

## The Early Literacy Curriculum: Focus on Best Practices



**I**N CHAPTER 4, we focused on what early childhood leaders need to know about the content of the language and literacy curriculum. In this chapter, we turn to *best practices*, the instructional strategies that foster children's learning of that content.

### KEY ISSUES RELATED TO BEST PRACTICES

A literacy leader's familiarity with several key issues related to best practices can make the difference between an effective curriculum and one that flounders. These issues include

- Keeping play at the forefront of literacy learning
- Providing a print-rich environment
- Encouraging linguistically and culturally responsive teaching
- Attending to prevention and intervention
- Organizing for differentiated instruction
- Balancing skills and strategies
- Scaffolding children's learning
- Using technology wisely
- Integrating literature and literacy across the curriculum

We provide a brief description of each issue with some implications and suggestions for practice.

### **Keeping Play at the Forefront of Literacy Learning**

A predisposition to play is inherent in children. Many of the researchers we cited in Chapter 2, especially Piaget and Vygotsky, explicitly link symbolic play with language and literacy. Early childhood educators have long been encouraged to use playful activities as a means to stimulate learning. Many teachers express concern that a focus on early literacy will gradually eliminate play from the curriculum. They worry that literacy-enriched activities will make preschool look more like kindergarten and that kindergarten will look more like 1st grade. Their fears are well founded when educators think of early literacy content as a composite body of knowledge that children must learn and spout back on demand, rather than as a symbolic system that they can acquire over time to help them make sense of their world. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that kindergarten and 1st grade literacy learning need be devoid of playful activities that encourage children's imagination, participation, and joy in learning any more than prekindergarten programs.

**Implications for Practice.** The best teaching strategies capitalize on children's natural propensity to explore and learn through play. This is accomplished through both teacher-led learning opportunities and through opportunities for children to apply what they know in "free" play situations. Including books, paper, and writing implements in the dramatic play area to encourage children to incorporate literacy in their play activities is just one example of providing opportunities for children to learn literacy through play.

### **Providing a Print-Rich Environment**

One important way that young children construct knowledge and understandings about print is through experiences with logos, labels, road signs, and other meaningful visual displays found in the immediate environment. Children observe as adults use environmental print in functional ways: to make selections from a fast food menu, to stop at a stop sign, and to choose items at the supermarket. At school they may be engaged in similar ways as they find their names on a chart or as they return materials, such as crayons or scissors, to a particular labeled bin.

**Implications for Practice.** Effective teachers plan the environment so that children are engaged in purposeful uses of visual symbols. In print-rich classrooms opportunities for using environmental print present themselves naturally throughout the day. A checklist for examining the quality of print exposure and use in classrooms is provided at the end of this chapter in Figure 5.3. It is important to note that the display of print for its own sake without links to the curriculum or signs of active use by children is not considered to be effective. Some might even construe it to be like bland wallpaper, given little or no attention by the occupants of the room.

### **Encouraging Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Issues related to a child's linguistic and cultural background represent a growing challenge for early literacy educators. In the changing demographics of our nation, preschool educators increasingly encounter children and families from a variety of cultures. Latinos, for example, are now the largest minority group in the country and are growing at a faster rate than the population as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Even for many English-speaking children, the school language (or dialect) and culture may differ greatly from that of their homes. Teachers of young children need to keep in mind that a child's prekindergarten classroom may be the first setting of sustained contact with a new culture and will help set the stage for early success or failure with formal schooling (Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

**Implications for Practice.** Early childhood professionals in effective programs seek to learn as much as they can about the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children with whom they work. Such teachers understand the nature of linguistic diversity and provide developmentally appropriate experiences with English language literacy for children. Family literacy programs are offered to reinforce these experiences and provide continuity between home and school. Whenever practical, such programs employ staff who speak the children's home language as well as English. In general the curriculum is implemented in ways that foster respect for what children bring to the learning situation and that provide continuity between the child's experiences at home and those within the early childhood program.

### **Attending to Prevention and Intervention**

Studies of the relationship between early literacy development and school achievement have had a profound impact on the early literacy curriculum as an intervention process for children considered to be at risk for failure. Risk factors include

- Exhibiting a developmental disability (e.g., oral language impairment, mental retardation, hearing impairment)
- Having a parent with a history of reading disability
- Speaking a language or dialect that differs from the local academic curriculum
- Living in a household in which experiences with oral and written language are infrequent (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998)

For children in such circumstances, a preventive approach to early literacy may be required to encourage timely attainment of the skills and abilities needed for later school readiness and achievement.

