

Language and Literacy in Preschools: Current Issues and Concerns

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ABSTRACT

The preschool years ages 3 and 4 are extremely important for social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. The purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of preschool to heighten awareness and inform administrators, educators, families, and policymakers about the value of preschool and in particular preschool literacy development. In this paper evidence demonstrating the importance of language and literacy development is discussed based on research that has followed children who participated in preschool programs throughout the grades into adult life. The results show that children who attended high quality preschool were more likely to graduate from elementary and high school, live healthier lives, have fewer social problems, earn more money than those who had not attended preschool, and have children who are likely to succeed. The country is becoming aware of the importance of preschool with standards and content guidelines for language and literacy preschool programs. A section of this article is devoted to the importance of preschool for “at risk” children. In addition, the need for excellent teacher preparation and continued professional development is discussed. Family involvement is recognized as crucial in the preschool program. The article ends with recommendations for steps preschool teachers, early childhood and elementary educators, public school boards, teacher educators, parents, and policymakers can take to make universal preschool a reality.

Literacy Teaching and Learning
Volume 9, Number 1

pages 7-19

The preschool years, ages 3 and 4, are extremely important for social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. High quality preschool experiences can translate into academic and social competence (Barnett, 1995; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Research studies and syntheses conducted over the past decade have helped us understand the importance of young children's experiences with oral and written language. The preschool years are especially important for oral language development and initial experiences with reading and writing that link to later school achievement (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Recently, a great deal of attention has focused on literacy development in kindergarten through grade 3. There hasn't been nearly as much emphasis on preschool literacy development.

The purpose of this paper is to heighten awareness and inform administrators, educators, families, and policy makers about the importance of preschool and in particular preschool literacy development.

EVIDENCE DEMONSTRATING THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

All preschool age children need rich language and literacy experiences so they are prepared to benefit from reading and writing instruction in school. Currently, only some 3- and 4-year-olds benefit from literacy experiences as a result of family involvement and/or access to quality preschool programs (IRA/NAEYC, 1998).

Children who have high quality preschool experiences with an emphasis on language and literacy are more likely to acquire strong language and literacy skills that translate into achievement in the early grades and throughout their schooling. Children who attend high quality preschool are less likely to be retained in kindergarten through grade 3, have higher graduation rates from high school, and have fewer behavior problems (Barnett, 1995; Campbell & Raney, 1995; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, & Levine, 2002; Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001). If a child does not have the appropriate language development by age 3, he or she is not likely to succeed in school. With quality preschool, a child can catch up and go on to be successful. The benefits of having a preschool education are found across economic backgrounds, although children from families with the least formal education and the lowest incomes appear to benefit the most (Barnett, 1995; Fuerst & Fuerst, 1993; Schweinhart, Barnes, Weikart, Barnett, & Epstein, 1993).

The National Early Literacy Panel (2004) studied research to identify abilities of children from birth through age 5 that predict later achievement in literacy. The abilities identified were: oral language development, phonological/phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, print knowledge, and invented

spelling. Researchers have also found that experiences with storybook reading, discussions about books, listening comprehension, and writing are crucial in early literacy development (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Wells, 1985).

Based on the evidence provided, access to many language and literacy experiences will enhance young children's development. Thus, preschools need to focus on a wide range of language and literacy experiences organized into the curriculum.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EXPERIENCES TO FOCUS ON IN PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

High quality preschool programs are concerned with the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of children. Quality preschool programs provide literacy instruction integrated throughout the curriculum. Classroom themes allow teachers to design meaningful activities for literacy development with experiences in science, social studies, math, art, music, and play (Dewey, 1966). Quality programs focus on language and literacy development and include standards for learning with outcomes described. These preschool programs have teaching plans that are intentional and are developmentally appropriate for young children. This means that instruction is organized so it happens in small groups, in one-to-one teacher-child interactions and in child-initiated experiences. Providing language and literacy experiences in preschool does not mean moving reading and writing instruction from kindergarten and the primary grades into the preschool; rather it means integrating appropriate literacy activities throughout the traditional preschool curriculum in a thoughtful way (Dickinson, 2002).

