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ABSTRACT

This research synthesis is organized around identification of instructional priorities for emergent literacy and existing evidence regarding curriculum design for those instructional priorities. First, areas of emerging evidence are identified and two major ideas are extracted: (1) children need to develop knowledge of and facility with multiple dimensions of early literacy knowledge, and (2) social contexts and conditions influence early literacy knowledge. These ideas are then made more explicit and employable by relating them to the following principles of curriculum design: conspicuous strategies, mediated scaffolding, strategic integration, primed background knowledge, and judicious review. (DB)

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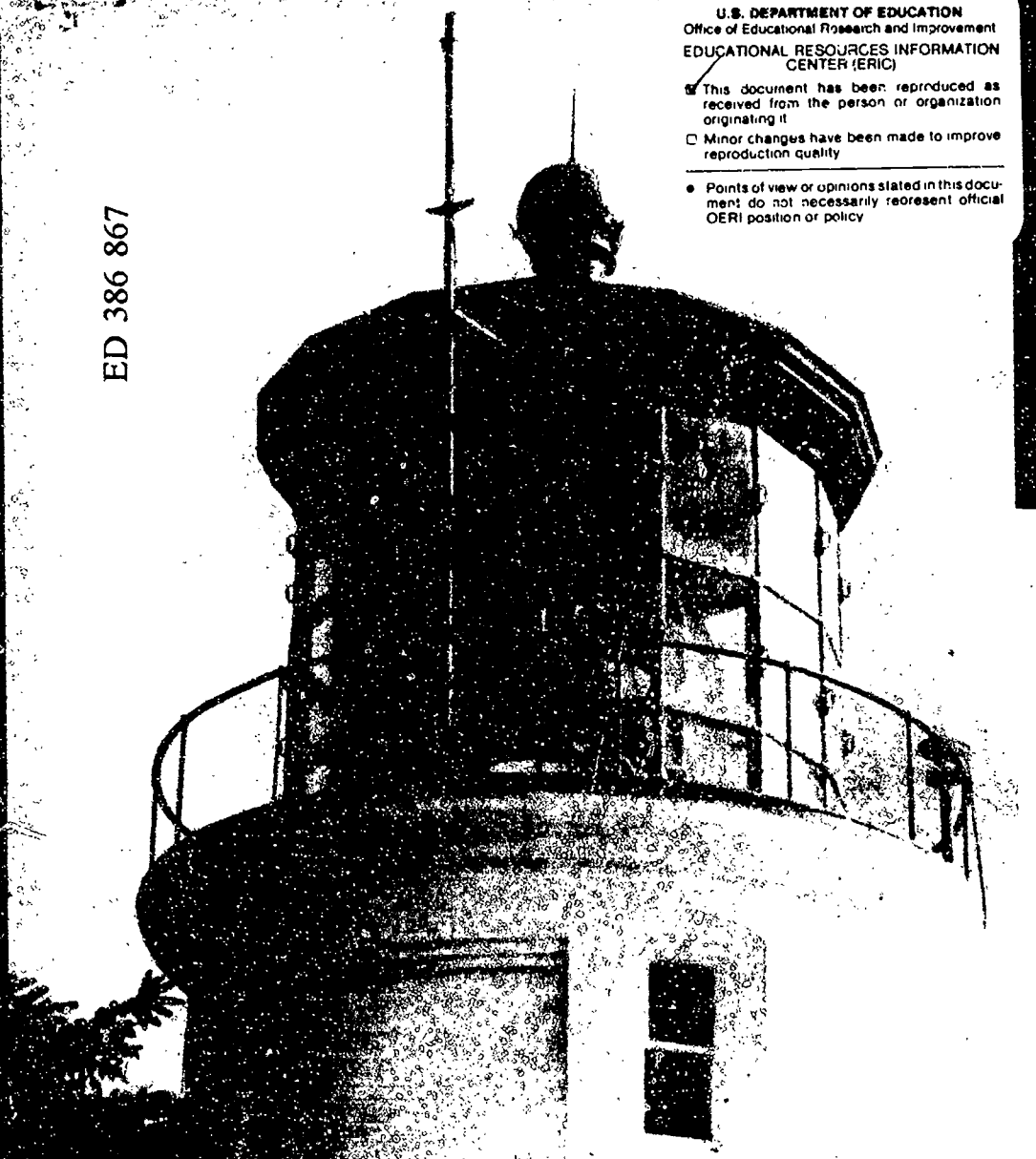

# Emergent Literacy: Curricular and Instructional Implications for Diverse Learners




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# Emergent Literacy: Curricular and Instructional Implications for Diverse Learners

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## Review of Emerging Evidence

The seemingly simple tasks associated with beginning formal reading instruction can be problematic for the child who enters school with meager literacy experiences. Moreover, the teacher charged with developing beginning reading skills will likely face significant challenges -- children with varied literacy experiences, diverse languages, competing literacy approaches. For child and teacher alike, this challenge is compounded by the relatively brief time available for optimal reading acquisition.

