



Beginnings of Literacy

Joan Brooks McLane and Gillian Dowley McNamee, Erikson Institute

Edited from the Zero to Three Journal, September 1991.

Introduction

Literacy often begins early, long before children encounter formal school instruction in writing and reading. Literacy itself is not easy to define, and there are many disputes and unresolved questions about how literacy develops. Central to many recent discussions of literacy is the notion that writing and reading are ways of making, interpreting, and communicating meaning. Reading is defined as the ability to "take meaning from print," (Heath, 1982) and writing as the ability to use print to communicate with others. According to these definitions, reading and writing are more than simply decoding and encoding print: they are ways of constructing and conveying meaning with written language. Becoming literate, then, is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves more than learning a set of technical skills (such as learning the alphabet, learning how to form letters and spell words, and learning how to decode print) that are typically taught in elementary school; becoming literate also includes mastering a complex set of understandings, attitudes, expectations and behaviors, as well as specific skills, related to written language (Erickson, 1984; Cook-Gumperz, 1986).

Many young children begin to learn about writing and reading well before they start elementary school. However, their early literacy activities may look quite different from more mature, conventional forms of writing and reading. For example, one weekend, Jennifer, who had just turned two, went with her father to visit her grandmother in the country. Her grandmother read her Johnny Lion's Book by Edith Thacher Hurd—a story book about a young lion who dreams of going hunting in the woods. About an hour later, Jennifer, who had been playing outside, called to her father, "I read a book, Daddy." She had picked two big leaves which she now held, one lying flat on the palm of each hand. She and her father sat down on the steps, side by side, and Jennifer started "reading" her "book" in what her grandmother described as a "dramatic voice," which sounded very much like reading: "And a big bear (pause) went into the woods and she chased a big lion (pause) and she caught a big lion." After another pause, her father said, "and then what did the bear do?" Jennifer answered, "Then the big bear went home to her mommy."

Jennifer's pretend reading makes it clear that she is interested in reading and stories. She does not yet know how to read (or write) in a conventional sense, but she pretends to know. Playing with reading is one way she learns about written language and how it can be used. This incident also shows how familiar Jennifer already is with reading—two leaves can serve as her "text" and she can invent a simple but coherent story and tell it in a voice that accurately mimics a reading intonation. And it indicates that Jennifer finds reading interesting and pleasurable—as well as a good way to capture her father's attention.

There are many ways that children make connections with writing and reading, and many pathways into literacy. Writing and reading can enter young children's lives in a variety of ways. Early experiences with literacy may be initiated by the child or by other people, they may be playful or work-like, and may take place at home, in the neighborhood or in community settings such as preschools, daycare centers, and churches. Early literacy experiences can include pretending to write and read stories and poems, writing a thank-you letter to a distant grandmother, receiving instruction in how to form the letters of one's name, listening to a story being read aloud, or reading passages from the Bible. The range and diversity of early literacy experiences suggests that there are many ways that children make connections with writing and reading, and many pathways to literacy.

Bridges to literacy

Literacy development often starts in young children's early symbol using activities: in talking, in play and fantasy, in scribbling and drawing, in pretend reading and writing. Between the ages of 1-5 children learn to use symbols they invent for themselves and those "donated by the culture" (Gardner & Wolf, 1979, p.vii). The use of symbols—which may include words, gestures, marks on paper, objects modeled in clay, and so forth—makes it possible to represent experience, feelings and ideas. Symbols also allow children to go beyond the immediate here and now and to create imaginary worlds. This is what they do when they talk about storybook plots, when they make up stories, engage in pretend play, or draw images on paper—and later when they read books and write stories. As children begin to experiment with writing and reading, often in playful ways, they may find they can use these new symbolic modes in some of the same ways they used earlier developed symbolic forms—so that talking, drawing, and playing can serve as "bridges" to literacy, as children discover that writing and reading offer them new and interesting resources for constructing and communicating meaning (Gundlach, 1982; Dyson, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978).

