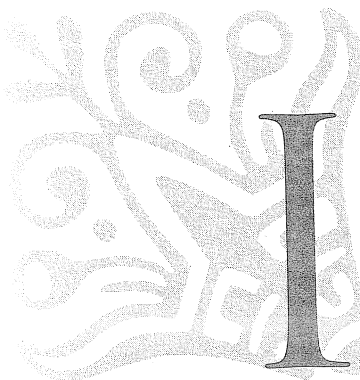


EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES FOR PRECOCIOUS AND EMERGING READERS



Intelligent children are generally characterized as being verbally precocious with large vocabularies and advanced oral language. Not all talented children, however, are developmentally advanced in reading skills. Not all precocious talkers become precocious readers. Precocious readers, sometimes called early readers, show the ability to read before formal instruction begins. Other talented young children read “on schedule” when preschool or school lessons are begun. Although reading early may be a sign of intellectual giftedness, it is not always the case. Reading is the result of a long developmental process that begins in infancy and accelerates in childhood. It includes several developmental stages and many skill areas—reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing. This development can be affected in many ways by the child’s physical environment and social-emotional interactions. Parents and other caregivers contribute to children’s literacy development by providing (a) an environment rich in print resources and (b) enjoyable interactions between the child, adults, and these resources. While

parent activities are modestly associated with individual differences in children's reading and oral language development, parent efforts alone cannot "make" a precocious reader. Attitudes toward children who read early have changed over the years, and newer research on emerging literacy and the whole-language/phonics debate have changed how educators view the instructional approaches for precocious readers.

WHAT WE KNOW

The current paradigm of emergent literacy posits that the foundation of a child's reading ability is the infant's experiences with the general patterns of oral language. According to Jackson and Roller (1993), literacy development can start as early as 2 or 3 years of age. The precocious reader can learn to identify letters, the sounds of letters, the nature of stories, and the function of print by listening to books read aloud, playing games, and talking to caregivers.

Identifying and Supporting the Early Reader

Case studies (Gross, 1992; Henderson, Jackson, & Mukamal, 1993; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2004a) and biographies (Bissex, 1980; Grost, 1970) of talented children who were early readers describe the challenges of parenting and teaching them. Conceptually, early readers are children who process information effectively in a specific domain and that processing, for some, is accomplished by decoding a specific closed symbol system (Jackson & Kearney, 1999). Jackson, Donaldson, and Cleland (1988) defined precocious readers as "children who have made substantial progress in reading comprehension before first grade" (p. 234). Stainthorp and Hughes (2004a) limited the definition further: "children who are able to read fluently and with understanding before attending school and without having received any direct instruction in reading." (p. 107). According to Jackson (1992), precocious readers are exceptional, but not rare; estimates vary on their incidence and prevalence (p. 173). Durkin's studies (1966, 1974-1975) have been cited by Jackson (1992) and Chall (2000) to illustrate the variability of these figures on geographical, historical, educational, and social factors. Studies have focused on development and achievement of readers from Black and bilingual families (Durkin, 1982; Jackson & Lu, 1992).

Researchers have been interested in the processes used by emerging readers. Mason (1980) studied 38 four-year-olds in preschool settings to determine if there was a hierarchy of skills and behaviors evidenced in emerging readers not receiving formal reading instruction. Although these were not children specifically identified as precocious readers, their reading experience began with the initial naming and printing of letters, then reading signs and labels to develop a sight word vocabulary of nouns and function words, and finally reading multi-

syllable words and abstract nouns. The last skill is considered advanced because it requires sound-letter knowledge usually developed through formal reading instruction.

In a review of the research on beginning reading achievement, Adams (1990) indicated that letter-name knowledge was the best predictor of success in reading, while the ability to discriminate sounds was also a good predictor. Precocious readers may develop sound-letter knowledge before formal reading instruction is given. Jackson et al. (1988) investigated 87 students between kindergarten and first grade, none of whom had formal reading instruction. Parents' reports about the precocious readers from this group indicated that the majority could recite the alphabet and identify capital letters before the age of 3. Sixty-eight percent recognized words on sight by age 3, 85% began reading preprimer books by age 4, and 92% were sounding out unknown words by the age of 5. These patterns may be considered an accelerated version of Mason's (1980) hierarchy of skills for emerging literacy. However, in contrast to Mason's study, Jackson and Cleland (1982) found that hierarchical skill development was less obvious among these precocious readers. Jackson and her colleagues (1988) documented diversity in reading styles and patterns of skill development. What is most critical to the success of precocious readers is "their ability to use relevant knowledge [strategies] appropriately, effectively, and flexibly" (p. 242). This ability leads to the development of skills that enable them to monitor comprehension, fill in the gaps, and apply "fix up" strategies in their reading to further improve comprehension.

