



## **What is Not Covered by the Standards: How to Support Emergent Literacy in Preschool Classrooms**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With our expertise and experiences in teaching language development and early literacy instruction courses at a teacher education college, we argue that it is imperative to find ways to integrate learning standards with developmentally appropriate play-based methods. We examined what literacy coach candidates found in their classroom observations to reveal a tension between developmentally appropriate literacy instruction and addressing conventional literacy skills. We suggest, as do the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy (2011), using developmentally appropriate instruction, such as play-based activities in preschool classrooms, to support emergent literacy.

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As we examined the New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) for English Language Arts & Literacy (New York State Education Department, 2011), the section entitled “What is not covered by the Standards” really struck us. The section stated that while the Standards address what could be most essential to teach, they do not define how teachers should teach. For example, “the use of play with young children is not specified the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations” and “the aim of the Standards is to articulate the fundamentals...not to set out an exhaustive list or a set of restrictions that limits what can be taught what is specified herein” (p. 4). To us, it was the message that teachers are entitled to enrich curriculum based on the Standards and use appropriate instruction, considering different developmental stages of learning.

However, we started wondering if this message has been clearly communicated with the classroom teachers and literacy coaches, especially for the teachers who teach and guide young



children. The pressures of accountability have dramatically increased in recent years and resulted in more direct instruction, which can be developmentally inappropriate for young children (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). New York recently joined many other states in the national trend to extend the Common Core Standards to preschool when the New York State Board of Regents approved the New York State Prekindergarten Foundation for the Common Core (New York State Education Department, 2011). To prepare young children to meet the demands of the Common Core Standards in kindergarten and elementary school, the Prekindergarten Common Core (PKCC) is being implemented statewide. However, if misinterpreted, all learning standards, including PKCC, may help to produce counterproductive learning exercises, including narrow procedural skills such as word or letter drills, recitations, or chanting letters and sounds, and therefore curtail children's learning into how to mimic or memorize without meaning attached. Such instruction could "undermine the very goals of improving literacy learning," which must extend beyond sounding out or decoding, but promoting communication, comprehension, and research (Neuman & Roskos, 2005, p. 23).

There are three key features of the Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening, with heavy emphasis on using various types and levels of text but also with focus on flexible communication and collaboration, including interpersonal skills. We decided to revisit all of the observation notes and reports written by our teacher and literacy coach candidates, whom we have taught for several years, and examine if there is any pattern in terms of how the standards are being implemented in these three areas of literacy and language in real preschool classrooms.

We have been using an observation tool, Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation, or the ELLCO (Smith, Brady, & Anastophpoulis, 2008) in a graduate course in which literacy coach candidates are required to observe early childhood classroom settings and various student learning activities. As we reviewed what the literacy coach candidates had written in their observation notes from four semesters over the last two years, we found both encouraging and concerning patterns in the three areas of Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening. We also decided to examine an additional category, the classroom setting, because the learning environment has an impact on early language and literacy development in the other three areas (Owoki, 1999). While the observations included pre-kindergarten through third grade classrooms, we decided to focus on the earlier years of learning: pre-kindergarten, which is recognized as an important foundation stage for later language and literacy development (NAEYC/IRA, 2009; Roskos, Tabors, & Lanhart, 2009).

In this paper, we will discuss what we have found from our review of the ELLCO observations made by our teachers and literacy coach candidates, focusing on preschool classroom observations conducted in 14 different preschool classrooms in New York City and its surrounding areas. This ELLCO tool is used across the country to assess the quality of the classroom environment and the teacher's practices. Our discussion will be categorized in four areas, including the classroom setting, reading, writing, and speaking and listening. We will argue that there seems to be a tension between meeting standards through direct instruction and play-based, developmentally appropriate methods. We will also suggest some possible ways to balance these demands on preschool teachers because we believe that this tension is unnecessary and not insinuated by any learning standard.



