

# **Part One**

# ***The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction: The Principles***

I struggled through the alphabet as if it had been a bramble-bush; getting considerably worried and scratched by every letter.  
—Charles Dickens  
***Great Expectations***

*Kathleen A. Roskos, James F. Christie, and  
Donald J. Richgels\**

All of the information in this training module was taken from the Article ***Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction*** by Roskos, Christie, and Richgels published in the Journal **Young Children**. Used with the permission from the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Title of article that is the source of this training module: Roskos, K.A., Christie, & D.J. Richgels, 2003. The Essentials of Early Literacy Instruction. *Young Children* 58 (2): 53-60. (Available online at: <http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200303/Essentials.pdf>)

The cumulative and growing research on literacy development in young children is rapidly becoming a body of knowledge that can serve as the basis for the everyday practice of early literacy education (IRA & NAEYC 1998; National Research Council 1998; Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray 2000; Neuman & Dickinson 2001; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2002). Although preliminary, the knowledge base outlines children's developmental patterns in critical areas, such as phonological and print awareness. It serves as a resource for designing early literacy programs and specific instructional practices. In addition, it offers reliable and valid observational data for grounding approaches to early reading assessment.

That we know more about literacy development and acquisition, however, does not let us escape a central issue of all early education: What should young children be learning and doing before they go to kindergarten? What early literacy instruction should children receive? What should it emphasize—head (cognition) or heart (motivation) or both?

Real-life answers to these questions rarely point directly to this or that, but rather

they are somewhere in the middle, including both empirical evidence and professional wisdom. While we will continue to wrestle with these complicated questions, we must take practical action so that our growing understanding in early literacy supports the young child as a wholesome, developing person.

What then are the essentials of early literacy instruction? What content should be included, and how should it be taught in early education settings? Our first response to these complex questions is described below in a skeletal framework for action. We briefly define early literacy, so as to identify what young children need to know and be able to do if they are to enjoy the fruits of literacy, including valuable dispositions that strengthen their literacy interactions. Then we describe two examples of instruction that support children's reading and writing learning before they enter the primary grades.

With the imagery of Pip's remark from *Great Expectations* in mind, we hope to show that well-considered early literacy instruction is certainly not a bramble-bush for our very young children, but rather a welcoming environment in which to learn to read and write.

Today a variety of terms are used to refer to the preschool phase of literacy development— emerging literacy, emergent reading, emergent writing, early reading, symbolic tools, and so on. We have adopted the term early literacy as the most comprehensive yet concise description of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that precede learning to read and write in the primary grades (K–3). We chose this term because, in the earliest phases of literacy development, forming reading and writing concepts and skills is a dynamic process (National Research Council 1998, 2000).

Young children's grasp of print as a tool for making meaning and as a way to communicate combines both oral and written language. Children draw and scribble and "read" their marks by attributing meaning to them through their talk and action. They listen to stories read aloud and learn how to orient their bodies and minds to the technicalities of books and print.

When adults say, "Here, help me hold the book and turn the pages," they teach children basic conventions of book handling and the left-to-right, top-to-bottom orientation of English. When they guide children's small hands and eyes to printed words on the page, they show them that this is the source of the reading and that the marks have meaning. When they explain, "This says 'goldfish'. Do you remember our goldfish? We named it Baby Flipper. We put its name on the fishbowl," they help children understand the connection between printed words, speech, and real experience.

Children's early reading and writing learning, in other words, is embedded in a larger developing system of oral communication. Early literacy is an emerging set

of relationships between reading and writing. These relationships are situated in a broader communication network of speaking and listening, whose components work together to help the learner negotiate the world and make sense of experience (Thelen & Smith 1995; Lewis 2000; Siegler 2000). Young children need writing to help them learn about reading, they need reading to help them learn about writing; and they need oral language to help them learn about both.

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**Test Questions: (select the most correct option)**

**1. The authors would describe well-considered early literacy instruction as**

- a.  a separate entity from other early classroom learning activities.
- b.  a welcoming environment in which to learn to read and write.
- c.  only those activities that are directly related to the acquisition of oral language skills.
- d.  a struggle such as learning the alphabet.

