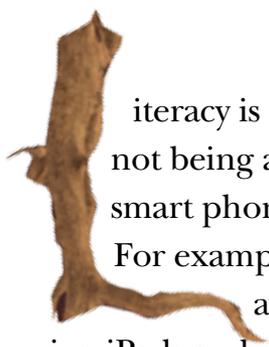


# Building a Foundation for Literacy and Learning

Early literacy and a rigorous early childhood curriculum puts students on the path to success.

By Kathy Ward-Cameron



Literacy is so embedded in daily life, it's hard to imagine not being able to read or write, especially in this age of smart phones and other digital communication devices. For example, in a recent survey, Neilson found that teens average 3,000 texts a month. Parents are introducing iPads and computers to children as young as 9 months, and most preschool classrooms are furnished with computers and tablets for children's learning. Literacy has never been more valued or important in our society.

## Roots of Literacy

For typically developing children, the journey to literacy starts as soon as they are exposed to the world—the sights, sounds, smells, physical and emotional feelings, and tastes. Their first utterances are the beginning of language, an attempt to communicate these experiences.

What does that have to do with learning to read and write? Consider that the subject of all those texts, tweets, and emails that we read and write daily are usually attempts at describing what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, or tasting. Beginning with those very earliest experiences, we start to figure out how to communicate effectively with others. If we think of literacy in broad terms, we can better understand how important the early years are in establishing the foundation for future reading and writing success.

Ninety percent of a typical child's brain is developed by the age of 5, putting early childhood educators on the frontlines of building that foundation. Their success (or failure) determines how successful a child will be in school and in life. School and reading readiness translates to life readiness.





### A Continuum of Learning

Head Start defines early literacy as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that lead to conventional reading and writing. The key to future reading and writing success begins with language development. According to The Take Care Net, by age 3, high socioeconomic status (SES) children have average vocabularies of 1,100 words, middle SES children have average vocabularies of 750 words, and low SES children have average vocabularies of 480 words. If we hope to close the achievement gap, all young children need rich language experiences to develop their receptive and expressive vocabularies.

The ability to pass a standardized test in fourth grade is primarily based on a child's ability to understand and appropriately respond to the questions. In this way we might think of most exams as "vocabulary tests."

According to studies by the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts, children learn best from a curriculum that builds on their prior knowledge and experiences relating new vocabulary, concepts, and information to what they already know. For example, during a study on nutrition, the teacher initiates a lesson on vegetables. The teacher might read the book *Rah, Rah Radishes*, by April Pulley Sayre, to the class, and then

## Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: [www.naesp.org/SeptOct13](http://www.naesp.org/SeptOct13)

Watch a short video in which David Dickinson discusses Vanderbilt University's **research on learning in preschool**.

Read the transcript of an interview with Robert Pianta on **early literacy**.

Listen to the NAESP Radio podcast, "Early Moves That Create a Continuum of Learning Success," where host Gail Connelly discusses **the state of early learning** with Deborah Leong.

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show real vegetables that are mentioned in the book. Children might then be asked to identify the colors, shapes, and textures of different kinds of vegetables. This activity could lead to further investigation of where vegetables come from and what they need to grow.

To move the child forward along the continuum, school readiness goals and curricula should be aligned with Common Core and state learning standards. But, a curriculum is only as good as the teachers implementing it. When a preschool teacher is knowledgeable about the literacy expectations for entrance to kindergarten, she will be much better prepared to lead her students toward those goals. Principals can support this effort by providing preschool teachers with training—and coaching if needed—on standards and teaching practices, as well as encouraging ongoing dialogue between preschool and kindergarten teachers to insure a smooth transition for children.

The classroom environment plays a major role in the development of language and early literacy skills. A classroom equipped with quality books and literacy materials is not enough. How the teachers set up the environment and the ways they use the materials to support children's language and literacy learning is critical. For example, children who are exposed to and use information books with their teachers in preschool to learn about topics of interest to them are more successful in third grade when they are required to use books for reference.

Principals should work closely with teachers to make sure the classroom furnishings are appropriately sized and in good repair, and that there are well-defined learning centers that are organized and well stocked with literacy-rich materials, including qual-

ity books and writing materials.

Phonological awareness has been identified as a strong predictor of early reading success. According to H.K. Yopps, the ability to hear the sounds of language is essential to learning to read and write because letters represent sounds, or phonemes. Phonological awareness is *not* phonics. In order for a child to be able to map sound to print, he must first be able to hear and pronounce sounds clearly.