### Setting: Balance Organization and Child Initiative

Before we discuss the three areas which the Common Core Standards define, we want to emphasize the importance of literacy environment, defined as the classroom setting, in ELLCO. When young children play in a purposefully designed, literacy-rich environment, teachers can discover and capitalize on teachable moments. Classrooms should embed literacy into various aspects of the environment, from labeling learning centers, to having a diverse and rich library, to infusing literacy into the learning centers. Such an environment invites teachable moments. For example, teachers could purposefully design the dramatic play area to include literacy by creating a theme, like a “restaurant” with menus, specials on a chalkboard, and the waitperson’s notebook. Young children would engage in this type of pretend play that mimics the adult world and want to be involved. Teachers could capitalize on this eagerness to be engaged and introduce relevant concepts in the context of play. Asking simple questions like “What is today’s lunch special?” or “How much do you need to pay for lunch?” at the restaurant could prompt the children to practice spoken language and help to develop relevant concepts, such as print awareness, comprehension, and reading skills. Linguistic awareness is best developed within the context of the child’s work and play. The environment should provide many opportunities to “play” with language (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). Classroom environment sends a message to students about teacher expectations as well.

The observations indicated that most classroom settings, including organization and contents of materials, were developmentally appropriate and literacy-rich. In their notes, the observers indicated that most classrooms had “clearly labeled areas,” “labeled bins and storage,” and centers on the child’s eye level, which make materials accessible for young children. The centers that were not clearly defined existed in two crowded urban schools, which were lacking space. Books in the library were accessible, age-appropriate, and in good condition. Student work was labeled and on display. Classroom organization was the highest rated of the four ELLCO components. This finding is positive since a well-organized classroom will certainly support learning in a preschool classroom.

However, one component of the setting raised concerns. The observers noted that preschool teachers seemed to struggle with offering children the “opportunity for child choice and initiative.” Teachers seemed pressed to “get through the content” and left little time for play or free choice. One observer noted that “the schedule does not allow for ongoing exploration.” Given the benefits of play, especially in preschool, this observation presents a major concern. The PKCC states that play is a valuable activity, yet it is often omitted from the preschool day to “get through the content,” as one observer described. This reduction of child initiative and play is reflective of a larger trend that minimizes free play time, which is necessary to develop self-regulation in young children. According to Bodrova and Leong (2005):

children today have fewer opportunities to learn to regulate themselves because many of the activities that they engage in work counter to developing thoughtful, deliberate action. Television, computer games, even the kinds of toys that children play with tend to emphasize behaviors that lead to more reactive thinking (p. 45).

From a Vygotskian perspective, early childhood teachers must foster the development of self-regulation and thoughtful, deliberate action, which is crucial to later learning and cognitive development. Vygotsky’s model (1977) of constructivist learning, in which children construct



their own knowledge and understanding through social interaction, calls for adults to “scaffold,” or build on the child’s prior knowledge. Through thoughtful, deliberate action, young children are able to connect new concepts to what they already know. Children are encouraged to think, make choices, and self-regulate, which are internal aspects of cognitive and social growth and developed best in the context of natural play.

Allowing the child to make choices and take initiative in his or her learning can be accomplished through well-organized free choice time, or center time (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). One way to balance the need to meet the PKCC and play would be to allot time in the daily schedule for free play. The centers should be thoughtfully organized to include some of the concepts from the standards. For example, including an “office” in the dramatic play area with phones, keyboards, clipboards, and writing utensils would allow for children to play by practicing writing, speaking, and even reading skills. This would be self-initiated and in the context of social play, so the children would be more engaged. In terms of the classroom setting, the major goal should be creating a well-organized learning environment in which free play is built in and purposefully inclusive of the curricular goals.