**2. Early literacy**

- a.  means what precedes and is related to learning to read and write.
- b.  means teaching a young child to read.
- c.  means correcting the speech of a child.
- d.  means teaching a child to write their name.

**3. Children's early reading and writing learning**

- a.  should only be taught in early elementary school.
  - b.  consists only in what children observe adults doing.
  - c.  is a very comprehensive system that should only be done by reading specialists.
  - d.  is embedded in a larger developing system of oral communication.
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## ***Necessary content and dispositions in early literacy***

Early literacy holds much that young children might learn. Yet we cannot teach everything and must make choices about what content to teach and which dispositions to encourage. High-quality research provides our best evidence for setting priorities for what to address and how.

Recent reviews of research indicate at least three critical content categories in early literacy: oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. They also identify at least one important disposition, print motivation—the frequency of requests for shared reading and engagement in print-related activities, such as pretend writing (Senechal et al. 2001; Layzer 2002; Neuman 2002; Lonigan & Whitehurst in press).

Children need to learn mainstay concepts and skills of written language from which more complex and elaborated understandings and motivations arise, such as grasp of the alphabetic principle, recognition of basic text structures, sense of genre, and a strong desire to know. They need to learn phonological awareness, alphabet letter knowledge, the functions of written language, a sense of meaning making from texts, vocabulary, rudimentary print knowledge (e.g., developmental spelling), and the sheer persistence to investigate print as a meaning-making tool.

### **Content of Early Literacy Instruction**

Teaching preschool children

- what reading and writing can do
  - to name and write alphabet letters
  - to hear rhymes and sounds in words
  - to spell simple words
- to recognize and write their own names
- new words from stories, work, and play
- to listen to stories for meaning

### **Valuable Dispositions of Early Literacy Instruction**

Cultivating preschool children's

- willingness to listen to stories
- desire to be read to
- curiosity about words and letters
- exploration of print forms
- playfulness with words
- enjoyment of songs, poems, rhymes, jingles, books, and dramatic play

Written language is harder to learn than oral. Learning an alphabetic writing system requires extra work. Both spoken and written language are symbol systems for representing and retrieving meanings. In spoken language, meaning making depends on phonemes or sounds. As children gain experience with the

language of their community, they learn which words (or sequences of phonemes) stand for which concepts in that language. For example, children learn that the spoken word table in English or mesa in Spanish names a four-legged, flat-topped piece of furniture.

Writing and reading with an alphabetic system involve an extra layer of symbols, where the phonemes are represented by letters. This means that beginners must both learn the extra symbols—the letters of the alphabet—and raise their consciousness of the phonemes (because, while speaking and understanding speech, we unconsciously sequence and contrast phonemes).

Speakers, for example, understand the two very different concepts named by the words nail and lane without consciously noticing that those words are constructed from the same three phonemes (/n/, /A/, and /l/), but in different sequences. When children learn to read, however, they must pay attention to those three phonemes, how they are sequenced, and what letters represent them.

Invented spelling is a phonemic awareness activity that has the added advantage of being meaningful and functional (Richgels 2001). Children nonconventionally but systematically match sounds in words that they want to write with letters that they know. For example, they may use letter names and sounds in letters names (/ch/ in H, /A/ as the name of the letter A, and /r/ in R) when spelling chair as HAR. Invented spelling begins before children’s phonemic awareness is completely developed and before they know all the names of the letters of the alphabet. With encouragement from adults, it develops through stages that culminate in conventional spelling. The meanings of both spoken and written language serve real purposes in our daily lives (Halliday 1975). We usually do not speak without wanting to accomplish something useful. For example, we might want to influence others’ behavior (“Would you turn that down, please?”), express our feelings (“I hate loud music”), or convey information (“Habitual listening to loud music is a danger to one’s hearing”). Similarly, with written messages we can influence behavior (NO SMOKING), express feelings (IxNY), and inform (Boston 24 mi) while serving such added purposes as communicating across distances or preserving a message as a record or a reminder.

