

The Push for Early Childhood Literacy: Critical Issues and Concerns

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Several issues and concerns relating to early childhood literacy in the current political climate seem very important and worthy of discussion.

First, the age-old reading debate over whether code-first or meaning-first instruction works best has become more politicized than ever. The 2000 Republican national platform endorsed phonics, and the Bush administration promotes the teaching of phonics in America's classrooms and is tying funds to programs that explicitly teach phonics. The National Reading Panel mandated by Congress, which promotes systematic phonics instruction, was produced largely by McGraw-Hill authors who write phonics-based materials and has been criticized as an extremely flawed research effort. But the report by this panel is having widespread influence over classroom instruction nationwide. This politicization of the longtime reading debate is undermining the progress that has been made in the literacy field toward better integration of these two opposing views. What serves children best is for research and theory to point educators toward the best practices that can support children's optimal literacy development. This path is available to educators now, but is being undermined by the current administration's bias.

A related issue of concern is that political leaders are not turning to the experts in the fields of literacy and early childhood education for guidance in developing policy. The report of the National Research Council, headed by Catherine Snow of Harvard University, entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (1999) calls for a balanced approach to literacy and spells out in great detail what kinds of language and literacy experiences children need in preschool and child care settings. Two committees of scholars in the literacy field have recently produced large works which spell out the wide range of specific experiences in oral and written language that young children need in order to become proficient readers and writers. These two books, *Speaking and Listening for Preschool through Third Grade* (2001) and *Reading and Writing Grade by Grade* (1999), also present practical standards for early literacy achievement beginning in kindergarten and standards in

speaking and listening that begin with preschool.² These standards put into practice the best of what is known in the field of literacy today, but they are not the standards on which federal policies and funding are currently based.

The federal government has also not relied on the knowledge base which guides practice in the field of early childhood education. In its widely used book *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has identified teaching practices in early literacy that best support young children's literacy development. These include the frequent reading of books, activities of drawing, painting and writing, play with open-ended materials, and unstructured, make-believe play. Emergent reading skills, such as knowing that a story is the same with each reading and beginning to know that meaning is conveyed in print, develop in settings that offer these kinds of activities. In such settings, children also begin to learn basic concepts about writing — print awareness, functions of print, and phonological awareness — as they experiment making marks and letters on paper with encouragement from their teachers. These emergent skills are developmental and occur differently in every child. NAEYC is opposed to the imposition of uniform standards and timetables on young children, and to standardized tests in the early years.

Another concern is that children today are having fewer of the kinds of experiences they need in order to build a strong foundation for early literacy. Even children ages two to four spend almost three hours a day in front of a screen. The hours lost in play and interactions with materials and peers puts children at increased risk for difficulty in learning to read and write. The erosion of play is of special concern because it is a main vehicle used by children to make sense of the world. It is through the reordering of experience through play that children actively make meaning of their experience, begin to use symbols that represent their ideas, and build the foundation for comprehension of print. Children are getting fewer positive precursor experiences for literacy in school as the emphasis on phonics

and standardized tests bears down on teachers, narrowing even the preschool curriculum.

The negative impact on children of hours of screen time spent outside of school is far more damaging when key experiences needed for learning are disappearing from the school curriculum.

Young children gradually build their understanding of symbols and begin to use a variety of symbol systems in the early years: language, play with materials, socio-dramatic play, movement, drawing and art. At the root of all symbol use is the effort by the child to make meaning. Very gradually, children begin to notice the symbols used in the world around them and begin to experiment with these, integrating them with other symbol systems they use. But for young children whose use of symbols is still highly subjective, conventional letters are too abstract to be of optimal use for conveying ideas and feelings. Children move in a gradual, developmental progression toward the use of conventional symbols, but ideally this happens in a way that maintains meaning and a sense of ownership over symbols.

The development of early literacy skills is a gradual and slow process. Children experiment with the creation of symbols from a young age, learning how to make marks that represent their meaning. Symbolic play with three-dimensional materials supports this process, as does drawing and making marks on paper. Over a long period of time, the marks children make will come closer to the conventional symbols used in reading and writing. But if this developmental process is rushed, children can become confused and can develop problems in making sense of the print system. Also, their command of symbols as within their control and as a vehicle for expression is undermined.

Another concern is with the false dichotomy of the phonics approach versus whole language that pervades all of the discussions and works against finding the best programs and practices for children. This current emphasis on school preparedness threatens to undermine the health and well-being of children by eliminating the very experiences they need in order to establish the foundation for early literacy during this critical period.

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