



VIEW POINT

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Literacy?

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and Kathleen Roskos



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The local school administrator recommends an exemplary school for us to visit. We watch a day unfold in a room filled with print. The walls are adorned with words; pocket charts, alphabet letters, numbers, signs, and environmental print claim every available space. A Big Book stands ready in the circle area, accompanied by a pointer for tracking print. The children sit "station style," with "quiet hands and feet," in their designated space in the circle and sing "Stop, Look, and Listen" along with their teacher. The day is about to begin.

Taking flash cards in hand, the teacher begins, "Good morning, Charley. Do you know the first two letters of your name?" Charley moves tentatively to the board and slowly writes *C* and *H*. Moving to the next child, then the next, the teacher follows a similar routine. Some 14 children later, she reviews many of the letters, asking children to spell the names of the helpers of the week.

The days of the week are next, and children repeat them in chorus. They compare the letters in Monday to the letters in Tuesday, then Tuesday to Wednesday, and Tuesday to Thursday. What follows is the Counting Calendar and "My, oh my, it's the 30th of the month," and so the children count each day up to 30. And finally with an "I like how you're listening" some 45 minutes later, circle time is about to end. Even so, the transition allows for one last teachable moment focusing on the *t-t* in *teacher*, the *m-m-m* in *Ms.*, and the */j/* in *j-j-jingle*.

These children are not first-graders. Nor are they kindergartners. The children in this room are between three-and-a-half and four years old and attend a local pre-K center.

Aside from the numbing quality of the exercises and the questionable age-appropriateness of what we see, what is perhaps most disconcerting about this visit, and many

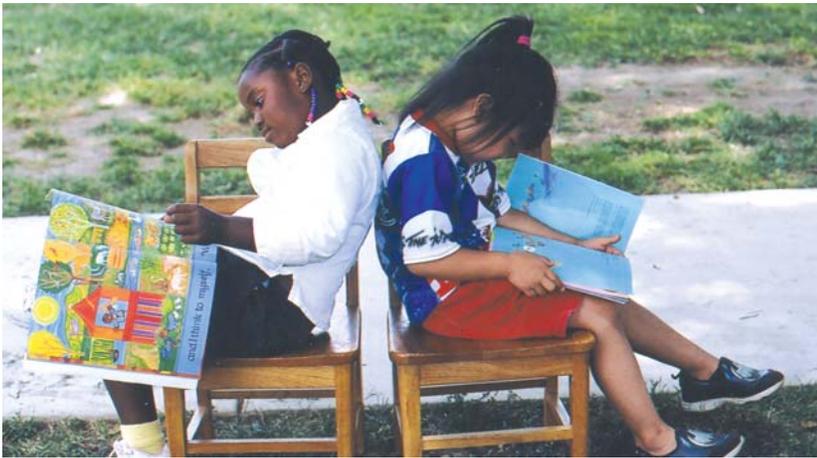


others we've made throughout the country, is that this pattern of literacy learning is typical of what has come to be known as early literacy instruction.

Addressing the enormous achievement gap (Lee & Burkam 2002; NAEP 2004) that differentiates children from low-income circumstances and their more affluent peers, this instruction presumably helps children catch up by teaching about the alphabet and letter sounds and the conventions of print that distinguish print from other representational symbol systems, such as drawing. By attending, reciting, chanting, and reviewing these letters, sounds, and numbers—again and again—this type of instruction supposedly will help these children from low-income homes overcome the devastating effects of poverty on their long-term learning and development. With these key skills in hand, they will be ready to learn alongside their counterparts from more affluent circumstances as they enter the kindergarten doors.

We beg to differ. In fact, we argue that this type of instruction may inevitably consign children to a narrow, limited view of reading that is antithetical to their

long-term success not only in school but throughout their lifetime. In other words, we believe that such instruction might actually undermine, rather than promote, the very goals of improving literacy learning. In contrast to this trend, this article highlights the key principles of early literacy as defined in the 1998 International Reading Association (IRA) and NAEYC joint position statement "Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices" and from our understanding of what it means for quality early literacy practice.



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Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices

Recognizing the importance of the early childhood years for children's literacy development, we participated in the formulation of the IRA and NAEYC joint position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in language and literacy instruction (1998). Growing out of a town hall meeting at the NAEYC Annual Conference in 1997, the statement was designed to reflect a developmentally appropriate view of early language and literacy teaching and learning. (Susan worked hand in hand with Sue Bredekamp [then at NAEYC] in writing the statement; Kathy was an important reviewer of the numerous drafts and comments.)

Making the case for a research-based approach in language and literacy, the statement focuses on children as active constructors of meaning. It argues that adults play a critical role in children's literacy development—engaging their interest, creating challenging but achievable goals and expectations, and supporting their learning. Among its key points, the statement emphasizes

- Young children need to engage in learning about literacy through meaningful experiences.
- Reading and writing should be viewed as a continuum; children do not progress along this developmental continuum in a rigid sequence.

