

Emergent Literacy and the Development of the Early Literacy Program Evaluation Guide

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In recent years, early childhood educators have been very worried about the “trickle-down” effect. This phenomenon refers to the teaching of formal, academic skills, once reserved for children in the primary grades, now being deployed in the classrooms of four- and five-year-olds. With the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation championing standards and accountability, this “trickle” has now become a flood. In many kindergarten classrooms blocks, centers, socio-dramatic play areas, or even well-stocked classroom libraries have been banished. Their place has been taken by student workbooks, basal readers, and scripted programs that teachers are required to follow as they strive to get children reading by the end of the school year. As a result, the kindergarten curriculum has become increasingly narrow and academic. And this trend is moving inexorably in the direction of the preschool. In the process, as we shall explain in this article, many of the skills and dispositions foundational to well-rounded literacy development of children are being sacrificed.

Early Literacy Curriculum

Early childhood educators believe that schooling for young children should focus on developing the “whole child,” socially, emotionally, physically, and academically. They are also committed to the belief that each of these areas is of equal importance. They believe that it is of the utmost importance to stretch and challenge children intellectually without sacrificing development in these other areas. Teaching pre-reading skills and encouraging children to read are essential steps on the path of literacy development. Of course, this must be done in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways in order to encourage the desire to learn, to give students the experience that learning to read is enjoyable, and to set them on the path of life-long learning. A narrow and persistent attention to academics is potentially harmful to children as it inhibits their social, emotional, and physical development. Many four- and five-year-olds are not developmentally ready to participate in a heavy academic curriculum in which they are expected to sit and pay attention for long periods of time, and where skills are taught in isolation rather in ways that are meaningful and relevant.

Teaching Literacy Skills

We recognize that the development of literacy skills is essential in preparing children for school, but the problem is that other essential skills are frequently sacrificed to lessons in phonological and phonemic awareness¹. Such lessons are important; however, they are *only a part* of a well-rounded early literacy program. Students also need to learn a number of more basic skills if they are going to learn to read and write (Adams, 1990; Flippo, 1999; International Reading Association, 1997; National Council of Teachers of English, 1997).

Students must first acquire the conventions of print. They need to know how to hold a book, gain a sense of directionality (left to right), become aware of the spaces between words, learn a little about the function of punctuation, and understand something about the uses and purposes of print. They also need to learn how stories are structured—that they have a beginning, middle, and end.

These lessons are best advanced by reading quality children’s literature to students and by talking about books with them. This well-established approach, long practiced by teachers of early childhood, is known to promote growth in children’s vocabulary and language. Children must not only be taught how to read, they must be taught in ways that lead them to *want* to read and gain an appreciation of reading as something useful and enjoyable. This supports the view that classrooms should provide a strong literacy programs in the early years. These goals are served best by a print-rich environment that includes an abundance of quality children’s books and opportunities to interact with meaningful print as they work and play together.

Children also need areas for socio-dramatic play where they can practice their developing reading, writing, spelling, and oral communication skills. For example, classroom centers can be set up so that they can role play in contexts such as a pretend restaurant, post-office, repair shop, sign-making shop, veterinarian’s office, dentist, or puppet theater. Teachers can also provide access to a wide variety of materials to use for writing and drawing with pencils, markers, crayons, and colored paper. The use of literacy centers is another effective teaching tool

in the repertoire of the early childhood teacher. Centers can be created to give children practice in sorting objects and pictures according to beginning sounds; play with magnetic letters; experiment with tracing, printing, and stamping; and work with clay, paint, and chalk.

Once these early literacy skills have been given time to develop, instruction in phonological and phonemic awareness can build upon the knowledge and experiences children bring to the school. They can then be integrated across the curriculum. Instruction in these areas should be thoughtfully planned, deliberate in application, and proceed in an orderly fashion. However, that does not mean a lock-step approach that requires all children to be on the same page at the same time. One size never fits all. Teachers must be skilled in assessing children and designing and adapting curricula accordingly. The curriculum should be based on the needs of the child rather than on a teachers' manual. Instruction should be engaging, and children should find meaning, purpose, and pleasure in their learning.

Phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics are critical to the process of learning to read. The question has never really been whether or not to teach these pre-reading skills, but rather *how* to teach them, and *how much time* should be spent on teaching them. According to a study conducted by the National Reading Panel, the best results in developing phonemic awareness were achieved in programs that used between 5 and 18 hours total in the course of a school year (Garan, 2002, p. 68). Of course, these effects may vary according to individual differences in students.

Phonemic awareness should be developed in age-appropriate ways such as through activities involving songs, rhythm, and rhyming. Teacher can play phonemic awareness games—for example, “I’m thinking of something in the room that starts with the ‘ch’ sound.” Sounds can be identified with students’ names, or the morning message, or in stories read aloud. These examples represent just a few of the many ways to develop reading skills in contexts that are meaningful and motivating to children.

It is important to remember that *the single most important factor in students’ reading success is the teacher*. Teachers must be knowledgeable in using developmentally appropriate literacy strategies, skillful in employing activities that engage children in meaningful work and play, and responsive to the needs of the children in their care.

The Early Literacy Evaluation Guide

Concerns have been growing among early childhood professionals in Hawai‘i regarding the many commercial early literacy programs that are beginning to flood the market, particularly those that overemphasize phonics at the expense of other competencies essential to the literacy development for young children. In response to these concerns, the Hawai‘i Early Literacy Consortium (HELCC) was formed to promote the importance of a well-rounded and comprehensive early literacy curriculum. The consortium is made up of public and private early education professionals with expertise in literacy. It is a working group of the School Readiness Task Force that coordinates readiness efforts in the state. The Good Beginnings Alliance facilitates this Task Force which is co-chaired by the superintendent of the Hawai‘i Department of Education, Pat Hamamoto, and the Chief Executive Officer of the Kamehameha Schools, Dee Jay A. Mailer. It is composed of the heads of various educational and human service agencies.

The purpose of the HELCC is to offer advice to preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators in the design and evaluation of their own early literacy programs. It has also established criteria to help in the selection of early literacy curriculum materials and commercial programs. HELCC is also responsible for the publication of *The Early Literacy Evaluation Guide*, which has been printed and distributed by the Good Beginnings Association to every preschool and kindergarten teacher in Hawai‘i, and to a number of early childhood agencies.

The Early Literacy Evaluation Guide was adapted from a K–12 decision-making matrix developed by the Commission on Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).² It was modified to reflect the needs and developmental characteristics of four- and five-year-old children following the principles in the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs serving Children Ages 3 through 8* (NAEYC, 1990).

The Early Literacy Evaluation Guide is aligned with the model of reading embraced by the NCTE.³

Reading is a complex, purposeful process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text, and knowledge of their culture to construct meaning from print. Effective practices are grounded in a professional knowledge of how children make sense of print and how students learn.

The model recognizes that literacy development is both a social and a cognitive process and that the nature and pace of students' learning is influenced by their age, their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, their world knowledge, and their prior experiences with print.

The Early Literacy Evaluation Guide is intended to be a discussion and decision-making tool for teachers and administrators. While it is not intended to evaluate entire early childhood programs, it may be used to evaluate the literacy components of such programs. The Guide uses a matrix that evaluates nine components that are included in effective and comprehensive early literacy programs:

- ❖ Oral Language development
- ❖ Quality and content of books and other literacy materials
- ❖ Balanced literacy development
- ❖ Reading, writing, and speaking connections
- ❖ Reading comprehension
- ❖ Word recognition and word study
- ❖ Instructional approaches to teaching literacy
- ❖ Grouping practices for instruction in the classroom
- ❖ Literacy assessment practices

References

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Endnotes

- ¹ Phonological awareness involves the ability to reflect on features of spoken language and includes activities such as breaking sentences into words, breaking words into syllables, identifying beginning or ending sounds, and hearing rhyming patterns. Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness and involves recognizing the individual sounds in words. Phonics is about understanding letter-sound relationships and applying them to reading and writing.
- ² National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) [website is www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org).
- ³ NCTE's Position Statement on Reading

