Emergent Literacy: Connections Between Parent, Child, and School

An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

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Abstract

Emergent literacy is a philosophy of early childhood education. The purpose of this thesis was to study implications both in the home and in the classroom. Much research has been done to support the premises of emergent literacy. The research has found that teachers along with parents need to be involved in creating an environment that supports the early attempts of children in reading and writing. Assessment of children's emergent literacy was also considered. Implications for the future were also explored.
Mrs. Smith walks into her daughter's kindergarten classroom. She is perplexed to find no textbook, or children sitting in desks doing work sheets. She is very concerned because all she sees is children doing what she thinks is playing. Children are in one corner of the room in dress up clothes, looking at rocks, and scribbling on paper. In another corner children are digging in the sand. Elsewhere, children are looking at books that they are yet unable to read. What could these children be possibly be learning, she questions. What she doesn't realize is that her child is part of new revolution in early childhood education called "emergent literacy."

For most of this century, the curriculum for the teaching of literacy skills in Britain and the United States has been based on the following fundamental assumptions:

1. Reading and writing are primarily visual and perceptual processes, involving printed unit/sound relationships.
2. Children are not ready to learn to read and write until they are five or six years of age.
3. Children have to be taught to be literate.
4. The teaching of literacy must be systematic and sequential in operation.

5. Proficiency in the "basic skills" has to be acquired before one can act in a literate manner.

6. Teaching the basic skills of literacy is a neutral, value-free activity.

Regardless of the method of teaching reading; phonetic, alphabetic, whole word, or a sentence based; certain elements remained unchanged. For example, control of the manner and rate of learning was in the hands of the teacher. The teacher's task was to control the child's development from a state of illiteracy to become someone with a mastery of the skills involved in being literate. The child was to follow the teacher's route from beginning to end.

A tremendous amount of research related to how children learn language and gain literacy has been produced in the last twenty years. These researchers' findings are the basis for the philosophy of emergent literacy. (Morrow, 1991) In this approach of learning, "literacy is seen as a continuous process beginning in infancy with exposure to oral and written language, books, and stories beginning in the home and extending
to other environments' (Morrow 1991, p.1). The research based philosophy of emergent literacy suggests that children are already aware of the world around them before they start their formal education in school. In order to make the transition from home to school as smooth as possible, the promoters of emergent literacy suggest that teachers need to relate activities in the classroom to what the children already have learned as toddlers from their homes.

**Emergent Literacy**

The concept of emergent literacy, as defined by Ollila and Mayfield (1992), contains the following premises:

1. **Emerging Literacy** includes an awareness of print, writing, and other uses of language.
2. **Emerging Literacy** is multidimensional and complex.
3. **Emergent Literacy** is child-driven.
4. Growth in literacy varies from child to child.
5. Emerging Literacy includes speaking, listening, reading, and writing, which are all interrelated.

6. Adults play a major role in helping children develop literacy. (Ollila and Mayfield, 1992, p.4-5)

It is within these premises that the promoters of emergent literacy creates a representative early learning environment.

The premises of emergent literacy are not found in a set curriculum published by a book company but rather in the theoretical approach of educating young children. In fact, "an emergent literacy curriculum emphasizes the ongoing development of skill in reading and writing and stresses participation in literacy activities that are meaningful and functional from the child's point of view" (Strickland, 1990 p.20).

Dorothy Strickland, a well known promoter of this philosophical view, outlined four important theoretical principles. These principles are the foundation of the philosophical view itself as well as the underlying components found in emergent literacy created programs.
Strickland's first principle stated, "Children's knowledge of the world and of their language largely determines the nature and quality of the meanings they construct when they read and write" (1990, p. 20). Children that have had a wide variety of experiences such as talking, being read to, and looking at and using print, will better understand new information if it had some previous meaning to them or if the knowledge can be related to something they have already experienced. Children that have had a limited experience with print of any type will have a more difficult time relating to print because the information will have no meaning to them. For example, a child that has had little exposure to print will have difficulty understanding why print should be read from left to right and top to bottom. In their minds, print could be read in any order.

