

Early Years Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

Literacy skills are the cornerstones of student learning and achievement. Now more than ever, educators are expected to produce quantitative data that demonstrates a high level of literacy success. Simultaneously, teachers are encountering a diverse student population that requires greater differentiation in instructional strategies. This research review identifies fundamental topics in early years literacy instruction, kindergarten to grade 3. Skills such as printing and phonics have been curricular constants for generations. Other key facets of literacy development, including text structure awareness, vocabulary instruction, and content-area knowledge, continue to require attention. These best practices are all integral to long-term educational success.

Early literacy skills are the foundation for future learning in all other subject areas. With school days that already seem to move at a frenetic pace, teachers are being asked to intensify literacy instruction for young students and to produce substantial results. Meanwhile, the growing diversity of the primary classroom demands a wider array of instructional strategies, particularly when it comes to literacy support. Alphabet work, phonological awareness, and phonics development should all be integral components of this literacy instruction, because these skills are the cornerstones of all reading and writing. With penmanship practice and authentic writing opportunities, graphic symbols become words that turn into sentences and eventually develop into meaningful pieces of written work. Early exposure to a variety of texts, both narrative and informational, provide teachers with opportunities to instruct young students regarding diverse text structures, relevant content area knowledge, new vocabulary, and useful comprehension strategies. While they may only be at the beginning of their formal education, our youngest students are certainly capable of tackling all of these literacy components.

Solid literacy skills in the primary grades are vital for general, ongoing success in school. From very early, children can begin to learn about language and print, as adults talk with them and read to them from the time they are born (Strickland, 2010). Subsequently, children are better prepared for school when their parents demonstrate how literacy is important in daily life (Strickland, 2010). With the provision of quality instruction from kindergarten to grade three that focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight vocabulary, reading struggles can often be avoided. Strong early literacy skills place students on the long-term path to academic success.

Current Educational Context

Currently, there is a huge focus on literacy growth, improvement, and achievement for those in education, which extends out into the larger community. Many Manitoba school divisions have set literacy goals as a part of their strategic plans. Teachers are expected to have a variety of fool-proof strategies at their fingertips to support diverse student needs. However, there is a lack of training on the part of those being asked to teach these more challenging literacy skills (Duke & Block, 2012). Teachers are often provided with prepared programs to follow rather than opportunities for relevant professional development that will make them better literacy teachers. Unfortunately, the desire for immediate, quick-fix results causes easier literacy skills, which can be acquired quickly, to become the focus of instruction. Limited time is another obstacle that prevents educators from implementing best practices when teaching reading and writing. Literacy development is currently a hot-button issue, and early years teachers must be cognizant of the skills required for early literacy success.

Today's student population is more diverse and complex than ever before (Strickland, 2010). Students' academic and English language development is affected by a number of factors, including social and cultural background, abilities and level of education in his/her native tongue, the duration of his/her experience with English, the quality of classroom instruction, and the amount and quality of oral language opportunities provided by the teacher (Brouillette, 2012). Between 2001 and 2006, two-thirds of Canada's population growth was due to immigration. Immigrants constitute almost 20% of Canada's "population and labour force" (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2011, p. 630). Therefore, student populations today include more immigrants, many of whom can not read or write in their primary language (Smith & Elish-Piper, 2002). This is the reality for their parents as well, and unfortunately adults with poor literacy skills often have children who struggle to read and write. These families may also have limited experience with school systems and educators. Teachers need to explain to low-literate parents how schools operate and the kind of instruction they provide. The oral language and writing expected in school is often very different from what is required at home. Teachers need to impress upon all parents the importance of literacy development and education in general, and outline the expectations of school staff. Our students who are learning English as an additional language add another layer of complexity to our literacy instruction.

Key Literacy Skills and Strategies

Alphabetic skill in early years is the strongest indicator of future literacy success (Reutzel, 2015), yet learning the alphabet is a difficult, abstract skill for children to grasp. Teachers can use a variety of strategies when providing alphabet instruction. The own-name effect enables students to begin learning the alphabet by becoming familiar with the letters found in their given name. This is a word that they will have seen and heard many times, and generally children have had lots of exposure to the letters in their own name (White, 2005). Another strategy is the alphabetic-order effect, which identifies the beginning and end letters of the alphabet as being easier to remember. There is also the letter-frequency effect, which states that the more frequently a letter appears in reading and writing, the faster it is learned. Additionally, there is the distinctive visual features letter writing effect, in which students learn letters based on their distinctive shapes, such as curves or straight lines. The Handwriting Without Tears program uses this strategy (Olsen, 2013). Teaching students to make these distinctive shapes and lines before learning to write complete letters increases printing success (Reutzel, 2015). On average, daily alphabet work should comprise only about 12 minutes of the school day (Reutzel, 2015, p. 18). This time should include letter identification and naming, letter/sound connections, letter discrimination, sorting upper and lower case letters, and printing. It is suggested that working on a letter each day, as opposed to a letter each week, and repeating all letters several times during the school year promotes greater success in learning letter names. Assessment of letter name knowledge at the beginning of the school year is the best indicator of student success later, in the second and third terms (Strickland, 2010).