### **Speaking and Listening: Balance a Strong “Culture of Conversation” with Opportunities**

As we move into the core literacy areas, we begin with the first set of skills acquired, speaking and listening skills. Between the ages of zero and six, these skills are paramount and serve as the foundation for reading and writing later. Preschoolers, who enter school with some skills in this area, have a window of opportunity for further language development as they develop phonological awareness and the recognition of spoken words and syllables (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Oral language is a cognitive tool used to construct meaning, internalize the language in print, and regulate through thought and activity. Kalmer (2008) argues that language production at age three predicts reading comprehension scores as measured at age nine to 10. Preschool should build upon earlier speaking and listening skills and transition into the more advanced literacy skills of reading and writing. One very easy way to do this is to create a “culture of conversation,” which is an environment that is filled with spontaneous and facilitated conversations, child to child conversations, dramatic play, story reading, and storytelling (Burnam, 2009). As the PKCC suggests, speaking and listening should infiltrate every aspect of the classroom environment.

The ELLCO observations provided many examples of how teachers addressed the standards pertaining to speech and listening. Examples of these attempts were recognized by all of the observers and the majority noted that “students were confident to participate.” Teachers facilitated an open culture of conversation by including expression, encouraging the child to talk, waiting for responses, reading interactively, and most importantly, having fun and making the interactions meaningful by asking about personal preferences or what the children are doing. Again, it is paramount that teachers make efforts create a literacy context that is meaningful and connected to the children’s lives.

The troubling part was that this “culture of conversation” was utilized only at basic levels. There was plenty of conversation, but most of it was superficial and most teachers were not observed taking advantage of scaffolding opportunities. For example, the observations noted that despite a combination of small and large group conversations, questioning during stories, and conversation, “the teacher did most of the talking,” or “there was a lack of open-ended questions,” or “teachers used simple two or three word sentences.” There were also very few



examples of helping young children refine their listening skills through purposeful activities. A few observers noted that teachers were more concerned about adhering to the daily schedule. One observer noted that “[the teacher] was more concerned with staying on schedule and moving through daily objectives than in engaging in conversations with students.” Another observer saw that “[the teacher] didn’t even look up when [a child] asked her a question.” Although speaking and listening opportunities were recognized, they were not utilized to their full potential. This lacking depth in conversation not only has literacy implications, but social and emotional implications too, since peer conversations are a major factor in preschool social development (Stanton-Chapman & Hadden, 2011). Simply taking the time to allow preschoolers to speak to the teacher and to one another can meet the PKCC standards in the speaking/listening domain.

Related to building the “culture of conversation” is taking advantage of scaffolding opportunities, such as vocabulary-building efforts. This aspect of speaking and listening also had mixed results, according to the observations. Most observers saw that teachers introduced new vocabulary, either verbally or visually. Vocabulary building was often introduced with pictures, then “reused and repeated vocabulary words throughout the day.” This type of drill and repetition is not appropriate for preschool, and there were few examples of vocabulary building occurring within a meaningful, play-based context. Instead of introducing new words in a detached manner, teachers could incorporate vocabulary building into play. For example, the children playing “office” could be introduced to what a “typewriter” is, and it is meaningful since they are engaged in playing office. Speaking and listening skills are the foundation of the more advanced literacy skills of reading and writing. Preschoolers enter school with skills and knowledge in the area of speaking and listening, which were acquired during infancy and toddlerhood, but this foundation must be built upon in preschool as it was at home: through meaningful everyday conversations about what is important to the children.

### **Reading: Teaching Reading or “Just” Reading?**

Reading is the area in which much tension exists between what preschoolers “should” be learning and what is developmentally appropriate for three to five year olds. Reading achievement in the earliest years may look like it is just about letters and sounds, but it is inevitably clear by grades three and four, it is about meaning (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). The child must be able to attach meaning to new concepts as their literacy skills develop, and meaning comes through their natural play. By integrating literacy in the environment and play, the child will create meaning that is so crucial to reading and writing, in addition to gaining foundational cognitive and social-emotional skills.