Reading Storybooks to Children

In *What Works* (U.S. Department of Education, 1987), parents were told that the best way to help their children become better readers is to read to them, even when they are very young. That advice has been supported by numerous studies in the past two decades. More specifically, reading storybooks has been linked to oral language development (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1984; Senechal, Le Fevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998; Sulzby, 1985), a skill important for reading achievement. Senechal et al. studied an unselected group of predominantly middle-class children and found that storybook exposure contributed to oral language development, while parent teaching about words contributed to children's knowledge about written language. Sulzby studied the patterns of emergent readers and confirmed a progression of development related to storybook reading. She noted that children who were read to frequently tended to score higher on traditional measures of reading readiness and on independent reading. Sulzby also indicated that children who learn to read and write prior to formal instruction often teach themselves to read through storybook reading. They tend to have favorite books, which they ask to have read to them over and over again. They correct the reader if some of the story line is eliminated and often attempt to read the story themselves.

Like Mason (1980), Sulzby also reported predictable developmental behaviors of emergent readers leading to independent reading. The levels of progression identified in Sulzby's research suggest that children's storytelling is based on labeling the pictures in storybooks, commenting on the pictures initially rather than relying on print, treating the individual pages as discrete units with no story line, and eventually reading the book as a whole with almost verbatim recall of the story. Eventually the story line and interaction between the child who is "reading" and the person being read to is more dependent on print than on the pictures.

Parents and Motivation

Although empirical research is limited, results suggest that the emotional dimensions of shared storybook reading are contributors to the development of motivation for reading. A review by Baker, Scher, and Mackler (1997) stated that if early encounters with literacy are enjoyable for children, they are more likely to read frequently and broadly in subsequent years. Parents who create a positive socioemotional climate during reading are more likely to motivate children to read. Hildebrand (1998) suggested that parents share reading in a "relaxed, patient, and encouraging way" (p. 263). Research generally supports the associations between not only parent attitudes, but also parent activities, and children's individual differences in emerging literacy (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Baker et al. 1997). Home activities, especially language-related activities with parents or caregivers, are associated broadly with reading success in the early school years. Current research shows correlation only—not causation. The effects of these activities are generally characterized as small when children's ability levels are controlled for. A meta-analysis by Bus et al. showed that parent-preschooler reading is related to language growth, emergent literacy, and reading achievement, but that this book reading accounted for only a small part of these outcomes, and that these effects tend to weaken as children begin school and become independent readers. Similar findings are reported by Stainthorp and Hughes (2000), who compared the family literacy practices for 15 precocious readers with 14 successful, but not precocious, readers. There were no systematic differences in the literacy activities of the two sets of parents. All parents tended to use the local library, purchase newspapers and magazines for the home, read across fiction and nonfiction genres, make copious lists, and expose their children to print at birth. There was a slight tendency for the parents of precocious readers and their children to play word games more frequently than successful, nonprecocious readers.

Interactions between all children and their parents can help develop vocabulary, basic reading skills such as top-down and left-right orientation, and higher level thinking skills. For young readers, parents may play the role of informal reading instructor by participating in an extended discussion of story-

book reading. Parents can talk about pictures and name the objects illustrated, comment on the printed page, and discuss story elements.

Comparison studies of gifted accelerated readers and gifted nonreaders by Burns and Collins (1987) and Burns, Collins, and Paulsell (1991) found some differences in the activities of parents of high-IQ precocious readers and the activities of parents of high-IQ children who were not precocious readers. Parent reports indicated that mothers of accelerated readers provided more opportunities for interaction, discussion, and word identification than the mothers of the nonreaders. Burns et al. indicated, however, that these differences could have occurred *in response* to the children's abilities. This bidirectional nature of the exchange was also emphasized by Baker et al. (1997). Parents influence children, and children's behaviors influence those of their parents. The emerging interests of the children can prompt the parents' behaviors.

Teachers and Reading Instruction

Stanovich (1986) suggested another way in which children affect their own reading development. His review of the research literature reconceptualized the effects of individual differences on reading development. Stanovich stated that a student's aptitude can influence a student's reaction to "environmental quality," including reading instruction. He posited that a student's cognitive processing affects reading ability and that reading ability also affects cognitive processing. Good readers become better readers because they effectively process information on reading; students with strong cognitive processing abilities become better at processing information because they read widely and well. Because these differences do exist, Witty advocated "differentiated methods, materials, and means of evaluation" for early readers (Bonds & Bonds, 1983, p. 5). Since that time, several researchers and practitioners have echoed the need for identifying the early reader and providing appropriate reading instruction (Brown & Rogan, 1983; Feldhusen & Feldhusen, 1998). Sacks and Mergendoller (1997) suggest that different methods of instruction may produce different outcomes, depending on the student's stage of reading development. These authors also noted the importance of individual differences in classroom participation (e.g., discussion). Higher scoring students engaged in more verbal interactions, especially in whole-language classrooms. This aptitude-by-treatment interaction is an excellent rationale for both the early identification of precocious readers and the differentiation of instruction. Teachers may need to provide different kinds of support for children at different stages of development to maximize progress; higher scoring students need access to higher stage literacy tasks (Sacks & Mergendoller). Current practice, however, generally does not match this recommendation. Burns et al. (1991) found that when early readers are not challenged, their achievement scores regress; that is, without instruction on their level, their scores drop toward those of more average readers. Jackson (1992) noted that "precocious readers test the schools' ability to provide appropriately differenti-

ated education for exceptionally able young children" because they have already mastered much of the curriculum (p. 172). Chall (2000) stated that in her previous studies she observed that teachers, when faced with widely varying ability levels, generally gave precocious readers enrichment material on grade level rather than more challenging material (p. 120). In a longitudinal study of precocious readers, Stainthorp and Hughes (2004b) found that students who begin school with high levels of reading maintain that advantage at age 11, but that their school experiences do not appear to have added any value to their progress. Precocious readers might have benefited from opportunities matched to their literacy needs, but did not receive them.

