Old and new

Catherine McBride, Catherine E. Snow, Natalia Kucirkova, Vibeke Grøver

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Reflecting on the enduring key issues in early literacy

Catherine McBride, Catherine E. Snow, Natalia Kucirkova and Vibeke Grøver

In this chapter, we highlight what we consider to be some of the major issues in early literacy development and education worldwide. These issues have been touched upon in previous chapters, and here we summarize our 'take' on some of the most consistent debates related to literacy learning. One is the tension between a focus in early instruction on learning to read versus learning to write. A second is the issue of skill-focused versus comprehension-/ communication-focused reading. Some scholars in the United States might refer to this as phonics versus whole language, though this label does not necessarily do full justice to the issue when considered across cultures (e.g. McBride, 2016). A third is the question of how useful or problematic digital devices are as an aid to early literacy development. The affordances of and limitations on digital media use are greatly influenced by local conditions, so this conversation needs input from many national contexts. Our fourth question is the right degree of focus on oral language in literacy instruction. We know that oral language skills predict literacy outcomes, a fact that creates a challenge when a majority of children in the world attend schools that use what is for them a second language. While we acknowledge the inevitability, and indeed the benefits, of multilingualism for all, we think there are serious questions to be raised about how best to build and exploit children’s oral language skills in early years literacy instruction, taking into account both what we know about child development and the constraints of practicality in multilingual settings. Given the robust evidence that children’s oral language skills predict their literacy development, a fifth question is related to the forms of oral language instruction in early childhood that may support children’s literacy achievements in a long-term perspective. The sixth issue is the nature of literacy across cultures. For example, should we continue to consider early literacy development primarily in the context of book reading, even in cultures where children’s books are rare and reading to children uncommon? Or should our thinking about promoting early literacy be broadened to include other literacy-related activities, engaged in both for learning and for pleasure? The seventh and final question is also a definitional one: how are the tasks of learning to read and to write influenced by the specifics of the language and the script in which the child is learning? Given limitations of space, we can only touch on each of these issues briefly. We begin with the first issue, among several, related to definitional aspects of literacy.
Learning to read, learning to write

We have tried, in this volume, to encourage inclusion of work on both reading and writing by scholars describing early literacy instruction and research around the world. However, it is often the case that researchers focus on one or the other of these processes. In fact, reading and writing development are not necessarily strongly associated (e.g. Ahmed et al., 2014; Shanahan, 1984). An extreme example of dissociation comes from children learning Chinese. Children texting one another in Chinese can choose from among several systems. They can write characters, but also have the option of relying on Pinyin skills. Pinyin is an alphabetic system (based on the Roman alphabet) that is used to spell out characters. For example, man means slow (man4 (慢)). Children who use this Pinyin system frequently to write electronically may recognize characters but lack the detailed knowledge of the various strokes required to write them correctly. This situation arises because entering the Pinyin brings up a range of characters to choose from, so the texter’s task is just to recognize the correct one. Writing the characters requires recall, a deeper level of memory than recognition (e.g. McBride-Chang and Liu, 2011).

There are entire societies and journals devoted only to the study of reading or the study of writing. And yet, there is evidence that writing can help develop reading skills. For example, invented spelling promotes phonological awareness and early word reading (e.g. Martins and Silva, 2006), and attention to the correct spelling of new vocabulary helps support retention (Ehri and Rosenthal, 2007; Silverman and Hartranft, 2015). Ultimately, though, writing is also an educational goal on its own, so it is unfortunate that there is much less research devoted to what facilitates good spelling or dictation skills, or how best to teach narrative and analytic writing, as compared with how children develop into excellent readers. We know the foundations of early word reading very well and those for reading comprehension moderately well. We know the foundations of spelling a bit less well, and those for writing composition not at all clearly yet. Thus, one research priority is to explore the precursors of writing, as well as relationships between reading and writing developmental trajectories in young children. There is clear evidence that scaffolding of both the writing (Aram and Levin, 2002, 2004) and reading processes by parents or teachers are uniquely helpful for young children’s development. There has been an upsurge on studies devoted to invented spelling across languages, for example (e.g. Martins et al., 2014; Sénéchal et al., 2012). At the same time, however, the precise ways in which teachers and parents can be most helpful in supporting early writing skills could be researched much more thoroughly, and we hope to see this as a direction that attracts robust research attention in the coming years. We now turn to an issue that has been the subject of considerable research and long-standing debates; namely what the precise foci should be for facilitating early reading skills.