Teachers design their classroom environment to be rich with literacy materials, including books, magazines, paper, and writing supplies (Hendrick, 2004). Teachers integrate literacy into play by setting up areas representing real life situations such as a restaurant or a veterinarian's office. In these settings children learn about behavior appropriate to particular social situations and how to interact with others (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Adults provide models for reading and writing when literacy materials are included such as reading the menu and taking orders for food in the restaurant. In the veterinarian's office, the nurse takes appointments, the doctor writes up reports on patients, and those in the waiting room read while they wait (Morrow & Gambrell, 2004; Vukelich & Christie, 2004).

Content analyses of preschool standards for language and literacy development are being prepared and provide guidelines for learning. The following content guidelines for preschool, typical of many, were created from a review of 15 state standards documents for preschool language and literacy programs.

Content Guidelines for Language and Literacy in Preschool

Oral Language Development

- Gestural expression
- Verbal expression
- Vocabulary and background knowledge
- Listening (attention to and comprehension of talk)
- Phonological development including phonemic awareness

Literacy Development

- Print awareness
- Print conventions and book handling knowledge
- Letter name knowledge
- Alphabetic principle
- Knowledge of text structures
- Comprehension of stories
- Interest in books
- Beginning writing (Strickland, Morrow, Neuman, Roskos, Schickedanz, & Vukelich, 2004)

Implications for the guidelines as they translate into practice are described in the following section.

Quality preschools include oral language experiences that focus on gestural expression, verbal expression, vocabulary development, building background knowledge and listening to others talk to understand and comprehend what they say (Dickinson, Cortez, & Smith, 1993). Children learn phonological awareness, that is, words are made up of individual sounds. They learn this in oral language experiences such as chanting poems, singing songs, and clapping the sounds they hear in words they sing and chant (Adams, 1990; Adams 2001; Carroll, Snowling, Hulme, & Stevenson, 2003; Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004).

Quality preschools include experiences for literacy development as they expose children to print conventions and book handling. This means that children have experiences learning that there is a front, back, top, and bottom to books. They learn that there is a left to right sequence in books, and there is a difference between the print and pictures. There are experiences to learn letter names, to identify letters visually, and to learn letter sounds. It is a meaningful experience when children's names are used to learn that words contain different sounds, to identify letters, and letter sounds. Preschoolers are not expected to master all of the above (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004).

Good preschools help children learn about different types of text such as stories, informational books, menus, signs, newspapers, and to be aware of and read print in the environment. Quality literacy in preschool helps children learn to comprehend stories and develop an interest in books. Research demonstrates

that one of the most important activities for building success in literacy is reading aloud to children. The experience is most valuable when accompanied by interactive discussions with adults and children to introduce new vocabulary and language structures. This conversation leads to understanding or comprehension of the story read (Morrow & Gambrell, 2004; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Bus, et al., 1995; Wells, 1985). Finally, experiences with beginning writing are important to literacy development as children make their first writing attempts by scribbling, making letter-like forms, using invented spelling, and writing in a conventional manner. Writing teaches children about letters, sounds and the meaning of text (Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2004).

Daily routines in a quality preschool program include whole group morning meetings as children gather on a rug and discuss and write a morning message about the theme being studied. Children work individually and in small groups at centers where they engage in reading and writing. For example, they partner read in the literacy center, write in their journal at the writing center, or work in the literacy-enriched themed play setting. While children are engaged independently, the teacher meets with small groups and works on literacy activities suited to their needs. During the day there is a theme-related story read with discussion before and after reading to develop comprehension. There are mini lessons for developing phonological awareness as songs and poems are sung and chanted. There are mini lessons dealing with letter identification in meaningful contexts. Children explore in playful content area centers during a time set aside. The whole group meets again for a conversation that summarizes activities of the day and predicts what might happen tomorrow (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenuart, 2004; Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003).

Throughout the day literacy instruction is integrated into other content areas and the teacher makes the children aware of the literacy skills they are learning (Morrow, 2005). Following is an example of literacy activities embedded within a theme being studied in a preschool classroom.