Both parents and teachers acknowledge the unusual challenges for early readers who prefer books on unusual topics, trade books rather than basal readers, reference books, and literature usually appropriate for older readers. They also face the physical challenges of turning pages. Harrison (1999) cites the story of Olivia who could read a book with flaps, but "her little fingers couldn't manage the flaps" (p. 28). These psychomotor challenges may also include frustration in writing activities that accompany reading in emergent literacy.

Fostering Literacy Development in the Talented Child Who Is Not a Precocious Reader

Not all children who talk early develop into precocious readers (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1992). Whether a child is talented in reading and begins to read "early" or is talented in another area, parents and teachers can support the emergence of literacy in a variety of ways. First, they can provide their children with enriching print resources. Second, they can read aloud to the child (Anderson et al., 1984). Third, they can verbally interact with the child to model and motivate the child to value literacy activities. Reading together with their parents motivates children to read, to value and appreciate reading, and to develop thinking strategies (Jackson & Roller, 1993). Positive and playful interactions are recommended rather than strained or highly controlled experiences, which can lead to negative attitudes toward school literacy (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). Interactions also are important because they serve as the raw material for concept development. For example, reading to young children establishes the concept that a reader can respond and interact with the literature. Parent comments encourage children to be active and to ask questions about what they read. Lastly, interactions may develop specific skills such as looking at illustrations for story clues.

Guidelines for Books

Halsted (2002), Jackson and Roller (1993), Feldhusen and VanTassel-Baska (1989), and Baskin and Harris (1980) have suggested guidelines for

choosing books for young talented children. Reading choices should (a) tell a good story; (b) have strong characters with which children can identify; (c) be open-ended enough to require interpretation, evaluation, or problem solving; (d) include a variety of literature (folktales, fiction, fantasy, and poetry) and high-interest nonfiction (e.g. animals); and (e) feature language that is varied and rich—rhymes, repetition, and predictable language that allows participation. Additional information on choices for gifted readers is available from a variety of sources (e.g., Halsted, 2002, and Robinson & Schatz, 2002).

Although precocious readers maintain their performance through the first years of school, precocious reading achievement may be associated with rather modest long-term benefits for middle-class children (Burns et al., 1991; Coltheart, 1979; Jackson, 1992; Jackson & Kearney, 1999; Mills & Jackson, 1990; Stainthorp & Hughes, 2004b). Precocious reading generally is associated with good reading and language performance in later years, but intelligent children who are not early readers also may show similar achievements in these areas (Jackson & Kearney).

WHAT WE CAN DO

At Home

☛ Parents can support literacy development in all talented children whether or not they are precocious readers. This support includes providing home and preschool environments rich in both print materials and oral language experiences.

☛ Recommended practices at home include establishing a regular reading time, reading to children aloud and discussing what is read, and modeling by reading for both information and enjoyment. Reading experiences shared by parents and children should be warm, loving, and fun.

☛ Parents can help teachers to recognize and support precocious readers when they begin school. When the early reader enters preschool or kindergarten, let the teacher know he or she can read. If assessment data on the child's reading ability is available, share it with the teacher; if not, ask for an assessment of the child's instructional reading level.

In the Classroom

☛ Early childhood education experiences should include teachers and classrooms that allow meaningful and varied learning experiences at the child's developmental level. Teachers should be aware of the developmental stages of

emergent literacy and provide developmentally appropriate activities to capitalize on children's readiness to learn. Reading should be integrated into all kinds of classroom activities.

✿ Elementary classroom teachers should identify early readers regardless of their other talent areas; assess their reading abilities, particularly in the areas of phonological awareness; and shape the curriculum and instruction to those ability levels and the child's interests. Parents should ask for a specific plan for appropriate reading activities that includes more than just enrichment.

✿ Parents and teachers should support literacy development in talented children who are emerging readers through environments and interactions that motivate, stimulate, and instruct at an appropriate level and pace.

At School

✿ Programs for young talented students must assess and provide for varying levels of language abilities, specifically for individual differences in reading abilities and interests. Instruction should be differentiated for precocious readers and those "ready to read."

✿ Schools should develop assessment policies and procedures for precocious readers on school entry. These assessments should include assessing the level of phonological awareness (the connections between sounds and words), decoding skills, spelling, and writing in order to plan a balanced and accelerated literacy program.

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