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Pre-school literacy in the light of european tradition

VERONIKA SZINGER

Abstract: In the field of kindergarten education there are two predominant, seemingly conflicting views of preschool literacy: reading readiness skills and emergent literacy. In the last decade of the 20th century kindergarten teaching practices moved towards the concept of 'emergent literacy' mainly in the United States but also in many countries of Europe. Our aim is to offer a brief survey of preschool and kindergarten curriculum reforms over the past ten years. In the new curricula it is highlighted that children should be provided with opportunities to meet written language system. However, besides applying the basic principles of emergent literacy many countries have preserved benefits from the traditional approach.

Keywords: education – preschool literacy – emergent literacy – kindergarten – language system

Résumé: Az óvodai nevelés területén két domináns, látszólag egymásnak ellentmondó megközelítés figyelhető meg az iskoláskort megelőző írásbeliséget tekintve: a tudatos készség- és képességfejlesztésre épülő kiváras, valamint a bontakozó írásbeliség elmélete. Az alábbi összefoglaló szakirodalmi áttekintést nyújt a két elmélet főbb jellegzetességeiről, valamint arról, hogy több európai óvodai program hogyan tért át egy újszerű megközelítésre, miközben a készségfejlesztés előnyeit is megőrizték.

Mots-clés: nevelés – tankötelezettség előtti műveltség – Sürgős (feltétlenül szükséges) műveltség – óvoda – nyelvrondszer

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Introduction

Concerning children's cognitive development and their language, formal instruction in reading begins in the first grade. Until the late 1980s, kindergartens and preschool education had the role of providing preparation for formal instruction (*reading readiness*). Since the 1980s, educators have moved away from viewing reading as a set of fragmented skills to a more interactive and socio-cognitive activity (*emergent literacy*). This new approach is corroborated by the International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children declaration in their position statement on „Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children” (International Reading Association/National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998) that reading and writing are embedded in the everyday lives of young children. In the last decade of the 20th century, kindergarten teaching practice moved towards the concept of „emergent literacy,” mainly in the United States but also in many European countries. The importance of the new approach is confirmed by the preschool and kindergarten curriculum reforms emerging during the last ten years. New curricula were developed for example in Portugal and Luxembourg in 1997, in Sweden in 1998, while in Greece and in Ireland it was in 1999. Britain introduced a new kindergarten curriculum in 2000 and Finland in 2001. New curriculum was implemented in Belgium and France in 2002. (Tafa, 2003) In the new curricula, it is highlighted that children should be provided with opportunities to meet written language system. However, besides applying the basic principles of emergent literacy, these countries have preserved benefits of the traditional approach¹.

¹ Ernestova, Marie. Current Transitions in Czech Early Education (Czech Reading Association, Czech Republic); Terwagne, Serge. New Trends in kindergarten classrooms (Haute Ecole A. Jacquard Namur, Belgium); Alon, Shlomo, (Hebrew University, Israel); Tafa, Eufimia (University of Crete, Greece) International Reading Association 21st World Congress on Reading, Budapest, Hungary – 7-10 August 2006; Symposium „European Trends in Early Literacy Education”.

Reading readiness

According to the philosophy of „reading readiness“ there exists the most suitable mental age for reading and writing, which was determined to be the age of 6 years². (Tafa, 2003) Until the late 1980s, it had been assumed that children younger than age 6 were incapable of intentional literacy behaviours. In reading readiness programs children were considered ready to read when they had met certain social, physical, and cognitive competencies. (Morrow, 1997) The literature on the reading process centred on the scope and sequence of skills. To behave in a literate way, children must acquire the prerequisite skills.

Educators were encouraged to use more direct instruction and structured curriculum. According to reading readiness programme, the main activities are fostering visual and auditory discrimination skills, vocabulary, listening skills, visual-motor skills etc. These are activities which are very important for formal instruction but are not directly related to the actual process of reading and writing. The main aim is to practice and master discrete skills.

Studies have shown that phonemic awareness³ abilities in kindergarten are a good predictor of later success in the acquisition of reading; it has been shown to be a significant correlate with later reading achievement scores. (Griffith & Olson, 1992) Phonological awareness can be taught to 4 or 5 year-old children through specific language play activities, so explicit instruction should begin in kindergarten. (Török – Vekerdy, 1989; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Lesiak, 1997; Tafa, 2003)

These skills can be measured by standardized testing that has a legitimate function, but on its own, it does not say much about each child's development and learning across a continuum.

Emergent literacy

Marie Clay introduced the term *emergent literacy* to describe the behaviours used by young children with books, even though the children could not actually read and write in the conventional sense. (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) By the late 1980s, researchers indicated that reading

² There were two different lines of research on preparing children for reading. One group believed that reading readiness was the result of biological maturation (“nature”), the other group thought that appropriate experiences could accelerate readiness (“nurture”). “Nature” perspective was the dominant from the 1920s into the 1950s. In this period, educators and parents were advised to postpone the teaching of reading until children reached a certain age. “Nurture” perspective from the late 1950s shifted from maturation towards readiness as the product of experience. If children had the appropriate experiences, their reading readiness could be accelerated.