In this review of the emergent literacy literature, we identified areas of emerging evidence that have instructional implications for teaching beginning reading to students with diverse literacy experiences and learning needs. These areas represent consolidation of current research and discourse on the aspects of emergent literacy knowledge that affect reading acquisition and the contexts that facilitate literacy knowledge.

The identified critical areas of emergent literacy knowledge are neither new nor revolutionary. Rather, they reflect consistent findings related to effective classroom practices and confirm the validity of literacy activities that have been practiced for years. Furthermore, the areas of literacy knowledge that affect reading acquisition complement and overlap.

In the following section, we highlight emerging evidence on those literacy practices that impact reading acquisition and development. In addition, we draw instructional implications for students with diverse literacy backgrounds and introduce major ideas that reflect the collective foci and content of the emerging evidence. Our goal is to point out how literacy

practices can be aligned with a set of curriculum design principles to develop a better match between individual literacy experiences and the design of beginning reading instruction. We attempt to connect research and practice by responding to two focal questions: (a) What are the research-based "big ideas," or instructional priorities, for emergent literacy? and, (b) For those instructional priorities, what is the existing research evidence regarding curriculum design?

## Areas of Emerging Evidence

- Experiences with print (through reading and writing) help preschool children develop an understanding of the conventions, purpose, and functions of print.

Children learn about print from a variety of sources and in the process come to realize that print -- not pictures -- carries the story. They also learn how text is structured visually (i.e., text begins at the top of the page, moves from left to right, and carries over to the next page when it is turned). While knowledge about the conventions of print enables children to understand the physical structure of language, the conceptual knowledge that printed words convey a message also helps children bridge the gap between oral and written language.

Ideally, teachers observe and evaluate what primary-age children know about reading and writing in order to plan instruction and monitor learning throughout the year. This is particularly important with beginning reading, where classroom expectations and experiences should match appropriately individual levels of literacy experiences.

- Children learn how to attend to language and apply this knowledge to literacy situations by interacting with others who model language functions.

The multiple functions of language that children use depend on the context and the desired function of a given communication. If children have not interacted extensively with adults who model language functions (e.g., dialogue to entertain, give information, maintain relationships) before coming to school, it is particularly important to incorporate opportunities into the curriculum that distinguish the various uses of language and show the link between oral and written language.

- Phonological awareness and letter recognition contribute to initial reading acquisition by helping children develop efficient word recognition strategies (e.g., detecting pronunciations and storing associations in memory.)

In addition to rich and varied experiences with print, phonological awareness and knowledge of print-speech relations play an important role in facilitating reading acquisition. Therefore, phonological awareness instruction should be an integral component of early reading programs. Within the emergent literacy research, viewpoints diverged on whether acquisition of phonological awareness and letter recognition are preconditions of literacy acquisition or whether they develop interdependently with literacy activities such as story reading and writing. However, moderate support was found for a systematic approach to teaching children the relation between sounds and letters in the context of reading authentic literature and writing using invented spellings. (Note: Phonological awareness is covered extensively in another section and therefore, it will not be discussed in detail here.)

- Storybook reading, as well as the nature of the adult-child interactions surrounding storybook reading, affects children's knowledge about, strategies for, and attitudes towards reading.

Of all the strategies intended to promote growth in literacy acquisition, none is as commonly practiced, nor as strongly supported across the emergent literacy literature as storybook reading. Reading to children and interacting with them about text can have a significant influence on their literacy development. Children in different social and cultural groups have differing degrees of access to storybook reading. For example, it is not unusual for a teacher to have students who have experienced thousands of hours of story reading time, along with other students who have had little or no such exposure. This difference is further compounded by the type of adult-child interactions that occurs during storybook reading, such as the degree to which the adult engages the child's attention or encourages the child to take on parts of the story-reading task.

•Socioeconomic status does not contribute most directly to reading achievement. Rather, other family characteristics related to context are more explanatory such as academic guidance, attitude toward education, parental aspirations for the child, conversations in the home, reading materials in the home, and cultural activities.

(Note: This conclusion was derived by White from his 1982 meta-analysis (cited in van Kleeck, 1990), and has been reinforced by recent literature on socioeconomic status and academic achievement.)

In addition to the degree and type of interaction students experience during storybook reading, it is necessary for teachers to consider family characteristics. Variance in family background as well as in literacy experiences indicates a need to consider differences between family environments and ethnic groups when planning reading instruction.

