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Early Literacy: Then and Now

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Abstract

What do these three things have in common: Ring-around-the-Rosy, a picture book, and labels on a shelf where a toy belongs? Did you guess they all promote early literacy? Singing a song or nursery rhyme increases a child's vocabulary. Looking at a picture book with children teaches them simple things such as reading from left to right and turning the pages that way as well. Placing labels on shelves where toys belong introduces print, allowing children to associate the word with the object. Early literacy is not just about reading to children at a young age. Through extensive research, I cover the history of early literature, the core issues, national and local programs developed to effect results, and suggestions for individuals and center activities.

This paper fulfilled B. Peister's Honor Contract for Honors English 232. Her faculty supervisor was Professor Marilyn Senter of Johnson County Community College.

Keywords

literacy, children, information literacy, early childhood development

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What do these three things have in common: Ring-around-the-Rosy, a picture book, and labels on a shelf where a toy belongs? Did you guess they all promote early literacy? Singing a song or nursery rhyme increases a child's vocabulary. Looking at a picture book with children teaches them simple things such as reading from left to right and turning the pages that way as well. Placing labels on shelves where toys belong introduces print, allowing children to associate the word with the object. Early literacy is not just about reading to children at a young age. Through extensive research, I cover the history of early literature, the core issues, national and local programs developed to effect results, and suggestions for individuals and center activities.

History of Literacy

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (The Holy Bible, Genesis. 1. 1-2.).

These familiar words remind us that the history of literacy is tied directly to the history of the Bible. Development of a common literacy was actually delayed because most early Bibles and sacred texts were written in Latin, not the language of the common people: “The first hand written English language Bible Manuscripts were produced in the 1380's by John Wycliffe.” Although the Bible was now produced in the English language, during this period, very few adults could read. In the 1450's Johannes Gutenberg changed publishing by inventing the movable type printing press, and the first book to be printed in Germany using this printing press was a Latin language Bible (“English Bible” 1). In 1476 William Caxton was the first to use this new printing technique in England. The following year, Caxton “published one of the earliest

books expressly for children.” This book was titled A Booke of Curteseye, and was filled with proper etiquette for “young aristocratic boys preparing for social engagements and military careers” (Temple, Martinez, and Yokota 10).

In 1526, a man by the name of William Tyndale “translated the New Testament into English” (“English Bible” 2). This was “the first printed edition of the scripture in the English language.” Tyndale’s New Testament would soon become very controversial, and the Bishop had all the copies confiscated so he could burn them. Although these measures were taken, some of the copies were still circulating in the public, even though if one were caught in mere possession of a Tyndale Testament, one could die. The reason that the bishop burnt all of these copies was because he “could find no errors.” According to Leonard S. Marcus, author of Minders of Make-Believe, “reading made possible the intimate knowledge of the Bible...” (Marcus 1). Having the Bible available in the spoken language also meant that the Roman-Catholic church “would no longer control access to the scriptures.” If people could read the Bible, it was thought that the church would lose its income and power (“English Bible” 3).

In 1539, the “Great Bible,” became “the first English Bible authorized for public use” (“English Bible” 3). A little over twenty years later “the Geneva Bible was first published.” This Bible preserved over “ninety percent of William Tyndale’s original English translation.” The Geneva Bible used a new technique which “ numbered the verses to the chapter, so that referencing specific passages would be easier.” By 1644 there were almost a hundred and fifty editions of the Geneva Bible published (4). With the number of Bibles available, and the accessibility of the language and verses, there was now a body of work for children to learn to read. Up until this point parents were responsible for the task of teaching their children to read. It was not until 1647 that teachers took over this responsibility. Regardless of who the teachers

were, having the children learn how to read marked the beginning of the “children’s spiritual training” (Marcus 1).

