This chapter reviews the issues surrounding the types of literacy instruction deemed appropriate in preschool and kindergarten. We will discuss two major perspectives and how their practice evolved influenced by research, theory and policy. We will identify the characteristics of each perspective. Then we explore whether the two could blend to create a comprehensive model that might be satisfactory to the different groups.

The *child-centered* approach in early childhood literacy education has been the most widely accepted. Within this approach preschool and kindergarten are viewed as places for social, emotional, physical growth, and natural intellectual development. Those who adhere to the child-centered approach think that learning is best prompted by exploring and experimenting in playful environments. Children also learn to self-regulate to prepare for more formal school. The proponents of the child-centered approach refer to their instruction as "developmentally appropriate practice."

The second approach, which we refer to as a *skills-based* model, involves systematic explicit teaching of literacy. This approach views preschool and kindergarten as a time when children are ready to learn the early reading and writing skills that will improve literacy achievement in the future (Hart & Risley, 1999; Barnett, 1998). Those who follow the child-centered model find it difficult to embrace a skills-based approach with young children. They view explicit teaching of skills in early literacy as a push down curriculum where kindergarten becomes first grade and preschool like kindergarten. Those who embrace the skills-based model view the child-centered approach as wasting precious time for learning.

**Child-Centered Models**

Philosophers, theorists, psychologists, and educators have addressed learning in early childhood and what is appropriate educational practice. Their ideas respond to the question of whether learning is primarily a result of nature or nurture or a combination of both. All have implications for planning early literacy instruction. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1962/1762) and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (Rusk & Scotland, 1979) strongly recommended that a child's early education be natural; this meant avoiding contrived instruction and instead allowing children to learn through their own interest and curiosity. Pestalozzi did however combine natural elements for learning with a bit of informal instruction since he felt that it was necessary for teachers to create conditions in which the learning process would grow. Friedrich Froebel (1974) specified the importance of playing-to-learn, but it required adult guidance and a planned environment. He designed a curriculum for young children, which included materials involving sensory experiences that children would have the opportunity to manipulate. When playing with these materials, children learned about them by using psychomotor skills and language to discuss shape, color, size, smell, measurement and comparison. He coined the term "kindergarten," which means children's garden. He viewed the child as a seed that needed to be tended to by the gardener, or in this case the teacher and then he/she would thrive.

John Dewey's (1966) philosophy of early childhood education led to the concept of the child-centered curriculum built around the interests of children. He agreed with Froebel that children learn best through play and in real-life settings. He maintained that social interactions encourage learning. Dewey rejected the idea of teaching skills as an end unto themselves. He also believed that learning is maximized through integrating content areas. Dewey influenced programs in early childhood throughout the twentieth-century and his influence is seen in classrooms today. Perhaps the most salient example of the Deweyian philosophy is the “center.” Early childhood classrooms often have different content area centers where children experiment with the materials there. For example, a science center might have a water-play...
table, plants, and magnets. The math center could have a scale, tactile numbers, and counting rods. The centers were based on a theme that children chose to study such as animals. As a result, materials in art, music, play, math, science, social studies and the language arts would revolve around the topic of animals. The instruction of reading and writing was embedded in activities such as stories written and read were about animals. There would be discussion and conversation about animals, and art and music related to the theme. Classrooms organized based on Dewey’s philosophy lacked formal skill instruction. Instead, these classrooms were rich with materials and activities allowing children to explore their interests and learn through purposeful play.

These philosophers and theorists strongly influenced what preschools and kindergartens look like. During the time they developed their ideas, there was little controversy about the child-centered approach.

Policies Effecting Preschool and Kindergarten Instruction The first federal policy that had an impact on preschool education was passed in 1965 under President Johnson as part of extensive legislation related to education (see Shanahan’s chapter 22, this volume). This legislation, which was passed during the civil rights movement, provided funding for preschools for disadvantaged children. The program was called Head Start, and the guidelines followed the child-centered model. The program was established to help children become ready for school socially, emotionally, and physically. The curriculum emphasized good nutrition, general health habits such as brushing teeth and hand washing as well as learning self-regulation. At the same time the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) became the main accreditation organization for independent preschools in the United States. Those within the organization coined the phrase Developmentally Appropriate Practice. Their philosophy for preschool was also child centered.

