

Introduction

THE QUESTION

Have you hesitated outside the door of the classroom of three-, four-, or five-year-olds, unsure as to whether you should enter, even less certain of how to enter into the play and conversation of small children? How many of you have wondered if there was not more we could be doing for children at ages three, four, and five years to further their literacy learning?

If these questions sound familiar, you are not alone. Most school leaders readily admit they know very little about the early years! However, a renewed interest in early literacy has many looking to the early years for solutions to the problem of underachievement in literacy and the means to provide early support to children who will struggle with literacy learning later in the primary grades.

TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE

The challenge for educators interested in acquiring a better understanding of the early years is that at first glance, the world of three-, four-, and five-year-olds appears to be a very simple world, structured around some very simple rules as suggested by Robert Fulghum (2003) in his poem, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in Kindergarten . . .

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess . . .

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: *LOOK*. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere—The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation, ecology and politics and sane living. (Fulghum, 2003, pp. 2–3)

Although Fulghum’s poem contains wisdom on how to live life, his version of preschool education and early literacy is outdated and serves as a reminder that the general tendency is to oversimplify the learning that occurs in early years before formal school and minimize the role that adults and the environment play in this critical period of learning. This period of learning is far from simple. As we gain a more precise understanding of how the brain works and how it develops, our understanding of how children learn has advanced, and our philosophies about the teaching and learning of young children have also evolved, influenced by the times in which we live. The same can be said for our understanding of the complexity of literacy learning and what it means to be literate.

OUR EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING OF LITERACY

Only 600 years ago, the average citizen did not think about reading, and children were reared to assist with work. Prior to the 1400s, reading was an activity reserved for scholars, the clergy, and the upper class. With the invention of the printing press and the ability to mass-produce books in the 1500s, the Bible became popular and people became interested in reading for themselves.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, in a predominately agricultural society, the home played a primary role in the raising and socialization of young children. Kindergartens, where they existed, were compared to a garden and children to the germinating seeds. Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852), the originator of the kindergarten, thought that children carried the seed of self-development, and given the right conditions and opportunity, it was thought that, like plants, children would naturally develop. The rate of literacy rose in the late 1800s with an increase in commerce and jobs that required a functional level of literacy, defined

as basic reading and writing. In primary school, children were taught to read using simple texts with limited vocabulary.

By the mid-1900s, during the industrial revolution, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, children were no longer cared for primarily in the home, and programs for young children became well established. Psychologists Jean Piaget (1896–1980), Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1958), and Erik Erikson (1902–1994) each identified stages and critical periods of learning—for cognitive, moral, and social development, respectively. Educators began to design materials and methods with learning in mind. For those paying attention, these new learning approaches and the results they achieved helped to illustrate the largely untapped learning potential of young children. A wonderful example of this is illustrated by Maria Montessori's (1870–1952) approach to educating the children whom society at that time had deemed uneducable—the disabled and disadvantaged. During this time period, children began to be grouped and instructed by age, and expectations for learning were developed according to different ages and stages. By the 1950s, literacy learning was defined as a certain set of habits and skills that effective readers had mastered. To learn to read implied the reinforcement and practice of these skills. A set of programs emerged for reading that included SRA labs, phonics, language experience charts, and eventually whole language.

Now well into the 21st century and the age of globalization, markets are fiercely competitive, and literacy levels have been statistically linked to a nation's economic viability. The pressure is on for children to perform literacy skills at younger and younger ages. Public education institutions are held accountable for achievement results, and programs are required that respond to the perceived gaps, in particular for children who come to school from disadvantaged circumstances or with limited literacy experiences. Early years interventions programs designed to combat the relationship between childhood poverty and school failure, such as those initiated by the Perry Preschool Project (1962) and Head Start (1970), have claimed both short- and long-term effects. The Perry Preschool Project has documented impressive results that include less delinquency, fewer crimes, and less police contact; higher academic achievement, including higher scores on standardized tests of intellectual ability, higher high school grades,

fewer school dropouts, and higher rates of high school graduation; higher median annual earnings; greater economic independence; and fewer pregnancies for women at age 19 (Weikart, Bond, & McNeil, 1978).

The expanded definition of literacy now includes communication in a variety of forms.

UNESCO's concept of literacy has moved beyond the simple notion of a set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating to one that encompasses multiple dimensions of these competencies. In acknowledging recent economic, political and social transformations—including globalization and the advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs)—UNESCO recognizes that there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures.

Literacy is central to all levels of learning, through all delivery modes. Literacy is an issue that concerns everybody. (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)

Literacy instruction includes reading and writing in a variety of subject areas, differentiation for learning styles, instruction that scaffolds for learning levels, and the explicit teaching of reading and writing strategies.