Additional support of Strickland's first principle is seen in the Harste, Woodward, and Burke study (1984). The researchers collected the writing of four-year-old children from different parts of the world. The children were asked to write their names or anything else that they could write. After analyzing the children's writing, the researchers found that the
children's writing imitated that of their particular culture.

"Dawn, a four year old from the United States, writes in unconventional script using a series of wavy lines. Each line is written from left to right. Dawn creates a page of such lines starting at the top of her page and finishing at the bottom of her page.

Najeeba, a four year old from Saudi Arabia, writes in unconventional script using a series of intricate circular formations with lots of "dots over the script". When she completes her story she say, "Here, but you can't read it, cause I wrote it in Arabic and in Arabic we use a lot more dot's than you do in English!"

Offer, a four year old from Israel, prints from right to left, then left to right, using a series of rectangular and triangular shapes to create his story, which his grandmother says,"... looks like Hebrew, but it's not." Her concern because he sometimes writes "backwards" sounds like the concern of any parents and teachers in the
U.S., with the difference being that the left-to-right- is "backwards" in Hebrew, and the right-to-left "backwards" in English (Harste, Woodward, and Burke, 1984 p.50).

Stickland’s second theoretical principle states, "To a large extent, beginning reading and writing start naturally through exposure to print in the environment" (Strickland, 1990 p.20). Environmental print can be anything from a McDonald’s sign to a child’s story book. Children are constantly being bombarded with print in their every day lives. They can understand cereal boxes, billboards, and books that are read to them. After being exposed to print for a period of time, they start to relate the meaning behind the print to the print itself. This association leads to an understanding of the relationship between print and meaning. Children who have had exposure to large amounts of print have an easier time learning to read and write because they have an understanding of mechanics of reading in the American culture, such as reading left to right and top to bottom.

Strickland’s third principle states that "Children as well as adults have a need for reading and writing in their lives. Literacy is learned best when
it is viewed as functional and useful" (Strickland, 1990 p.20). In order for children to learn to read and write, they must first feel a need to have these skills. Children that see reading as useful to their lives will have more success when they attempt to learn the needed skills. Children that see use for reading such as cookbooks, street signs, and newspapers will want to gain the knowledge for themselves. These children see reading as useful in their everyday lives.

Strickland's fourth principle states, "Exposure to a variety of literature builds a sense of the structure of written text" (Strickland, 1990 p.20). Children that have been read to from a variety of types of literature will better understand story structure and then be able to better understand what they have read.

Emergent literacy is a philosophy of education that stresses the interrelatedness of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Children with strong skills in all of these areas will be more successful in school and life in comparison to children that are lacking in ability in one or more of these skill areas. A lack of ability in one area will greatly affect the other areas as well. A child that is lacking in oral communication may have difficulty listening and interpreting what
they hear. Many of the skills of a good speaker are reflected in the ability to listen for both oral and visual feedback from the audience. Emergent Literacy stresses giving children a chance to improve their skills in all of these areas. The traditional kindergarten classroom only focused its attention on one skill at a time. Even though children learned to speak though a natural process, educators have felt that reading and writing needed formal instruction in order for a child to master those skills. The child's day was spent in "readiness" activities. Children could not start to learn to "read" until they have mastered these "readiness" skills such as their numbers and letters. Children did not learn to write until they had begun to master reading. Children were not considered literate until they had modeled their reading and writing patterns after those of adults. (Strickland, 1990). In a classroom that is based on the emergent literacy philosophy, children would be actively involved in their education. The environment is set up to promote children to read, write, listen, and speak simultaneously. The focus of the emergent literacy classroom is child need centered as compared to the skill orientated focus of the traditional classroom.
Implications in the Classroom

A child's day in a classroom rich with literacy is filled with experiences that are child centered. Unlike the traditional classroom, the child is the focal point of the room, not the teacher.