The curriculum components outlined in Chapter 4 are viewed as essential elements of instruction for all children. Nevertheless, children vary in how well any "basic" curriculum will serve them. They differ in what they bring to the preschool setting and what they gain from it. Some children enter preschool having had the advantage of an abundance of experiences with books and print. Their backgrounds include numerous opportunities for visits to interesting places where adults and older siblings hold conversations

with them about what they observe. Equally important, they enjoy opportunities for play at home that serve to expand their general knowledge and intellectual development. For these children, both their linguistic and experiential backgrounds match well with what most schools expect. The preschool curriculum provides an opportunity to reinforce and expand the rich reservoir of skills and knowledge these children possess.

For a variety of reasons, many other children need more, different, or specifically targeted learning opportunities in preschool. Indeed, variability among any group of preschool children can be assured. Children vary in the amount and type of language and literacy experiences provided at home. They vary in their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Some may have specific learning difficulties. Still others may simply take longer to learn than most. Moreover, several of these factors may be represented in any individual child. Justice and Pullen (2003) suggest three approaches that have strong evidence as promising preschool interventions:

1. Adult-child shared storybook reading
2. Literacy-enriched play settings
3. Teacher-directed structured phonological awareness curricula

**Implications for Practice.** Keep in mind that no matter how theoretically sound and well-crafted the written curriculum may be, it is only as effective as its ability to serve the differing needs of individual children. Skillful teachers are constantly alert to variability in student progress and response to instruction. They make adjustments within the framework of the curriculum in order to make instruction more responsive to student needs. When necessary they seek the advice of specialists in particular areas and resources outside of the classroom in order to adjust the curriculum even further.

### **Organizing for Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiating instruction to meet the individual needs of learners is arguably one of the most important things that effective teachers do. Differentiation can take many forms. Varying teacher-pupil ratio is the most common way that teachers differentiate. They sometimes work with the whole group, with small groups,

and with children one-to-one. Changes in teacher-pupil ratio result in important changes in the constituency of the group.

**Implications for Practice.** Whole-group instruction involves the entire class. It generally takes place with all of the children seated on a rug during "circle time," so called because children are often seated in a circle for instruction. By its very nature it includes the widest range of abilities and interests in the group. It is excellent for introducing and supporting specific concepts, skills, and strategies. Used diagnostically, it can help determine the need for small-group and individual follow-up. It also has the advantage of building a sense of community among the children.

Small-group instruction (generally 2–5 children) is often scheduled during "center time," a block of time in which some children work independently at various activity centers in the room while their teachers work with small groups and individuals. This type of organization allows for a more homogeneous grouping of children who have similar needs, interests, and abilities. Both small-group and one-to-one instruction are a natural follow-up to whole-group instruction. Teachers may briefly revisit specific aspects of a whole-group activity with two or three children: "Did you notice any letters that looked the same on the chart we worked on earlier?" Intervention for English Language Learners, educationally advanced children, and those with other special needs is best done with small groups.

One-to-one instruction may occur as part of center time activities or as brief, highly focused adult-child interactions throughout the day. Typical purposes and types of interaction are the same as that of small-group instruction, only individualized.

Providing for both explicit (direct) and more informal but well-planned indirect instruction is another consideration for differentiation. Explicit teaching may take place during whole-group or small-group time. Well-planned opportunities for independent work during center time allow children to work in informal ways, often applying the knowledge more explicitly.

Another way to differentiate instruction is to provide a variety of materials and modalities for children to explore and apply what they know. For example, children can improve their letter recognition through explorations with felt or wooden letters and computer software programs, and by attempts at writing letters on their own.

Literacy leaders should insist that teachers plan for differentiated instruction. Moreover, the planning should be treated as an intentional, thoughtful activity that builds on stated curriculum goals with strong links to standards and assessment.

### **Balancing Skills and Strategies**

Effective educators throughout the grades emphasize strategy instruction over the accumulation of isolated skills. While both skills and strategies are important to early literacy instruction, early childhood leaders and teachers need to understand the difference between the two. Paris, Wasik, and Turner (1991) suggest that strategies are distinct from skills. People perform skills the same way every time. For example, recognizing the names of letters and reading from left to right are skills. Skill instruction is often accomplished through drill and repetition. Strategies are plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning (Duffy, 1993). Unlike skills, these plans are not automatic. Learners modify their plans—their strategies—depending on the situation. For example, how you pronounce *wind* will depend on the meaning of the sentence in which you find it: “The *wind* blew the tree down,” or “Mother asked me to *wind* the clock.” The reader uses the meaning of the sentence in a strategic way to decide how *wind* will be pronounced.