These added purposes require that written messages be able to stand on their own (Olson 1977). Written language is decontextualized; that is, the sender and receiver of a written communication usually do not share the same time and space. The writer is not present to clarify and extend his or her message for the reader. This means that young readers’ and writers’ extra work includes, in addition to dealing with phonemes and letters, dealing with decontextualization.

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**Test Questions: (select the most correct option)**

**4. Reviews of research indicate at least three critical content categories in early literacy:**

- a.  oral language, encouragement from adults, and print knowledge
- b.  oral language comprehension, print knowledge, and grammar awareness
- c.  oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, and print knowledge
- d.  phonological awareness, print knowledge, and conventional spelling.

**5. Written language is harder to learn than an oral Learning an alphabetic writing system.**

True       False

**6. Invented spelling begins before children's phonemic awareness is completely developed and before they know all the names of the letters of the alphabet.**

True       False

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## ***Why do the extra work?***

Historically, societies have found the extra work of writing and reading to be worthwhile. The extra functions of written language, especially preserving messages and communicating across distances, have enabled a tremendous growth of knowledge. Individual children can experience similar benefits if teachers help them to acquire the knowledge and skill involved in the extra work of reading and writing while always making real to them the extra purposes that written language serves. We must cultivate their dispositions (curiosity, desire, play) to actively seek, explore, and use books and print. As they learn what letters look like and how they match up with phonemes, which strings of letters represent which words, and how to represent their meanings in print and retrieve others' meanings from print, they must see also how the fruits of those labors empower them by multiplying the functionality of language.

With speech, children can influence the behavior of others, express their feelings, and convey information. A big part of motivating them to take on the extra work of reading and writing must be letting them see how the permanence and portability

of writing can widen the scope of that influencing, expressing, and informing. Young children who can say “No! Don’t!” experience the power of spoken words to influence what others do or don’t do—but only when the speakers are present. Being able to write No extends the exercise of that power to situations in which they are not present, as morning kindergartners Eric, Jeff, Zack, and Ben realized when they wrote NOSTPN (No stepping) to keep afternoon kindergartners from disturbing a large dinosaur puzzle they had assembled on the classroom floor (McGee & Richgels 2000, 233–34).

## ***The practice of early literacy instruction:***

### Two examples

Unlike the very real and immediate sounds and meanings of talk, print is silent; it is obscure; it is not of the here and now. Consequently, early literacy instruction must often be explicit and direct, which is not to say that it must be scriptlike, prescriptive, and rigid (Schickedanz 2003). Rather it should be embedded in the basic activities of early learning long embraced by early education practice and research. These include reading aloud, circle time, small group activities, adult-child conversations, and play.

Teachers can embed reading and writing instruction in familiar activities, to help children learn both the conventions of print and how print supports their immediate goals and needs. The two examples below show how what’s new about early literacy instruction fits within tried-and-true early education practice.

#### ***Interactive storybook reading***

Reading aloud has maximum learning potential when children have opportunities to actively participate and respond (Morrow & Gambrell 2001). This requires teachers to use three types of scaffolding or support: (a) before-reading activities that arouse children’s interest and curiosity in the book about to be read; (b) during-reading prompts and questions that keep children actively engaged with the text being read; and (c) after-reading questions and activities that give children an opportunity to discuss and respond to the books that have been read.

Instruction can be easily integrated into any of these three phases of story reading. This highly contextualized instruction should be guided by children’s literacy learning needs and by the nature of the book being read: information books, such as Byron Barton’s *Airport*, can teach children new vocabulary and concepts; books, songs, and poems with strong rhymes, such as Raffi’s *Down by the Bay*, promote phonological awareness; and stories with strong narrative plots, such as *There’s an Alligator under My Bed*, by Mercer Mayer, are ideal for generating predictions and acquainting children with narrative structure, both of

which lay a foundation for reading comprehension.

In addition, most books can be used to teach print recognition, book concepts (e.g., cover, page), and concepts of print (e.g., print vs. pictures). Of course, instruction should be limited to several brief teaching points per reading so children can enjoy the read-aloud experience. Enjoyment and building positive dispositions should always be given high priority when reading aloud. For an example of how a teacher might do an interactive story reading session with *There's an Alligator under My Bed*, see "Shared Reading to Learn about Story Plot."