Although other books became available to the children, most books still had the underlying theme of religion. It was not until close to the turn of the century that books moved beyond didacticism. In 1693, Some Thoughts Concerning Education written by John Locke was published in Britain (Marcus 4). John Locke’s work was a “wide range essay on child-rearing practices” (5). This essay provided multiple theories within one another. The first point of his theory was “Tabula Rasa.” John Locke believed that when children are born their minds are blank slates – “white papers” – on which experiences are written (Myers 3). This takes us to the second part, which is that children could be shaped through well thought-out experiences from “books and other influences suited to their capacity” (Marcus 5). This is what opened the door for John Newbery to create a new form of children’s books, which allowed for “a new attempt to teach children the use of the English Alphabet, by way of diversion” (Machado 273). The idea of education being fun caught on, and “by the 1770’s, Newbery’s groundbreaking books were in circulation in the colonies in both imported and pirated editions” (Marcus 5). The well-circulated New England Primer, an alphabet picture book, was another staple of eighteenth century literacy (Temple, Martinez, and Yokota 11).

The nineteenth century brought civil war, magazines, The Great Boston Fire, free public libraries, and the first children’s reading room in a library. At the end of the Civil War in 1865, the people of the nation were wondering what the war had done to their children. Teens and children found interest outside of the interests of their elders. Some speculated that “the War between States had spawned a home-front war between generations” (Marcus 33). As families restructured themselves after the war, so did the businesses of publishing. By the end of 1865,

almost every major publishing company had, or soon would have, published a magazine, a trend that “no new house with the ambition to rise to the top could afford not to participate in” (35). Magazines encouraged reading because they were short, current, and published for a wide range of ages, teens up to adults. All seemed to be prospering until fall of 1872. November 9, 1872, would be written down in the history books as the Great Boston Fire. The fire decimated most of Boston’s business district in downtown Boston. This business district is where the majority of the publishing houses were located, which therefore caused the publishing houses to rebuild or at least renovate due to the fires. As they rebuilt, they re-envisioned publishing. In just four years after the fire in 1876, the city of Boston, which prided itself as the “Athens of the New World,” would lay claim to the first free public library (63). Barely a decade later in 1887, Minerva Sanders, a librarian, would be ridiculed for “setting aside a corner of her reading room for children” because libraries were serious places to further academic studies (64). This new interest in children’s literacy and new printing capability due to the rotary printing press allowed for the “Golden Age of Masterpieces” from 1865 to 1902 when many masterpieces for children were published, including “Alice in Wonderland, Father Goose, and The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” (58-70).

Core Issue: Developing Literacy

Literacy can be defined in many different ways, but overall, literacy can be defined as “both an individual intellectual achievement and a form of cultural knowledge that enables people to participate in a range of groups and activities that in some way involve writing and reading” (McLane and McNamee 3). A more specific definition is focused on a specific age group involving infants to six year olds. Early literacy can be defined as “the beginning of literacy and the processes by which young children become literate...literacy development

consist of mastering a complex set of attitudes, expectations, feelings, behaviors, and skills related to written language” (4).

As children grow from infancy on, they should be exposed to activities that promote literacy. The problem is that children in today’s society are not equally exposed to such activities. With an immense amount of research to back this, it has been proven that “children whose parents read to them become better readers and do better in school” (“Family Support” 1). This information supports that an early exposure creates an increased interest in literacy. This early interest is vital to further learning because “learning to read and write at a high level of proficiency is a lifelong process” (Green, Peterson and Lewis 1).

Jean Piaget, a psychologist in the 1920s, believed that “thinking about knowledge occurs at all stages” (Morgan 65). As children play, they “construct their understanding from their interactions with the world” (Myers 154). This shadows what John Locke thought over two hundred years earlier: children are blank slates who can be shaped through well thought-out experiences. John Locke also thought that through these experiences, the children will “learn to perceive the world” (254). Locke understood that children did not just learn through the experiences, but through what is called association. For example, a child who has a dog at home calls all pets “dogs” until his experience changes. This is a form of organization for the experiences (313).

Early literacy spans over a six-year range in age, due to all the specific aspects of early literacy. When infants cry, turn their head toward a voice or make sounds other than crying, this is all part of early literacy (Allen and Marotz 64). As children grow into toddlers, they develop a vocabulary of “five to fifty words” (109). This simple, very basic vocabulary has the potential to expand up to three hundred words if early literacy is included in the daily routine (118). By the

time children are three, they have a vocabulary ranging from three hundred to one thousand words. At this age, the children start adding endings like “ing” to verbs and use “s” to indicate plurals (136). This is just the tip of language development. By age six, a child will have a vocabulary ranging from “ten thousand to fourteen thousand words.” At this age, children will learn “five to ten new words each day” (169).

