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Policy Brief

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Early Literacy: New Issues and New Challenges

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Nearly 40 percent of the nation's fourth-graders are reading below a basic level of proficiency, according to a study conducted by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP, 1999). This startling statistic and others like it have citizens, from politicians to parents, searching for ways to deal with this critical issue in American education.

Concern about literacy has surfaced in recent years for several reasons. First, American schools have seen enormous changes in student demographics. Over the past 10 years, for example, the student population for whom English is a new language has increased 104 percent compared to a 14 percent increase in the overall student population (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1999). Second, increased testing of third- and fourth-graders has provided concrete evidence for what was, in years past, a suspected but unverified problem. Third, with the advent of a more complex, technologically driven society, higher level skills — including literacy — have become an absolute requirement for personal success and a well-functioning economy.

This growing public concern about literacy presents educators with new challenges, one of which is how to build a foundation for very young learners so that fewer children experience later reading difficulties. The past 30 years of research on precursors to reading and writing have produced substantial data identifying specific behaviors young children engage in that contribute to later academic success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). These "early literacy" behaviors typically occur prior to children entering first grade and before they are taught reading and writing in a formal way.

GUIDANCE FOR POLICYMAKERS

Early literacy *standards* should

- be developmentally appropriate and
- reflect critical early literacy competencies and underlying cognitive skills.

Early literacy *instructional strategies* should

- take into account unique developmental characteristics of young children that affect how they learn,
- not take time away from strategies that support the development of other content areas, and
- include substantial teacher/adult guidance.

Early literacy *assessment* should

- be developmentally appropriate and
- be used only to make decisions relevant to that assessment.

Early literacy *professional development* should

- be no less rigorous than for higher grades;
- teach the precursors of literacy and how to recognize pre-literacy behaviors; and
- incorporate the latest research, best instructional strategies, and appropriate assessment.

Today, early literacy development is no longer considered something that takes place outside the classroom, and teachers are being held accountable in new ways. At the federal level, this trend can be seen in recent revisions to the Head Start Act (1981) that demand new data and include a number of literacy performance measures not previously specified for children at this age. For example, Head Start graduates are now expected to "develop phonemic, print, and numeracy awareness," "identify at least 10 letters of the alphabet," and "associate sounds with written words" (Head Start Act, 1981, sec. 641A).

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At the state level, there has been increased funding of programs for young children — more than 40 states now offer some form of publicly funded preschool — along with an increased demand for data to show how well such programs are working (Jacobson, 2000). For example, in Georgia, which is one of the leaders of the move toward publicly funded preschool, the Office of School Readiness has recently contracted with Georgia State University to examine the long-term effects of pre-kindergarten classes on 4,000 students over 12 years (O'Dea, 1999). These examples are but a few of the ways an increasing requirement for accountability in early literacy education can be seen.

Policymakers will soon deal with — if they aren't already — a variety of issues in early literacy that are moving to the forefront of the nation's education agenda:

- What should young children know and be able to do?
- What are the best ways to facilitate literacy development in young children?
- How should the literacy development of young children be measured?
- How should teachers be prepared to provide effective instruction for young children?

What should young children know and be able to do?

The standards movement of the past several years has focused educators on those instructional practices that best support student learning of the knowledge identified in state and district frameworks. With implementation of these standards, several critical issues have emerged.

Initially, standards were specified using a continuum of statements that represented various bands or grade levels (often referred to as benchmarks or indicators). Although this delineation provided some degree of clarity, the scope and sequence of knowledge children needed to master in the various content areas was either incomplete or, in some cases, developmentally inappropriate. The acquisition of literacy, for example, constitutes a continuum with more advanced skills and concepts being built on the foundation of more basic competencies; however, there are some qualitative differences between how young children build their early understandings and how older children learn more advanced content (for a discussion, see Snow et al., 1998).

In their early stages, literacy benchmarks often lacked the specificity that identified these qualitative differences. Gradually, the need to develop standards specifically for early childhood emerged.

Additionally, early versions of standards documents sometimes reflected the "activities" students should be involved in rather than the actual "knowledge" they should be learning, resulting in benchmarks that were vague and open to much interpretation (Wixson & Dutro, 1998). This lack of clarity and consistency eventually caused many states and districts to rethink literacy standards, particularly at the primary grade level.

At the same time, conversations were taking place concerning standards and their relationship to the national goal to have all students reading by the end of third grade. In an effort to meet this goal, some educators began to place inappropriate

and arbitrary expectations on young children, often forcing the creation of benchmarks at grade levels that were unrealistic and "hurried" children, without giving them sufficient time and instruction to master underlying pre-literacy cognitive concepts and skills.

