Young Children's Development in Language and Literacy

Reading research has yielded useful information about how language and literacy develop, from which the following are summarized (Collins & Schickedanz 2024; Ranweiler 2004):

> Language and literacy are connected from infancy onward. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing develop concurrently rather than sequentially.

> Differences between children's home languages and cultures and those of the program can affect children's language and literacy development. It is essential that educators understand language development in monolingual and multilingual learners and seek to "provide experiences that build on a child's funds of knowledge and are culturally and linguistically responsive" (NAEYC 2020, 23).

> Children differ in their rate of learning. Some children pick up literacy skills easily and quickly; others need more explicit help and time.

> Some language and literacy learning is incidental. It arises naturally during play and other everyday experiences. Other learning depends on the explicit instruction that occurs during formal teaching. Thus, children actively construct their own knowledge, but they also need support from adults to further their development.

> Children acquire language and literacy as they interact with others, learning to talk, read, and write because they are social beings. They want to communicate with adults and peers at home, school, and other familiar places.

> Children learn best when instruction is relevant and meaningful to them. When children can apply language and literacy to their everyday interests and activities, that learning will be genuine, deep, and lasting.

> Language and literacy learning happens through activities children initiate, such as engaging in dramatic play, exploring print materials, and using inventive writing. It also happens through instruction such as book reading, letter identification practice, and performing or composing songs and poems using alliteration and rhyming.

To be successful in the world, children need to learn to communicate their thoughts, needs, and ideas. Although young infants do express their basic needs and emotions—quite effectively!—through cries and other early vocalizations, they also begin very early to communicate their more intangible thoughts. At the earliest stages of life, they catalog the sounds of their language and learn to make those sounds more than sounds that are not part of their language. They discover that those sounds mean something and that the same sounds over and over mean the same thing over and over. Eventually children realize that those sounds strung together can mean different things when strung together in different ways. They start to play with the sounds and listen carefully when others make the sounds. They memorize the strings of sounds and start to use them. They slowly develop the understanding of words. *Dog* stands for that big, fluffy thing that leans over the side of the crib, breathes loudly, and sometimes makes a big noise. Children might

learn that the sound string /mama/ represents the responsive person who snuggles and feeds them. Those sound strings are stand-ins for the actual thing in the real world. This is the earliest understanding of representation.

Representation also exists in the written word. As noted previously, the word *cat* isn't furry and doesn't say "meow," but when you see it in print, you have some mental representation that matches the word. In this way, language and literacy share a code and a way of representing the world as well as thoughts.

In 2009, researchers looked across more than 300 research studies on early literacy for the National Early Literacy Panel report. This foundational report, which is still relevant today, found that six variables linked to literacy predicted the later success of children as readers and writers:

1. Expressive and receptive oral language development
2. Understanding of the alphabetic code
3. Phonemic awareness and the larger category of phonological awareness
4. Use of invented spelling (understanding and representing the letter-sound connections, even if not correctly spelled)
5. Print knowledge, including awareness of environmental print
6. Other skills such as rapid word naming of letters and numbers, name writing, and visual perception abilities (drawn from a summary of the 2009 NELP report in Morrow, Dougherty, & Tracey 2019)

The early childhood community has had a difficult time deciding what to do with this information. Some have interpreted the value of rapid word naming to mean teachers should be using flashcards to speed young learners along. Others have jumped on the chance to use worksheets to reinforce concepts. But as mentioned previously, children learn best when concepts are relevant to them. All six variables are learned best through play, multiple exposures that are authentic and engaging, and experiences that are meaningful and interesting to children. In particular, children recall word meanings best when adults provide an explanation of the word in context, repeat as needed, and give a deep-enough explanation for the learner to understand the concept and make the word relevant. In short, children learn most effectively when concepts are repeated, relevant, and real.

Consider the vignette with Miss Genevieve at the opening of this chapter. It's an excellent example of playing with words and the sounds of language, all while engaging children in personally meaningful language use. There is no word more important to a child than their own name. Miss Genevieve wisely crafted an activity to play with the sounds of children's names while they were already engaging in a compelling activity (going for a walk). Because the game used each child's name, each child could be successful. When there was a moment that Sophie seemed uncertain, Miss Genevieve supported her and invited others to do the same. Miss Genevieve, whose own

name did not lend itself to rhyming with a real word, cheerfully modeled a nonsense word that *did* rhyme, and she could have done the same for a child in the same situation if needed. The activity was playful, was relevant, and offered repeated examples of the concept of rhyming.

Joyful, play-based language experiences like these create a positive foundation for literacy, making learning enjoyable and fostering a love for words and language. To become literate, young children must see reading and writing as not only useful but also pleasurable. Adults play a key role in promoting this positive attitude, particularly through the use of guided play (Hassinger-Das, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff 2017).

Teaching and Learning in Language and Literacy

As with all curriculum areas, a balance of child-guided and adult-guided experiences is essential in early language and literacy development, and the division between the two is not well-defined. Even though children have language and literacy experiences and acquire some literacy skills on their own, support and intentional instruction from thoughtful adults who understand the necessary elements for literacy learning and can support children in meeting learning goals are critical to sustain the children's motivation and supply essential information.