Social Constructivist Influences Prominent from the 1960s through the 1980s, the work of social constructivists brought about many changes in instructional practice in early childhood literacy development. Investigators looked at the cognitive development of the child using varied research methodologies. The research was done in diverse cultural, racial, and socioeconomic settings. It was field based, taking place in classrooms and homes rather than in laboratories. This qualitative research where children’s literacy behaviors were observed and described enabled us to understand more of the processes involved in becoming literate. It was recognized that in order to acquire skill in oral language, early reading, and writing, children need models to emulate. They needed the support of their families and teachers.

The term “emergent literacy” first used by Marie Clay (1966) changed attitudes and ideas about early childhood strategies for literacy development. Emergent literacy assumes that the child acquires some knowledge about language, reading, and writing before coming to school. Under this view, literacy development is recognized as beginning in the first year of life. There is a dynamic relationship among the communication skills (reading, writing, oral language, and listening) since each influences the other in the course of development. Development occurs in everyday contexts of the home, community, and school through meaningful and functional experiences that require the use of literacy in natural settings. Children at every age possess certain literacy skills, although these skills are not as fully developed or “conventional” in the sense that they match mature use of literacy skills (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000). For example, emergent literacy acknowledges a child’s scribble marks on a page as rudimentary writing, even if not one letter is discernible. The child who knows the difference between scribble writing and drawings has some sense of the difference between writing and illustrating. Literacy development approached in this manner accepts children at any level of literacy they are functioning and provides a program for instruction based on individual needs. The emergent literacy perspective exposes children to books and writing early; it is a child-centered approach with more emphasis on problem solving than on direct instruction of skills. The emergent literacy perspective is similar to the whole language philosophy of how children learn to read. Whole language addresses all children at all ages; emergent literacy is only addressing beginning readers. The similarities are evident however.

In both whole-language and emergent literacy, learning is designed to be meaningful and functional. The purpose and significance are drawn from the child’s life experiences at home or those created in school. Commercial materials do not dictate the instructional program. Literacy learning is consciously embedded throughout the curriculum in the whole school day (Collins & Shaeffer, 1997; Dunn, Beach, & Konto, 1994; Fingon, 2005). Literacy activities are purposefully integrated into the learning of content-area subjects such as art, music, social studies, science, math, and play. Equal emphasis is placed on teaching reading, writing, listening, and oral language, because all help to create a literate individual. Varied genres of children’s literature are the main source of reading material for instruction. Teachers create literacy-rich classrooms environments with materials for reading and writing in centers. Learning is individualized, with self-selection and choices of literacy activities. Rather than teaching lessons in literacy, teachers are more likely to provide models of literacy activities for children to emulate. Children learn through practice by engaging in long periods of independent reading and writing. In classrooms using a holistic approach, skills are taught when they are relevant; for example, when studying a theme such as “Healthy Habit,” the teacher may focus on the initial consonant “h” since it is being used in context. Some who used whole language thought that skills were not to be taught in any systematic way and that children...
would acquire them by being immersed in experiences with writing and the reading of children’s literature. This did cause some problems for children who needed more explicit instruction (Morrow, 2009).