If a class is studying the seasons, for example, the teacher creates activities to enhance language and literacy within different content areas.

1. Literacy skills developed: letter identification, word identification, vocabulary development, listening comprehension

Activity: The teacher identifies the title and author of an informational book she will read about the four seasons. After the book is read the children discuss and role play their favorite seasonal activities from the book. The teacher writes and illustrates the seasonal activities mentioned such as planting in spring, swimming in summer, raking leaves in fall, and building a snowman in winter. The teacher identifies the letters *S* for spring and summer, *F* for fall, and *W* for winter. Children identify letters in their names that appear in the seasonal words and read the words together.

2. Literacy skills developed: vocabulary development, phonological and phonemic awareness, working with rhymes and syllables

Activity: The teacher and children sing a song about spring. As they sing they clap the syllables of the words and the teacher lists the words that rhyme. The class reads the words and talks about them.

3. Literacy skills developed: Reading and understanding photos, identifying details in photos, writing

Activity: The teacher encourages discussion about three different photographs that include information about the fall. The information children generate is written on a chart. The teacher and children read the chart.

4. Literacy skills developed: vocabulary development, following directions, reading whole words, art experience

Activity: The teacher provides the children with dark blue construction paper for a background and bits of silver foil, white doilies, cotton balls, white tissue paper, and chalk. The children are asked to create winter collages with the materials. The children are encouraged to talk about the materials and their pictures while creating them. The teacher writes the children's favorite words associated with their pictures. They read the words together.

5. Literacy skills developed. hypothesizing, predicting, vocabulary development, writing

Activity: The teacher asks the children to observe a pan filled with water and discuss what the water looks like, how it feels, and what it does. She asks the children to predict what the water will look like frozen. The water is put in the freezer or outside if it is cold enough to freeze. When it is frozen discussion focuses on what the water looks like and how it feels. The ice is allowed to melt, and freezing and melting is discussed again. The teacher records and illustrates what was found in the experiments and reads the written recording together with the class.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN AT RISK

Kindergarten children enter school with a considerable range in their language and literacy experiences. There is often a disparity in the type of language and literacy experiences they have had. Although most have had experiences of some type, many have not had experiences that will help them in school. Children from families with less educational background compared to families with higher levels of education sometimes are not ready for school (ECLS, 2002). This difference in children's language and literacy experiences can lead to achievement differences in school. This achievement gap widens as children move up the grades (Strickland, Snow, Griffin, Burns, & McNamara, 2002;

Hart & Risley, 1995). It has been found that many preschool programs serving low-income populations implement a more limited view of what children can learn and provide little in the way of needed early literacy experiences (McGill-Franzen, Lanford, & Adams, 2002).

All children must have the opportunity to learn language and literacy skills in quality preschools. Preschools with an appropriate emphasis on literacy provide children with skills that enable them to benefit from early literacy instruction in their kindergarten year (Lonigan, Burgess, et al., 2000). Children who are English language learners especially benefit from systematic attention to language and literacy development in preschool. Goals for English language learners include becoming fluent in English and early literacy and maintaining the child's home language, literacy, and culture (Tabors, Roach, & Snow, 2001). For example, teachers label objects in the classroom in different languages of the children in their classroom. They read stories, sing songs, and chant rhymes in the home language, particularly when there are many children speaking the same first language. Children are assigned a buddy English language learner who speaks their first language as well as English. Steady routines are kept at school and illustrations are used for routines to be identified. When teachers simultaneously support English acquisition and the child's home language and culture, the child can become bilingual and biliterate.

TEACHER PREPARATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teachers in early childhood programs are better able to provide quality programs in language and literacy when they understand the continuum of reading and writing development and its integration in the preschool curriculum. In the past, many preschool teachers have not always been well prepared. Preschool teachers need to know about the individual needs of children, taking into consideration social, emotional, physical and cognitive abilities. Teachers must be sensitive to children from different cultural backgrounds. Quality preschools have teachers with college degrees and an early childhood teaching certification. In their preparation they have a strong background in language and literacy development. To be on the cutting edge of language and literacy instruction, preschool teachers and directors need to engage in continuous professional development (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Showers & Joyce, 1996; Shulman, 1998; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000).

