Children’s literacy development during the elementary school years is the foundation for their academic success and, to an extent, their life success in their later years. While this chapter focuses on reading and writing, we would like to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of literacy development. Speaking, listening, reading and writing are integrated, communicative processes (Langer, 1986; Teale & Yokota, 2000). Contemporary researchers also conceive of literacy as text mediated social practices, which consist of many literacies in many identifiable forms within varying social contexts and under varying conditions, including new technologies (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005). Within these varying social contexts and technologies, oral language is intricately related to reading and writing development. While a rich examination of oral language development is beyond the scope of this chapter, we would be remiss in not emphasizing that oral language functions both as precursor and ongoing support for literacy development across the elementary years.

With this acknowledgement of the complex and multi-layered process that is literacy development, we now turn to reading and writing in the early elementary years. Both kindergarten and early primary grade learners (grades 1–2) and learners in the middle elementary grades that immediately follow (grades 3–5) view reading and writing as being both purposeful and cognitive activities used to help them conceptualize personal experience and world knowledge. This chapter reports what the research says about how children in the early elementary school years develop as readers and writers and what that means for classroom teachers and policy makers. First, we present theory and research on reading and writing in the kindergarten and early primary grades that immediately follow (grades 3–5) view reading and writing as being both purposeful and cognitive activities used to help them conceptualize personal experience and world knowledge. This chapter reports what the research says about how children in the early elementary school years develop as readers and writers. The challenges that readers and writers face as they confront varied types of texts. Finally, we offer implications and recommendations for policy and practice.

The Primary Years (K–2)

**Perspectives on Literacy Learners in the Primary Grades**

Until the late 1980s, reading readiness was the approach used by most early literacy teachers to provide a foundation for formal literacy instruction, which typically began in first grade. Even then, Teale and Yokota (2000) suggested that reading readiness was pursued by educators along two different paths. Down one path went educators who were convinced that readiness was essentially a result of maturation or “neural ripeness.” Down the other path were those who believed that appropriate experiences created readiness or came to accelerate it.

Several decades ago, Lapp and Flood (1978) defined reading readiness as the necessary level of preparation children should attain before beginning formal reading instruction. Alphabet and word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, and visual discrimination were cited as possible predictors of reading readiness. More recently, *Developing Early Literacy: The Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (National Institute for Literacy, 2008) confirmed that alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, oral language, and writing/name writing in 4- and 5-year-old children are among the best predictors of later success in literacy achievement. In traditional readiness programs, prescribed skills in these areas are directly taught to get children “ready” to read.

Emergent literacy, on the other hand, looks at both reading and writing (literacy) as they are in the process of emerging in the everyday lives of children from their earliest years (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Teale & Yokota, 2000). More recent research on the phonological skills of young children indicates that the developmental origins of learning to read begin prior to the onset of formal reading instruction in school (Lonigan, 2006). Thus, when researchers and teachers use the term emergent literacy they are usually referring to children from infancy through kindergarten or first grade (Chapman, 2006).
**Writing in the Primary Grades** Emergent writing most often refers to both written texts and to other representational forms (Chapman, 2006). There is a strong body of foundational research in this area. According to Sulzby (1985a) and Temple, Nathan, Burris, & Temple (1988), most kindergarteners begin to write by drawing and scribbling. They will write such things as messages, grocery lists, stories and notes, and “pretend read” them to parents, teachers, or peers. As soon as they can write a few letters (e.g., those in their name), they begin to add these and other letter-like marks to their drawings/scribbles, showing that they know writing is not completely arbitrary but that it involves certain kinds of special marks (Clay, 1975). Temple et al. (1988) call this the prephonemic stage. Gentry (1981) notes that the scribbling stage parallels the babbling stage in oral language development.

When their informal exposure to written language through environmental print is augmented by more direct experiences with print such as group composing of text (Hall, 1981) and shared reading interventions (Wasik, 2001; Zevenbergen, Whitehurst, & Zevenbergen, 2003), children begin to internalize the alphabetic principle. They may use one or two letters, usually consonants, to stand for whole words. Temple et al. (1988) call this the early phonemic stage and give the following example: RCRBKDN = Our car broke down. With an accompanying illustration, the message is perfectly understandable, thereby indicating children’s early development of the alphabetic principle.