Jean Piaget’s theories (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) had a strong influence on early childhood education. Piaget believed that a child acquires knowledge by interacting with the world and constantly changing and reorganizing their own knowledge. Piaget stressed that learning occurs when children engage with peers and adults in a social setting. Educators who incorporated Piaget’s theories in curricula for early childhood education have designed child-centered programs that look very much like what Pestalozzi or Froebel might have created. The setting has real-life materials, including the opportunities to play, experiment, and use language. A Piagetian preschool curriculum emphasizes decision-making, problem-solving, using self-discipline, goal-setting, planning and evaluating one’s own activities with teachers and peers. Piaget’s theory interpreted into classroom practice advocates using centers that involve children in the following cognitive activities: Language Development: talking, listening to stories, describing, etc.; Classifying: children describe attributes of objects, notice sameness and differences, sort, match, etc.; Seriating: children arrange objects by color, size, shape, etc.; Representing in Different Modalities: learning about something in many different ways (For example, to learn about an apple the child can eat it, make it into apple sauce, draw it, write and read the word apple, and sing a song about apples, etc.); and Spatial Relations: children are asked to put things together, take things apart, rearrange things, reshape things, see things from a different point of view, describe direction, and distance.

Piaget agreed that young children should use their curiosity and spontaneity to learn. Lev S. Vygotsky’s general theory of intellectual development, like Piaget’s, suggests that learning occurs as children acquire new concepts or schemas. A schema is a mental structure in which we store information we know. We store information about concepts or schemas and call them to mind to predict, generalize, and infer. According to Vygotsky, mental functions are acquired through social relationships. To extend or learn new tasks children must interact with others. Children need to talk about new ideas in order to understand them. Parents and teachers provide the language children need to help them solve a problem and internalize new concepts. The child needs a more knowledgeable person to scaffold and model the new ideas by showing children how to complete the task. Scaffolding discussions give information about finishing a task, provide advice, and directs a child’s attention to what they need to know. Vygotsky speaks of the time when the child is almost capable of performing the new task alone as the “zone of proximal development.” This is when a child can do some parts of a task, but not all. This is a sensitive time for learning and growth. It is important for the adult to step back at this time and allow the child to perform and practice the new skill so it becomes internalized (Vygotsky, 1978).

Skills-Based Models

The idea of a skills-based model for literacy instruction in preschool and kindergarten is a difficult concept for those who believe in a child-centered approach. The two models in their extreme form deal with literacy instruction in completely different ways.

Judging from the professional literature from the early 1900s, little attention was paid to a child’s literacy development before he or she entered first grade. A strong influence on reading instruction came from developmental psychologists like Gesell (1925) who suggested that maturation was the most important factor in learning to read. Preschool and kindergarten teachers generally ignored reading instruction. Instead, the influences of Pestalozzi and Froebel were evident in their classrooms with stories read to them, play, exploration, songs and discussions based on themes. Methods were child centered with great concern for the social, emotional, and physical development.

Influenced by the climate of the times, Morphett and Washburne (1931) supported the postponement of reading instruction until a child was developmentally “old enough.” Their research concluded that children with a mental age of 6 years 6 months made better progress on a test of reading achievement than younger children. This correlational study was taken as support for the postponing of reading instruction until a child was “old enough.” But although many educators believed that maturation was the precursor to literacy, others grew uncomfortable with simply waiting for children to become ready to read. They didn’t advocate formal reading instruction in early childhood, but they did begin providing experiences they believed would help children become ready for reading.

Reading Readiness

The growing popularity of testing during the 1930s and 1940s affected early childhood reading instruction. Generally, the standardized tests served the prevailing concept of maturation by indicating if a child had reached the maturity he or she needed to learn to read. The skills tested were thought to be elements that would help children become ready to read. Instead of waiting for a child’s natural maturation to unfold, educators focused on nurturing that maturation through instruction with a set of skills identified as prerequisites for reading. The concept gained strength when publishers of reading materials capitalized on the idea of reading readiness skills and began to prepare materials for preschool and kindergarten that would make children ready to read. Skills associated with reading readiness include: (a) auditory discrimination: the ability to identify and differentiate familiar sounds, similar sounds, rhyming words, and the sounds of letters; (b) visual discrimination: including color recognition, shape, and letter identification; (c) visual motor skills: such as left to right eye progression, cutting on a line with scissors and coloring within the lines of a picture; and (d) large motor skills: such as skipping, hopping, and walking on a line.