The observations noted many positive aspects of emergent reading in preschool, including basic “pre-reading” skills, such as reading aloud, book handling, page-by-page reading, individual time with books, picture naming, flannel boards, story re-enactments, and retelling stories from familiar books. The single most important activity for building these understandings and skills essential for reading success is reading aloud to children (Bus, 2002). The observations noted, for the most part, that books were immersed in the curriculum. Books are for more than reading to class and children looking at alone; they are lead-ins for every subject in the curriculum. Most classrooms contained quality books, which include multicultural characters, realistic characters, attractive illustrations linked to the story, minimum text to keep attention, funny, rhyming or repetitive words, and often served as a lead-in to the curriculum. The characteristics and types of books were consistently rated exemplary to very good in the



observations. The fact that high-quality children's books are widely used in the preschool classrooms is a notable strength. In terms of actual activities, preschool "pre-reading" activities build visual literacy skills, allowing children to extract meaning from pictures and build a foundation for reading. The approaches to reading were generally positive, including "reading as an integral part of the schedule," "asking questions during book reading," independent reading time, and reading aloud that included questions, reflection and "making the story come alive." Making reading a fun, consistent part of the preschool day is important.

The tension in the classrooms seemed to arise from teachers trying to more than "just reading aloud," as noted by one of the observers. Most of the observations noted positive reading strategies in the classrooms, such as reading aloud in an engaging manner and independent reading time, which is consistent with emergent literacy and the PKCC. However, some of the observations also included direct, focused teaching of reading, such as one-on-one instruction, directed strategies to build comprehension, grammar and punctuation, and decoding words, which is more appropriate for kindergarten or first grade. For example, a few observations pointed out concentrated efforts at teaching children to read, such as a "sight word center," in which students would choose a word out of an envelope, read it, build it, and write it repeatedly, "sounding words out during a story", "identifying punctuation during a story", introducing new vocabulary words every week, phonics games, and guided reading. Some observers and teachers separated reading aloud as "just reading," which was distinct from "teaching reading," even though reading aloud is the most effective way to teach young children how to read. One teacher commented that these more "direct approaches" to reading would prepare preschoolers for kindergarten. When it comes to reading, we must remember the preoperational cognitive state of the preschool child's mind (Piaget, 1972). Simple pre-reading activities, like reading aloud, making it fun and interactive, exploring the meaning of the text, and getting children to enjoy reading are developmentally appropriate activities for three to five year old children, whose preoperational minds are often not prepared for the complexity of reading text. Pre-reading activities for preschool children include exposure to a wide variety of literature, reading aloud to children in an interactive way, asking predictive questions, making comments to connect the literature to the children's lives, and discussing the literature. Word play, such as rhymes, nonsense words, music, and having children "read" their illustrations are other examples of activities that prepare young children for more conventional reading. "Just reading" *is* teaching young children how to read.

### **Writing: Fine Motor Foundations First**

The last area of literacy explored in the observations was writing. Although reading seems to be a great concern to teachers and parents, most children learn to write before they read around the world (Shagoury, 2009). Although storytelling understanding and communication come first, the physical act of holding a utensil and writing involves developing hand-eye coordination. Motor control peaks in preschool with the maturation of prehension (coordination of fingers and thumbs to grasp) and dexterity (precise movement and coordination of the hands and fingers) (Shagoury, 2009). At this age, the focus should be on perception and eye-hand coordination, which can be strengthened through three-dimensional art, stringing beads, cutting, molding clay and mud, cooking, block building, woodworking, and hammering. This type of fine motor play builds a foundation of motor skill necessary for writing. It was interesting to note that the ELLCO tool did not include this motor play in the writing component, even for preschool



classrooms. It is not surprising that none of the observers noted this type of play as part of writing preparation, even though it is critical in preschool (Beatty & Pratt, 2011; Bodrova & Leong, 2003). The PKCC writing standards involve “using a combination of drawing, dictating, or writing” and do not specifically mention these prerequisite motoric skills. In balancing the standards with play, these prerequisite fine motor skills provide a bridge between play and writing skills.