Michael French suggested the following three goals for teachers to use while designing their reading and writing environments: "1. create an environment around the theme, 2. provide for language and concept development, and 3. provide for group and individual writing" (French 1991 p. 520-521). The environment of the classroom can be changed into anything from a jungle to a sea shore by rearranging the furniture and adding props and decorations. The classroom boundaries can be extended to include everything from the entrance of the classroom to the windows and ceiling. For example, while studying a unit on the zoo, each learning center could become a different area of the zoo. The sand and water table could become a home for seals and fish. The library center could become a gift shop or an information center. Books about different animals would be placed in the library corner to provide information about the animals to the children. The walls could be covered with posters and charts.
about different animal life. A drama center could become a box office to sell admission tickets, provide information about the animals, have charts listing feeding times, have signs about times when the zoo is open, etc. Paper birds could hang from the ceiling to simulate birds in flight. In the writing center, the children could write books on paper shaped like different animals such as elephants, tigers, and bears. As the children learn more about the subject, they will be able to add things of their own creation to the room environment. The unit would develop as the children show different areas of interest.

The teacher can develop language and concepts by providing a "wealth of activities and materials pertaining to the theme" (French 1991 p. 521). Teachers can provide books, videos, models, toys, etc... that are related to the theme. As the children are exposed to the materials, their interest will grow and they will want to learn more about the theme. As the class discusses the theme, the teacher will be able to introduce new vocabulary and concepts. These concepts will seem real to the children because they will have background knowledge about the subject to relate what they are learning. French found that "reading,
discussion, questioning, projects, and individual inquiry simulated the children's growth in the areas of oral language, reasoning, content knowledge and beginning research skills" when he observed this approach being used in the classrooms discussed in his article. (French, 1991 p.521)

The library corner is an integral part of an emergent literacy classroom. The books in this center should be within the child's reach and sight of vision. The center should include soft places to sit, plenty of light, and be inviting to the child. The library of books should include titles that are well known to the children as well as titles that have been read to them in class or will soon be read. This center should also include books related to themes that are being taught in the classroom. Children will enjoy looking at the books and will soon be able to recognize simple words by sight after they have become familiar with the books. The reading center should contain more than just books. It should have newspapers, books written by the children, magazines, and other types of written material that the children may see adults in their lives reading. The more a child is exposed to print at an early age, the more natural the reading process will
become to the child. Great care should be made when selecting materials for the reading center. The children should not just be exposed to a wide selections of topics, but the size and type of books should be varied as well. The print in the books should include print the children is familiar with such as printed handwriting as well as type written pages of varying sizes and styles of print.

Print can be expanded to be included in more than just the reading center. In their study of preschool children, Morrow and Rand found that children's literacy play was increased when reading and writing materials were added to areas based on themes as opposed to the usual dramatic play areas. This was also found when teachers guided children to different items in the area and gave suggestions on how the materials could be used. It was found though that more literacy play had occurred in classrooms that had provided literacy materials but no guidance, than those that had no literacy materials at all (Morrow and Rand, 1989).

Writing in the classroom can be facilitated in a variety of ways. The child will be involved in different types of writing during the day. Journal writing can be started from day one. The journal can
take a variety of different forms. One type of journal is the child's personal journal. An example of this would be providing each child with a file folder on the first day of school with blank sheets of paper inside of it. Each day, time would be provided for the children to "write" on a topic of their choice or one provided by the teacher. Possible topics can be related to topics that are being studied in the classroom. A trip to the zoo or a fire station could spark an idea for a child's piece of writing. Brainstorming ideas as a class can aid children in coming up with ideas and possible topics for their journal entries. At the beginning of the year, the children's "writing" may be in the form of drawings and scribbles, but a story about the piece can be told to others. Towards the end of the year, the children's writing will progress to that near enough to conventional writing so that it can be read by classmates and teachers. (French, 1991).

Children also can dictate stories to someone as part of a daily journal. An important part of dictating the story would be to read back to the child what they have dictated.

Journals can also be done as an entire class.

Language experience stories are an integral part of a
literacy rich classroom. Children dictate daily entries on such topics as the weather, special events happening at school, field trips, or an assortment of other topics.

Message boards are another way of exposing children to written communication. The board could be a bulletin board, chalkboard, or even a piece of tag board. This board would be divided into sections to communicate information to the children. Possible topics for the board would be the weather, day of the week, special events, personal messages to the children, and daily helpers. Seeing their name in print will help the children to recognize their names and those of their classmates.