Early literacy not only involves increased vocabulary skills, it also involves cognitive association, print awareness, letter recognition, and the children’s imagination. Cognitive association is important to young children so they are able to organize information they are receiving from the outside world. For example, the child above who refers to all pets as dogs can learn through a story that there are many different types of pets. This child then can begin to organize “pets” according to information from this story. Print awareness begins by exploration in a print rich environment, which allows children to explore and learn through play. Children learn by exploring books, magazines, hand written stories and other sources of print through out the room. Although children are able to see print, it is very important that children see others using print. Parents and teachers should be examples of the proper way to use the written language. This allows children to begin to recognize the “conventions and characters of a written language (Hurst). It includes recognition of directionality in reading, that print forms words corresponding to speech, and that spaces separate words and other features” (Machado 476). Print awareness and letter recognition parallel because as children are exposed to print, they are more likely to become interested in dissecting the print and learning about the individual letters. The letters that will most interest a child are letters in the child’s name. In addition to vocabulary and print recognition, early literacy promotes children’s imagination and allows children to have a sense of wonder, and curiosity (Hurst). Early literacy is a key aspect to

children's development, due to the broad spectrum of the development it affects.

The most effective strategy in promoting early literacy is “reading aloud to children in an interactive style that engages them as active learners” (Green, Peterson and Lewis 3). Although reading aloud is one of the most effective ways of promoting literacy, it still involves having the time and resources available to do this activity at home. It has been confirmed that even the simple bed time story proves “how valuable parents are in the reading development of their children” (Raban 35).

National and Local Programs to Promote Literacy

“Unfortunately, millions of children are growing up in home environments that fail to provide the support needed to foster children's early literacy development” (Barnett, 421-423). These children must depend on other programs to fill the gap. Some of these programs might include Head Start program, No Child Left Behind, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and Reach out and Read.

Head Start was created in 1965, after research had linked juvenile delinquency to poverty. President Lyndon B. Johnson “believed strongly that education was the key to breaking the cycle of poverty.” Head Start originally began as an eight-week summer course that was staffed by volunteers. When the first session had more than 561,000 children arrive nationwide, it was evident that Head Start would become something much larger than an eight-week summer course (“Head Start..”). Head Start has helped over 25 million preschool aged children over the course of forty four years. Head Start has been deemed the “most successful, longest-running, national school readiness program in the United States” (“About NHSA“).

According to Fran O'Brien of Olathe Head Start, promoting literacy is a large part of the program's focus. Head Start works as a team with the family and teachers to create literacy

goals not only for the child, but for the family. Literacy is even promoted on the bus; when children are picked up on the bus, the bus aides provide an activity such as books, file folder games, songs, Magna Doodle, etc. Olathe's Head Start program has a parent library where parents can find parenting books as well as books about child development. Classrooms are print rich and have writing centers, books, and letter games, which all foster a child's curiosity (O'Brien).

The No Child Left Behind Act was founded in 2001. This act "reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965." No Child Left Behind would "ensure that that no child is trapped in a failing school." This act was created to "strengthen accountability in public school systems." Focusing on grades third through eighth, the act looks at state wide testing scores ("Executive").

Beth Underwood, who was a first grade teacher for Olathe public school district, clarified that first graders do not take the standardized testing. However Beth said "as a building, everyone in our school worked to prepare students to score well on those tests so that our building could meet the qualifications and guidelines of No Child Left Behind". Beth goes on to explain that although this was not a requirement for first graders to take the test, the school district believed that all the children should be prepared for this testing (Underwood).

One part of No Child Left Behind is "Reading First" which is a state grant program, available in six-year packages. The money from the grant is used for "screening and diagnostic assessments to determine which students in kindergarten to third grade are at risk of reading failure." Although No Child Left Behind focuses on the third through eighth graders, it is thanks to this act that we have Reading First. Recently Reading First expanded and now has "Early Reading First." This awards grant money for six years to "Local Educational Agencies to

support early language, literacy and pre-reading development of preschool aged children” (“Executive“). Without federal grants like this finding, the funding for preschool programs to promote early literacy could be challenging.