Skills-focused versus content-focused development

Some researchers have spent considerable resources on the question of how much time and energy to devote to the development of specific reading-related skills as compared with overall comprehension skills (for a review, see Tunmer, 2014). That said, there is some consistency in what early childhood educators consider to be good practices across cultures. Essentially, it is important to teach children the building blocks of reading in their script(s) and also to emphasize that the code gives access to meaning by including rich exposure to stories and other text genres (e.g. McBride, 2016). What we mean by ‘the building blocks of reading’ varies across orthographies, but in all scripts is key for ensuring that children
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develop accurate and fluent word-recognition skills. In Chinese, this might involve learning some very simple characters and some radicals, character components that give clues to the meaning and/or sound of given characters. In Korean, children are often exposed to syllable blocks that they memorize from a syllable chart. Although these syllables comprise phonemes, they are first learned as consonant–vowel or consonant–vowel–consonant units. In alphabetic orthographies, the foundational skills typically involve memorizing letter names, letter sounds or both. Other aspects of word recognition are highlighted by culture as well. For example, in Thai, words are initially separated and only later presented in their mature form, that is without spaces between words. In Hebrew and Arabic, children first learn words with short vowels explicitly included in the writing and only later learn to infer the short vowels.

The second aspect, exposure to stories and other text-based genres, as well as confrontations with extended texts, ensures that children get the idea that reading is for the purpose of communication. In addition, it creates positive attitudes, by demonstrating that reading can be fun. Shared book reading gives parents, teachers or other adults a chance to scaffold the child’s understanding, pose and answer questions, and familiarize the child with basic print concepts (letters versus illustrations, title and author, the ‘shape’ of specific repeated words). The language of books exposes children to new vocabulary, to a wider range of grammatical structures than those used in conversation and to information about phenomena, characters and real or hypothetical situations that expand their knowledge base and stimulate their imaginations (Dickinson et al., 2012; Robbins and Ehri, 1994). Motivation for reading is likely to be enhanced by shared book reading as well (Baker et al., 2001), in part because it creates a warm affective bond between child and adult (see Bus et al., 1995).

It is unfortunate that the debates in the area of early childhood literacy have driven participants to extreme positions. Worries about overly academicized early childhood settings have led to banning alphabet friezes or book corners in some places, whereas in others three-year-olds are given worksheets to complete. Fortunately, the phonics versus whole language debate has receded, and most educators embrace a focus both on specific literacy skills and on a rich oral language/literacy environment as prerequisites for solid literacy skills (Tunmer, 2014). Clearly, children need to learn the tricks of the code in order to be able to read and write fluently. At the same time, they require control over language structures and some understanding of how and why reading is useful from the beginning. Books as a source of information and entertainment are key for this.

Digital media as a tool for literacy development?

Another key literacy debate at present involves the utility of digital media as ways of introducing and practising different aspects of literacy. As we have learned from Chapters 4 and 5, digital media can and do serve to enhance literacy skills. Computer games can be successful in facilitating children’s mastery of word reading and writing skills. Digital books (or e-books) can also be helpful in probing aspects of reading comprehension. Years ago, some researchers posed the question whether television viewing is good or bad. Others argued that such a question is basically obsolete. Rather, the question should be how television should be used. In what ways is it helpful or detrimental? A similar question should be considered in relation to all digital media. Video games, social media and, for younger children, computer games and e-books are all powerful tools that can facilitate learning in some circumstances and impede learning in others.