Writing centers expose children to a wide array of writing styles and means of written communication. Located in a writing center should be mailboxes for each of the children. A wide variety of materials should be included in the center so that children can create any type of writing they wish. Writing experiences can be provided for both groups and individuals. Students and teachers can write language experience stories based on what they had learned. Big books could be created by reading a well known book
such as *Brown Bear Brown Bear* by Bill Martin and then writing a book using based on the theme. After the children have written selections, they need to be given opportunities to share with an audience what they have written. This could be done by reading selections to the class or even making the children's books a part of the classes library so that the books could be read again and again. Children feel a great since of pride by sharing what they have written with others.

**Role of the Teacher**

The teacher's role in an emergent literacy classroom is different than that of a traditional classroom. The teacher is there to facilitate learning and provide the environment for the students. The classroom teacher needs to make sure the classroom is arranged so that events are likely to happen. "Learning stems as much from these incidental literacy events that occur by virtue of living with a print rich environment as form the number of daily activities planned to involve the children in oral and written language" (Strickland, 1990 p. 21).

Teachers need to realize that children in the early grades are making a transition from learning at
home to learning at school. Teachers need to nurture what the children bring with them and expand on the knowledge so that it will be meaningful. (Freeman, 1989).

Teachers in an emergent literacy classroom should read aloud to their children at least once a day, if not more. These experiences will help children relate what is being read to the written print on the pages.

The teacher is responsible for providing an environment in which the child can succeed and grow. She needs to make sure the appropriate amounts of materials are provided and that the materials are frequently changed. The types of materials provided will influence the type of play that occurs. For example, children will create more elaborate stories when playing with blocks if human figures and paper for signs are provided within the block center. The teacher needs to make sure that enough time is allowed for the students at the activity. A child that is allowed more time in a center will have a greater chance of becoming more involved within the activity.

Teachers need to spend time playing with the students, not just supervising them. The teacher can
model ways that the materials can be used. She can also model vocabulary that relates to the child's play.

The teachers role in an emergent literacy classroom is to provide an environment that is conducive to the children's literacy development. Teachers can model language art skills by reading to the children and modeling silent reading by showing them that she enjoys reading even when she isn't in front of the classroom. She models writing by writing them messages, transcribing the stories they tell, and showing them that written language extends outside the classroom as well. "Teachers can create an atmosphere conducive to sharing thought and feeling in a variety of developmental appropriate ways through literacy activities" (Ollila and Mayfield, 1992, p.177).

**Parent's Role in Emergent Literacy**

Parents play an important role in the education of their children. They were the child's first teacher and will have an effect on the child's education whether positively or negatively. "Young children who have good oral language, listening, reading, and writing skills tend to come from homes in which literacy is valued and plays an important role in the daily life of the
family" (Ollila, 1992, p.253). Parents can play an active role in the education of their children if they are made aware of things they can do at home and classroom opportunities for involvement.

One of the best things parents can do to help their child is to expose their child to written print whether it be reading or writing to the child. Studies have shown that continued exposure to books develops children's vocabulary and sense of story structure, both of which help them learn to read (Teale, 1981). Children need to be read to even from birth. This time spent reading together will have a positive effect on the remainder of the child's life.

Fathers, mothers, grandparents, baby-sitters and older siblings should all read to younger children. They should let reading become a ritual done at the same time and in the same place each day. Bedtime stories are a good habit to establish because both the child and parent can look forward to them as something to share at the end of the day. It has a calming effect and establishes a routine for children, who will eventually read by
themselves before going to bed. (Strickland, 1990 p.518)

Modeling is one of many ways that parents can assist their children in gaining skills in literacy. A child will imitate his parents because he wants to be as much like his parents as possible. The child will continue to imitate the actions of his parents if the activity has some meaning to the child or brings him some type of pleasure. For example, children that see their parents enjoying reading will want to pick up books and read to themselves so that they can have the same type of enjoyment. Children that see their parents reading and writing will have a better sense that reading and writing are important skills to learn. They will have a better understanding that these skills are meaningful and have a purpose in their everyday lives.

