

# New Paths in Early Literacy Teaching and Learning

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## Abstract

This article offers ideas for opening up new paths in early literacy teaching. Some of these paths involve taking a new perspective on topics that have been popular for decades; such as the role of phonics and home reading programs in children's literacy learning. Other paths involve social and cultural issues that are becoming increasingly important as teachers deal with the realities of today's classrooms.

## Introduction

In this article I present my perspectives on the ways in which the findings of some current research in early literacy learning and teaching might be used by teachers to address the realities of today's classrooms. These studies address questions and issues that my pre-service and graduate teacher education students identify as relevant to their work with young children. I selected some research studies - those on the role of phonics in everyday classroom instruction and in working with dyslexic children, and of home reading programs - that present new twists on familiar early literacy research topics. The other research studies provided, address ways in which students' social and cultural identities impact on early literacy teaching and learning. These issues are becoming increasingly important in early literacy research.

## Teaching Phonics

The question of the role of phonics in early literacy learning and instruction comes up in every pre-service and graduate course that I teach. I draw on the work of Clay (1998), a researcher who has had an impact on early literacy for a number of decades, and on relatively recent researchers such as Dahl, Scherer, Lawson, and Grogan (2000), and Moustafa (1998) when responding to this question. All of these researchers advise that children should have a variety of experiences with reading and writing before and while they are learning about letters and sounds. They claim that phonics should be taught formally because phonics information is useful in reading. However, they say that phonics instruction should always include some connection to actual reading and writing because phonics provides only one source of information for readers and writers.

The notion of teaching phonics by starting with whole texts and moving to parts of words has been with us for a number of decades. Moustafa's research (1998) provides new information about the ways in which letter-sound relationships should be taught within the context of reading actual text. She explains that sounding out words using onsets and rimes is more productive and easier for children than sounding out words sound by sound. Onsets are the consonants, consonant blends or consonant digraphs preceding the vowel in any syllable. Rimes are the vowel(s) and any consonants that follow the vowel(s) in a syllable.

For example, in the word, *stream*, *str* is the onset and *eam* is the rime. Sounding out the word as *str* and *eam* is much more likely to help the reader arrive at the word *stream*, than sounding out the word *s/t/r/e/a/m*. Using this research, I recommend to my students that they might read a predictable story, nursery rhyme, chant, song, or poem with children in a shared book setting. The children then might choose their favorite words from the text. The teacher would demonstrate how children could chunk a one-syllable word like *stream* into the onset and rime by writing the word and saying something like: "These letters say *str* and these letters say *eam*." The words could be grouped with other words that have similar onsets and similar rimes and displayed in charts in the room. Children could then use their knowledge of the sounds of these onsets and rimes when sounding out unfamiliar words in their reading and writing.

Another issue that arises from discussions of teaching phonics is that of best practice for teaching children who have been diagnosed as dyslexic. My students sometimes ask about particular strategies that might be effective when working with these children. I draw on a research study by Fink (1998) when responding to these questions. She examined the literacy history of 12 successful dyslexic adults, who had problems with word and letter identification, fluency, spelling, but were able to carry out the literacy demands of lawyers, biochemists, graphic artists, theatre set designers, doctors, teachers and business people, in spite of

their difficulties. Fink found that these adults had learned to read through lots of self-initiated reading. They developed and pursued a passionate interest through reading whatever print they could get their hands on. They used the cueing systems that worked well for them; the meaning cues and their growing background knowledge and sight word vocabulary. Having a purpose for the reading was critical in their learning to read.

Using Fink's findings, I suggest that teachers think about motivation and having a purpose for reading when teaching children with dyslexia. An emphasis on phonics only highlights the problems that these children have in processing the visual information on the page. Interest surveys and interviews are useful for tapping into students' passions, prior knowledge and skills. Teachers could provide captivating reading materials based on the results of the surveys and interviews, and also help the children to develop skills for searching out more information about topics of interest. Children could be taught to use the internet, magazines, videos and other sources of information available to them, in addition to books.

### Home Reading Programs

Like the teaching of phonics from whole to part, the idea that daily reading at home contributes to children's literacy learning is one that is widely accepted. Some researchers, like David Bloome (1997), however, are asking us to take a new perspective on taken-for-granted assumptions. He says that "what was once family time becomes school time . . . what was once an activity that had no definition of success or failure—parents and children either enjoyed the book they were reading or got another, either finished the book or went to sleep—now becomes an instructional activity involving success and failure" (p. 21). He says that bedtime story reading is no longer about families enjoying themselves around a book, but rather an extension of school time. He concludes that by making home reading look like something

done at school with lesson plans and assessments, teachers may be taking away some of the qualities that made home reading so successful. Drawing from Bloome's provocative perspective on home reading programs, I encourage teachers to examine their procedures and expectations for establishing home reading programs to see if the enjoyment of a book with family and friends is an important element of the reading that children do at home. A procedure used by one of my graduate students might be a good starting point. She surveyed her students' parents and guardians to find out what they did and what they would like to be able to do with the books that her kindergarten children brought from school. She used the survey information to modify her home reading program.