The ELLCO observations identified several good examples of making children aware of writing, such as print-rich environments, which included labeled objects and centers around the classroom, writing centers with varied writing utensils, and teacher-modeling how to write actual letters and words. As in the case of reading, there was evidence in some of the classrooms that expectations were too high for preschoolers. Some observations noted direct attempts at writing instruction, such as writing in journals and direct teaching of writing letters. Student writing instruction and practice focused more on mechanics of writing, such as “the teacher writing words out for students to copy” and “writing workshops,” but lacked individualized strategies, such as inventive spelling and motoric development.

Writing is a process of discovery in preschool and should be meaningful to the child, like starting to recognize the letters in his or her name. Without meaning, writing is a random set of symbols. Writing can easily be integrated into play, such as having the waiter in the “restaurant” take an order or asking the office worker take a phone message in the “office” from the dramatic play areas referenced earlier. Again, writing should take place in the meaningful context of a child’s play and should be developmentally appropriate, moving from a basic understanding of communication and motoric development to meaningful pre-writing activities. In the case of reading and writing, some teachers and/or parents are pushing preschool children to levels beyond what is developmentally appropriate, or even expected by the PKCC, to “prepare” them for kindergarten and first grade. The PKCC Standards readily recognize that “children develop at different rates and each child is unique in his/her own development, growth, and acquisition of skills” (2011, p. 8).

### **Suggestions for Preschool Teachers**

Many preschool teachers across the nation feel “caught in a tug-of-war between direct instruction and play to nurture the school readiness of young children” (Tullis, 2011, p. 26). Given the state’s adoption of the Common Core Standards and the developmental necessity for play, how can preschool teachers balance these two demands in a developmentally appropriate way?

The first step in meeting both the standards and needs of young children is to understand the developmental context and recognize that play is absolutely essential for preschool children. The field of early childhood education has long recognized that play is a necessity for young children, especially since preschool is their introduction to peer socialization and first experience with formal learning outside of the home (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Elkonin, 1978; NAEYC, 1998; Vygotsky, 1977; Vygotsky, 1986). The foundation of language and literacy in preschool is best developed within the context of a child’s play and natural environment (NAEYC/IRA 2009; Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

The “critical period” of literacy growth, during early childhood (ages zero to eight), is fundamental and must be understood in a developmental context. Play allows for open-ended exploration, as opposed to children imitating what the teacher does or says. Bonawitz et. al



(2011) conducted an interesting study in which groups of preschool children either were instructed how to use a novel toy or left to explore the toy in free-play conditions without adult instruction. The preschool children who received instruction learned to use the toy. The children in the exploratory group eventually learned how to use the toy, too, but also used creativity and problem-solving skills when trying to figure it out. Teachers want children to know the facts and be good problem solvers. As Snow (2011) states:

What is striking, though, is an unspoken reality: We want children to be both knowledgeable about facts and details *and* be creative and good problem solvers. We want young children to know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but also use that knowledge across a range of situations beyond answering a single test item. Shouldn't that mean there is a place for both direct instruction and play? (para. 3)

Play, the activity that fosters creativity and problem solving skills, should be central to any kind of teaching in the preschool classroom.

However, many teachers in this study felt the need to address the standards through direct instruction. This tension between direct instruction to meet the standards and developmentally appropriate, play-based methods seems dichotomous, but it does not have to be so. Snow (2012) debunks the play vs. learning dichotomy, stating that it is a “false dichotomy—that both direct instruction and play have roles to play in high-quality early childhood education.” Meeting the PKCC standards and preserving the imagination, creative thinking, positive socialization, and problem solving that comes from play is possible.