**Implications for Practice.** Understanding the distinction between a skill and a strategy is especially important when teaching phonemic awareness and letter knowledge. While it is important for children to hear the sounds in words and to name letters, this is only a small part of what they need to know. The fact that a young child can recite the alphabet is quite an accomplishment, but it is not a strategy. It is a skill. Having that skill does not mean that the child understands that letters are used to form words and that changing the order of the letters actually changes the word.

Both phonological awareness and letter knowledge may function as isolated skills that are not very helpful unless children understand how to apply them as they read and write. At that point, these skills become useful strategies. This is why we stress that teachers continually model the uses of reading and writing and actually demonstrate the process for children in a variety of

formal and informal ways. As children observe how our system of language works, they begin to connect their knowledge of sounds and letters to what it means for reading and writing. They begin to ask questions about letters and words. Ultimately they begin to “try out” what they know through their own attempts to read and write.

### **Scaffolding Children’s Learning**

Scaffolding refers to the process whereby a child’s learning occurs in the context of full performance as adults gradually relinquish support (Cazden, 1988). Think of the phrase “everybody needs a helping hand,” and it will be easy to remember what scaffolding is. Adults frequently help children accomplish things they want to do, such as work with a puzzle, write the first letter of their name, or ride a bike. First we show them how we do it. In fact, for some time they may have been observing us doing an activity when we were in control. Now we invite them to try, and we help as they attempt to do it. At times we intervene, but only when our assistance is needed. When we think they are ready, we let them try completely on their own (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004).

**Implications for Practice.** When a teacher reads aloud or models writing for children, he or she has full control of the process. The children watch and learn what skilled readers and writers do. When a teacher invites children to join in as he or she reads from familiar big books or engages children in writing a chart, they are involved in the process. The children participate as much as they can. Their understanding deepens as the teacher guides them to read a repeated phrase in a book or prompts them to suggest a word to be written on a chart. Throughout, children are systematically involved in observing and participating in literacy activities, leading to opportunities to “try out” reading and writing on their own. Effective teachers use scaffolding to plan and guide instruction that moves from teacher control to child independence. Literacy leaders should be watchful for this type of instruction in the classrooms they observe.



### Using Technology Wisely

Virtually all of today's young children are immersed in a world of technology. This is true regardless of their cultural or economic backgrounds. They come to preschool already familiar with television, VCRs, CD players, computers, cell phones, and iPods. Nevertheless, many educators remain cautious about the use of technology in the classroom. Teachers are concerned that time spent at computers may be at the expense of more valuable time spent involving hands-on opportunities for learning and exploring the environment. They worry that the use of television programs designed especially for language and literacy development may appear to others as an excuse or substitute for providing their own instruction. Yet the selective and limited use of language and literacy programs may be appropriate for the classroom, especially when they are accompanied by teacher-support materials.

**Implications for Practice.** Some teachers are unfamiliar with what is available in the way of technological support and have little experience or training in its use. Others lack the background knowledge required to incorporate technology into the existing curriculum. In such cases teachers may have access to computers and other types of technology, but they are either used poorly or not at all. For example, simply allowing children to aimlessly operate software programs with no preparation or support is a waste of time. As with any kind of independent activity, teachers should model the use of a new software program for the entire group before children are allowed to use it on their own. Follow-up monitoring of children's use is also important.

It seems prudent for literacy leaders to become better informed about the possible uses of technology. Taking advantage of technical support from the school district or appropriately trained university educators who specialize in this area would make an excellent year-long professional development project for the entire staff. Topics explored could include shoring up the knowledge and skills of classroom teachers and other personnel in the use of technology, learning how to evaluate and select computer software, and planning for the inclusion of technology as one of many tools that support literacy learning. Later in this chapter, Figure 5.4 offers a checklist to use when evaluating computer software for purchase.

## **Integrating Literature and Literacy Across the Curriculum**

The need to help teachers pull all the pieces of the curriculum into an integrated whole is among the greatest challenges facing literacy leaders. None of the elements described in this chapter should stand alone. All assume that the language and literacy program is equipped with an adequate supply of excellent children's literature and that there are ample opportunities for children to be immersed in the exploration of content themes that truly intrigue and engage them. Investigations into themes such as how plants grow, the many ways we travel, or the change of the seasons involve communication through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A wide array of children's literature is available to support virtually any theme that teachers and children might wish to study. Teachers can read aloud to children and have them respond in various ways. They can involve children in shared reading and writing and in activities promoting phonemic awareness and phonics. The point here is that learning to read and write is a unifying element that touches every aspect of the curriculum. While discrete lessons on various aspects of literacy learning are important, opportunities to connect and apply the learning across curriculum content are what makes those lessons stick. A sound curriculum for young children is grounded in helping them use and build on what they know in the process of becoming self-reliant, independent learners.

