Using the Newspaper to Support Children's Emerging Literacy

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Young children's literacy development involves emerging knowledge, skills, and attitudes about both written and oral language. However, until relatively recent years, children's oral language development has received the lion's share of attention in most early childhood programs. What young children know about written language and their natural ability to learn about writing and reading have been underestimated and misinterpreted and so have received little developmentally appropriate support from early childhood program administrators, teachers, parents, and the public.

There are new perspectives on early childhood emergent literacy supported by new knowledge about young children's writing and reading development. Widespread professional support for these new perspectives on literacy learning is increasing teachers’ awareness of the need to provide an environment filled with meaningful activities and materials designed to support the natural development of young children's literacy knowledge and skills (Bredekamp, 1987; IRA, 1985). As they work to implement a daily literacy program, many teachers in child care, preschool, and the primary grades are concerned about limited budgets and finding the time and energy necessary to provide and manage a functional literacy environment. One important concern is to gather adequate materials that will support children's learning of reading and writing. Though it is often overlooked, the daily newspaper is an inexpensive and readily available resource that can provide a great variety of appealing opportunities for stimulating children's literacy development in preschool and the primary grades.

We first consider new perspectives about how young children construct knowledge, acquire skills, and develop positive attitudes toward written language. Next we explore how the classroom environment can help teachers put new emergent literacy concepts into practice. Finally, we provide many practical ideas for using the daily newspaper to support literacy learning in the early childhood classroom through both child-initiated and teacher-directed learning activities.
New Perspectives on Literacy Development

One new point of view on early literacy development is that most young children begin to learn about reading and writing much earlier than was previously imagined. We now know that many toddlers and early preschoolers can already identify logos and signs familiar in their homes and community environments. This knowledge suggests that providing opportunities to support children’s literacy development should begin very early in life. Many unstructured activities and games for the very young in which adults talk and encourage young children to talk about familiar examples of symbols and written language to be found around the home and community can increase their interest and emerging literacy skills.

Another viewpoint suggests that young children learn to write and read in the same way that they learn to talk: by actively figuring out how written language works and by using written language to accomplish specific purposes as they go about the activities and tasks of daily group living. Many opportunities to explore written language in relevant and functional social settings will contribute to the young child’s literacy development. Reading menus and writing orders in a play restaurant, writing thank-you notes to classroom visitors, and signing up on a list to use the workbench or to play in the block center help children discover the usefulness of written language.

It is also well documented that young children are developing literacy knowledge and skills as they observe adults engaged in purposeful writing and reading. Filling out forms, reading the sports page or looking up a TV program schedule in the newspaper are some examples. As children interact with parents, teachers, and others engaged in purposeful reading and writing, they discover more functional uses that written language serves in our society.

Utilizing New Perspectives

If adults are to use these new approaches to support children’s literacy learning, they must provide meaningful experiences and activities within a literacy-rich environment. The reading center is a cornerstone of the early childhood literacy environment. It should be immediately visible to children as they enter the room and should attract children with its comfortable furniture, its opportunities for quiet and privacy, and its arrangement and variety of books and other print materials. Materials should be stored and displayed so that children can notice and select from among the many choices available. Literature selections should include poetry, nonfiction information books, picture books, nursery rhymes, big books, folktales, and easy-to-read books. The reading center should also contain other print materials, such as posters, adult “coffee table” books, catalogs, children’s and adult’s magazines, and newspapers.

The classroom environment can also support children’s literacy growth by providing opportunities to use reading and writing in functional activities which are available throughout the room. Dramatic play centers present especially relevant possibilities for using reading and writing. In a doctor’s office, children can read magazines in a waiting room, write appointments in the appointment book, and write prescriptions for patients; in a florist shop, children can write orders and receipts for customers, and customers can read descriptions (both illustration and text) of flower arrangements they would like to order; and in a grocery store, customers can write grocery lists and locate needed items by reading their labels.

As illustrated above, the early childhood classroom environment presents multitudes of possibilities for supporting children’s literacy development. While often overlooked, the daily newspaper has many characteristics that make it a valuable classroom resource around which many reading and writing activities can be built.

Using the Newspaper

The daily newspaper is an ideal support for young children’s emerging literacy skills. First, the newspaper is an example of printed material that is familiar and available in many young children’s homes. It is the source of reading for a purpose by parent and adult models whom children are likely to observe. The contribution of parent modeling to children’s developing literacy skills is well documented.

Another reason that the newspaper is a valuable support in the early childhood classroom is found in its format. Headlines, ads, photographs, illustrations, cartoons, maps, and print present a wide variety of interesting elements not available in many other genres. The newspaper contains items of interest to a broad range of ages. Because the learning of both oral and written language by the young is a social activity, the newspaper’s large size and format invite children to examine it in pairs or small groups in much the same way big books are used. And not of least concern, the relatively low cost of the newspaper is attractive to the early childhood educator working with a limited budget.

Finally, the newspaper supports literacy development through its contents. Helping young children to better understand their world outside the classroom is a major goal in early childhood education. The newspaper is helpful for learning about major community, national, and international events; human interest stories; weather conditions; advertisements; and the multitude of other items that are included in each daily issue.

As illustrated, the newspaper is a readily available source for supporting literacy development in the early childhood classroom. Let us present some specific ways of using the daily newspaper in both child-initiated and teacher-directed activities.

A good portion of time is available each day for children to select their own learning activities. The teacher can provide many opportunities for children to engage in literacy learning through the use of the newspaper.

When first introducing the newspaper to young children, clip pictures, cartoons, and advertisements from a copy and display these on a bulletin board. Place other copies of the same newspaper on a table beneath the clippings so that children can find the same pictures, cartoons, and advertise-