³ *Phonemic awareness* is a conscious understanding of the structure of spoken language. It is the ability to hear and manipulate the separate speech sounds in words.

readiness approach was theoretically and practically inappropriate for young children. According to the concept of "emergent literacy," literacy development begins long before children start formal instruction or even start kindergarten. It starts even with birth – if a child is surrounded by literate society – and lasts until the time when children read and write conventionally. Literate cultures provide opportunities for children to become naturally involved in literacy-related events, so they use legitimate reading and writing behaviours as an integral part of their everyday lives. (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Neuman & Roskos, 1997) For example, by age 3, a lot of children can identify signs, labels and logos in their homes and in their communities. This approach views literacy in its development not as a series of acquisitions of skills but as a series of transformations and adaptations. (Neuman & Roskos, 1997) The aim of the concept is to emphasize the importance of the early years in establishing a foundation for literacy, to create environments that engage children in print activities. Literacy develops through real-life activities and active engagement with their world instead of practicing some types of academic activities or exercises. Emergent literacy teachers believe that children should be actively engaged in using print for real purposes, rather than using a prop related to print in an artificial setting. (McMahon et al., 1998) In an emergent literacy kindergarten programme, reading and writing are incorporated into everyday activities, for example in teacher read-alouds or in children's play. (Tafa, 2003)

An emergent literacy kindergarten programme should provide a print-rich classroom environment, appropriate literacy activities, story book reading. A *print-rich environment* means books, magazines, posters, charts, labels arranged in library corner, writing centre. All of them may build a positive attitude towards literacy. In a print-rich classroom environment, children use literacy in a variety of functional ways within pretend play events which are motivating and meaningful for them (e. g. vet's surgery, restaurant, travel agency etc., and using such authentic objects as recipes, envelopes, menus, credit cards, catalogues). Pretend play allows children to create, adopt or change roles, so they play with symbols and conventions of their culture while imitating adult behaviour. (Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Pellegrini & Galda, 2000) Environment is also important because it has been proved that the physical changes in classrooms might influence behavioural changes like literacy-related interactions. (Neuman, 1999) *Developmentally appropriate practices* mean procedures and routines that are consistent with children's natural development, since children do not reach each stage of development at the same time and same rate. The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, in their joint position paper, offered activities that are age and individual appropriate as opposed to the use of paper-and-pencil activities presented to large groups of children. (Lesiak, 1997) Moreover, because of socio-cultural differences, children who come to school – or even to kindergarten – have different levels of knowledge about printed language.

Story-book reading is the most powerful activity contributing to early reading and writing. (Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Tafa, 2003) Young children need rich and diverse reading materials to acquire the complex set of attitudes, skills, and behaviours associated with literacy development. Through reading to young children they develop interest and skill in literacy, come to understand the functions and structure of written language and they also learn about concepts relating to print: how to hold a book, to turn pages; a book is read from front to back, from left to right in our culture, meaning comes from letters and not from pictures. (Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Neuman, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Bromley, 2000; Tafa, 2003) However, teachers should pay attention both to the selection of books and the way they are read, since the quality of the books and the active participation of the children are very important. (Tafa, 2003) Active participation means that teachers should lead discussions before, during and after reading a book. By asking the children questions (mainly "what" and "why" questions) about the text and pictures, we help them to comprehend the story. Researchers recommend materials such as big books, enlarged texts to increase children's engagement with books during shared readings.

In emergent literacy programme, writing is as important as reading. Teachers encourage children to express their ideas by using drawings, scribbles or actual alphabet symbols.

Instead of standardized tests, literacy development in case of emergent readers can be measured by using assessment techniques⁴ in different literacy activities and situations (anecdotal records or portfolios⁵). When taken with care, informal observations can be very helpful to teachers in planning appropriate instruction for each child that meets the individual needs. (Harp & Brewer, 2000)

There is one thing is very important to note: emergent literacy does not mean formal reading and writing instruction to young children. Children are not taught reading and writing formally or systematically. Either phonic, whole language or the balanced approaches used in first grade are inappropriate for kindergarten children. Moreover, research has suggested that *teaching* children letter-names has little effect of future success reading. (Lesiak refers to Blanchard & Logan, 1997) In preschool education, emergent literacy means learning literacy through play, so it should not be confused with teaching. (Tafa, 2003)

⁴ *Assessing* means collecting data; *Evaluating* means interpreting that data to make instructional decisions. (Harp & Brewer, 2000)

⁵ Portfolios are collections of students' work over time. A portfolio as an authentic evidence often documents a student's best work and it may be used for evaluation of a student's abilities and improvement.