THE ROLE EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCE PLAYS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRAIN

Where once we thought our brains developed from our genetic gifts, now we understand brain development to be a function of the interaction between genes and experiences. Previously we thought of the experiences before three years of age as limited and with little consequence for later development; now we recognize the early experiences actually change the structural design of the brain. Now we understand that early interactions do more than create a favorable environment for learning—these interactions impact the very development of the brain. We now know there are

prime times for learning different kinds of knowledge and skills and that at three years of age, a child's brain is twice as active as an adult's (Shore, 1997). McCain and Mustard (1999, 2002) maintain that the evidence continues to mount to support these conclusions that early-years' experience influences brain development.

New evidence from neurobiology, animal studies, epidemiological and longitudinal studies of populations, intervention studies, and observational studies reaffirms that experience-based brain development in the early years of life, including the in utero period, affects learning, behavior, and physical and mental health throughout life. (McCain & Mustard, 2002, p. 5)

Educational philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) explained that experience teaches—either positively or negatively. Class differences in language development can be detected in the first years of life, and by twenty-four months, differences in vocabulary can be detected among children from different classes. This period of development has a significant effect on later language development and is strongly related to the words spoken to the child during the early period of life. Experiences in the early years, whether as a result of challenging circumstances or poorly designed programs, can be detrimental to development or lead to adverse responses later in life. Programs for young children that are successful empower children through active learning initiated by the children, empower parents by engaging them as partners, and empower teachers with systematic inservice curriculum training and supportive curriculum supervision (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993).

LEARNING TO BE LITERATE: SO MUCH MORE THAN LEARNING THE CONVENTIONS OF LANGUAGE

The press down of primary education into the early years, the desire to teach the conventions of language (learning to read and write) at younger ages, and the lack of understanding of how

young children learn has created a disturbing trend toward the elimination of activity and play in the early years, a move away from the engagement between mother and child and simple word play, toward more structured lessons, often fashioned by commercial publishing companies, imitating more traditional techniques from earlier times and those we would have once seen in later primary school. Early literacy is so much more than alphabet naming, phonemic awareness, and print recognition.

IT STARTS WITH SCHOOL LEADERS

It is only through a better understanding of how young children learn and how they think that, as school leaders, we can ensure that we are developing and providing programs for children that engage and enrich the youngest minds and ensure their success as lifelong learners. This understanding is important for the new administrator, as well as a refresher or upgrade for the more seasoned school administrator.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to provide school leaders with a concise, easy-to-understand synopsis of how three-, four-, and five-year-olds learn, as well as the tools to apply this understanding to early literacy. By providing sufficient background and insight into early literacy, it is hoped that principals, vice principals, and lead teachers will be able to support young children's literacy learning, assess the newest and latest trends and early literacy intervention strategies, and provide deeper and more meaningful programs so that children's literacy learning can be maximized during the early years. By providing the criteria for differentiating between practices that benefit young children and those that don't, it is hoped that principals will be able to promote practices that will make the most significant long-term differences.

Like the other books in this series, the focus of this book is on blending the theoretical with the practical in order to support school leaders in their instructional roles.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book has been divided into four sections for easy reference. Presented in a conversational format with real life examples, it offers school leaders both the background and tools that they need to implement sound early literacy programs. Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 outline, in easy-to-read terms, the information essential for understanding how young children learn, why particular programs are better suited for young children than others, and consequently, what makes a good literacy program. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the background information required to begin the conversation with staff about the nature of young children, their learning, and how school teams can best serve young children's preferred learning styles. Chapter 3 provides principals with the practical tools for working with teachers and school teams toward implementing and improving early literacy programs. Principals can use many of these tools for professional development, taking examples provided as models of good practice and working through the process of planning together. Chapter 4 reviews the essential keys to build a school team and school culture that will support and sustain good programs and ensure continuous improvement in early literacy.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

Each chapter starts out by asking one or two big questions and in response includes vignettes and examples taken directly from schools and classrooms. Checklists and templates—tools to assist school leaders as they work with staff—are provided in each chapter. At the end of each chapter is a summary and a few guiding questions that leaders can pose to staff as starting points for professional dialogue related to instructional practices in the early years. At the end of the book is a resource section titled “Tools for School Leaders,” which contains many of the templates provided in reproducible form.

It is hoped that through this introduction to the world of three-, four-, and five-year-olds through the lens of literacy learning, you will discover the exciting potential of three-, four-, and five-year-old children's learning and the possibility of making a

major difference in their literacy development. It is my hope that school leaders, having read this book, will be eager to get involved with our youngest learners, never hesitating outside the door of their classroom again.