Play: making connections with writing and reading

Play consumes much of young children's time and energy, and for many children, play is where writing and reading begin. Play is the arena in which young children make connections between their immediate personal world and activities that are important in the larger social world of family and community, and play is the context in which many children find ways to make culturally valued activities part of their own personal experience. When children play with writing and reading, they are actively trying to use—and to understand and make sense of—reading and writing long before they can actually read and write. When books, paper, and writing material are among the objects children play with, important literacy learning can occur. As they experiment with written language, often in playful ways, children begin to learn what writing and reading are, and what they can do with them. At the same time, children can acquire a range of information and skills related to writing and reading, as well as feelings and expectations about themselves as potential readers and writers. This multifaceted body of knowledge and attitudes constitutes early or "emergent" literacy (Holdaway, 1979; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Play appears to have at least two potential links to the development of literacy: First, as a symbolic activity, pretend play allows children to develop and refine their capacities to use symbols, to represent experience, and to construct imaginary worlds, capacities they will draw on when they begin to write and read. Second, as an orientation or approach to experience, play can make the various roles and activities of people who read and write more meaningful and hence more accessible to young children.

When children create imaginary situations in pretend play, they invent and inhabit "alternative" or "possible worlds." This is similar to what they do when they listen to storybooks, and to what they do when they read or write stories themselves. Indeed, there are similarities between pretend play and storytelling, and in the kinds of competence the two require (Britton, 1983; Bruner, 1984; Galda, 1984). Many children make up their first stories in the context of pretend play, creating and enacting their own dramatic narratives (and reenacting favorite stories they have heard being read aloud). Indeed, one of the things that attracts young children to pretend play is the chance to tell stories. Later, many children are attracted to writing and reading for the same reasons: they find they can participate in stories told by others.

As children mature, their pretend play and the symbolic transformations they use to create and sustain it become increasingly elaborate, complex, and abstract. With development, pretend play becomes less dependent on physical props, gestures, and actions, and relies increasingly on ideas, imagination, and language. Children often employ abundant, rich language in pretend play. An increasing proportion of the time devoted to pretend play is spent in talk, as children discuss the setting, the characters or roles, and the plots they will enact in their play. Indeed, at times it seems as though "the saying is the playing (Garvey Berndt, 1975, p.9)." As pretend play becomes increasingly dependent on language to create possible worlds and to express and communicate meanings, it comes closer to the experiences of storytelling, writing, and reading.

Children seem to be able to play with almost anything: objects, movements, behaviors, roles, rules, and language. Many play with the implements and materials of written language: with paper, pencils, markers, crayons, and books, with the activities of writing and reading, and with the roles of writer and reader. Children incorporate both real and pretend writing and reading into their dramatic play, using them to enhance the drama and realism of the pretend situation. They may use characters and plots from their favorite storybooks. Some preschool children explore the tools and activities of literacy in playful ways, using pretend writing to create "stories," "poems," or "news bulletins"—as 4-and-a-half year-old Joshua did one Sunday afternoon: After dressing up in various costumes and pretending he was "a baby learning to fly," Joshua wrote some letters and letter like figures on a piece of paper. He showed this to his mother and said "Now wait for the surprise." Then he held the paper in front of his face while he shouted: "Good evening ladies and gentlemen! This is the ABC News! Now we have lots of weather!"

Joshua's written news report and his reading of it contain elements of real literacy—letter like shapes, and the understanding that these carry a message. In this sort of play children practice and integrate what they know or what they surmise about a range of activities and roles outside their immediate experience and understanding. As Greta Fein observed, "pretense [may] provide special opportunities for the partially understood and the dimly grasped to become more firmly mastered (1979, p.206)." By playing with writing and reading, children become familiar with the tools of literacy and begin to learn how to use and control them. Such play also allows children to acquire some global notions of what writing and reading consist of and what they can do with them.

In play the focus is on exploring rather than on accomplishing predetermined ends or goals, so there are few pressures to produce correct answers or final products. Play's nonliteral, not-for-real, "not-for-profit" orientation allows players the freedom to manipulate materials, experiences, roles and ideas in new, creative, experimental, "as if" ways (Bruner, 1977, p.v; Garvey, 1974). Play thus creates a risk-free context in which children do not have to worry about "getting it right" or about "messing up." This freedom may lead children to discover or invent possibilities—new ways of doing things and new ways of thinking about ideas—which may, in turn, lead them to new questions, problems, and solutions. Approaching writing and reading with such an experimental, "as if" attitude may help children realize that written language is something they can manipulate in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. "Playing at writing and reading—by scribbling, drawing, pretending to write, or pretending to read—may serve to open up the activities of writing and reading for children's consideration and exploration (Bruner, 1976; Sutton-Smith, 1979).

