hill, Crevola, 1999). And, “there is very little evidence that programs designed to correct reading problems beyond second grade are successful” (Pikulski, J., 1998). Literacy development begins at birth. “Although it may seem as though some children acquire these understandings magically or on their own, studies suggest that they are the beneficiaries of considerable, though playful and informal, adult guidance and instruction. The ability to read and write does not develop naturally without careful planning and instruction.” (IRA, NAEYC, 1998). And, “the place to start early intervention programs is kindergarten, not first grade.” (Pikulski, J., 1997).

Developmentally Appropriate

The terms “developmentally appropriate” or “developmentally appropriate practice” have become buzzwords. Like the terms whole language and balanced literacy, these terms are often used with reverence, as if common understandings are shared by all. In order to bring some clarity to the term “developmentally appropriate”, the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defined developmentally appropriate as “goals and expectations for young children’s reading and writing, which are challenging but achievable with sufficient adult support.” (IRA, NAEYC, 1998) Unfortunately, developmental appropriateness has frequently been interpreted to mean that reading and writing are “academic skills” that do not belong in child centred early childhood programs and that there is no role for adult modeling or teaching in so called “active” learning environments. “As much as it is true that young children play and discover many things on their own, it is also true that children need adult assistance and guidance. This long tradition of stress on the importance of child activity, child interest and self-discovery has caused some early childhood teachers to fail to pay attention to research and theory on instructional practice that can be found in the emergent literacy literature. “We will not have done our best for young children if we deny them the path to learning they seek through play, but we also will not have done our best if we fail to provide instruction. As much as it is true that young children play and discover many things on their own, it is also true that children need adult assistance or guidance.” (Schickedanz, J., 1994).
**Literacy Goals and Skills**

**Literacy Goals in Kindergarten**

“Two goals are paramount:

- The first is to ensure that students leave kindergarten familiar with the structural elements and organization of print. By the end of kindergarten, students should be familiar with the forms and format of books and other print resources and be able to recognize and write most of the alphabet; they should also have some basic phonemic awareness – that is, the understanding of the segmentability of spoken words into smaller units.
- The second major goal of kindergarten is to establish perspectives and attitudes on which learning about and from print depend; it includes motivating students to be literate and making them feel like successful learners.” (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998)

**Literacy Skills in Kindergarten**

Students excel as they:

- develop both a rich vocabulary and a deep understanding of many concepts and language structures. Developing reasoning, creative/critical thinking, and inquiry skills is crucial.
- learn that written language is a system for representing oral language.
- learn the concepts about print (e.g., directionality, concept of letter, word) and the concepts about books (e.g., purpose of book, book features.)
- learn that speech can be segmented into small units of sound, and learn how to play with language (phonological awareness.)
- learn to recognize letters and their corresponding sounds.
- learn how to print most letters (when provided with letter names, sounds, pictures, or keywords) and a few words (using invented spelling.)
- recognize their own names in print and a few other familiar and high-frequency words.
- are able to listen to and understand stories and informational books. Retellings must include important information or ideas.
- begin to see themselves as readers and writers.
“Too many preschool and kindergarten teachers, perceiving themselves as advocates of developmentally appropriate practice, fear pushing children too much academically and fail to teach them the knowledge and skills they need.”

(Bredenkamp, 1997)


Parent Involvement

Research shows that the home plays a key role in emergent literacy. The most important implication for kindergarten teachers is to help parents embed literacy into their families’ everyday lives. (Sulzby and Teale, 1991).

Teachers can help by sharing with parents what has been learned from the work of Delores Durkin (1966), who studied the home environments of many youngsters who learned to read before coming to school. She found that these students received an average of 1000-1500 hours of enjoyable preschool literacy experiences. Many occurred daily and were spontaneous, often taking less than a minute. They were simply part of living. These experiences included:

- Reading and discussing story books frequently
- Teaching letters and sounds, both spontaneously and intentionally
- Teaching “sight words,” both high-frequency words and words of personal significance (e.g., one’s name)
- Providing help based on the child’s questions and requests for assistance
- Making rhymes with words
- Participating in reading-related activities (e.g., magnetic letters on fridge, writing a letter, baking etc.)
- Listening to the child “reading”
- Enjoying family literacy activities “on the run” (e.g., reading signs)
- Providing direct instruction (information and explanations)

Parents need more than “read to your child.” Observation surveys, such as My Child as a Literacy Learner, help parents to more effectively monitor and support progress:
My Child as a Literacy Learner
Observation Survey

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Further Observations:


Early Intervention for Students At-Risk

“Recently constructed instructional interventions in kindergarten and first grade have improved children’s later reading.” (Mason & Sinha, 1993)

Children who have not benefited from numerous preschool literacy experiences (minimum of 1000 hours) are frequently at risk, and even those who have such experiences may still struggle. In fact, approximately 20 percent of students have some difficulty with phonological awareness, with about 7 to 10 percent experiencing substantial difficulty.

According to the International Reading Association “Approximately 20 percent of students have not achieved phonemic awareness by the middle of grade 1. The research on this statistic is as clear as it is alarming. The likelihood of these students becoming successful readers is slim under current instructional plans. We felt that we can reduce this figure through the early identification of students who are outside the norms of progress in phonemic awareness development and through the offering of intensive programs of instruction.” (IRA, 1998).
“The concept ‘developmentally appropriate’ should not suggest delaying intervention but using appropriate instructional strategies at an early age – especially in kindergarten”. (Centre for the Future of Teaching and Learning 1995) Waiting for the student to “flower” (mature) by providing “the gift of time” will not provide the support needed.