Today, states and districts are still in the process of creating appropriate standards frameworks or documents to support and guide early literacy instruction. When evaluating such documents, state and local leaders should consider:

- *the developmental appropriateness of preschool and kindergarten benchmarks.* Early literacy benchmarks should not simply be "dumbed-down" versions of higher-grade benchmarks. Taking benchmarks from higher levels and then preceding them with statements such as "begins to" or "makes an effort to" does not adequately capture mastery of specific pre-literacy skills.
- *that underlying cognitive skills necessary to early literacy must be addressed within benchmarks.* Unlike the higher grades, many early skills that lie outside what is traditionally thought of as literacy are, in fact, critical to literacy development in young children. For example, a four-year-old's ability to do representational drawing — that is, drawings that look like something recognizable rather than just experiments with color — is an essential prerequisite to learning to write.
- *the way benchmarks are written.* Benchmarks written as statements of knowledge and skills, rather than activities or tasks, provide a clearer picture for selecting and constructing appropriate and valid assessments.
- *the need for clear relationships among benchmarks from various standards (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics).* A strong standards document should not have repetition or overlap of benchmarks from one standard to the next, which can lead to problems when creating recording and reporting systems.
- *the language used in benchmarks.* Early literacy standards and benchmarks may contain language that is different from that used for higher grades. Terms such as "read" or "write" may not be used very often, but references to "representational drawing" or "symbolic play" are likely.
- *how benchmarks are prioritized.* Benchmarks should be prioritized to reflect those competencies that are most critical for laying the foundation for literacy. Given the limited amount of time young children spend in the classroom, the most effective teaching strategies will be those that address the most basic literacy skills and understandings.

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What are the best ways to facilitate literacy development in young children?

The early childhood classroom contains learners whose abilities span a greater spectrum than that found in the classrooms of older students. The skills of young children are changing daily, and their rates and patterns of growth are hard to predict based on their current achievements (see e.g., McAfee & Leong, 1997). To support early literacy development, policymakers must first understand how developmental characteristics of young children affect how they learn and then examine the implications for instructional practice.

One of the unique features of early learning in general, and literacy learning in particular, is that it involves the "whole child" (National Research Council, 2000, p. 8). Literacy development in young children is not a separate function that occurs only during "literacy time" or only when children are engaged in so-called literacy activities. In fact, many related competencies, which occur across all content areas, provide a foundation for children learning

to read and write. An understanding of patterns acquired in a math activity, for example, will help a child to see the repeating words in a predictable book. Each of these competencies plays its own unique role and should not be neglected (see e.g., Snow et al., 1998). Thus, instructional approaches for early literacy development should not take time away from strategies that support other areas of development.

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Another unique feature of early learning is that it requires a high degree of adult guidance. Whereas older students can learn in contexts that require only indirect adult involvement (e.g., workbooks, computers, or cooperative groups) due to their longer attention spans, more mature social skills, and higher levels of abstract reasoning, young learners are much more dependent on face-to-face interactions with adults for learning to take place. In fact, research from a variety of sources suggests that a key feature in a supportive environment for early childhood development is a responsible and responsive adult (National Research Council, 2000, p. 4). It is these kinds of concerns that prompt organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children to recommend both smaller group sizes and lower staff/child ratios for this age group (NAEYC, 1998).

Therefore, to facilitate literacy development in young children, policymakers in a position to recommend programs or instructional methods must

- make sure such programs and methods are developmentally appropriate (literacy instruction in the early childhood classroom cannot simply be adapted from grade-school curriculum);
- assure that time for literacy instruction, per se, is not emphasized at the expense of other content areas; and
- consider the fact that young children require more adult guidance than older children.

How should the literacy development of young children be measured?

Assessment that measures student skill level and student progress has several valuable purposes. When considering different assessments, it is important to know what purposes they serve and what kinds of decisions they may inform.

A primary use for assessment is to inform instruction. This type of assessment is generally given to all children in a class and provides information that can guide a teacher's decisions about how to teach each child individually or the class as a whole. Standardized instruments may be used but are not required. With very young children, teachers need to assess more often and use multiple pieces of evidence (e.g., writing and drawing samples, teacher observation, dictated stories) collected over time to obtain a full, rich picture of individual student status and progress. Results from this type of assessment can be used to report student progress toward standards or benchmarks but not in relation to other students' progress. With this or any type of assessment, no decisions about an individual student should be made solely on the basis of the results of one test, especially when the student is a preschooler or kindergartner.

Another valuable purpose for assessment is to evaluate the effectiveness of a curriculum or program in order to make curricula decisions. For this purpose, standardized tests are required, but testing a random sample of children is sufficient. This type of assessment should be used to make decisions about programs only, never students. Thus, testing only a small group of students saves valuable instructional time and also decreases the likelihood of an individual student's information being used to make high-stakes decisions.

