

Introduction

Why Early Literacy?

Let's begin by contemplating the question of "Why early literacy?" from a historical perspective. At one time, learning to read and write was linked with entering first grade. In fact, many educators believed there was a magical moment when children were "ready" to learn to read. This belief was reinforced by one influential study published in the *Elementary School Journal* (Morphett & Washburne, 1931) in which it was determined that children needed to reach a "mental age" of six and a half years in order to be successful with reading in first grade.

However, research starting in the mid 1960s has led us in another direction when thinking about what children know about written language before they begin formal schooling. Much of the research through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s pointed to reading and writing as conjoined developmental processes that started well before children entered first grade. Throughout the chapters in this book you will get a flavor for this early research as we develop the theoretical underpinnings for the information we present about early literacy instruction.

While much of this research focused on how young children develop an understanding of reading and writing, less of it focused on specific instructional strategies teachers in early childhood classrooms might use to foster the understandings and literacy development of young children. However, over the last two decades teachers and researchers have begun to think about early literacy from an instructional perspective. In part, this has resulted from a focus on literacy at the national level. The lenses for this focus are multifaceted and include a nationally funded research center, an important policy statement, two high-profile research reports, and two influential pieces of legislation.

- The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) was funded by the Office of Educational Research and

xiv • Literacy for Young Children

Improvement from the period of 1997–2002. The purpose of this research center was to study ways to improve reading achievement in the early elementary years.

- In April 1998, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children published the joint position statement *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*. This statement helped bring light to the teacher’s role in supporting the early literacy development of young children (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000).

- “Reading is essential to success in our society” (p. 1) begins the Executive Summary of *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). This work resulted from a committee established by the National Academy of Sciences at the behest of the United States departments of Education and of Human Services. The committee charge was to study the effectiveness of interventions for young children at risk of having problems learning to read. Among the recommendations was ensuring high-quality preschool and kindergarten programs that support language and literacy development.

- In 1998, the U. S. Congress passed the Reading Excellence Act. As a result of this act, the term “scientifically based reading research” was introduced. SBRR, as it is sometimes called, is defined in the bill as the “application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties” (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2003).

- In 2000, the report of the National Reading Panel was released. This report, commissioned by the U.S. Congress, was prepared by a group of “leading scientists in reading research, representatives of colleges of education, reading teachers, educational administrators, and parents” (NICHD, 2000, pp. 1–1). The Panel reviewed studies in the areas of alphabets (phonemic awareness and phonics), fluency, and comprehension (including vocabulary). On January 8, 2002, President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act. This law reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and it added two new reading initiatives: Reading First and Early Reading First.

The result of these national initiatives is an emphasis on closing the gap: closing the achievement gap and closing the gap between best and current practices in early childhood.

Introduction • xv

Head Start is the nation's oldest and largest nationally-funded program designed to close gaps in achievement of children at risk of school failure. National studies following two cohorts of Head Start children (1997–1998 and 2000–2001) have indicated that “all 4-year-old children who entered Head Start both in the fall of 1997 and fall of 2000 were considerably below grade level in vocabulary, emergent reading, writing ability, and letter identification” (Stahl & Yaden, 2004, p. 143). In addition, the performance of Spanish-speaking children was behind the performance of both the U.S. population of preschool children and English-speaking preschoolers (Stahl & Yaden, 2004). Yet we know from studies of early childhood development and literacy learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) that children who begin schooling with rich preschool experiences are more likely to be successful in their early school achievement than children who have less rich experiences.

Early Reading First is one of the federal government's “closing the gap” initiatives aimed at children before they enter kindergarten, and since its inception in 2001, billions of dollars have been invested in sites around the United States to improve the quality of child care and to bring the emphasis on early literacy into prekindergarten classrooms. The goal of Early Reading First is to create early childhood centers of excellence that will provide preschool children with rich literacy experiences. Many of the recommendations in this book come out of our work in Early Reading First classrooms. In the next section, we provide information about the Early Reading First initiative.

EARLY READING FIRST

Early Reading First (ERF) seeks to foster development in early language, cognitive, and prereading skills so that children, and particularly children from low-income families, enter kindergarten prepared for continued school success. Specific program goals include the following:

- To enhance the early language, literacy, and prereading development of preschool-age children, particularly those from low-income families, through strategies and **professional development** that are based on scientifically based reading research.
- To provide preschool-age children with cognitive learning opportunities in **high-quality language and literature-rich environments** so that the children can attain the fundamental knowledge and skills necessary for optimal reading development in kindergarten and beyond.

xvi • Literacy for Young Children

- To demonstrate language and literacy activities based on scientifically based reading research that supports the age-appropriate development of:
 - Oral language (vocabulary, expressive language, listening comprehension)
 - Phonological awareness (rhyming, blending, segmenting)
 - Print awareness
 - Alphabetic knowledge
- To use **screening assessments** to effectively identify preschool-age children who may be at risk for reading failure.

(These Early Reading First program goals are quoted directly from the Early Reading First Web site at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/earlyreading/index.html>. The emphasis within the goals, in bold, is ours.)

Early Reading First legislation has an impact on teacher training, curriculum development, and student assessment as one sees in the language woven through the ERF goals. This book addresses each of these components of ERF.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

Standards aimed at accountability are a force in education today even at the preschool level (Dunn & Kontos, 2003). Frequently, however, literacy educators find themselves navigating the tension around instruction informed by standards, including SBRR teacher-directed instruction, and what they consider developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood classrooms. However, there need not be a disconnection between these two forces, both of which can inform instruction in early childhood classrooms. Our approach in discussing aspects of instruction in early literacy classrooms is that teachers must be informed decision makers who understand their children and purposefully provide learning experiences (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Dunn & Kontos, 2003). In fact, we believe teachers' practical and professional knowledge is at the heart of decision making and is what ties together what we teach and how we teach it in an era of standards and accountability (Griffith & Ruan, 2003). Below we provide a discussion of developmentally appropriate practice that forms the foundation for the literacy practices we present in this book.

Developmentally appropriate practice requires that teachers use knowledge about child development to inform practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). We also know that literacy does not just emerge naturally (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000). In this book, we rely on what we

Introduction • xvii

know about scientifically based and developmentally appropriate practice for literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms based on the following principles:

- Literacy includes both reading and writing.
- Oral language development is the foundation for literacy development.
- Reading and writing develop concurrently along a continuum from emergent to standard behaviors.
- There is no one method of instruction that is effective for all learners.
- Literacy experiences must build on prior knowledge.
- Literacy experiences must occur in meaningful contexts.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

This book is designed to meet the needs of early childhood teachers in PreK and kindergarten classrooms, as well as literacy coaches working at this level. Throughout the book we include vignettes of four children representing diverse backgrounds and different levels of accomplishment to illustrate the nature of early literacy development and how PreK teachers can align their instruction to support each individual child. The reader is introduced to these children in Chapter 1, and subsequent chapters contain vignettes about these children. Each chapter also includes sections addressing theory to practice, assessment and instruction, centers, diversity, and a chapter summary. For further reference, an appendix contains a list of appropriate Web sites. Chapters address the following topics: child development, oral language, phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, writing, comprehension, sharing books with children, integrating literacy across the curriculum, literacy in the real world, and bringing developmentally appropriate literacy instruction together in the classroom.