NAEYC's professional standards and competencies (2019c) apply research findings to create a list of expectations for teachers, including having a deep knowledge of academic disciplines, understanding how children learn in each discipline, and using effective methods of teaching content. These standards note that to help young children gain academic knowledge, including the skills necessary to become readers and writers, educators engage in genuine, reciprocal conversations with children; foster oral language and communication skills; ask questions that probe and stimulate children's thinking, understanding, and theory building; and provide early literacy experiences both in English and in children's home languages.

Even child-guided experiences offer opportunities for teachers to observe and consider ways they might scaffold children's learning while still honoring child choice and discovery. An example of this might be children playing together in a dramatic play area set up to be a fire station. Children are choosing how to use the provided materials, and a nearby adult might augment the play by modeling how to use a map to drive to the scene of the emergency. The teacher can also add vocabulary to the play by pointing out some of the following: "Make sure to wear your helmet! Did you jump into your turnout gear?," "Someone needs to hook up the hose!," or "Did the dispatcher give you the address of the fire?" By using these words while playing with the children, teachers help children see the connection between the language and the materials around them. The importance of the words is underscored by their use in advancing the play.

Language, Literacy, and Intentional Use of Digital Tools

Using digital tools, such as touch-screen tablets, intentionally in early childhood settings allows teachers to support children's language and literacy development while balancing their use with play and other real, hands-on experiences. Effective integration of technology requires planning experiences that are interactive, purposeful, and enhance learning outcomes (Armstrong & Moses 2023). For example, along with providing high-quality print books in different genres, teachers can support children's literacy skills by using ebooks and interactive storytelling apps that let children see themselves and their experiences represented in media, fostering connection and engagement.

Digital tools should complement—not replace—hands-on activities, providing opportunities for children to create, narrate, express themselves, and collaborate with each other. By considering the purpose of a particular technology experience and teaching children ways to use the technology for storytelling, drawing, writing, and documenting what they have created, teachers support self-expression and language development while building an informed awareness of use. Balancing screens with active play helps children learn to engage thoughtfully with technology and offers multimodal communication.

Making practical and developmentally appropriate technology choices may require a shift in teachers' perspectives to determine, as NAEYC's position statement notes, how "technology and interactive media can help to support developmentally appropriate practice" in educators' own settings so "the uses of technology and media by children are active, hands-on, engaging, and empowering . . . [the uses] become normal and transparent—the child or the educator is focused on the activity or exploration itself, not the technology" (2020, 13).

Through careful selection, intentional use, and scaffolding of high-quality, age-appropriate devices and media, teachers can make technology a valuable component of language and literacy learning, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

Language-Rich Communication

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To most effectively promote children's language and literacy development, it is critical to view the processes of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as interconnected, dependent, and supportive of one another. This foundational understanding demonstrates the value of promoting children's engagement in language-rich communication across all aspects of children's daily life, including both informal (social conversation) and formal (academic discussion) (Cavanaugh et al. 2017).

The value of children's interactions with teachers and peers that include opportunities for both expressive and receptive language is significant for young children. Children's learning is enhanced through conversational turn-taking, even before they have developed enough words to fully engage in a verbal back-and-forth exchange. Frequent, sustained back-and-forth exchanges (both social and academic) support children's brain development and academic achievement (Flynn 2016; Romeo et al. 2018). Teachers promote language by modeling it, providing varied and frequent opportunities for children to express themselves verbally, offering encouragement for language attempts, uncovering shared and unique experiences in conversations, restating and expanding on what children say, and asking responsive questions that encourage children to think more deeply.

Teachers also support variations in storytelling, such as stories about themselves, stories that are unconnected to the current time or place, or stories that are completely made up with fictional or fantastic characters (Flynn 2016). Storytelling offers rich opportunities for language learning:

> When children engage in storytelling, they actively construct narratives to express their ideas. Through storytelling, children learn to organize their thoughts, articulate ideas, and develop a sense of narrative structure. They begin to understand character development, plot progression, and story elements—essential components of reading and writing stories. (Joseph 2024, 10)

By supporting children's storytelling, teachers also reinforce the important role that storytelling plays in many cultures. Indeed, many cultures use oral storytelling and the sharing of poetry and story songs more than they use books with young children. It is a joyful, culturally significant activity where children and adults work together. Incorporating these practices in the classroom can be an important validation for children and families.

Children benefit from opportunities to deepen understanding of academic content through dialogue, including increasingly complex academic vocabulary. For multilingual learners, these conversations are especially valuable. In literacy-focused conversations, educators can discuss story elements, ask children to predict what happens next, and encourage them to summarize key points. This approach helps children build both language and comprehension skills. In math-focused conversations, teachers might support children's ability to compare, gather information, and understand basic math concepts. Science-focused conversations support children's observation, planning, and scientific inquiry skills. Social-focused conversations support children's abilities to communicate about past experiences, thoughts, feelings, desires, and motivations (Curenton 2016). Through intentional support in these areas, educators can create a rich linguistic environment that fosters the academic growth of all children, including multilingual learners.