Another role of the parent is to provide the child with an environment at home that will nurture the child’s interest in reading and writing. The child needs a place that he will feel welcome to be curious and try out his newly developing skills. The child’s room should have a soft place such as a comfortable chair or bean bag and have adequate lighting. The child
should have access to a bookshelf full of children's books and magazines. This shelf could also have picture filled magazines and catalogs that can be used to cut apart and copy print from. Their are numerous creative ways that parents can include print in the environment of their child's room such as posters and labels for different objects, such as the desk or bed. A child's life should be full of exposure to print. Their day should be full of modeling of how print can be used.

Ollila and Mayfield suggested that:

> Just having bookcases filled with materials does not necessarily insure children will use these materials. And even if a child scribbles on the paper of flips through a book, he or she may not learn as much about writing and reading as a child whose parents involve themselves in these activities with their child. (Ollila and Mayfield, 1992, p.259)

Parents who are actively involved in the literacy development of their child will make a difference in the literacy skills that develop.

> Emergent literacy will seem strange and unlike anything parents may have expected their children to be
involved with at school. They will be expecting a traditional classroom setting with individual desks, and worksheets. A simple letter home will help to reassure them about how their children will be learning and the theories behind how the children are being taught. Letters and flyers can be an excellent means of communication between the home and the school. A letter at the beginning of the year can serve as an introduction of both the teacher and the teacher's style of teaching. This letter could be the start of a series of newsletters informing the parents about themes that are being taught in the classroom, and ways that they can help their child at home (Strickland, Morrow, Taylor and Walls, 1990). Newsletters could also include dates of upcoming special events in the classroom, programs in the community, words to favorite songs and finger plays, or copies of stories written by the children themselves.

Teachers can assist parents by providing a list of books that can be read to the child. This list might include classic books as well as books that would relate to the specific theme being taught in the classroom. Other lists of books could be developed to include books that could help the parent in working
with their child. A library corner could be developed in the classroom for the parents as well as the children. This library could include a bulletin board with current articles of interest to parents, copies of class newsletters, books they can check to read to their children at home, as well as books the parents can read for themselves.

Another way to include parents in the education of the children is to plan parent meetings and conferences. Guest speakers can be invited to talk about topics that are of interest to parents as well as teachers. These meetings will give parents a chance to interact with other parents and the classroom teacher in an informal setting. They will be able to share ideas and talk about problems they are having with their child. "Make-It-Take-It" workshops are another idea for parent meetings. During this workshop, parents would be able to make materials for use with their child at home. For example, if the theme in the classroom for the month was "television", the parents could create a guide of appropriate shows that their child could watch during the week. This guide could be used by the child to select shows just like their parent does with an adult television guides. The shows
could be identified by pictures as well as words to assist the child. The more ideas a parent is given in working with their child at home, the more they will be able to individualize their child's literacy development.

Assessment of Emergent Literacy Skills

Teachers working with young children need some way of finding out what the children already know and what they have learned. Teachers also need to be able to assess the educational program itself. Young children's literacy development can be assessed in a variety of ways. Reading and writing can be analyzed by looking at the processes and products that result when children read and write. Reading can be assessed by looking at how children relate to books, retell stories, interact with environmental print, and read orally.

Children's writing can be assessed by looking at how they go about writing and the actual writing that is produced. Oral language can be assessed by listening to the child speak in various situations such
as social situations as well as how well they express themselves in a more formal situation.

When a teacher goes about developing a system of assessing children's literacy skills, they need to first decide their purpose for assessment in the skills. Ollila and Mayfield (1992) suggested three purposes of assessment: 1. To attain information about children's development, 2. To attain information about children's achievement, and to 3. To evaluate effectiveness of program.

Teachers can use two techniques to evaluate children's literacy development. First, they can observe the children's behaviors as they use language and literacy. Second, they can collect oral and written samples of the children's language and literacy activities.

**Example Program**

For the past two years, Head Start, has been emphasizing the emphasis of literacy skills in the classroom. During an interview with Alice Alt, the educational coordinator of the Garrett Keyser Butler Head Start, the author of this thesis paper was able to also interact in the classrooms and review the
materials they use. Garrett uses a variety of methods to create an environment conductive to emergent literacy.

