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How to Boost Literacy in Ages Birth to Three

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### Abstract

This literature review explores the history, viewpoints, theoretical frameworks, and themes in literature of early literacy in the United States. It also discusses legislation on this topic, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Literacy in ages birth to three has been a long time educational issue. The ‘pendulum’ has swung between different approaches to literacy instruction. It is important for every person to be informed on this subject because early literacy affects each life. What one learns or fails to learn in the first three years of life affects the rest of one’s life by contributing either to reading success or struggles. Reading skills are arguably the most important skills to learn in school because they are required for success in all other subject areas.

*Keywords:* literacy, early literacy, reading

### How To Boost Literacy in Ages Birth to Three

Many studies have been conducted and many theories presented on the best way to teach and boost early literacy. However, each study contributes different results due to focusing on specific aspects and contexts of early literacy. In the United States, there is a long time debate among professionals over the best literacy instructional approach. This literature review examines findings and theories in the field and suggests the strategies that have boosted literacy the most in ages birth to three.

#### **Historical Perspective/ Opposing Viewpoints**

Those who work in and out of the field of education alike are familiar with the vastly different viewpoints between educators about early literacy instruction in the United States. For decades, American educators have debated about what constitutes appropriate reading instruction in the preschool and elementary schools. This issue has come in and out of the spotlight over the years, and is once again a hot topic in the field of education. What is referred to as the reading wars was started when literacy experts accused the National Council on Teacher Quality of supporting the idea that direct and explicit teaching of phonics was the best approach to reading instruction. These experts view this idea as old and narrow.

After years of controversy, there is still no universal agreement among researchers and practitioners regarding best practices in teaching children to read. Some still conceptualize literacy acquisition as a set of pre-determined, discrete skills transferred from a teacher to a student. Others argue from the perspective of social constructivism and a belief that literacy is learned as a result of sociocultural constructed meaning through everyday literacy activities (Giles & Tunks, 2015, p. 523).

The skills-based reading readiness approach originated with the maturationist theory of learning. This theory stated that one should wait for a child to mature to the point that he or she is ready to learn new concepts. However, when this theory was applied to reading instruction, the theory soon morphed into a behaviorist view. The term reading readiness began to be used to mean it was time to teach the child a set of prerequisite skills no matter if he or she was ready. Hence, the skills the child was taught contributed to his or her readiness to learn to read. This approach was highly structured and systematic; it used teacher-led whole group instruction. This approach was popular in the 1970s after research showed definable prereading skills. “Teachers and researchers began to critically examine the assumptions surrounding the necessity of skills acquisition in learning to read during the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the reading readiness skills approach to instruction began to wane” (Giles & Tunks, 2015, p. 524).

The emergent literacy approach focuses on meaning making. At the heart of this approach is the belief that children learn best through play-based experiences and exploration. Educational pioneers, theorists and scholars have supported this view. For example, “the work of constructivist learning theorists Jean Piaget and Vygotsky provides additional support for the concept that children’s learning occurs, in part, through social interactions with significant people” (Giles & Tunks, 2015, p. 524). The research of Marie Clay contributed possibly the most to the emergent literacy approach, as she coined the term emergent literacy in 1996. Clay was one of the first to suggest, “that literacy learning begins before children receive formal instruction. She also promoted the idea that reading and writing were learned concurrently and interrelated, rather than sequentially” (Giles & Tunks, 2015, p. 524). Clay’s theory was popular in the 1980s after a paper was published by the National Association for the Education of Young supporting the integration of literacy experiences into the school environment. This practice was

seen as developmentally appropriate, a new term that was first used in this NAEY paper. The term ‘developmentally appropriate’ was used to describe reading concepts such as reading comprehension, print awareness, and prompting use of language within a child’s familiar contexts of work and play. “This view of literacy learning is based on the precept that symbolic thinking is the cornerstone of meaningful literacy learning while acknowledging that teaching isolated skills is still a part of the bigger literacy picture” (Giles & Tunks, 2015, p. 524).

### **Legislation/ Impact on Students and Teachers**

Reading First, a program that was a part of the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 (NCLB), kept teaching isolated skills as part of the literacy picture. Reading First was created with the purpose of ensuring that all students could read at grade level or above by the end of third grade. The program promoted “practices recommended by the National Reading Panel for early reading instruction, highlighting five essential components of reading instruction” (NCEE, 2009, p. 1). These five components were phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The program also provided funds for curricula and materials related to the five components and for professional development for teachers to learn recommended instructional strategies.