Research shows that excellent teachers are not only well-prepared teachers but those who continue to participate in professional development during their careers. In addition, children at risk, those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and marginalized populations who often fail, do better in schools that have the greatest number of well-trained teachers.

Successful professional development programs for preschool professionals should include input from teachers and strong administrative support. Researchers have found that there are certain requirements for effective professional development and for change to occur. These requirements are:

- Teachers need to be reflective practitioners by engaging in a continuous process of questioning, planning, trying out, and evaluating their own and their students' learning.
- Teachers need to work toward establishing a professional community in which they rely on the collective expertise and mutual support of colleagues to inform their day-to-day judgments.
- Teachers need opportunities to learn about research-based strategies and pedagogy.

Professional development programs that utilize these requirements have (a) reading coaches who help teachers with new strategies for teaching, and (b) teacher study groups that provide opportunities for teachers to engage in reading about new ideas, reflective planning, and evaluation. A goal for professional development is to create a collaborative community in their school. Participating in study groups and having coaches as a source of information offers the opportunity to learn about research-based practice. Preschool teachers need these opportunities for professional development (Showers & Joyce, 1996; Shulman, 1998; Sparks, Loucks-Horsley, 1990; Taylor, et al., 2000).

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Family members are the first teachers children have. They are also the teachers children have for the longest period of time. Quality preschools engage family members as an integral part of the language and literacy programs both in school and at home. All children from all backgrounds are likely to become successful readers and writers with preschool teachers who are well prepared, with a program that focuses on language and literacy with concern for social, emotional, physical and cognitive development, and a strong family involvement component (Tabors, Snow, et al., 2001; Tabors, Roach, et al., 2004; Wasik, 2004). The success of the school literacy program frequently depends on the literacy environment at home. Families play a crucial role in the development of children's literacy. Teachers and supervisors need to disseminate information about how parents can help. The preschool must involve parents as an integral part of the literacy program. Teachers need to involve families in school activities during the day, and provide activities for families to do at home. Families need to feel they are welcome in school as partners in the

education of their children. Because no two communities are the same, family literacy programs need to be tailored to the needs of the individuals they serve.

CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the strong relationship between language and literacy experiences in preschool and later school achievement, children need to attend quality preschools. They also need to attend preschools that have excellent literacy programs. To help make this a reality the following recommendations should be considered for preschool educators, early childhood and elementary educators, school boards, teacher educators, parents, and policymakers.

Preschool Educators

- Recognize the importance of language and literacy experiences in preschool to subsequent school achievement.
- Integrate early literacy experiences into the preschool curriculum.
- Connect physical, emotional, and social goals in the language and literacy curriculum when appropriate.
- Develop appropriate language and literacy standards for preschool.
- Create a language and literacy program that is culturally sensitive.

Early Childhood and Elementary Educators

- Build relationships with preschool, primary, and elementary educators to learn more about the language and literacy at the different levels.
- Build a continuum of reading and writing development from preschool through the elementary grades to ensure continuity.

Public School Boards

- Provide preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in the public sector.
- Ensure that the preschool curriculum includes an emphasis on language and literacy experiences.
- Ensure that preschool educators receive appropriate preparation, certification, and continuous professional development concerning literacy instruction.

Teacher Educators

- Create standards for strong undergraduate and graduate preparation of preschool teachers, emphasizing language and literacy development.

- Encourage interactions between university, college, and community college faculty to discuss strong preparation programs for preschool teachers.

Parents

- Encourage families of preschoolers to participate in home and in school activities that deal with their child's literacy development.
- Assist parents with helping their children with language and literacy development.

Policy Makers and Community Leaders

- Build support for quality preschool programs that provide standards for integrating language and literacy experiences.
- Provide resources to establish quality public preschools.
- Require excellent teacher preparation which includes an emphasis on language and literacy instruction

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