Principals should observe and encourage teachers to provide many opportunities throughout the school day for children to build awareness of sounds in language through rhyming, syllable segmenting and alliteration activities, and games and songs, as well as to use phonological terms with children such as rhyme, syllable, and beginning/ending sound.

### Rigorous Teaching Practices

Philosophies and research have changed over the past 15 to 20 years regarding the role of the teacher and early childhood teaching practices. The idea that young children "learn through play" was once taken to mean that teachers should set the stage by adding fun activities to learning centers, and then get out of the kids' way so they can go about the business of learning. Another misconception was that children don't need to be taught to read; it just happens automatically. Now we know that preschool teachers need to be as rigorous in their teaching practices as teachers in K-12.

In an interview with the Reading Rockets literacy initiative, Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia, one of the nation's top authorities on teacher/child interactions, explained that "play is an important vehicle for learning because it engages the children in activities they enjoy and are

motivated to do naturally. And then teachers enter that play in ways that then extend the children's skills while they're engaging in the play." Pianta goes on to provide an example of children playing at a sand table, dumping sand in and out of shapes. "If a teacher enters that interaction with children, that's an opportunity to learn all sorts of things about shape and number and geometry and quantity and change in ways that the children are going to enjoy," said Pianta.

Teachers must be intentional about what they are teaching. David Dickinson, a prominent leader and researcher in the area of early language and literacy at Vanderbilt University, says teachers need to constantly ask themselves what they want the kids to learn. Teachers who read interesting books to their students, talk with them about the meanings of words, and engage them in meaningful conversations are not only expanding vocabulary and knowledge, but they also are developing habits of engagement. Learning to be intellectually present is a critical skill for future success in school.

Other signs of rigorous instruction in a preschool classroom include drawing, writing, dictating, or using graphic organizers to record children's observations or predictions.

### Characteristics of Literacy-Rich Preschool Classrooms

An effective way to determine if a classroom is language- and literacy-rich is through classroom observation. Many early childhood programs use the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation-PreK (ELLCO) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tools to assess teacher intentionality in providing quality language and literacy-rich opportunities for children.

ELLCO assesses the general classroom environment, including classroom structure and curriculum, as well as language and literacy, specifically the language environment, books and book reading, print, and early writing.

CLASS targets the quality of teacher-child interactions around three domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. The instructional support domain measures important dimensions for language and literacy acquisition such as teacher effectiveness with concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling.

### Principal's Role in Improving Early Literacy

During a recent training, I overheard a group of public school preschool teachers saying that they are never included in schoolwide meetings or planning, don't get support, and view school events as irrelevant to them. The common theme among this group of teachers was the perception that preschool and early childhood educators are not valued.

Principals can support teachers in improving early literacy by first examining the school's attitudes, systems, and policies. Is preschool viewed as merely babysitting or a holding cell until the kids are old enough to start "real" school, or is it as important as kindergarten and fifth grade?

Helping teachers assess where the children are in their language and literacy development, and then setting goals and planning where the children need to be, is the surest way of ensur-

ing that children succeed. Teachers may need professional development and additional support to make sure they know how to administer the assessment tools; analyze the data; and effectively individualize, modify, and implement the curriculum so all children can achieve school readiness.

In preparing this article, I met with David Dickinson and asked him to reflect on ways that principals can enhance language and literacy schoolwide. Here are a few of his insights:

- **Embrace Common Core State Standards.** Have month-long, schoolwide celebrations around a shared topic (science or social studies themes) that include displays in halls, class reports with demonstrations, hall displays, and skits related to the topic of study.
- **Focus on building language.** Encourage talking through more hands-on activities, oral reports, and book discussions rather than worksheets. Praise teachers when they engage children in conversations.
- **Reinforce reading.** Bring in more quality books. Promote information books as well as storybooks. Form partnerships with libraries.
- **Include families.** Encourage families to do language and literacy enhancing activities together at home, such as making books or talking about family photos.

Early literacy is the foundation on which all learning occurs. Children who enter kindergarten with a strong vocabulary and possess language skills to express their thoughts and feelings to others—who are curious and interested in learning as well as have knowledge of the alphabet and the sounds of letters—are well on their way to being successful in school and in life. They'll be texting and tweeting before we know it! 

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