Intervention programs are not intended to replace effective ongoing literacy instruction. Before designing an intervention program, it is important to examine literacy in the kindergarten program, across the day. “Most students’ reading and writing development can be accelerated if schools are reorganized and resources are used to create programs that provide students with instruction of sufficient quantity and quality.” (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). However, even with strong literacy programs, some kindergarten students will need intervention in one or all of the three major areas:

- Print awareness
- Phonological awareness
- Oral language

This 15-30 minute daily (one-on-one and/or small group) intervention supports and complements the effective classroom program.

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**Essential Elements of Effective Kindergarten Literacy Intervention Programs**

Intervention programs support and complement effective classroom programs:

- They generally occur on a daily basis (15-30 minutes)
- They involve working with individuals or small groups of six or less. These groups change depending upon the needs of students.
- They involve more time in “reading” (shared, partner, and independent), writing, and phonological awareness activities.
- They involve spending more time in direct teaching – teacher modeling, explaining, and demonstrating what reading and writing are about. “All children benefit from instruction, but some need incredible amounts of careful, personal instruction – usually clear and repeated demonstrations of how readers and writers go about reading and writing.” (Allington and Cunningham 1996).
- They provide opportunities for students to apply immediately the strategies that have been shared.
- They involve repeated “reading” of the same text (e.g., chart, Big Book)
- They provide daily, ongoing assessments that drive instruction, generally in the areas of print awareness, phonological awareness, and oral language.
- They involve frequent home communication that helps parents to understand specifically how they can support their children at home. (see Chapter 6: Linking Home and School).

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**Literacy across the Kindergarten Day**

Kindergarten teachers can make a monumental difference to student literacy learning, and even our most at-risk students can be very successful with the right kindergarten environment and sufficient support. Educators and parents working together have a small window of opportunity (kindergarten to grade two) in which to support strong early literacy skill development. Being child-centred and activity-centred, although important, is not enough nor is simply immersing students in a print-rich environment. Classroom activities based on kindergarten literacy goals must intentionally promote literacy throughout the day, and teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, volunteers, and buddies must demonstrate model, and explain the strategies that effective readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and viewers use.

Students must be provided with the opportunities to apply the strategies they are taught by doing interesting activities that make sense to them because they learn best when they see a specific purpose for what they are doing. By using materials and activities that are “just right” for them, and through linking home and school, literacy becomes embedded in students’ everyday lives in both settings. Students in kindergarten and beyond construct knowledge, but they also need direct teaching. The two are not mutually exclusive. Teachers must
make use of those spontaneous experiences or “teachable moments,” but they must also plan intentional literacy experiences in all areas of the curriculum – math, art, science, social studies, and gym. All literacy experiences need to focus on the three crucial areas:

- Print awareness
- Phonological awareness
- Oral language

Effective kindergarten classrooms replicate strong home environments by encouraging students to engage actively in storybook, writing, and play experiences, with support. “A balanced developmentally appropriate language and literacy curriculum is not only beneficial but perhaps crucial in these early years.” (Neuman, Susan B., 1998)

As Anne McGill-Franzen states, “I believe that reading and writing do belong in the pre-school – absolutely massive amounts of playful and even raucous literacy activities. Ditto for kindergarten and first grade.” (Teale, William H., 1995) Students will become literate if their teachers, beginning in kindergarten, use a balanced approach and provide the appropriate conditions to make it happen.

“Research consistently points to the importance of ensuring that children enter first grade with the attitudes and knowledge about literacy that will enable them to succeed in learning to read. A strong message is that a priority mission of every school district should be to provide good kindergarten literacy to all children.”

(Snow, Burns, Griffin, 1998)
Bibliography


Pikulski, John J. “Reading and Writing in Kindergarten: Developmentally Appropriate” *Reading Today* August-September 1997: 24


BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF PRESENTER:

Miriam Trehearne has been a classroom teacher, resource teacher, program specialist (exceptional needs students) and University Associate. She is presently on leave from her position as a Specialist in Early Literacy with the Calgary Board of Education to work as a Literacy Consultant.

Miriam was the recipient of an International Reading Association one-day Institute in New Orleans, Louisiana in April, 2001; was a keynote presenter at “Aiming for Success: Early Reading in Ontario”, Toronto, Ontario, September, 2001; and also presented at I.R.A. San Francisco, May, 2002. In July, 2002 Miriam spoke at the World Congress of the International Reading Association in Edinburgh, Scotland and most recently at the I.R.A. Conference, Orlando, Florida, in May 2003. She will be a Featured Speaker at the I.R.A. 49th Annual Convention in May 2004.

She has published in several professional journals and recently (October 2003) was senior author of The Comprehensive Literacy Resource for Kindergarten Teachers (ETA Cuisenaire) and The Language Arts Grades 1-2 Teacher’s Resource Book (February 2004, Nelson, a Thomson Company). The Comprehensive Resource for Preschool Teachers will be available in September 2004. Miriam has been honoured as a Canada Post 2001 Literacy Educator Finalist.