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### Social and Cultural Issues

In addition to taking a new look at practices that have been with us for decades, I urge teachers to break new ground by examining issues in early literacy teaching and learning that may not be so familiar. These issues arise from social and cultural factors that impact on children's learning. Helping *all* children to become literate, minimizing the influence of social and cultural factors on their learning, is particularly important

when we consider that literacy contributes to overall school success and to living fulfilling lives. Hofstetter, Sticht, & Hofstetter (1999), for example, found that people who achieve and exercise power over their lives spend more time reading than those who feel they don't have power over their lives. If teachers are to make it possible for no child to fall between the cracks, what can be done to minimize the impact of gender, socioeconomic status, race, language, ethnicity, and social status within the classroom on children's literacy learning?

To respond to this question, it is important to identify which groups of children are succeeding and which groups are struggling with reading and writing. One such group is boys. The National Center for Education Statistics (2000) shows that boys are three to five times more likely than girls to have learning and/or reading disabilities placement in schools. Time and time again, the results of literacy achievement tests show that boys do not do as well as girls.

### Boys' Literacy

The research (Epstein, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998) on boys' literacy struggles shows that working class boys, in particular, seem to have too many female models of readers and writers in their lives and not enough male role models. As a result, the boys perceive reading and writing as feminine activities. The boys feel that in order to present themselves to the world as masculine, they need to put energy into and be successful at things that are considered masculine. This means avoiding feminine-type activities. These researchers also say that cultural norms of masculinity and boys' natural tendencies lean toward a lot of physical activity. Reading and writing tend not to be physically active processes.

Accepting these explanations as reasonable in understanding boys' struggles with literacy, my students ask how they might use these ideas to support boys' literacy learning in their classes. I draw on a number of educators and researchers when presenting possible



teaching approaches. Pollack (2000) proposes bringing more male teachers into primary classrooms, bringing male volunteers into classrooms to read with children, and bringing literature, including comics and non-fiction, that appeals to boys into the classroom. Booth (2002) suggests that teachers need to support the book selections that boys make. He goes on to say that the ways in which teachers ask students to respond to books in class should consider the impact on boys' and girls' future literacy lives. Other proposed solutions include working toward an understanding of being masculine as one that does not have to fit one stereotypical model—to make it possible for boys to perceive themselves as masculine while succeeding as readers and writers (Epstein, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

My research with grades three and six teachers in Alberta and Ohio (1998; 2000) provides another approach to the issue of why many boys are not doing well as literacy learners. In my research, both teachers and students who were asked to determine the gender of writers of narrative papers generally looked at student writing differently if they thought a girl wrote it, than they did if they thought a boy had written it. The teachers in my research studies expected

the boys' writing to be of lower quality than the girls' writing. In a second study of grades four and eight students' perceptions of girls' and boys' writing, the students perceived girls' writing to be more detailed, descriptive, creative, and felt that girls' writing had better grammar, punctuation and spelling than boys' writing. Boys felt that their strengths lay in writing more creative and exciting stories, and in writing stories that appealed to their peers, as they were able to make peers laugh or "gross them out."

These findings are of great interest when I read Johnson's research (1973) of Nigerian teachers' expectations. In Nigeria, where teachers expected better reading and writing performance from boys, the results of large-scale tests showed that boys did better than girls. It is difficult to say what comes first—the expectations or the performance—but the contrasting co-relations do beg some questions about teachers' expectations for boys' and girls' writing and how they might influence both students' expectations for themselves and their writing.

Drawing from my research, I recommend that teachers consider analyzing the scoring criteria within the assessment tools they use, thinking about what the rubrics identify as important about student writing. Criteria that describes

what boys say they do well could be incorporated into the rubrics and other assessment tools. In addition, teachers might talk with colleagues about their expectations for girls' and boys' writing. These conversations might center on questions such as: (1) What gender patterns have teachers observed in their own and in students' writing? (2) How do girls and boys talk about their own writing in student-teacher conferences and among themselves? (3) What kinds of feedback do girls and boys give to each other? (4) Are there gender patterns in the comments that teachers write when evaluating students' writing and in conferences? (5) What aspects of writing do teachers emphasize when evaluating student writing and are there gender patterns in terms of who experiences the greatest success within each of these areas? These could be the topics of informal conversations or in professional development sessions. They help to bring to the forefront some of the taken-for-granted ideas that teachers have about good writing and about the influence of gender.

#### **Impact of Socioeconomic Status, Mother Tongue, Dialect, and Race on Early Literacy**

Gender issues have opened up new paths in literacy instruction, but they are not the only issues. Achievement test results and my students' experience show that socioeconomic status, mother tongue and dialect, and race often have an even greater impact on children's success in reading and writing. Lisa Delpit (1988), an African American scholar, talks about the need for minority children to learn the "culture of power." She says the kinds of reading, writing and talk that go on in classrooms reflect what those who have power think is important. Those who have the power (usually from the white, middle class) are often not aware of the existence of the power relationships and how they use oral and written language to maintain the power. Those who do not have power (usually the non-white children working class children

who may or may not speak English as a second language or speak a non-standard dialect of English) are generally well aware of the power relationships. They do not have access to the powerful ways of using language because the adults in their homes do not use language in these ways. What these children need, according to Delpit, is teachers who will explain that the children's own way of talking and writing is important. The children's dialect gives them status when they are with their friends, neighbours and family. But in many situations, if the children write or talk using non-standard English, people who will make important decisions affecting their lives—people like potential employers, like teachers or university instructors, like bankers considering giving them a loan for a new business or a mortgage—will not see them as being as capable and worthy of the job/good grade/loan as if they spoke and wrote standard English. This means that teachers do need to correct children's grammar and spelling and punctuation in their writing and their pronunciation in their reading and speaking. They also need to provide explicit instruction in what is expected and how to go about being a successful reader and writer.