They encourage parents to support their children through their "Book Club Literacy Program." Each of the families is given a copy of the Parent's Books on Early Literacy. This is a booklet developed by the classroom teachers. Included in the book is a point system in which points are offered to they parents that can be turned in for free books for completing various literacy activities with their child. Included are reading books and writing stories.

Garrett Keyser Butler Head Start uses a curriculum entitled The Little People Curriculum. The program offers daily lessons that relate to a coordinating whole language program. A unique aspect of the program is the Let's Pretend Language Guide. Each month the teachers receive a set of activities. Each set gives children developmental appropriate opportunities in spoken and written language. It builds language skills by facilitating social interaction through dramatic play opportunities in the classroom. All of the language and writing experiences pave the way to developing a positive healthy attitude towards
literacy. For example, April's theme was a Let's Pretend Garden. A center is established in the room complete with props from the curriculum. Writing material included signs to label rows of plants, a list to draw or "write" what plants are in the garden, and a story starter entitled, *Can You Believe What Grew in My Garden.*

The children really seemed to enjoy the theme for March. It was a Let's Pretend Restaurant complete with menus, order pads, play money, and receipts for the children to fill out and deliver to customers. The program has proven to be successful with the children. The children have responded well to the centers and materials as well.

The Head Start teachers use two formal assessments with their children. These are the Dial R and the Portage Checklist.

Dial R is an assessment implemented at the beginning of the year in the areas of motor skills, cognitive skills, and language assessment. This assessment is used to document for the teacher what skills a child has when he enters the program. These results are transferred to the Portage Checklist which is a list of skills by age appropriateness. The
teachers then observe the children through the year and check off what skills they have gained.

The Portage is also used to individualize instruction for each child. The staff tries to focus on at least one area each week offering opportunities for growth and encouragement. For example if a child knows two colors, the teacher might focus on offering a third color during art and add books about this color in the library center and commenting on this color in the child's art work, or environment.

A typical day in the Head Start program begins with an opening and greeting time. One class had an interesting way of taking attendance. Each child has a bunny shaped name tag in their cubby (the place where they hang up their coat). As they come into the classroom, they deposit this bunny into the designated attendance box. During the opening circle, the teacher shuffles the bunnies and asks the children to raise their hand as they see their name. By the Spring of the year, many children recognized almost all the names in the classroom. All of the children can rapidly learn to read their own name. After the opening circle, the children have breakfast and then move into their center time. This is a child initiated free play time where
the children can choose from many centers in which to play. This time usually lasts for an hour. Each center time begins with a review of the centers highlighting new items that have been added. The centers that are offered to the children are a large motor, a library corner including a writing area, art, a computer, science, blocks, a manipulative area, and housekeeping. A section of the housekeeping area is changed each month to coordinate with the Little People Theme of the Month. In the computer corner, the children use a program called, Muppet Keys. This program utilize a touch keyboard and picture cards to help the children recognize letters and letter forms. One part of the program allows the children to type stories and then prints the stories out in large print on elementary lined paper. The Garrett Keyser Butler Head Start program is dedicated to providing an environment conducive to developing the children's emergent literacy skills.
Implications for the Future

As the current trends of whole language and integrated subjects are used more widely in the elementary classroom, more parents, teachers, and children will become familiar with the term: emergent literacy. Preschool as well as elementary level classrooms will need to adapt their curriculums to incorporate the philosophies of emergent literacy.

As curriculums are adapted, teachers will need to prepare themselves by utilizing additional resources and continuing education at the college level. Preschool and elementary education will no longer be worksheets and block building. It will utilize thematic unit curriculums that better meet the needs of children. The environment and the process of learning will become more important than the products that result.

In the classroom, traditional means of assessments such as testing and report cards will be replaced with portfolios and teachers observations. Teachers will need to have better communication with parents about these assessments, what their children are doing in the classroom, and ways that parents can assist their
child's learning processes at home. Parents will need to be educated about teaching styles that are being used so that they will not be confused and think that their children are just playing, when they are actually actively involved in the learning process.

Emergent literacy will touch the lives of teachers, parents and children. This philosophy will influence both the home and the classroom. When the home and school work together, the child will have success both in the early grades and in life.
References