Pretend play often involves reversals of everyday, real-life roles and power relationships. When they pretend, children can enact powerful roles such as mother, father, doctor,

fireman, witch, monster, writer, and reader and take on the competencies that come with these roles, as Joshua did when he "wrote" and "read" the "ABC News". In doing this, Joshua assumed the confidence and power of someone who can write and read, and engaged in writing and reading on his own terms, defining them as he was able to carry them out at the moment.

Play thus encourages children to act as if they are already competent in and about to control the activity under consideration: they can act as if they know how to cook, put out fires, kill monsters, read books, or write stories. Playing with the roles of writer and reader can give children a sense of ownership of these roles. Through play, children may come to feel that they are writers and readers long before they actually have the necessary skills and knowledge to write and read. The feelings of competence and control that can be seen in children such as Jennifer and Joshua are likely to nourish assumptions and expectations about becoming literate, and to give children the motivation to work at learning to write and read.

Literacy and relationships

While activities like talking, playing, and drawing are closely linked to writing and reading, and while their use often intertwine and overlap, there are no direct or inevitable transitions between earlier—and later—developed symbol systems. Whether and how children make connections between talking, playing, drawing, and writing and reading depends on the children's interests and personalities, on what is available and valued in their particular culture, on how the people around them use writing and reading in their own lives, and how these people initiate and respond to children's writing and reading activities.

In other words, early literacy development does not simply happen; rather, it is part of a social process, embedded in children's relationships with parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, caretakers, and teachers. To understand the beginnings of literacy, one must study the environments in which young children develop, and the ways in which these settings provide opportunities for children to become involved with books, paper, and writing materials. Early experiences with literacy are part of the relationships, activities, and settings of young children's everyday lives. It is people who make writing and reading interesting and meaningful to young children. Family members, caretakers, and teachers play critical roles in early literacy development by serving as models, providing materials, demonstrating their use, offering help, instruction, and encouragement, and communicating hopes and expectations. To their interactions with young children, these people bring their own attitudes and expectations, both conscious and unconscious, about writing and reading, and about the child's eventual development as a writer and reader (Gundlach, McLane, Stott & McNamee, 1985).

The beginning of writing

Early writing activities tend to be more visible than early reading activities because they involve making something. If given crayons or pencils, children usually begin to scribble around the age of 18 months; they find scribbling interesting because it leaves a visible trace—they have made something that didn't exist before. When children encounter print in their environment, they use this visual information in their scribbling and pretend writing. Marie Clay (1975) has shown that as scribbling develops, it begins to incorporate various features of conventional written language, such as linearity, horizontally, and repetition. As children learn that marks and letters represent or stand for something, they are developing an understanding of what Clay calls the "sign concept"—which is of central importance in learning to write and read.

Robert Gundlach (1982) has argued that beginning writers need to master the functions, uses and purposes of writing; the forms and features of written language; and the processes of writing. Children must learn what writing can do, and, in particular, what they can do with writing.

The beginnings of reading

Young children can begin to learn about the complex process of deriving meaning from print long before they can decode or even recognize letters. Susan Knontos has pointed out that "before they become readers, young children must learn why people read and what people do when they read (1986, p. 58)." As in learning about writing, young children begin to understand the enterprise of reading from observing and participating in activities with family members and other competent readers. When young children see other people reading, and when others read to them or involve them in other activities related to reading, they become familiar with print and some of its uses. For example, when they see people who are important to them reading a recipe to bake a cake, reading a newspaper to find out what movies are on TV, or reading letters from distant relatives in Vietnam, young children experience reading as a meaningful activity and part of everyday life. In addition, many adults point out print to children, helping them notice a particular configuration of letters such as the spelling of their name or the name of a favorite brand of breakfast cereal. In this way, young children may develop a "sight vocabulary" of words like "STOP," "Crest," and "McDonald's" (Heath, 1986, p.20; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Reading books to children is a powerful way of introducing them to literacy, and it is the one early experience that has been identified as making a difference in later success in learning to read in school (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985). But this is not usually the reason that adults, particularly parents, read to young children. More often, they do it because they find it enjoyable, they see that children enjoy it, and they may believe that reading nourishes children's minds and enriches their relationships. When adults read to children, the occasion tends to be warm and intimate; parents, caretakers, and older children often hold young children on their laps or sit close to them while reading aloud, and their attention is focused on their interaction with the child. The reader