### ***Literacy in play***

The general benefits of play for children's literacy development are well documented, showing that a literacy-enriched play environment exposes children to valuable print experiences and lets them practice narrative skills (Christie & Roskos 2003). In the following example, two preschoolers are playing in a restaurant activity center equipped with wall signs (Springville Restaurant), menus, pencils, and a notepad:

**Food server:** *Can I take your order?*  
**Customer:** [Looks over the menu] *Let's see, I'd like some cereal. And how about some orange juice. And how about the coffee with that too.*  
**Food server:** *We don't have coffee. We're all runned out.*  
**Customer:** *Okay, well . . . I'll just take orange juice.*  
**Food server:** [Writes down order, using scribble writing] *Okay. I'll be right back with your order.* (Roskos et al. 1995)

Here, the customer is using the literacy routine of looking at a menu and then placing an order. If the menu is familiar and contains picture cues, some emergent reading might also be taking place. The food server is using another routine—writing down customer orders—and is practicing emergent writing. In addition, the children have constructed a simple narrative story, complete with a problem (an item is not available) and a resolution (drop that item from the order).

A Vygotskian approach to developing mature dramatic play also illustrates the value of tangible play plans for helping children to self-regulate their behaviors, to remember on purpose, and to deliberately focus their attention on play activity—foundational cognitive skills of reading and writing (Bodrova & Leong 1998). We have found that preschoolers often spend more time preparing for their dramatizations than they spend acting out the stories. For example, one group of four year-olds spent more than 30 minutes preparing for a pizza parlor story (organizing felt pizza ingredients, arranging furniture for the pizza kitchen, making play money, and deciding on roles) and less than 10 minutes acting out the cooking, serving, and eating of the pizza meal. One would be hard pressed to

find another type of activity that can keep young children focused and “on task” for this length of time.

literacy-in-play strategy is effective in increasing the range and amount of literacy behaviors during play, thus allowing children to practice their emerging skills and show what they have learned (Neuman & Roskos 1992). Evidence is also accumulating that this strategy helps children learn important literacy concepts and skills, such as knowledge about the functions of writing (Vukelich 1993), the ability to recognize play-related print (Neuman & Roskos 1993), and comprehension strategies such as self-checking and self-correction (Neuman & Roskos 1997). Like storybook reading, the literacy learning potential of play can be increased when it includes before, during, and after types of scaffolding as illustrated in “Guided Play to Explore New Words and Their Sounds.”

## ***Closing***

We are gaining empirical ground in understanding early literacy learning well enough to identify essential content that belongs in an early childhood curriculum. Increasingly, the field can articulate key concepts and skills that are significant and foundational, necessary for literacy development and growth, research-based, and motivational to arouse and engage children’s minds. The need to broadly distribute this knowledge is great—but the need to act on it consistently and carefully in instructional practice is even greater, especially if we are to steer children clear of the bramble bushes and on to be successful readers and writers.

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### **\*The authors**

Kathleen A. Roskos, Ph.D., is the director of the Ohio Literacy Initiative at the Ohio Department of Education and is a professor at John Carroll University in Cleveland. She coordinated Bridges and Links, one of the first public preschools in Ohio, and is instrumental in the development of content guidelines in early literacy. Kathleen studies early literacy development, teacher cognition, and the design of professional education for teachers.

James F. Christie, Ph.D., is a professor of curriculum and instruction at Arizona State University in Tempe, where he teaches courses in language, literacy, and early childhood education. His research interests include children’s play and early literacy development. James is the president of the Association for the Study of Play.

Donald J. Richgels, Ph.D., is a professor in the literacy education department at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, where he teaches graduate and

undergraduate courses in language development, reading, and language arts.  
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**Test Questions:**

**7. While reading, using prompts and questions will distract from the story being read.**

True       False

**8. Focus on developing attention span should always be given high priority when reading aloud.**

True       False

**9. literacy-in-play is a way children can show what they have learned.**

True       False

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**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location** \_\_\_\_\_