Games embedded in technology-enhanced environments are most helpful when they are targeting skills for which children require extensive practice in an engaging yet focused way.
For example, GraphoGame, as described by Richardson and Lyttinen (2014), has yielded remarkable success for children at-risk for reading difficulties (e.g. Kyle et al., 2013; Ojanen et al., 2015; Saine et al., 2011). Different researchers have debated the value of digital media in targeting particular reading-related skills (e.g. Tallal et al., 1996; Wouters et al., 2013), some arguing that particular skills are gatekeepers to fully-fledged literacy. It seems clear that computer games that target specific skills related to fluent word recognition, such as phoneme or syllable recognition (e.g. Kyle et al., 2013; Wouters et al., 2013), tend to yield good results for the skills targeted. Some researchers claim that video games can even help specifically with visual skills in reading (e.g. Franceschini et al., 2013). These games, if targeted to specific skill sets, are fun for everyone and potentially essential for those who are at risk for reading problems or dyslexic, that is lacking in those particular targeted skills. Most typically developing readers, on the other hand, acquire such skills naturally, without the need for support from intensive practice sessions.

Digital books have a somewhat mixed record. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that children sometimes pay good attention to and learn from books that are narrated. They follow along and they comprehend text that is at an appropriate level. On the other hand, stories with many ‘bells and whistles’ can be distracting. That is, when interesting visual or auditory manipulations occur in the book, children often pay attention to these (e.g. a dog barks, a girl throws a ball, a flower grows) in ways that interfere with comprehending the overall narrative. This is a risk of enhanced (or embellished) e-books (Bus et al., 2015).

Future research in this area needs to concentrate on developing a fuller understanding of the key features of digital books that would enhance or impede children’s learning and enjoyment derived from book reading. While early research on children’s e-books focused on comparing them with print-based books, more recent research has analysed specific features of e-books such as interactivity (Takacs et al., 2015), personalization (Kucirkova et al., 2013), aesthetic value (including chromatics and colours; see Kao et al., 2016) and high visual representation (Wei and Mia, 2016). There has also been a shift towards the use of e-books in pre- and primary schools, with studies complementing home-based and parent–child e-reading with investigations of e-books’ use in traditional literacy teaching (e.g. Roskos et al., 2014). The role of teachers as media mentors in facilitating this transition and their role as co-developers of e-book content is likely to be the primary focus for the next years (Guernsey and Levine, 2015).

Given the international focus of this volume, it seems important to note that digital resources are a potential solution to a major educational challenge in many parts of the developing world: access to books, both in the language of schooling and in local languages. Providing paper-based libraries to all the schools in the developing world is a daunting task, but providing access to digital resources, for reading either on digital devices or for downloading and printing, can greatly expand many children’s access to print. Groups such as African Storybook (www.africanstorybook.org/), Pratham (https://storyweaver.org.in/about) and others have created open-source resources to support literacy education around the world.

The role of oral language in literacy development

All fully-fledged theories of literacy development emphasize comprehension and effective written communication as the ultimate goals. Thus, it is impossible to avoid a focus on oral language development in thinking about promoting literacy, as language is the key to both comprehension and to writing. One can legitimately ask, though, to what extent early literacy programmes are and should be focusing on teaching vocabulary, grammar and
discourse structures, and whether long-term outcomes from such a focus would be superior to outcomes from a focus on decoding and spelling.

There is robust evidence that children’s oral language skills predict their literacy achievement. For example, oral language at age three predicts first grade reading (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005), kindergarten vocabulary scores predict reading comprehension scores through to at least eighth grade (Snow et al., 1998; Snow et al., 2007), preschool measures of vocabulary (Forget-Dubois et al., 2009) and comprehension (Cristofaro and Tamis-Lemonda, 2011) predict school readiness, and clinical deficits in language skills are associated with poor literacy outcomes (Justice et al., 2009; Lyytinen et al., 2005).