A third purpose for assessment is to diagnose possible learning difficulties. This type of assessment is helpful for refining instructional decisions. It is usually conducted in addition to regular class assessment and only with students

for whom regular class assessment suggests possible problems. This is also an important step prior to making any high stakes decisions (such as retention), particularly with young children.

Regardless of the purpose or intended use of an assessment, policymakers should be cautious when recommending the use of specific standardized assessments for young children. Assessment, like instructional strategies, must take into account the unique developmental characteristics of early learners. Years of research have shown that young children do not do well on tests that ask questions out of context or require them to follow multi-step directions (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998). Test procedures that rely on group administration, multiple choice answers, and paper-and-pencil format — common characteristics of many large-scale standardized tests — can be so developmentally mismatched as to render an assessment useless.

Given these kinds of concerns, organizations like the NAEYC (1987) and the National Education Goals Panel (Shepard et al., 1998) caution educators against over-reliance on standardized tests with the features mentioned above to assess children before third grade. It is important to understand, however, that standardization itself isn't the problem; rather, certain testing methods typically associated with standardized assessments are not developmentally appropriate for young children.

With the increased demand for accountability of teachers and programs, it is unlikely that early literacy instruction will escape more intensive scrutiny and new requirements for assessment. Thus, it is important that policymakers

- clearly understand the purpose of a given type of assessment,
- assure that its results are used to make decisions appropriate to that assessment, and
- resist any push to make premature decisions or to mandate policies that do not take a full view of early literacy development.

How should teachers be prepared to provide effective instruction for young children?

In the past, early childhood teachers were not expected to teach literacy. The early childhood classroom was viewed as a place where children acquired general skills (primarily social) necessary for school, but not a place where specific instruction in pre-academic skills was expected. While social trends and advances in research have changed that perception, the training of early childhood teachers still needs to change, both in terms of teacher preparation in higher education as well as professional development offered by schools and districts.

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Teacher preparation in colleges and universities is a concern for policymakers on many levels. While the design of college curriculum for students of early childhood education is outside the scope of this policy brief, it is nonetheless a critical component of meeting the national goal to have all children reading by the end of third grade.

Policymakers facing issues of teacher licensure must recognize that early childhood education is not a place to skimp on teacher skill and preparation. Certification requirements for early childhood teachers should be no less rigorous than those for the higher grades and should require the specific skills and knowledge for working with young children. By investing in the preparation of high quality early childhood teachers, policymakers may be able to reduce the cost of later student remediation.

Experienced early childhood teachers already in the classroom face somewhat similar issues in terms of their professional growth and development. Although highly sensitive to the

needs of young children, they may not be versed in the latest research about literacy development nor aware of the best instructional and assessment practices. Teachers who move to the early childhood classroom after teaching older children may be similarly lacking in knowledge. Thus, it is important for policymakers to

- place a high value on the professional development of all staff who are already working with young children and
- support training opportunities that address 1) the early literacy development process; 2) instructional strategies that promote early literacy development; and 3) early literacy assessment.

Conclusion

The demand for a literate society will only grow in the years and decades ahead; likewise, the challenge to provide effective early literacy education will increase. A more diverse student population, for whom English is a new language, will add new twists and require new solutions. But by understanding how any young child becomes literate and how to build on his or her natural inclinations, skilled practitioners can help young students build a literacy foundation that will increase their chances of future success both in school and life. It is crucial that state and local leaders support polices that increase the likelihood that all students have this foundation.

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Resources

Center for Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) http://www.ciera.org — practical, research-based solutions to persistent problems in learning and teaching beginning reading.

Early Literacy Advisor (ELA) http://www.mcrel.org/resources/literacy/ela/ — a computerized system that assists classroom teachers in assessing and promoting early literacy development in children ages 4–6. Developed by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).

Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers http://www.nap.edu/openbook/0309068363/html/R1.html — recent comprehensive study of the education of young children ages 2–5 conducted by the National Research Council, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) http://www.naeyc.org/ — a major resource for information on developmentally appropriate practices in assessment and instruction, as well as information on program accreditation.

National Education Goals Panel http://www.negp.gov/ — a bipartisan and intergovernmental body of federal and state officials created in July 1990 to assess and report state and national progress toward achieving the National Education Goals.

National Reading Panel http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/ — report on research-based approaches to reading instruction, including instructional practices aimed at young children.

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children by C.E. Snow, M.S. Burns, and P. Griffin — contains a comprehensive analysis of research on early literacy development, along with a discussion of the implications for instruction. Published in 1998 by National Academy Press.

Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success by M.S. Burns, P. Griffin, and C.E. Snow — a follow-up to *Preventing Reading Difficulties* aimed at a broader audience including those who are new to the area of early literacy development. Published in 1999 by National Academy Press.

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