No Child Left Behind policy makers believed that the emergent literacy approach was a waste of classroom time. They constructed early learning standards and accountability policies for preschool teachers to follow. This resulted in preschool teachers reportedly, feeling pressured to focus on intensive practice of isolated skills. “The stresses of accountability have dramatically increased in recent years leading to more direct instruction, which is in direct opposition to

developmentally appropriate practices that have become widely accepted as best practice in early childhood programs” (Giles & Tunks, 2015, p. 525).

Part of the legislation was to conduct an impact study. The Reading First impact study compared data from schools receiving Reading First funding to those that were not. “The study collected observational data on reading instruction in grades 1 and 2 and assessed student reading comprehension in grades 1 through 3 over three school years: 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07. The study also assessed students’ decoding skills in grade 1 and surveyed school personnel about their reading programs in spring 2007” (NCEE, 2009, p. 1).

The study showed that first, second, and third graders in Reading First schools scored higher on reading comprehension tests, but the difference was not large enough to be considered statistically significant. However, first graders in Reading First schools scored higher on decoding skills and the difference was statistically significant. The program also contributed to other improvements in schools. Teachers “reported an average of 106 minutes a day spent on reading instruction [and] 59 minutes of the daily reading block [spent] on the essential components of reading instruction” (NCEE, 2009, p. 3). Teachers also reported that they received professional development and coaching from a reading coach on the five components of reading instruction. The time spent on this learning, training, and coaching was more than was reported in non-Reading First schools.

In December 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), which became the national education law in the United States. The ESSA was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which has been called No Child Left Behind since 2001 (Sharp, 2016, p. 9). The ESSA shifted a lot of

educational power back to the states and local agencies. Hence, schools will be impacted in different ways depending on state and local decisions. The part of the ESSA that impacts early literacy the most is that it “increases access to quality preschool programs for more children” (Sharp, 2016, p. 9). Quality preschool programs use research based literacy strategies and routines. As explored later in this paper, many parents do not have knowledge of recommended literacy strategies and routines for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Hence, increasing access to quality preschool programs will benefit more children by providing early literacy instruction at a younger age.

Teachers are directly impacted by legislation that outlines requirements for teaching. In this case, teachers were told what to focus reading instruction on and to give more time to reading instruction. This would affect a teacher’s daily schedule and routine. The program also impacted teachers by deepening their knowledge through professional development. The legislation influenced students in similar ways. The amount of time students spent practicing the five components of reading greatly increased. However, it is not solely legislation on early literacy that affects teachers and students; early literacy itself also makes an impact on lives. Learning and practicing phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills at a young age contributes to greater reading success in the future.

### **Underlying Theoretical Frameworks**

Over the years, there have been multiple theoretical perspectives to teaching early literacy. Early thinking in the field of education was quite different from perspectives that are more recent. Additionally, from 1965- 2000 there were “three major paradigm shifts moving from behaviorist to cognitive to socio-cultural perspectives. These ‘intellectual currents’ have shaped policy and impacted on schools and classrooms changing the way literacy is

conceptualized, taught, and assessed” (Kennedy, Dunphy, Dwyer, Hayes, McPhillips, Marsh, O’Connor & Shiel, 2012, p. 48).

The cognitive theory took over from the 1960s through the mid-1980s. The main influence on reading research during this time was the schema theory. This theory explained the cognitive process that took place while reading. It was believed that meaning was stored in the brain in a way that it could be activated during reading. “This view asserts that readers and listeners actively construct meanings for texts they encounter rather than simply ‘receiving’ meaning from texts” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 49).

The psycholinguistic theory of the reading process was constructed by analyzing the miscues of young readers. In this perspective, the teacher’s role is that of a facilitator instead of an instructor in reading. Supporters of this theory believe that reading is a constructive process; children read by using their prior knowledge to make sense of text. “The work of the psycholinguistic theorists had a major impact on the study of reading and fostered the use of authentic literature using texts with natural language patterns to make it possible for emerging readers to use their knowledge of language to predict words and meanings” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 50). In this perspective, the importance is placed on knowledge of the world and language context rather than decoding skills and orthographic knowledge.

Metacognitive theories are all about the strategies the reader knows and chooses to use. Readers who utilize metacognitive strategies monitor their attempts to solve problems while reading, writing, and spelling. The reader comes to add to his or her list of strategies through direct instruction from a teacher.