Given the centrality of oral language to reading success, questions arise about situations in which children are being taught to read in a language they do not speak. Immigrants, children from language minority communities, children growing up in highly diglossic situations and the majority of children in post-colonial school systems are confronted with instruction in a language that may be completely unfamiliar to them, or that deviates in various ways from the variety they speak. Such children may also face extra challenges associated with membership in groups at high risk of poor literacy outcomes – low parental education, limited financial and educational resources, and so on. Thus identifying the optimal literacy-learning environments for such children is crucial. There is now ample evidence that a very high proportion of children learning to read in a second language fail (see, e.g., Pretorius and Spaull, 2016), that children can benefit from initial literacy instruction in their first language, but at the same time that many children succeed at learning to read in a second language (August and Shanahan, 2006). The question is how best to introduce literacy to second language learners so as to maximize the likelihood of their success and minimize their risks of failure.

Designing early childhood programmes that support literacy achievement

A fifth debate, following up on the previous topic, is related to instructional implications of the evidence that oral language skills are crucial in literacy development. Early education institutions, even in fairly homogeneous societies, demonstrate huge variability across classrooms in the types of words, complexity of sentences and range of discourse structures children are exposed to in interaction with their teachers and peers. This variability is found to have implications for children’s oral language development, documented both in descriptive long-term studies (Dickinson and Porche, 2011; Rydland et al., 2014; Snow et al., 2007) and in short-term experimental intervention studies (Coyne et al., 2007; Silverman, 2007). However, the implications of this evidence for the development of early childhood programmes are not yet clear. We identify two pertinent research topics related to questions of designing early childhood programmes with the purpose of supporting literacy achievement. The first has to do with whom programmes are developed for; the second is related to how – that is identifying core components of efficient early education programmes.

First, the motivation behind language and literacy programmes is often compensatory; that is to enhance language skills in children who are demographically at risk and expected to lag behind their peers in reading and writing achievements. Some experimental studies of oral language interventions have confirmed the Matthew effect, suggesting that children with more developed language skills benefit the most from language-enriching programmes (Penno et al., 2002). Other studies have concluded that universal programmes serving children from lower and higher income families may be beneficial for children across demographic groups (Weiland and Yoshikawa, 2013). Second, while some intervention results in small-scale trials
addressing oral language learning have been encouraging, large-scale studies of programme impacts on young children’s language and literacy have produced mixed findings. For example, a study in Chile that incorporated support to teachers found moderate to large impacts on classroom quality, but no universal programme effects on the children’s language and literacy outcomes were detected (Yoshikawa et al., 2015). On the other hand, studies on early education curricula designed to ensure an emphasis on children’s language and literacy development, in addition to offering support for teachers, have reported positive outcomes (Dickinson et al., 2011; Wetland and Yoshikawa, 2013).

Effective programmes may require a nuanced vocabulary, complex sentences and a wide range of discourse structures embedded in meaningful and engaging content in the classroom. We need more research on the conditions under which a curriculum might support the development of oral language skills in early childhood as preparation for future reading comprehension. For the international readership of this handbook we would particularly like to point out the value and necessity of researching questions of for whom and how across societies that differ in demographics, language profile and resources.

Beyond these issues that relate primarily to what advice or practices might be advocated for policy-makers, teachers and parents of young children, there are two broader issues that are important to consider across cultures. The first is the culture of literacy. The second is how literacy is manifested in one’s culture.

The culture of literacy: what are reading and writing for?