From a very early age, children pick up on and respond to the "rhythms and patterns of spoken language" (White, 2005, p. 3). This is the beginning of a student's phonological awareness, which is "the ability to tune in to and identify the sounds that make up our language" (White, 2005, p. 3). Phonological awareness includes the phoneme-related skills of "rhyming and phonemic identification and manipulation" (Reutzel, 2015, p. 16) in oral language. These are the skills that enable children to generate a list of rhyming words, such as *cat*, *sat*, *bat*, and *mat*, by simply changing the first sound. It should be noted that rhyming ability is not a precursor to phonemic awareness, as was often thought to be the case. In fact, phonemic dexterity has been identified as a better predictor of reading success than rhyming ability (Reutzel, 2015). Phonological awareness should not be taught in isolation, but rather in conjunction with alphabet and decoding skills in a context of relevant words and meaningful instruction (Duke &

Block, 2012). While this is an important skill, phonological awareness should not be the only focus. Unfortunately, teachers are spending more than half of their literacy instruction time working solely on phonological awareness and phonics (Al Otaiba et al., 2008, as cited in Duke & Block, 2012), up to an average of 33 minutes a day (Connor et al., 2009, as cited in Duke & Block, 2012, p. 59). Nevertheless, the recommendation is that in kindergarten, phonological awareness instruction should constitute no more than 18 hours of the entire school year, and no one lesson should be more than 30 minutes long (Duke & Block, 2012, p. 62). For our youngest students, rhythm and word rhyming tasks are an integral part of early literacy development.

Segmenting, or breaking a word into parts, is crucial to reading and writing development. Phonics skills deal with the symbol-sound relationship of graphemes and phonemes in print. Having students develop phonetic knowledge, such as chunking or sounding out words, has “sparked more optimal brain circuitry than” sight word memorization (Wong, 2015, p. 1). In fact, phonics instruction causes increased brain activity on the left side of the brain in the visual and language areas that are the key to reading success (Wong, 2015). Sustained stimulation and “engagement” (Wong, 2015, “Instructional Strategies,” para. 7) of the left side of the brain is a characteristic of good readers, but is deficient in those who struggle to read. In the past, young children have generally been taught “grapheme to phoneme,” meaning that they first learn to spell a word, and then learn the corresponding sound that each letter or word part makes. The United Kingdom’s National Literacy Strategy (1998) suggested that children first play with the sounds that each word part makes, and then learn the graphic representations for the letters that spell that word (as cited in White, 2005). It is suggested that graphemes and their phonemes be presented in specific groups, and in a particular order, beginning with the letters *s, m, c, t, g, p, a,* and *o* (White, 2005). These groupings were established “based on usefulness, ease of discrimination and development of handwriting” (White, 2005, p. 4). Knowing the initial sound in a word is the first skill of segmenting. Children should practise identifying the first sound in a word, and then learn the name of the letter that makes that sound. This seems to be a logical progression, because children develop oral language skills first, before reading and writing. Isolating and identifying the sounds in a given word is an indicator of future literacy success (Strickland, 2010).

In this era of technology and instant communication, penmanship is often viewed as a skill from the past that no longer warrants instructional time. However, for young students, printing letters stimulates the reading area of a child’s brain more than any other motor activity, such as sand writing or building letters with play doh (Reutzel, 2015). As children mature, the speed and legibility of one’s writing is a predictor of quality and quantity of work, as well as one’s ability to take notes and score well on written assessments such as tests and exams. This is known as transcription fluency. Poor transcription fluency can result in a lack of “clarity, organization, coherence, and creativity” (Reutzel, 2015, p. 15) in one’s written work; students who are slow and/or illegible writers have difficulty getting their ideas down on paper fast enough to keep up with their train of thought. It is important that students possess transcription fluency so that they can direct their energy toward higher level thinking instead of focusing solely on the fine motor skills required for simple written output. Teachers often think that the answer to slow writing is to allow students to use word processing technology, but there is a “high correlation between handwriting speed and typing speed” (Reutzel, 2015, p. 15), so children who struggle to print and handwrite will also have difficulties with keyboarding skills. While good printing and handwriting may seem obsolete, penmanship tasks provide important brain stimulation and development.

Good readers are also better writers, and poor readers often struggle with writing. It is important that early years teachers try to instill a joy for writing in young students and provide them with engaging writing activities. Writing tasks should be incorporated into their play opportunities as often as possible, and students should be writing for diverse audiences and for a variety of purposes. Process writing opportunities, such as writer’s workshop, can be a successful strategy to use with even the youngest of students (Reutzel, 2015). They may also

benefit from Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD), which utilizes a cycle of scaffolding, writing strategy instruction, teacher modelling, monitored practice, and time for independent writing in which model texts are used as exemplars (Reutzel, 2015). Reading and writing should be facilitated in conjunction with one another, because the skill development in one literacy area significantly influences the other.