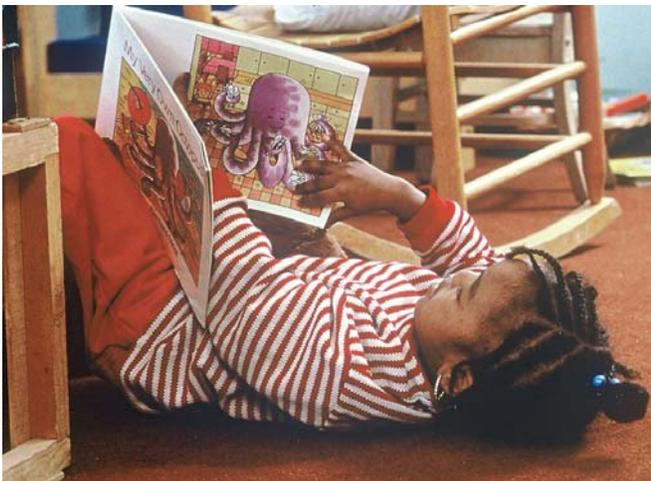
**Meaning, not sounds
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experiences with print.**

- Given the individual differences among children, teachers should come to understand the difference between normal variation in developing literacy skills and extraordinary variation (for example, when intervention is necessary).
- Teachers need to respect children's home language and use it as a base on which to build and extend children's language and literacy experiences.
- Teachers need to regularly and systematically use multiple indicators to assess and monitor children's progress in reading and writing.

The research-based statement stresses that for children to become skilled readers, they need to develop a rich language and conceptual knowledge base, a broad and deep vocabulary, and verbal reasoning abilities to understand messages conveyed through print. At the same time, it recognizes that children also must develop code-related skills: an understanding that spoken words are composed of smaller elements of speech (phonological awareness), the idea that letters represent these sounds (the alphabetic principle), and the knowledge that there are systematic correspondences between sounds and spellings.

But to attain a high level of skill, young children need many opportunities to develop these strands interactively, not in isolation. *Meaning*, not sounds or letters, drives children's earliest experiences with print. Therefore, the position statement points out that although specific skills like alphabet knowledge are important to literacy development, children must acquire these skills in coordination and interaction with meaningful experiences (Neuman, Bredekamp, & Copple 2000).

The position statement, formally adopted in 1998, won endorsement and support from 12 other major organizations, all dedicated to the learning and well-being of young children. And although our knowledge of early literacy has grown significantly since this statement was issued, its key points are still critically important for quality instruction in today's early childhood settings.



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Where have we gone wrong?

Visiting a classroom using a Letter of the Week curriculum, we find the four-year-olds cutting and pasting the letter *I* on a large piece of butcher paper. We ask the teacher the objective of the activity. "We're learning about the letter *I*, our letter of the week, and we're finding other *I* words," she explains. Turning to the children, we then ask what they are learning. "We're learning how to cut and paste," they say.

Such responses from young children are common when skills are taken out of context. With their knowledge networks only beginning to form, children organize new experiences into what they already know a bit about. In this context, the physical act of cutting and pasting seems far more real and engaging than some black squiggle of questionable use (the letter *I*). As Piaget ([1952] 1992) recognized many years ago, young learners attempt to use their sensory experiences, object manipulations, and physical props to make sense of their worlds.

But the press for academic success has recently overwhelmed voices that call for the interplay of development and learning. Early childhood curriculum packages, adorned with the trappings of puppets and other playthings, provide hours of activities, all targeted to basic sounds and letter skills. Described as



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compensatory, these preschool programs presumably play catch-up, helping children who are considered less fortunate to develop the skills that other children in more privileged circumstances are learning at home where parents read and talk with them regularly and expose them to interesting places, ideas, and concepts.

There is a tragic fallacy to this logic. Reading achievement in the earliest years may look like it's just about letters and sounds. But it's not. Reading achievement, as it becomes inevitably clear by grades 3 and 4, is—once again—about meaning (Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998). Successful reading ultimately consists of knowing a relatively small tool kit of unconscious procedural skills, accompanied by a massive and slowly built-up store of conscious content knowledge (Neuman in press). It is the higher order thinking skills, knowledge, and dispositional capabilities, encouraging children to question,

discover, evaluate, and invent new ideas, that enable them to become successful readers.

Children, especially those who come from poverty circumstances, need knowledge-building opportunities in their earliest years (Neuman in press). Contrast the letters/sounds approach in the previous scenario with a recent visit to a family child care home where the children range in age from nine months to four years.