Play is a particularly important vehicle for emergent literacy. The early experiences in infancy and toddlerhood provide a foundation for more formalized education in the areas of reading and writing in elementary school. An important part of this developmental continuum is the bridge of preschool. We must remember that preschool is “pre”-school, before formalized schooling. For many children, this is the first exposure to peer socialization and formal education. For three to five year old children, play is absolutely essential. Early experiences in a play-based and developmentally appropriate preschool setting are crucial, not only in terms of literacy, but also in terms of a child's perspective and opinion of school. A child's first experiences in school are crucial in building upon earlier experiences and transitioning into formalized schooling (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009). If we make preschool about drills and memorization, we may well damage the child's natural curiosity and enthusiasm for school. During the preschool years, children need to acquire a set of fundamental cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional competencies that shape their minds for further learning—not just academic learning, but all learning. These skills include oral language, deliberate memory, focused attention, and self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1977). For a true foundation for lifelong learning to occur, young children must develop in all of these areas. All of these positive skills can be developed through play, free choice time, centers, and spontaneous discussion in the classroom. Teachers should strive to integrate the expectations of the PKCC into these developmentally appropriate activities by becoming familiar with the standards and then exploring ways to naturally integrate them in the context of play and other high-interest activities for young children.





## Conclusion

Our examination of the four areas pertaining to early literacy setting—Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening—identified several positives. The 14 preschool classrooms in this study demonstrated many positive components of emergent literacy, such as developmentally appropriate books, accessible materials, print-rich environments, various literacy-based lessons, and group and individual activities that were relevant to the students’ prior knowledge and background. These examples should be a part of any preschool classroom and are supported by the PKCC standards. The main area of concern is that some preschool teachers seem to hold high academic expectations for preschool children, and direct instruction seems to be the method of choice when trying to address the standards.

The findings of this study suggest that many preschool teachers are opting for direct instruction as a method to meet the expectations of the PKCC, which are often developmentally inappropriate. We suggest that meeting the standards and managing a developmentally appropriate play-based environment is possible. Environment and setting is the first step. In the classrooms observed, free choice time and play in general was not highly valued, despite the fact that play is the most powerful means to quality early learning experiences (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008; Piaget, 1962; Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Every preschool classroom must include free choice time, in which children can explore independently. Creating well-planned centers that integrate the goals of the PKCC is a way to address the standards and allow the benefits of free play. In terms of literacy experiences, opportunities to develop speech and language were underutilized in the study. Speech and language opportunities were not maximized with scaffolding, missing the opportunity to create a deep “culture of conversation.” Preschool teachers should allow children varied opportunities to practice their speech and listening skills and use everyday conversation to introduce new vocabulary. In terms of reading and writing, some preschool teachers utilized more teacher-directed, direct instruction methods, to meet and, in many cases, exceed what is expected by the PKCC. Play, foundational skills, and the tenets of emergent literacy seemed overshadowed by the emphasis on teaching the nuts and bolts of reading and writing. Reading and writing are multi-faceted skills that take years to master. The focus in preschool should be the foundation exposure to reading, enjoying reading, refining fine motor skills for writing, and most importantly, connecting literacy concepts to the child’s experiences to make them meaningful. Jumping ahead to more advanced reading or writing skills without this critical foundation is not only developmentally inappropriate, but may backfire in the future and result in a child losing enthusiasm for school and learning.

This troubling trend of pushing pre-kindergarten children beyond what is developmentally appropriate to prepare them for kindergarten is in direct contrast to what kindergarten is really meant to be—a “child’s garden,” as Froebel (1899) originally conceived. The PKCC can be balanced with developmentally appropriate expectations for emergent literacy, including play, if the standards are approached as expectations that be integrated within a child-centered, play-based curriculum. Teachers of young children should value the hallmark of the early childhood years—play, a powerful vehicle to refine social, cognitive, physical, and language skills. To balance the PKCC with play, teachers should build on children’s interests and existing pre-literacy skills and knowledge in a meaningful way through play. After all, literacy is best developed within the context of a child’s natural language of play.



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