Preschool literacy in hungarian kindergartens

From the late 1800s to the beginning of the 1900s, the research literature on reading and writing focused only on the elementary school years and in kindergartens it was a direct formal instruction that was characteristic. In the 20th century, educators began to recognize the early childhood and kindergarten years as a period of preparation for reading and writing. (Vág, 1960; Mészáros et al., 1999)

The National Curriculum of Nursery School Education (Az óvodai nevelés országos alapprogramja) was published in Hungary in 1996. It keeps a distance in preschool literacy, providing various interpretations for kindergarten teachers. All kindergarten teachers have a belief system about reading, whether explicit or implicit, that provides the foundation from which decision about reading instruction emanates. (McMahon et al., 1998) A survey (Szinger, 2002) tried to reveal kindergarten teachers' attitudes towards literacy through analysing data in four categories: 1. Direct instruction of reading and writing; 2. Developing skills and language awareness necessary for reading/writing; 3. Assuring print-rich environment and experiences connected to literacy; 4. Total ignorance of either skill development or other pre-literacy forms. With the interviews, the purpose was to investigate kindergarten teachers' perceptions of literacy acquisition and the role of kindergarten education in it. The interviews in seven Hungarian towns and settlements were completed with analysis of kindergarten programmes investigating literacy. (Szinger, 2005)

According to the results of interviews and document analysis, direct teaching or the total ignorance of preschool literacy is not characteristic. Concerning the seemingly opposite approach of reading readiness and emergent literacy, one would find more traditional reading readiness approaches when visiting kindergarten classrooms around the country, while emergent literacy exists partially (e. g. reading aloud to children).

This result may be attributed to the teachers' lack of support for early attempts at reading and writing, so the responsibility of teacher training institutions can not be ignored. And also, kindergarten teachers must work with first grade teachers and parents to discuss the appropriate practices in educating young children.

Summary

Unfortunately, few published studies have compared the effects of reading readiness skills programmes versus emergent literacy programmes on the literacy acquisition of young children. (McMahon et al., 1998) But it is worth having a look at advantages of both of them.

In emergent literacy:

- Language is learned through use.
- Informal activities can meet the needs of all children.
- Similarly to the home environment, children are provided with numerous and varied opportunities to interact with print that is meaningful and functional. It has a good affect on motivation.
- Results have indicated (Taylor at al., 1989) that scores of children in a print rich environment are significantly higher on a written language awareness test.
- Research has also shown (Scarborough at al., 1991) that children who have smaller literacy experience in preschool tend to be poorer readers later in school.

Nevertheless, applying emergent literacy approach exclusively may have its limitations. Authentic real-life practices do not suggest how print conventions and literacy skills are formed by young learners. Moreover, such activities do not support children's knowledge about literacy, apart from its functional uses. (Neuman & Roskos, 1997)

In emergent literacy classrooms, we can rarely observe practicing basic reading sub-skills. Preschool teachers are sometimes reluctant against any early formal instruction, as it is considered to be the job of schools. This is the reason why, for example, they are not very fond of direct phonemic awareness training⁶. Both Pearson (1996) and Heibert (1996) have cautioned (McMahon at al. refers to Pearson and Heibert, 1998) that complete retreat from any and all skill instruction is not warranted.

Skill development is important because:

- Many children may not decipher the alphabetic principle by sheer immersion in print or in listening to others read.
- Without direct skill development, receptive language skills may remain static over time.
- Direct skill improvement is essential for children with expressive and receptive language delays.
- Disabled students may need more intensive instruction with more direct but informal activities, for example teaching phonemic awareness. It can also be done in meaningful and playful ways. For example, instruction in phonics and other skills should be placed within larger context of meaningful literacy activity⁷.

⁶ Terwagne, Serge. New Trends in kindergarten classrooms. International Reading Association 21st World Congress on Reading, Budapest, Hungary – 7-10 August 2006.

⁷ It is also valid for phonics instruction: children taught phonics in context are almost twice as successful in sounding out unfamiliar words as children taught traditional phonics. (Moustafa refers to Freppon, 2000).

“Providing opportunities for both situated learning and formal school learning, therefore, could create dynamic and active classroom contexts for participation in literacy development. Classrooms like these provide both academic instruction and real world opportunities for children to engage in literacy practices around self-initiated problem solving situations, creating continuity between the rich contexts of home and school literacy practices.” (Neuman & Roskos, 1997:32)

We must ensure that children of diverse backgrounds receive opportunities both for systematic skill instruction and for higher-level thinking with text. (Au, Kathryn H., 2000)

Studies are needed to compare the effects of learning environments that promote reading readiness skills with a *combination* of reading readiness skills and emergent literacy. (McMahon et al., 1998) Similarly to a balanced reading programme, a balanced preschool literacy programme includes skill focused development and immersion in whole works of literature. With this attitude, we have the opportunity to consider what is both effective and developmentally appropriate.

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