The cognitive apprenticeship theories are appropriately named because they focus on the scaffolding a professional can offer a student. This aligns with Vygotski's concept of the zone of proximal development that is taught in many preservice programs. The zone of proximal development was described by Vygotski as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 53). Problem solving can be taught during scaffolding by modeling, thinking aloud, and presenting hints or options to the student. The goal is for the scaffolding to be temporary and the student to learn go-to problem-solving strategies to use independently.

Socio-cultural theories focus on the research that shows the role culture plays in the development of literacy. Studies in the socio-cultural field have shown "that literacy is not simply an individual cognitive activity, but is a communicative tool for different social groups with social rules about who can produce and use particular literacies for particular social purposes" (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 54-55). These theories view literacy as being shaped by the contexts in which one lives and therefore suggest that teachers draw on students' out-of-school experience when teaching literacy.

Socio-linguistic theories are closely associated with socio-cultural theories. However, socio-linguistic theories focus on social and linguistic aspects of literacy in addition to the cognitive aspect. The social aspect is about using language and literacy to maintain social relationships, whereas the linguistic aspect focuses on meaning and communication among people. "A socio-linguistic perspective involves examining how language is used to establish a

social context, while also examining how the social context influences language use and the communication of meaning” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 58).

Constructivist and socio-constructivist models of literacy are shown when students interpersonally construct meaning from text. Students learn literacy skills and the process of learning literacy skills simultaneously while working together and sharing knowledge.

“Knowledge is not merely ‘the sum of individuals’ knowledge’ but is rather ‘distributed among participants as the nature of their participation shifts’” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 59).

Critical theory is a theory specific to teaching English in English speaking countries. The focus of this approach to teaching is to cause students to realize how certain texts are trying to influence them and members of society. “There are two broad perspectives related to critical literacy: a neo-Marxist/ Freireian perspective, focusing on the use of literacy to empower the disempowered, and the Australian perspective, which emphasizes the interpretation of language and text as a social construct and the recognition that a text (whether oral or written) is never neutral but is designed to inform, entertain, persuade and manipulate” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 59-60).

Two relatively new theories have emerged in recent years because literacy is changing due to the developments in technology in this digital age. The first theory is multimodality, which refers to the many modes humans use to make meaning. Schools have mainly focused on teaching the modes of oral and written language, but there is now a need to revise that.

Multimodality takes into account the many different modes in printed and on-screen texts (such as image, layout, color and language) and also the different modes that people use as they engage in face-to-face interaction (such as gesture, gaze, artifacts and language),

and considers how these modes work together to create meanings in a ‘multimodal ensemble’ (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 61).

Young children naturally and purposefully use modes in strategic ways to communicate.

According to a recent study, young children also do well making meaning while moving across media and engaging with texts. Such media includes computers, iPads, television and electronic toys. It is believed by researchers in this field that teachers should “enable children to create multimodal, multimedia texts, such as animations and electronic presentations, which utilize their skills, knowledge and understanding of multimodal texts that they have developed through home literacy practices” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 62). Early childhood teachers and parents should pay attention to how their students and children are using different modes to communicate.

The second theory related to the digital age is digital literacy. Synonyms for digital literacy include techno-literacies and new literacy. “What all of these terms refer to are the skills, knowledge and understanding required to analyze, produce and make meaning with multimodal texts that are disseminated through electronic media, such as computers, televisions, console games, handheld consoles, mobile phones and touch screen technologies such as the iPad” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 63). Digital literacy offers differences from the non-digital years. One difference is that texts can now be written by multiple authors who have not met each other in person. Also, the book is no longer the go-to text. Information and opinions on multiple topics can be found on digital resources, such as blogs. Readers are able to engage with text in new ways and write for global audiences thanks to the internet and social networking sites.

### **Themes in the Literature**

Although there are many theories about how to best approach teaching literacy to children ages birth to three, one may wonder what strategies boost literacy. The literature on literacy suggests some strategies and practices that have been found to improve reading skills as children go through school. These suggestions are related to parent education, collaboration between home and school, routines at home, and strategies in school.

A parent is a child's first teacher. "Literacy development is highly correlated with school success. Families and family environments influence the development of emergent literacy skills in young children" (Zeece & Wallace, 2009, p. 36). Before a child enters preschool, it is important for parents to provide rich oral language and literacy environments. This can be accomplished by talking with and responding to the child and using literacy strategies while reading storybooks to him or her. When the child enters preschool, the parents should maintain their literacy routines at home. Teachers and parents should work together in an effort to optimize each literacy experience. However, some parents are not confident enough in their knowledge of literacy strategies to participate in their child's education at such an early age.