We enter as circle time is beginning. Four-year-old Darion is busy sharing his story about the big squiggly worm he found near the backyard creek. The children become very animated as they talk about its care and the need for all living things to have water. Since the provider also lives near a large water tower, she introduces the children to the concept of water pressure and the purpose of the big structure. She asks them to press their hands together real hard, and she uses vocabulary to describe the sensation of pressure. She demonstrates air pressure by blowing into a beach ball and then letting the pressure out, and the children squeal with delight. She returns to the picture of the water tower and describes how water pressure is stored. Together, they build a model water tower from blocks and make the water flow. Finally, the provider talks about gas pressure, and the children experiment with letting air out of an aerosol can and touching shaving cream. She ends by describing some of the common features of air, water, and gas pressure.

Throughout these activities, children of widely different ages engage in learning about ideas, hearing new words, and attempting to use those that are of most interest to them. Even the youngest child attempts to keep up with the others as they experience new concepts and see how the ideas translate into pictures and words.

These children are learning about literacy in the practice of acquiring new knowledge. And we would argue that any early literacy instruction that does not explicitly and systematically help children develop the conceptual knowledge base that underlies the meanings of words will never make much difference in overcoming the gap between children from low- and middle-income families.

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Content-rich literacy learning

Literacy development is a purposeful activity involving children in ways of making, interpreting, and communicating meaning with written language.

At another child care home, we find four-year-old best friends busily writing numbers and letters on paper. Josh and Yoc are talking about the upcoming Rose Bowl, trading numbers and facts, as other children try to join the conversation. Occasionally, Josh runs to the provider for help with writing, so he can get his numbers “right.” While the provider is helping, she is also listening to the conversation, asking questions to learn more about the game, then extending the discussions as the boys compare and contrast the ideas in their notes. What is so striking to us is the boys’ level of engagement, their uses of literacy in the practice of understanding what written language and symbols are all about, and the social context in which they are learning literacy.

Children want to learn about their worlds. As they acquire knowledge, they become fascinated with the tools of communication—reading and writing—and what they can do with them. In play, for example, young children use both real and pretend writing and reading to enhance the drama and realism of the pretend situation. They want to master the tools of literacy, as when writing down the football facts that interest them, and they’ll often seek help from more proficient writers and readers who serve as spontaneous apprentices to help them learn about written language and how to use it for various purposes. After all, literacy development is not just a matter of learning a set of technical skills. It is a purposeful activity involving children in ways of making, interpreting, and communicating meaning with written language.

Content-rich literacy experiences involve children in integrated instruction that helps them build an understanding of ideas, connecting new learning to what they already know and can do. Children actively apply their early skills to learn about their world either through projects or themes, with their teachers assisting and guiding them through key experiences that are challenging but achievable. The teachers recognize that children’s exploration, manipulation of objects, and dramatic play make critical contributions to children’s literacy development (Neuman & Roskos 1992, 1993). They know that play allows children to express and represent their ideas and new knowledge, making it their own.

Letter games and sound activities have a place in content-rich literacy instruction. Children learn about the alphabet and sing and play with rhythm and rhymes. In an environment full of vivid displays of developmental writing and functional print, children engage in learning how to write their names and perfecting the sounds of language. But letters and sounds do not take center stage.

Rather, these skills serve a supporting role, strategically placed to help children in their content explorations. Driven by their curiosity and interest in communicating and interacting with others, children learn about the uses of literacy in ways that have personal meaning and value for them.

Where do we go from here?

Exposed to a language- and content-rich setting, children begin to acquire the broad array of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that serve as a foundation for literacy learning. With a literacy curriculum reduced to a set of narrow, largely procedural skills, they learn the skills of pleasing others through mimicking, reciting, and repeating. It’s like going to a dentist—something they have to do, but not much fun.

William Geiger



Having children struggle to sit for hours of exercises (that seem to grow longer each day) with little meaning is not only detrimental to an understanding of the functions and joys of learning about print but also takes valuable time away from activities that are more fruitful for learning. Studies (Lee & Burkam 2002; NAEP 2004) show that without powerful intervention, children from economically disadvantaged settings are likely to start school behind their middle-class peers and stay behind, with the gap becoming ever larger in each subsequent year.

These children are not lacking in the ability to learn. They are lacking in learning experiences that will help them develop problem-solving and higher order thinking skills. We do a terrible disservice to them by using a limiting, marginalizing, and reduced curriculum that is devoid of any real thinking. To catch up, these children need just the opposite: content-rich instruction that blends meaningful learning with foundational skills. Features of effective content- and language-rich instruction include

- time, materials, and resources that actively build language and conceptual knowledge;
- a supportive learning environment in which children have access to a wide variety of reading and writing resources;
- different group sizes (large, small, individual) and different levels of guidance to meet the needs of individual children;
- opportunities for sustained and in-depth learning, including play; and
- a masterful orchestration of activity that supports learning and social-emotional development.

Every day more and more young children are being subjected to a narrow, limited curriculum. Each day more and more children are sitting station style, learning to follow, comply, and obey for hours on end. And every day more and more children are losing their eagerness for learning to read and write. We must speak up. We owe this to the profession we love and the children we teach.

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