With daily meaningful reading/writing experiences, children move into the letter-name stage in which vowels begin to appear along with prominent consonants (Read, 1986; Temple et al., 1988). By now they know the names of the letters but not necessarily which letters represent which sounds. As active learners, they invent spellings according to their own phonemic rules, for example, “chran” for “train,” “yet/vent” for “went,” and “pan” for “pen.” Soon standard spellings are mixed with invented spellings, and children are said to be in a transitional stage. Throughout the elementary school years, spelling tends to become more standard, but invented spellings can be found at all levels. Furthermore, invented spelling is related to learning to read; Ouellette and Senechal (2008) found that kindergarteners who participated in an invented spelling intervention that included developmentally-appropriate feedback made greater gains in learning to read new words than their peers who participated in a phonological awareness intervention. However, children do not move through these suggested developmental phases evenly. Some may skip and appear to go from drawing directly to invented spelling. According to Teale and Sulzby (1986), writing development is best thought of as a sociocognitive constructivist process. Rather than being an invariant sequence, children vary in their experiential backgrounds, approaches to learning, abilities, and overall rates of development. Furthermore, different purposes, tasks, and discourse forms also influence children’s writing processes.

The interdependence of oral language and literacy development is evident from the earliest years and continues through the grades. Both talking and drawing are necessary adjuncts to writing in kindergarten and Grade 1 (Dyson, 1983; Calkins, 1986). By Grade 2, drawing becomes less necessary, but talking with others, as rehearsal for writing and for feedback on drafts, becomes even more important. Bodrova and Leong (2006) suggest that private speech seems to support young children’s writing in several ways. It helps them remember the words they wish to write, to practice voice-to-print correspondence, and to concentrate in ways that promote accurate phonemic representations.

As children mature, their sense of themselves as writers broadens. Seven-year-olds find emotional support in peer review. Manning, Manning, and Hughes (1987) found that personal content dominated the journals of first graders, who wrote about themselves and their feelings and their families and pets. However, given the opportunity, young children can write informational texts and stories and are aware of how they are different (Donovan, 2001; Wollman-Bonilla 2000).

**Reading in the Primary Grades** Smith (1985) describes reading as an active, constructive process in which one applies different kinds of knowledge (knowledge of the world, the language system, and the content) to make meaning from written language. Ashby and Rayner (2006) agree that reading is much more than an automatic act of object perception. Children come to school able to understand and respond to thousands of spoken words, but their ability to recognize words in print relates to their preschool activities with written language. Most will be able to recognize their names and can quickly learn to read the names of their classmates, signs and labels in their classroom, and a basic vocabulary of common words from language experience and shared book activities (Mason & Au, 1986; Roskos & Christie, 2000). There are, however, significant gaps in vocabulary knowledge among students from different socioeconomic status (SES) groups in the elementary years (Hart & Risley, 1995). One model for addressing this gap is Beck and McKeown’s (2006) program Text Talk; in the context of this program using read-alouds, Beck and McKeown found that rich vocabulary instruction can significantly enhance low-income kindergarteners’ and first graders’ oral vocabulary knowledge.

In addition to vocabulary knowledge, research has clearly established phonemic awareness as significant in early reading development (e.g., Adams, 1990) and in literacy achievement throughout the elementary school years (Torgeson, Morgan, & Davis, 1992; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004). While reading development can indeed be idiosyncratic, stages of reading development have been identified by several scholars. Chall (1983) distinguished between learning to read and reading to learn, two sets of stages that explain children’s reading development. In the learning to read stages, children are learning to decode fluently; in the reading to learn stages, children are learning new information from independent
reading. Additionally, Weaver (1988) suggested phases that children may go through, similar to those noted in spelling development. In the schema emphasis phase stage, which is compared with the pre-phonemic stage in spelling, children exhibit reading-like behavior, turning pages and “reading” from prior knowledge of story and picture clues. In the semantic/syntactic emphasis phase, which is like the phonemic or invented spelling stage in writing, they continue to use schematic knowledge and picture clues but begin to read some words in context. Miscues at this stage are likely to fit the context semantically and syntactically but may not reflect the actual words on the page, for example “bird” for “canary.” Researchers found developmental progressions as children rely on grapho-phonemic cueing systems (Weaver, 1988); engage in quasi-reading (Bussis, Chittenden, Amarel, & Klausner, 1985) and eventually engage in independent reading (Sulzby, 1985b).

The Middle Elementary Years (Grades 3–5)

**Perspectives on Literacy Learners in the Middle Elementary Grades** Most middle-grade students have mastered the basic skills required to cope with relatively simple texts, such as narratives and uncomplicated informational books. Most can read and carry out simple directions contained in recipes and procedures for constructing models. As they move through the grades, however, intermediate grade children encounter more abstract, complex, and unfamiliar content (Schleppegrell, 2004). At the same time, high stakes tests are often implemented in these grades to hold teachers and children “accountable” for achievement and success (Alvermann, 2002). Ivey (2002) reviewed the research on the literacy needs of middle elementary grade and adolescent learners. The research reveals inconsistencies throughout this grade range between the literacy skills of these young learners and the literacy demands of the school, including: (a) a mismatch between instruction and students’ needs, (b) a tension between school literacy versus out-of-school literacy, (c) and a focus on the teaching of content versus the teaching of literacy. These inconsistencies generally begin at Grade 4.