In the following section, we discuss these areas of emerging evidence in relation to a framework of curriculum design principles. We derived two

big ideas from the areas of emerging evidence and now use the principles of conspicuous strategies, mediated scaffolding, strategic integration, primed background knowledge, and judicious review to render those ideas more explicit and employable. The procedural design principles in combination with the big ideas illustrate how to translate research into practice. The following section should not be viewed as a prescription, but rather as an application of principles that can be used to make tangible these aspects of instruction that are important for students who lack literacy experiences.

Research-Based Instructional Priorities in Emergent Literacy: Big Ideas

- Children need to develop knowledge of and facility with multiple dimensions of early literacy knowledge (e.g., conventions, purpose, and functions of print, link between oral and written language, phonological awareness and letter-sound correspondence).

- Social contexts and conditions influence early literacy knowledge.

Understanding the multiple dimensions of early literacy knowledge does not ensure that a child will learn how to read; however, this early knowledge of the functions and uses of oral and written language is important to successful literacy acquisition. By recognizing the influence of social contexts and conditions, teachers can develop strategies and structures for reading instruction that are accepting of children and their varied literacy experiences. In tandem, these two "big ideas" frame the content of the curriculum design principles and guide the focus of instruction.

Evidence of Curriculum Design in Emergent Literacy

In this section, we focus on five curriculum design principles: (a) conspicuous strategies, (b) mediated scaffolding, (c) strategic integration, (d)

primed background knowledge, and (e) judicious review, while addressing the question: For the instructional priorities of emergent literacy, what is the existing research evidence regarding curriculum design?

Conspicuous Strategies

As an instructional priority, conspicuous strategies are a sequence of teaching events and teacher actions used to help students learn new literacy information and relate it to their existing knowledge. Because emergent literacy focuses on the development of general, diffused literacy knowledge rather than specific components of instruction, our review found limited applications for this design principle. However, conspicuous strategies can be incorporated in beginning reading instruction to ensure that all learners have basic literacy concepts. For example, during storybook reading teachers can show students how to recognize the fronts and backs of books, locate titles, or look at pictures and predict the story, rather than assume children will learn this through incidental exposure. Similarly, teachers can teach students a strategy for holding a pencil appropriately or checking the form of their letters against an alphabet sheet on their desks or the classroom wall.

In addition to teaching the physical aspects of literacy, conspicuous strategies can be used to help children understand the symbolic aspects of literacy. Roberts (1992) suggested that children's concept of a word proceeds along a developmental continuum from awareness of words in spoken language to awareness of words in written language. Although children eventually learn the abstract characteristics of a word through experiences with print, teachers can use a conspicuous strategy to focus the child's attention on the definitional attributes of words. By making explicit the connection between speech and print and discussing the featural and relational characteristics of words, teachers can help children acquire the

abstract concept of word and accommodate their schemata to new information (Roberts, 1992).

Mediated Scaffolding

Children who have had limited exposure to print often lack the language experience, background knowledge, and awareness of print-speech relations that many children from the broader school population already possess upon entering school. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that these children will acquire this conceptual knowledge incidentally. Through the use of mediated scaffolding, teachers can provide guidance and support to help students (based on individual needs and current levels of ability) acquire the literacy concepts that will support initial reading acquisition and help reduce the likelihood of future academic failure.

Mediated scaffolding can be accomplished in a number of ways to meet the needs of students with diverse literacy experiences. To link oral and written language, for example, teachers may use texts that simulate speech by incorporating oral language patterns or children's writing. Or teachers can use daily storybook reading to discuss book-handling skills and directionality-concepts that are particularly important for children who are unfamiliar with printed texts. Teachers can also use repeated readings to give students multiple exposures to unfamiliar words or extended opportunities to look at books with predictable patterns, as well as provide support by modeling the behaviors associated with reading. Teachers can act as scaffolds during these storybook reading activities by adjusting their demands (e.g., asking increasingly complex questions or encouraging children to take on portions of the reading) or by reading more complex text as students gain knowledge of beginning literacy components.

Mediated scaffolding can also be used to address the social contexts and conditions that influence individual literacy knowledge by making the work and social contexts of the classroom compatible with those of the home and community. This can be done by organizing environments that match children's cultural experiences (e.g., parental attitudes towards literacy) with their instructional experiences, and by helping children see the connection between their literacy values and the act of reading.

The literature on classroom literacy environments supports the instructional value of mediated scaffolding, in keeping with Vygotsky's theory (cited in Morrow, 1990) that children learn higher psychological processes with adult guidance within a child's "zone of proximal development." Indeed, Morrow (1990) found that classrooms in which teachers provided guidance to students produced more literacy behaviors than classes where no guidance was given. In the adult-guided classrooms, teachers provided scaffolding by introducing literacy materials in the play centers and discussing with children how to use the materials (e.g., reading to dolls, writing notes to friends, making shopping lists, and taking telephone messages). The students in those classrooms, in turn, used more printed materials with attention to their printed aspects and produced more printed materials than students in classrooms with no specific teacher guidance.