A study was conducted with the goal "to explore those particular types of parental involvement that help parents learn to support their children's academic achievement while fitting into the lives of contemporary parents" (Steiner, 2014, p. 728). Parents in the treatment group participated in an eight-week intervention where they learned literacy strategies focused around storybook reading. The strategies included making predictions, asking and answering questions, making connections, using illustrations, retelling, and returning to the text after reading. The data collected showed that because of the intervention, parents in the treatment group read to their child more frequently and increased their "use of school-like literacy

practices, including greater use of effective storybook reading strategies, to talk about storybooks” (Steiner, 2014, p. 719). Educating parents can give parents the confidence to engage in literacy activities with their child. This parental involvement has a positive impact on children’s education.

The intervention does not have to be that extensive in order to help a child learn at home. “Several studies have demonstrated that even modest literacy-promoting interventions can significantly enhance a young child’s early literacy environment by increasing the frequency of parent–child book-sharing activities” (Zeece & Wallace, 2009, p. 36). One strategy that can be used to accomplish this is called BAGS. The BAGS (which stands for Books And Good Stuff) intervention is a way for early childhood programs to partner with families to accomplish literacy goals. Each student gets to take a bag filled with books, developmentally appropriate activities, related games, manipulative, and a journal home for the week. The bag may also include a parent letter containing suggestions for how to use the provided materials. This is an ideal intervention for early childhood because it is a fun way to involve families and the bags can be tailored to the interests of each child or family.

Literacy routines are important to have in the home from the time a child is born. “A literacy routine is the regular use of a variety of techniques to enhance children’s abilities to listen, to observe, to imitate, and to develop their language, reading, and writing skills” (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002, p. 113). To better understand the importance of literacy routines, it helps to understand basic child development. Literacy learning begins in prenatal development when voices are heard. “From the time a human voice is heard, the abilities for listening, and later cooing, babbling, and the production of other vocal sounds, are developing” (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002, p. 114). Infants begin by cooing vowel sounds, which leads to naming objects and

transitions into adding gestures and developing vocabulary by the end of year two. Appropriate literacy routines for infants and toddlers include reading to children one-on-one, talk with and respond to children during daily activities, and using nursery rhymes, songs, and finger plays.

Strategies to use in the classroom are important to note. A study was done to discover that most frequently used strategies used among Head Start teachers to promote emerging literacy. Data was collected in the domains of alphabet knowledge, early writing, book knowledge, phonological awareness, and print awareness. The most widely used strategy was encouraging play with magnetic letters, followed by presenting children with opportunities to use a variety of writing tools. Practicing holding books, turning pages, and name writing were also frequently used strategies. Strategies to improve phonological awareness skills did not rank among the top most used strategies. However, it is important to note that “research evidence has clearly indicated that if children are to be on track for reading, acquiring phonological awareness skills is essential to overall reading success” (Hawken, Johnston, & McDonnell, 2005, p.239).

### **Conclusion/ Areas for Future Research**

In conclusion, there are opposing strong opinions on how to teach reading in the United States. This debate has been going on and likely always will. There have been studies conducted on different theories in the field of literacy and they have all brought helpful findings to the table. Each educator, whether a parent or professional teacher has his or her own philosophy of the best way to teach reading. Although not everyone agrees on how to teach reading, most agree that reading skills are important and should be taught starting at a young age. However, this area in the field of education could benefit from further research.

In relation to the aforementioned multimodality theory of teaching literacy, more research needs to be done on the different modes young children use to communicate. The research

should aim to answer the questions of what each mode offers and what modes should be used for what purposes. “There is also a need to develop assessment criteria so that teachers are able to identify stages of development in children’s skills and knowledge in this area” (Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 62).

A recent study explored the relationship between invented spelling in Kindergarten and reading and spelling success in first grade. “Allowing children to engage in the analytical process of invented spelling, followed by appropriate feedback, has been found to facilitate learning to read and spell, not hamper the process” (Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2017, p. 85). Studies have shown that practicing reading and writing skills help make better readers. However, as the invented spelling approach to reading instruction enters the early literacy discussion, further research is necessary to confirm the correlation between the use of invented spelling and future reading success.

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