Early childhood literacy instruction based on the reading
readiness implies that one prepares for literacy by acquiring a set of prescribed skills. These skills are taught systematically on the assumption that all children are at a similar level of development when they come to preschool or kindergarten. The system does not consider experiences or information that a child may already have about literacy.

Slavin, a well-known behaviorist, fostered skill-based models of direct instruction for young children (1977). His research had a strong effect on classroom practice. He suggested that we learn through imitation, association and through conditioning. The conditioning consists of a series of systematic steps that are repeated so that the response becomes automatic. Skinner (1954) hypothesized that human learning is not automatic and unintentional. People themselves operate on their environment to produce learning and when given positive reinforcement for a desired behavior the frequency of use of that behavior increased. Skinner’s point of view emphasized that skills are acquired in a series of steps, small enough to avoid failure and frustration, with rewards at each level.

Learning with a behaviorist perspective includes an organized program presented in a systematic and direct manner. Learning requires direct instruction, time on task, structure, routines, and practice. Behaviorist programs are concerned about the acquisition of skills, with little time or concern for social, emotional, or physical development. The material used in behaviorist programs are rated according to difficulty, can include programmed sequential lessons, and can have guides for teachers which include objectives for learning, the outcomes expected and a script that the teacher recites to students.

Maria Montessori (1965) believed that children needed early, orderly, systematic training in mastering one skill after another. She created and supplied her teaching environment with materials for learning specific objectives. The use of the materials is modeled by the teacher and then provides the source of learning for the child. Children use the manipulatives to learn and because the materials are self-correcting, the children are able to determine their own errors and make corrections independently. All materials in the classroom are stored in their own containers, on a particular shelf, and in order of difficulty. In the Montessori curriculum, children’s natural curiosity and exploration are of less concern than their ability to work with specific materials to achieve a particular goal done correctly. Unstructured play is not important in the Montessori model, instead work is very important for achieving goals. However, the materials that Montessori created are manipulative. As the children work at accomplishing a goal, the tasks are interesting and playful.

By the turn of the 21st century, the explicit teaching approach in kindergarten classrooms was bolstered by research dealing with phonics and phonological awareness. Research by Juel (1989), determined that as children first begin to experiment with reading and writing, they need to focus on the sounds that make up words. Children need to know that words are made up of individual sounds. The ability to segment these sounds out of the words and blend them together is called phonemic awareness. Studies found that phonemic awareness instruction in preschool, kindergarten and first grade strengthens reading achievement. Phonemic awareness is also thought to be a precursor to phonics instruction (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1993, 1995; Stanovich, 1986). With phonemic awareness, children then learn phonics which includes:

1. alphabetic understanding (knowing that words are composed of letters), and
2. Cryptoanalytic intent or sound–symbol relationships (knowing that there is a relationship between printed letters and spoken sound).

Research also suggests that knowledge of sound–symbol relationships, or phonics, is necessary for success in learning to read and write (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004; Lonigan, 2006). Those who propose a behaviorist or explicit-skills approach for literacy instruction have argued for a strong phonemic awareness program in preschool and both phonemic awareness and beginning phonics in kindergarten. The materials for instruction are systematic and provide direct instruction with scripted manuals for teachers to use.

Based on the research discussed, changes in early literacy instruction occurred in the mid-1990s. Some moved away from a totally child-centered spontaneous approach and learning to read and write became more systematic. Meeting standards, and accounting for skills acquired became a major concern. It is apparent that success in early literacy is crucial for survival. Those who are literate earn more than those who aren’t. Those who are literate are less likely to have social problems or get in trouble with the law. Those who are literate are less likely to be chronically ill. If a child’s language is not appropriately developed at age 3 and he/she does not attend a quality preschool with a language and literacy focus, it is likely that this child will have trouble learning to read. If a child does not learn to read in by the end of third grade, we can predict that this younger is likely to drop out of school. Ninety percent of the children who do not read on level at the end of grade 3 will never reach grade level. Preschool and kindergarten are the time when literacy gaps can be closed and those who are at risk can catch up. As a result of these facts, early childhood is increasingly seen as a vitally important time for learning phonemic awareness, beginning phonics, listening and beginning reading comprehension, increasing vocabulary and concept development (Hart & Risley, 1999).