is usually sensitive to what interests the child, and what he or she finds scary, exciting or amusing. Reading often includes conversations about the characters in the book, about what they might be thinking and feeling, and about experiences in the child's own life that are related to those in the book (Lindfors, 1984; Deloache, 1984).

As children are read to they acquire an enormous amount of information about reading and the world of books. They learn what books are, what you do with them, and how you talk about them (Snow & Ninio, 1986; Teale, 1982). They learn that written words can create imaginary worlds beyond the immediate here and now. They learn that written language has its own rhythms and conventions. They learn about specific features of written languages: for example, that the black marks on the page are letters and words, and that print goes from left to right and from top to bottom on the page. Gradually, children learn that the reader is reconstructing the story through the words written on the page—that print has a precise and unchanging meaning. And, perhaps most important, they come to expect that books will be interesting, challenging, exciting, and comforting, developing, in Holdaway's words, "high expectations of print" (1979).

One way that children show us they are learning from being read to is through pretending to read storybooks by themselves. Don Holdaway was probably the first to point out that very young children who are read to frequently spend a great deal of time on their own with favorite storybooks, pretending to read them and reenacting the behaviors they observed while they were being read to. In observing a number of children between the ages of 2 and 5 "reading" favorite storybooks, Holdaway was struck by how hard the children worked to recapture the meaning of the stories: "They have remembered very little of the surface verbal level: what they have remembered most firmly is the meanings (Holdaway, 1979, p. 44)." The children were not giving a memorized rendition of a story, but were, instead, working to construct the message of the story using the rhythms and sounds of language in which they first heard the message.

Elizabeth Sulzby (1985) describes a progression of changes in children's pretend reading as they gradually approach independent reading. Preschoolers' reading of favorite books is, for the most part, guided by "reading" the pictures in the book. Young children hold the book and turn the page quite deliberately, while naming or commenting on what they see in the pictures. In time, and as they become more familiar with the story, they "read" the book by making up a story, creating a rough story line that follows the sequence of pictures. Gradually the language they use in "reading" (while still looking at the pictures), sounds more like real reading—the child's voice and intonation come to sound like written language read aloud.

Children ages 3, 4 or 5 may give close renditions or even verbatim recitations of stories they have heard frequently. As Sulzby and Holdaway have observed, children do not simply memorize the text but work from a strong sense of what the story should sound like, and they work to retrieve and reconstruct the meaning of the text. Children strive to get the exact working—they sometimes hesitate, correct themselves, or ask others for help. Young children's independent efforts to read books demonstrate the wealth of knowledge about books, print and narrative they acquire while they are being read to.

It is clear that over the months and years of being read to, children learn many of the subtle details of behavior and speaking that go with reading a book. Pretend reading allows children to role-play, to reenact and try out the behaviors, skills and thinking processes that are part of reading. This long period of play brings children very close to actual reading.

Conclusion

Early literacy development is closely tied to the specifics of young children's relationships and activities. To these relationships and activities, children bring their curiosity, their interest in communicating and interacting with others, and their inclination to be a part of family and community life. They also bring their desire to use and control materials and tools that they perceive as important to the people around them—their urge to "do it myself." And they bring their willingness to seek help from more proficient writers and readers. When they interact with more competent writers and readers, children serve as "spontaneous apprentices" (in George Miller's phrase), learning about written language and how to use and control it for a range of purposes.

What is the relationship between early experiences with literacy and later, long-term literacy development? There are as yet no definitive answers to this question, but as in other aspects of psychological development, we assume that there is a relationship between early literacy experience and later mature literacy. How this relationship unfolds for a particular child will depend on several factors which interact with one another in complex ways. These include the child's interests, temperament and personality, opportunities at home and in the neighborhood for writing and reading, as well as the nature and quality of the instruction the child encounters in school.

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