## **LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES**

Selecting a curriculum program model for implementation in your school is a very big decision. We suggest that leaders guide staff members to discuss what they believe about how children learn and how they are best taught before even looking at available curricula. For example, you may wish to consider whether or not you want a program that is highly prescriptive (scripted), detailing everything a teacher is to say and do. Or you may want a program that consists of a set of activities, loosely organized around a set of topics or curriculum areas. Further, you may look more favorably on programs that provide some structure and guidance for

teachers with opportunities for teacher flexibility and decision making. Figure 5.1 offers a set of questions for early childhood educators to consider when adopting a curriculum model.

Within any curriculum, even the most well-intentioned, teachers may have difficulty meeting the challenges associated with children whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from their own. Figure 5.2 is offered as a stimulus for candid and thoughtful discussions about the challenges faced by the entire school community—the children and their families, teachers, and administrators. Its use is intended to encourage a mutually supportive environment for all involved.

Informed educational leaders can tell a great deal about the quality of instruction in a classroom simply by observing the literacy environment. The checklist in Figure 5.3 is meant to serve as a reminder of the type of evidence on display where literacy learning is active and supported through the classroom learning environment.

**FIGURE 5.1 Questions to Consider About a Proposed Curriculum Model**

1. What is the theoretical orientation of the curriculum model?  
How does the theoretical model define the roles of the teacher and the child in initiating learning?
2. What domains of learning are addressed, and are they integrated or treated as distinctly separate content and skills?  
How much emphasis is placed on oral language development, higher-order thinking, and problem solving?  
Will the curriculum lead to achievement of state standards?
3. Does the curriculum model provide guidance, adaptations, and specific strategies to differentiate teaching depending on characteristics of the children (e.g., children with special needs, English Language Learners, children with challenging behaviors)?
4. How is learning assessed?  
Is an assessment system provided that is consistent with the teaching philosophy and content of the model?
5. What is the research base for this curriculum model?

---

*Note:* Adapted from Frede & Ackerman, 2006, p. 2.

**FIGURE 5.2 Characteristics of Effective Schools and Classrooms for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Preschool Children and Their Families**

---

Throughout the **school**, teachers and administrators—

- Show sensitivity and respect for the diverse community of learners and families
- Demonstrate awareness that all parents have goals and aspirations for their children
- Make attempts to learn as much as possible about the children and their families
- Encourage parents to engage in extended conversation with their children
- Encourage parents to read to their children in whatever language they feel most comfortable

In **classrooms** with English Language Learners, teachers—

- Accompany verbal communication with lots of nonverbal communication and gestures
  - Attempt to keep messages simple
  - Focus lots of talk on the here and now
  - Emphasize the important words in a sentence
  - Encourage a low-risk environment for oral language use in any language
  - Include some personal, extended conversations that go beyond the here and now
  - Show respect for all languages while helping children expand their understanding and use of English
- 

The appropriate use of technology is another aspect of the learning environment. When evaluating software for purchase, we recommend that teachers collaborate. Inquiries made to independent evaluators and other teachers will be of enormous help in making good decisions. The list of questions in Figure 5.4 is meant to serve as a reminder about some important points to consider.

**FIGURE 5.3 Print-Rich Environment Checklist**

---

- \_\_\_ 1. Print is visible on open charts and bulletin boards around the room.
  - \_\_\_ 2. Children's names are printed on their cubbies, place mats, paintings, and other items.
  - \_\_\_ 3. Children are encouraged to write their own names or letters from their names on their paintings and drawings.
  - \_\_\_ 4. Environmental print is clear, easy to read, meaningful, and displayed at children's eye level.
  - \_\_\_ 5. Print in the environment represents words familiar to children through daily activities and through thematic inquiry about growing things, the neighborhood, and other special experiences.
  - \_\_\_ 6. Where appropriate, some print is written in languages other than English.
  - \_\_\_ 7. Name cards and other carefully printed words are available for children to copy or "read."
  - \_\_\_ 8. Functional uses of print are incorporated into the routine activities, for example:
    - Mailboxes are available for each child/family to encourage the sharing of messages between home and school.
    - A newsletter describing children's activities is shared with the children and sent home regularly.
  - \_\_\_ 9. Print is incorporated in every area of the classroom.
-