**Writing in the Middle Elementary Grades** At the onset of the middle elementary years (i.e., around Grade 3), writing becomes increasingly more important in the everyday lives of children. Key findings of research on intermediate grade writers indicate that they gradually gain awareness and control of their writing process, draw on multiple sources of information as they write, and include their own experiences, repertoires of knowledge, and social worlds (Calkins, 1994). Intermediate writers focus more on meaning and making connections among ideas (Langer, 1986) and they use writing as a vehicle for personal exploration of ideas and growth (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1992). Children’s conceptions of writing also change with age and experience. Bradley (2001) investigated first-grade children’s conceptions of writing, concluding that their perceptions and actions are greatly influenced by what their teachers say about writing. Children defined “good writing” as making sense, demonstrating conventional correctness, and having an acceptable appearance. Likewise, the second-grade children interviewed by Kos and Maslowski (2001) focused on the conventions of writing as qualities of good writing. McCarthey (2001) examined fifth-grade students’ notions of good writing; these students focused on the use of imagination, expressiveness, and capacity for a variety of genres. This research, although cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, suggests students’ increasing sensitivity to the multiple purposes and genres of writing throughout the elementary school years.

By the age of 10, children can view their writing through the eyes of a reader. Their writings become more multidimensional, and they can shift between narrative and description and narrative and dialogue in one piece. Calkins (1986) suggests that children begin to be able to reread to revise in grades 4 to 6, especially if they are in instructional environments in which they read their pieces to others for reaction and response. She suggests that children gradually move toward holding their own internal conferences as they shift from the concrete approach taken by younger children, who write everything out, to write out only portions of alternative leads, endings, and titles, and simply think about others as they move toward more representational thought. Thus, writing becomes a means of thinking and rethinking. In addition, the ability to comfortably use and combine print, spoken, visual and digital processes in composing a piece of writing is an important aspect of the writing development of today’s primary and middle-grade students (Yancey, 2000). Children’s enthusiasm for writing with computers is a relatively consistent finding, though researchers suggest that more studies are needed in this area (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000).

**Reading in the Middle Elementary Grades** Despite the wide difference in abilities and experiences and the idiosyncratic nature of literacy development itself, research suggests some trends in reading development for children in the middle elementary years. Third graders exhibit a growing independence in reading. Relying heavily on cues in the text, they can figure things out for themselves. However, they see print as literal truth and think that what the text says is correct. Although they can read orally with meaning and expression, they like to read to themselves both for pleasure and information. By this time, most children have internalized several print grammars, both narrative and simple expository, to help them make sense of written language appropriate to their experiential background (Cochrane, Cochrane, Scalena, & Buchanan, 1984; Van Sluys & Tropp Laman, 2006).

Middle-grade students are faced with the task of comprehending an increasing variety of texts in a variety of forms, formats, and genres. In their report on the knowledge base on reading comprehension, the RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG; 2002) defines the term reading comprehension as...
“the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (p. 9). The RRSG explains that learning to read well is a long-term developmental process. As they move through the elementary school years, children’s ability to comprehend written language may be limited by their prior knowledge or their knowledge of text structures and topics (Mason & Au, 1986). Readers are actively constructing meaning from text, based on what they already know and what the author has written. Serving many purposes, student’s background knowledge help them make inferences, summarize, remember, add new knowledge, and make decisions about what is important (McNeil, 1970; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Vocabulary knowledge is also essential for successful comprehension. Although children do build their vocabulary from explicit instruction, they also add thousands of words each year from their reading of trade books and content area texts. Students learn most new words incidentally through repeated exposures; only about 10% of new words are learned from explicit instruction (Carlisle, 2007). Incidental word learning can occur in many contexts, including independent reading (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987), but there must be sufficient understanding of other words in the text for students to learn new words (Blachowicz and Fisher, 2000). Biemiller and Slonim (2001), in their seminal work on the size and sequence of vocabulary development, found that typically-achieving students know about 8,400 root words by the fifth grade.

Finally, besides being active readers, children in the middle grades are strategic readers. Meyers and Paris (1978) found that these children are aware of a variety of reading strategies and know how to use them, acquiring metacognitive capabilities as they go through the grades. Babbs and Moe (1983) define metacognition as the ability to monitor one’s own thinking. Teachers can actively promote metacognition by modeling comprehension strategies, having children practice them in a variety of situations and content areas, and encouraging students to teach each other about the reading process (Garner, 1987; Pressley, 2002).