Yet, Delpit says that along with being explicit, teachers also need to respect the language and perspectives on the world that children bring to school. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) give suggestions about what teachers can do to create classrooms that operate on an understanding that all children have the right to achieve high literacy levels and that open up opportunities to disrupt inequities among various groups of children. They suggest that teachers can begin by looking at everyday ways of using reading, writing and oral language, thinking about who has power and who is entitled to do well. This includes using not only books, but the texts of popular culture such as comics, videos, the internet, video games, etc. When selecting books teachers need to think about whether all their students see

themselves represented in the texts that are used in read alouds, shared reading, and guided reading, and those that are in classroom libraries. Teachers can ask questions like: (1) How are girls and boys of diverse races, languages and dialects, and socioeconomic status represented in the texts? (2) Are the representations perpetuating stereotypes or portraying children in realistic ways that children can connect with? (3) What are the assumptions about what boys and girls think, feel and do? about what chil-

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dren of various races, social classes, and languages think, feel and do? about how they interact with each other? In the selection of texts as a whole, teachers might consider whether diverse races, social classes and languages are represented or whether there is a predominance of one particular group and its ways of thinking, talking and acting.

Other researchers and educators write about specific ways to support children's literacy learning when their mother tongue is other than English. O'Malley and Pierce (1996) suggest that teachers might provide support for English Language Learners (ELL) by asking children to dictate to their teacher or a peer, a few phrases and words that could later be illustrated or dramatized by the children. The ELL students could also write to their teacher in a dialogue journal. The teacher would provide a model of conventional English grammar and

might ask the child to illustrate what is written to reinforce the meaning. McCauley and McCauley (1992) propose that choral speech is an excellent vehicle for enhancing ELL students' literacy learning. They say that choral speech provides ELL students with opportunities for building vocabulary, for practicing reading through repeated readings of a poem, song, rhyme or chant with more fluent peers in a non-threatening environment, and to reinforce the meanings of unfamiliar words by dramatizing using gestures and actions.

### **Impact of Social Status in the Classroom**

Inequities of social status within the classroom affect children's opportunities to grow as readers and writers, as well. Researchers such as Lensmire (1994), provide classroom examples showing why it is important to consider social status inequities when opening up new pathways for literacy instruction. Lensmire (1994) provides a scenario of three students in his grade three classroom. He observed the emotional damage inflicted on one socially unpopular girl, Jill, by a socially popular girl, Maya, through Maya's writing. He proposed that teachers cannot take the easy way out and give feedback on students' writing that just addresses vocabulary, organization, conventions, and other criteria on scoring guides. He asks teachers to consider if those are the only things that they want students like Maya to learn from these writing experiences. He questions how to balance individual children's rights for self-expression by using writing for their own social purposes with the responsibility to write stories that will not reinforce unequal power relationships within the classroom. Teachers who want to create classroom writing environments that encourage children to take responsibility for the social consequences of their writing might begin by trying to develop empathy through discussions in student-teacher conferences. Teachers might ask children to consider what their writing

says about how people should treat each other. They might also invite children to put themselves in the shoes of characters in their stories, thinking about how particular characters might feel when treated the way they are in the writing.

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### **Conclusion: Creating New Paths in Early Literacy**

The questions and issues raised by educators and researchers presented in this article make it clear that reading and writing are complex processes. They also make it clear that opening up new paths in literacy instruction is going to take hard work and commitment to students. It is important that teachers and researchers continue to observe children's learning and to listen and talk to each other, asking difficult questions about the challenges and successes in the children's literacy learning that we observe in classrooms today. We cannot expect that literacy learning and teaching today are going to proceed by the same principles and understandings that worked in the mid to late 20th century. Teachers and researchers need to ask questions about the things we observe in classrooms that trouble us and excite us. When something becomes really commonplace, we need to step back to see if there is another way to talk and think about it. The opening up of new paths in response to new issues and challenges that arise, requires that we never stop questioning our practice. Each new class of students gives us the opportunity to take the first step down those new paths. Who knows where our next class of students may lead us? The possibilities are exciting!

*Photo courtesy Carol Jonas*

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Intervention 2 - Learning to Praise and Expand, focused on teaching parents to recognize and praise their children's participation and to expand their responses; Intervention 3 - Learning to Vary Questions, focused on the inclusion of questions requiring the child to recall previous parts of the story, make inferences and relate the story to their personal experiences.