Young students need opportunities to talk about various text formats. Even preschoolers can increase their comprehension when text structure is explored and they have a chance to talk about it (Reutzel, 2015). Unfortunately, early years teachers do not spend adequate time teaching text structures. Therefore, children who have poor oral language skills in kindergarten and the primary grades often demonstrate reading comprehension difficulties later on. Just because young students can not read does not mean that they can not demonstrate comprehension of text and its structure. They can do this orally, and should practise frequently before they work on it in independent reading. When introducing text structures, it is helpful when students can interact with types of texts that they have previously seen or used at home (Strachan, 2014). Children grasp new concepts more easily when they connect with something that the children already know. Using texts similar to what students have seen in their personal environment demonstrates to them that reading is an activity people do all day long, both in school and at home. Later literacy reading comprehension can be supported by giving our very young students opportunities to be read to, learn about text structure, and then talk about it.

The majority of text that young students are exposed to is in narrative, fictional form. In addition, the lower the socio-economic status of a community, the less exposure students have to informational text (Strachan, 2014). It is recommended that elementary students read an equal number of fictional and informational types of texts and that both include a wide array of literature forms. Each genre of informational text is unique, and because it comes in many different formats, it does not facilitate the same transfer of knowledge that narrative text provides. Using a wide variety of text types helps to expand students' content area knowledge; reading instruction can simultaneously be incorporated into this content area work. Teachers can tackle the instruction of informational text structures while providing content area information. Even a read-aloud can be an informational text that introduces students to new subject matter and contextual language (Richardson, 2009). In turn, these increases in content area knowledge and vocabulary contribute to improved student comprehension. Similarly, students have shown greater improvements in both reading development and content area knowledge when these two skills are infused together during instruction (Strachan, 2014). A lack of instruction in the content areas of science and social studies early on will affect students in later grades when they are expected to work with and comprehend informational text independently (Duke & Block, 2012). In one survey (Griffin & Scharmann, 2008), more than 50% of primary teachers were spending less than 90 minutes a week on science instruction (as cited in Duke & Block, 2012, p. 60). This is the equivalent of less than 20 minutes a day. Even the youngest students need access to more than just story books. They need to be provided with a multitude of diverse text materials, both fiction and non-fiction.

All too often, there is very little vocabulary instruction happening in early years classrooms. Vocabulary development can be sporadic or spur of the moment, often occurring during read-alouds when an unfamiliar word comes up in the text. Less than two-thirds of K-3 teachers teach vocabulary, and for those who do, it only takes up approximately 5% of their instructional time (Duke & Block, 2012, p. 59). Vocabulary growth is crucial to developing oral language, whether in one's primary language or in an additional language (Brouillette, 2012). Increased diversity in our student population requires vocabulary instruction. Word knowledge is necessary for adequate comprehension, and best practices for vocabulary development of English language learners also promote vocabulary growth for native English speakers. By middle years, vocabulary and word knowledge are better predictors of reading comprehension than are word reading/decoding skills (Duke & Block, 2012). Unknown words require direct

instruction and repeated opportunities for students to work with them in genuine scenarios. Teachers need to explain new words explicitly and give students a chance to talk about them and work with them in authentic ways.

Students must be taught specific strategies to improve their reading comprehension skills. These skills can include predicting, inferring, visualizing, summarizing, and questioning. Student reading comprehension is greatly affected by the quality of the texts chosen by the classroom teacher. On average, only 23% of literacy instructional time is spent on reading comprehension in the early years, and it generally is provided in a whole-class format (Donaldson, 2011, as cited in Duke & Block, 2012, p. 59). The larger focus on phonemic awareness and phonics instruction has spawned children who are “word callers,” or students who are good decoders and sound like solid readers, but fail to comprehend what they have actually read (Duke & Block, 2012, p. 66). Even our youngest students require cognitive flexibility, which is being able to consider the multiple meanings of a word, and choose the appropriate one for the given context. Obviously, children who have greater cognitive flexibility have stronger reading comprehension skills. To fully comprehend and interpret text material, students need a toolbox of ideas that they can call upon when they struggle to understand what they are reading.

Conclusion

The development of basic literacy skills in our youngest students is vital if they are to experience future academic success. Currently, early years teachers are being held accountable for early literacy achievement and growth in their classrooms more than ever before. Simultaneously, the academic and language skills of students are becoming increasingly varied and demanding. The traditional skills of alphabet knowledge and letter-sound relationships should continue to be focal points of instruction for all children in kindergarten and grade one. Similarly, even in our technological world, meaningful, legible writing is still a necessity. Then there are the additional skills of text structure awareness, adequate subject-specific knowledge, and an ever-growing vocabulary that can support and enhance reading comprehension of both fiction and non-fiction text. While many children possess basic literacy skills when they arrive on the school doorstep, early years educators must work to support the complex development of these skills so that students can interact with and respond to the literacy-filled world around them.

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About the Author

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