Literary Development

Galda, Ash, and Cullinan (2000) suggest that most research on children’s literature in the classroom has focused on children’s ability to recognize literary elements or to use those elements in their speech or writing. For example, researchers studying children’s concepts of story have noted that children’s early notions of story are gradually modified and refined as they continue to encounter new stories in a variety of situations (McNeil, 1987). Stadler and Ward (2005), using earlier models of narrative development in children, found that children in the early grades follow a predictable sequence characterized by the following actions: labeling, listing, connecting, sequencing, and narrating. Similarly, Whaley (1981) found evidence of a developmental trajectory in that, when reading stories, older children were better at predicting events than younger children. She concluded that the expansion of a story sense in older students enabled them to predict more of the story structures. With respect to young children, Sutton-Smith (1981), and Long and Bulgarella (1985) report that they organize their stories around basic pairs of actions such as chase and escape and that they tend to repeat these actions in their written stories. However, Mandler (1978) found that as children mature, their story retellings appear to move away from a simple, ideal concept of story toward a more complex adult model. Analyses of children’s written stories reveal the same developmental patterns. Sipe (1996, 2008) created a typology of children’s literary understandings based on their oral responses to picture books. He describes three dimensions through which children’s understandings can be seen: (a) Stance: How children situate themselves in relation to texts; (b) Action: What children do with texts; (c) Function: How texts function. This typology suggests that even first and second graders analyze stories and consider the characteristics of books. Indeed, the ability to identify and focus on literary elements after a reading appears to be enhanced by the stance the reader takes at the time of the reading (Many & Wiseman, 1992). Students asked to take an aesthetic stance prior to reading were more likely to identify literary elements in their response than those given an efferent stance, and this ability increased with age. In general, young children talk about plots and story endings, link stories to other literary works, and describe connections across authors or genres.

In addition to text structure, texts can also differ in respect to multicultural perspectives. Some researchers have looked at children’s literary experiences as multicultural and global education (Au, 2003). For example, Bishop (1994) suggests that children’s literature provides both a “mirror and a window,” an illuminating metaphor for thinking about this aspect of children’s literary development and their developing understanding of diversity. Consequently, as Hade (1997) suggests, children can learn to read either multiculturally or “against a text” (Nodelman, 1996). As such, it is important for authors to provide authentic representations of cultures in their writing. And, as readers develop, it becomes their responsibility to recognize and question the author’s implicit assumptions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Research on children’s written language development provides evidence that learning to listen, speak, read, and write is complex and multidimensional. No single approach is likely to be appropriate for all children. Yet, there is a convergence of research evidence that can be applied to both policy and practice. Following is a set of recommendations for policy and practice related to the classroom environment and to learner attributes.

Classroom and Instructional Environment First, a print rich environment is essential. Classroom environments that
support language and literacy are filled with appropriate literature, meaningful environmental print, prominent reading and writing centers, and opportunities for students to discuss what they read, write and experience (Feeley, 1982; Chapman, 2006). In addition, instruction should include a variety of texts and modalities, including technology and traditional print sources.

Meaning should be at the center of language and literacy activities in the classroom. Both language and literacy are best taught within the context of topics and situations of interest and importance to children. Moreover, such practice will likely increase motivation (Alvermann, 2002). Attention to motivation, particularly in the middle grades, is extremely important for both policy and practice. Efforts to address demands for accountability need not result in an over emphasis on the results of standardized tests, which may serve to foster less effective teaching and decrease student motivation.

Reading and writing should not be isolated from each other or from other aspects of the curriculum, including the content areas. Additionally, there should be increasing attention to expanding children’s knowledge about text structures and literary genres (McNeil, 1987; Mason & Au, 1986). Given the unique text structures and literacy demands of the content areas (Schleppegrell, 2004; Achugar, Schleppegrell, & Oteiza, 2007), professional development should be provided to teachers to heighten their sensitivity to content-area demands and to employ scaffolds to support students of varying linguistic backgrounds with these demands.

Learner Attributes Attention to cultural and linguistic differences should be integral to all language and literacy activities. Policy, and funding, should support students’ access to books that reflect a range of cultures and encourage respect for cultural and linguistic differences. Similarly, special attention needs to be given to the needs of linguistically diverse learners. What we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for English learners as well (August & Shanahan, 2006). When possible, bilingual education for ELLs should be supported because of its positive effects on reading and achievement in English (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006).

Building background knowledge and vocabulary are critical to literacy development. Children should be encouraged to make use of what they know about topics to aid in meaning making and to broaden their experiential background. As their conceptual base grows, so will their vocabulary for oral and written language (Langer, 1986). Because background knowledge and vocabulary are most effectively employed when students are purposeful in their literacy habits, children should be encouraged to be reflective and metacognitive about their reading and writing. Students should be taught to plan, evaluate, and regulate their own comprehension and to be more aware of strategies that improve their reading comprehension (Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984; Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995).

Conclusion
The literacy development of elementary students is influenced by a variety of social, instructional, and intra-individual factors. Understanding the interplay of these factors is essential to best support children’s early literacy development and to provide the foundation that will serve them in all later academic endeavors. Policy and practice decisions should be informed by research and implemented in ways that directly support the literacy development of young children.

References