The Influence of No Child Left Behind and Scientifically Based Research

The results from the National Reading Panel Report (2000, NRP) and the National Early Literacy Report (2008, NELP) are from scientifically based research. The federal
government called for states to create rigorous standards for literacy development for kindergarten to Grade 3, and in many states preschool literacy standards are created or are still being created. The standards are based on the NRP report (2002) and the NELP report (2008).

The NELP report (2008) and the NRP report (2000) present findings about the most effective strategies for teaching children to read. The NRP panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies to come up with their results. The results of the report indicate that teaching the following elements are crucial to learn for reading success in kindergarten through Grade 3:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension
- Fluency

The NELP report also studied existing scientifically based research to identify the skills and abilities of young children from birth through age 5 that predict later achievement in reading. The variables the panel identified include:

- Oral language development: expressive, receptive, and vocabulary
- Alphabetic code: alphabet knowledge, phonological and phonemic awareness, invented spelling
- Print knowledge: environmental print, concepts about print, writing one’s name
- Other skills: rapid naming of letters and numbers, visual memory, and visual perceptual abilities

As a result of the NRP report, the NELP report models for preschool and kindergarten instruction are still being discussed. Many advocates of the child-centered models find the new guidelines inappropriate for preschool and kindergarten programs. Several large scale studies that observed and described what was happening in child-centered preschools found that in preschools where social, emotional, physical and language development and the learning of self regulation skills were considered important: 35% of the time was spent in routines such as lining up, meals, bathroom, cleaning up, etc.; 32% of the children’s time was spent in free choice activities and center time; 23% of the time was spent in whole group instruction and 6% of the time was used for small group instruction. These findings were considered indicative of a lack of focus on the development of academic skills, which are typically best addressed in small groups, particularly with young children. Studies that examined the time spent on the development of skills found the following: 12% of time was spent on literacy; 6% on math; 1% on writing; 8% on science; 13% on social studies; 9% on art and music; 7% on large motor activities, and the remaining 44% of time was spent on activities that related to none of the skill areas. In a study that looked at the extent of teacher-child verbal interaction in preschool, which is important in the fostering of language development, it was found that: 8% of verbal interaction was elaborated; 18% minimal; 1% routine and the remaining 73% of the time no teacher-child verbal interactions occurred (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Those concerned with the academic preparation of children in preschools view this data as highly problematic.

Do the theories and research discussed contribute to a way we could look at literacy development in early childhood that would satisfy those who hold a child-centered orientation and those who are in favor of a skills-based model?

We believe this is possible when we look at the most important elements from each model.

1. Concern for individual needs and level of development: physical, social, emotional, and intellectual
2. Concern for prepared environments in which learning can take place
3. Emphasis on learning and on teaching
4. Emphasis on social interaction with supportive adults who scaffold learning
5. Focus on learning through real experiences in meaningful and natural settings
6. Focus on learning in settings with explicit but appropriate teaching
7. Focus on actively engaging students in learning using manipulative materials and experiences that are functional and interesting
8. Practicing and repeating skills learned