Strategic Integration

Many children with diverse literacy experiences have difficulty making connections between old and new information. Strategic integration can be applied to help link old and new learning. For example, in the classroom, strategic integration can be accomplished by providing access to literacy materials in classroom writing centers and libraries. Teachers can also develop thematic play centers -- such as a grocery store or doctor's office --

where primary-age students can act out reading and writing behaviors. Students should also have opportunities to integrate and extend their literacy knowledge by reading aloud, listening to other students read aloud, and listening to tape recordings and videotapes in reading corners.

Instruction that integrates students' existing literacy knowledge with new learning can also help children become efficient at constructing meaning from text. However, as Stahl and Miller (1989) noted, instructional approaches that emphasize the construction of meaning alone may not be the most efficient means of helping children comprehend text. These authors observed that children need to develop word recognition abilities in order to read with understanding. Stahl and Miller (1989) suggested integrating effective components of beginning reading programs regardless of philosophy -- an approach they observed in first-grade classrooms where teachers implemented reading programs that integrated direct instruction of phonics with children's literature and individual opportunities to write.

Morrow, O'Connor, and Smith (1990) offered further support for the importance of integrating effective components of reading programs. They found that a storyreading program in an urban district with at-risk kindergarten children appeared to improve free and probed recall comprehension, attempted readings of favorite stories, children's concepts about books and print, and children's awareness of learning to read. However, in terms of developing auditory and visual discrimination or letter identification it did not appear to be superior to a readiness program. The authors concluded that a blend of approaches, that is, a strong storybook reading program coupled with instruction in letter recognition and letter-sound correspondence may be a reasonable instructional strategy, particularly for children with meager literacy experiences.

Primed Background Knowledge

All children bring some level of background knowledge (e.g., how to hold a book, awareness of directionality of print) to beginning reading. Early literacy contexts of home and community provide opportunities for children to learn about print through encounters in meaningful, real-life social interactions (van Kleeck, 1990). Background knowledge is important because it gives students a conceptual foundation for further learning. For example, Ehri and Sweet (1991) found that children's success with fingerpoint reading was influenced by what they already knew about print (e.g., letter names, phonemic segmentation).

Teachers can utilize children's background knowledge to help children link their personal literacy experiences to beginning reading instruction, while also closing the gap between students with rich and students with impoverished literacy experiences. Activities that draw upon background knowledge include incorporating oral language activities (which discriminate between printed letters and words) into daily read-alouds, as well as frequent opportunities to retell stories, look at books with predictable patterns, write messages with invented spellings, and respond to literature through drawing (Hiebert & Papierez, 1990).

Judicious Review

Design principles serve as a framework for organizing effective, efficient instruction. However, even high-quality instruction falls short of its ultimate goal if not accompanied by opportunities for students to apply what they have learned. Judicious review suggests that proficiency occurs through frequent, diverse, purposeful, and meaningful practice. For the general knowledge forms encompassed by emergent literacy, this means that students should be offered repeated opportunities to engage in beginning literacy

activities, and practice what they have learned. Review activities need not be highly controlled rehearsal sessions. Appropriate activities could include alphabet games, repetitive rhyming activities, re-reading of favorite stories, and regular opportunities to engage in literacy talk with teacher and peers.

## Conclusion

Emergent literacy research examines early literacy knowledge and the contexts and conditions that foster that knowledge. Despite differing viewpoints on the relation between emerging literacy skills and reading acquisition, strong support was found in the literature for the important contribution that early childhood exposure to oral and written language makes to the facility with which children learn to read.

The typical variation in literacy backgrounds that children bring to reading can make teaching more difficult. Often a teacher has to choose between focusing on the learning needs of a few students at the expense of the group, or focusing on the group at the risk of leaving some students behind academically. This situation is particularly critical for children with gaps in their literacy knowledge who may be at risk in subsequent grades for becoming "diverse learners."

The primary purpose of this section then was to discuss how literacy practices can be aligned with a set of curriculum design principles to develop a better match between individual literacy experiences and the design of beginning reading instruction. Emergent literacy knowledge provides a necessary and important (but not sufficient) foundation on which to build. A secondary purpose was to reconcile the emerging evidence on emergent literacy with the demands and limitations of beginning reading for the purpose of suggesting feasible, effective and efficient instruction that ensures

that all students will obtain the necessary literacy background to support successful reading acquisition.

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