Although federal funding is a valuable resource, other organizations have chosen to take the rougher terrain of the not-for-profit organization. These programs are compiled, by the educator and doctors of young children who work one on one with child and understand the children’s development. These organizations acknowledge that children who are introduced in the proper setting to books at a young age will learn to enjoy books earlier in life. Organizations like National Association for the Education of Young Children and Reach Out and Read support early childcare center and families in promoting literacy among our youth.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children was founded in 1926. NAEYC is a well-established accreditation program striving for higher standards in early childcare centers. NAEYC states its mission in three goals. The first one is, “improving professional practice and working conditions in early childhood education.” NAEYC has taken the position on as advocates, not only for the children but also for the staff, fighting for competitive wages and more schooling opportunities available for early childhood educators. The second goal is to “support early childhood programs by working to achieve a high-quality system of early childhood education.” This is high quality care for anyone. NAEYC wants high quality care to be available to the public no matter, socio-economical status, ethnicity, or religion. This leads us to NAEYC’s third goal, “building a high-performing, inclusive organization of groups and individuals who are committed to promoting excellence in early childhood education for all young children” (“Our Mission”). Allowing teachers to collaborate on a national level through conferences and professional development trainings; encourages the

teacher to constantly be thinking outside the box when it comes to curriculum, room arrangement and extending professional development. Through these three goals, NAEYC provides a high standard accreditation program that will change childcare centers for the better.

“The National Association for the Education of Young Children is dedicated to improving the well-being of all young children, with particular focus on the quality of educational and developmental services for all children from birth through age 8” (“About NAEYC”). NAEYC believes that quality does matter, which is why it focuses with great intent on quality care:

Several decades of research clearly demonstrate that high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood programs produce short- and long-term positive effects on children's cognitive and social development. Specifically, children who experience high-quality, stable child care engage in more complex play, demonstrate more secure attachments to adults and other children, and score higher on measures of thinking ability and language development. (“A call for Excellence”)

Language development is a crucial part of early literacy. This allows children to understand more information around them and as they get older this allows them to understand more complex or abstract thoughts and sayings. In the Kansas City Metropolitan area, there are sixty-two accredited programs which encourage this language development, one of which is the Hiersteiner Child Development Center on Johnson County Community College campus.

The last program is Reach Out and Read. “Reach Out and Read (ROR) is a national nonprofit organization that promotes early literacy by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud in pediatric exam rooms across the nation.”

Reach Out and Read was founded in 1989 at Boston City Hospital by doctors, nurses and early childhood educators. Reach Out and Read was based on a simple principle: “Encourage parents to read regularly to their children and give them the tools (the books) to do so.” Reach Out and Read touches a huge number of children across the nation. In one year “Reach Out and Read serves 3.8 million children annually...by distributing 6 million books each year” (“Reach Out”).

Reach Out and Read has a local connection as well. In the Kansas City area, there are forty-three sites that participate in this program. Children’s Mercy and KU Medical Center are both participating in Reach Out and Read. There are three basic components to the program. First the staff at doctor’s offices are trained to advise “parents about appropriate books and reading activities that support their child’s healthy development.” The second component is at each check up from birth to five, the children are able to choose an age-appropriate book and take it home for free. Finally the last component is that trained volunteers read to the children in the waiting rooms, which allows an example for the parents to see how to share books and stories with their kids. Using these three components and many hours of volunteering is how Kansas City has been able to reach out and touch twenty-five thousand children each year (“Reach Out...KC”).

Conclusion

Next time you sing a song, look at a book, or label a toy for a child, do so knowing that promoting early literacy is just that simple. Acknowledging that children who are read to at a young age will be better readers and will enjoy reading is the first step that we must take. Just as infants learn to walk and become more confident in their ability to accomplish the task, the same can be said for early literacy: the more children are exposed to literacy at a young age, the more confident they will become as readers and the more successful they will be as learners. Early

literacy is the child's foundation.

A Chinese Proverb says: "Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere." But accepting this treasure has not been easy. Acceptance started with translating the Bible to English, allowing common people to have access to scripture. It included innovations with the printing press, which changed the way we produced and distributed books. It necessitated dedicated programs focused on early intervention. To educate the young, our ancestors embraced these changes and many more that have occurred throughout the history of literacy. By embracing these changes, you allow children to explore through their curiosity as well as their imagination. So please, open that treasure up to the next generation, allowing them to find the gold in learning.

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