A Comprehensive Literacy Instruction Model

The following documents help to define a combination of child-centered and skills-based instruction for young children. One is published by the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children entitled Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices (1998), the other two are position statements by the International Reading Association, one entitled Using Multiple Methods of Beginning Reading Instruction (1999) and the other, Literacy Development in the Preschool Years (2005). These documents suggest that no single method or single combination of methods can successfully teach all children to read. Teachers must know the children they teach from a social, emotional, physical, and intellectual perspective. They also must know about the many methods for reading and writing instruction. Only then can they develop a comprehensive plan for teaching reading to meet individual needs. A comprehensive approach or one that blends the two models discussed includes careful selection of the best theories available and use of learning strategies matched to the learning styles of individual children (Morrow & Tracey, 1997). According to Pressley (1998), skills-based, explicit
teaching is a good start for constructivist problem-solving activities, and constructivist activities permit consolidation and elaboration of skills. One method does not preclude or exclude the other. A comprehensive perspective is not a random combination of strategies. A teacher may select strategies from different learning theories. One child, for example, may be an auditory learner and benefit from instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics; another child, whose strength may be kinesthetic, needs manipulative activities. A comprehensive approach is a thoughtful and mature approach. It focuses more on what is important for individual children than on the latest fad in literacy instruction. Comprehensive instruction is grounded in a rich model of literacy learning that encompasses both the elegance and complexity of the reading and language arts processes. Such a model acknowledges the importance of both forms (phonemic awareness, phonics, mechanics, etc.) and function (comprehension, purpose, meaning) of the literacy processes and recognizes that learning occurs most effectively in a whole–part–whole context. This type of instruction is characterized by meaningful literacy activities that provide children with both the skill and desire to become proficient and lifelong literacy learners.

In a preschool that fosters a comprehensive model, a rich literacy environment and content area centers filled with interesting materials for exploration and experimentation will be present. Books and paper and writing utensils will be provided in the centers. In addition to times for problem solving and play there will be a time during the day when children meet with teachers in small groups for explicit instruction based on need. The instruction will however be developmentally appropriate, for example, learning letters will begin with letters in the child’s name. The child will be given magnetic letters that match those in his/her name and will be shown how to put them into the right order. The child might also find a letter in their name that is in his/her friend’s name or copy the letter. For a child who is not yet phonologically aware, instruction might involve clapping the number of syllables in his/her name and of others in the classroom. Similarly, children learn sight words by having a collection of their favorite “Very Own Words” that are drawn from the child’s environment. One child’s words might include his Mom’s name with her picture, the word football with a picture since it is his favorite sport, and McDonald’s since he likes to eat there. While these types of small group, explicit lessons are congruent with the skills-based approach to early education, other parts of the day in the comprehensive preschool program will be drawn from the traditional child-centered approach. Thematic teaching, art, music and play will be incorporated throughout the day. During these times of the day, the teacher will continue to seek opportunities to purposefully teach literacy skills.

Final Comments

The research, theory, philosophies, and methods that have influenced early education through the years have helped us to understand that children learn in situations that are purposeful. They develop literacy in social contexts and through interaction with adults and other children. The instruction they receive should reflect upon their background knowledge and be sensitive to a child’s stage of development socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. We have also learned that skill-based literacy instruction or the systematic teaching of skills in an organized fashion is a necessary for literacy development. When teaching, the following features are essential if learning is to occur:

- Explicit modeling and scaffolding of lessons to be learned
- Guided practice
- Independent practice
- Time on task
- Structure and routines
- Differentiation of instruction to meet individual needs
- Feedback for children
- Time to explore
- Time to experiment
- Time to collaborate in social settings
- Time for problem-solving

Literacy development begins at birth and continues throughout the early childhood years. The philosophies, theories, research and policy presented here suggest there is no one best approach to literacy instruction in the early years. Selecting the right format for each child is how we will be successful. We learn from this review that quality instruction takes place in literacy-rich environments, with social interaction, peer collaboration, and whole-class, small-group, and individual learning experiences. Those from the skills-based tradition have shown us that children must be taught explicitly during small group instruction to meet individual needs. On the other hand, those from the child-centered tradition have demonstrated the benefits of exploration and problem solving. The work of child-centered theorists and educators suggest that literacy needs to be taught in an integrated fashion—therefore, oral language, reading, writing, listening and viewing should be taught in an integrated system. Learning must be functional for children and related to real-life experiences so it is meaningful. Finally, it is clear that literacy activities that are integrated into content areas through thematic instruction create enthusiasm. We advocate, then, a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction in the early childhood years. This approach will incorporate aspects of both the child-centered and skills-based tradition and, thus, will support both the social and emotional growth and academic preparation of young children.

References