One other pervasive issue in early literacy is how to teach and present literacy skills. This involves an academic conversation about how important it is to emphasize literacy skills for enjoyment and love of the written word versus for academic necessity. Worldwide, many countries are introducing literacy instruction to children at younger and younger ages for the purpose of ensuring that they learn as much as possible as early as possible. There is more and more to learn. Hong Kong is an extreme, with children receiving formal instruction from age 3.5 years. But there is a push in many countries to introduce children to literacy skills relatively early. This issue relates also to how to test children’s skills as they grow up. Should we routinely tap all kinds of literacy skills, including making a shopping list, texting a friend or searching for a topic on a search engine on the internet? Should we test children’s reading skills not only via traditional narratives or expository texts but also by noting how efficiently they can glean information from a website or play an online game that makes use of text for giving instructions?

Snow’s (2002) model of reading comprehension highlights the different types of reading that adult literacy competence requires. We not only read intensively to learn things but also we skim to get the gist of an article or to locate one specific piece of information (e.g. what colour were the boy’s high tops?). When we talk about literacy skills, then, and what is important, what should we highlight? The nature of communication these days makes it such that literacy skills need to be more flexible and diverse than previously. The trend appears to be that we are adding more and more skills to be learned, rather than substituting some for others.

Literacy-learning across languages/orthographies

The way forward for literacy development in early childhood also depends somewhat on the culture in which one finds oneself. The varied language environments of Africa and India,
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for example, ensure that for many parents and teachers the literacy skills that should be taught may be debatable. There are usually official scripts or languages to be learned, but at the same time, most support the idea of teaching children literacy skills first in their mother tongue. This situation is complicated when the teacher or school makes use of a different language than the one that is the child’s own. This may be particularly confusing in India, which makes use of at least 20 different scripts and many more languages.

We mention this because many of the current models of literacy learning, whatever their focus, come from places in the world where literacy learning is relatively cut and dry. There is a longer history of research on literacy learning from the USA, UK, Canada or some other countries in Europe than, say, from China, India or Africa. However, in China, India and Africa, it is much more common than, say, in Europe or in English-speaking countries for children to speak one language at home and to have to learn another one in school. Moreover, children in most non-English speaking countries have to learn English fairly early in school as well. In Asia and at least some of Africa, children are learning English as early as second grade even if they began schooling in a local language. The challenge of learning to read perhaps first in a non-native language and possibly also in not one but often two second languages is quite different from the situations that Western models typically highlight. Indeed, it has been estimated that more than 50 per cent of the world population first learn to read in a second language (e.g. McBride, 2016). In addition, the prospect of having to learn two very different scripts seems daunting; there are few models for that as of yet. In China, the scripts are Chinese and English. In India, the scripts are usually Hindi and English. But often in each place, the language at home is different from either of these.

There is not enough space to talk extensively about how models of literacy might differ for these multilingual, multiliterate, multiorthographic learners. However, it is likely that such diversity demands more different cognitive-linguistic skills than would be required for fewer languages or for several languages all using a single script, in particular for word reading. Furthermore, different languages may evoke important, divergent cultural aspects to the reading process. Are motivations to read very different texts in very different scripts divergent? Future research should focus more particularly on the well-populated but under-researched areas of the world vis-à-vis literacy. These should include particularly Africa and Asia.

This chapter has highlighted what we consider to be seven promising domains of exploration that might enhance literacy learning around the globe. We have attempted to explain why more research on learning to write, along with learning to read, is important for future work in early literacy. The second issue we raise, skills-focused versus content-focused teaching, can be extended to writing (word writing versus sentence/essay writing). Our third topic, the status of digital media for literacy, is of great interest around the world. Worldwide, most families have access to either a computer or a cell phone, and aids to literacy can be easily presented on either one. However, teachers and parents should be cautious about how to use these in ways that will benefit children. We also tried to point out that reading and writing represent a wide range of skills. Reading can be undertaken for pleasure, for academic learning, for informal learning, for religious purposes and for many other purposes as well. Writing is similarly complicated. As societies become more complex and students are required to learn more and more in order to compete globally, the issue of the range of literacy components is important to highlight and define. Having expanded our definition of literacy to encompass writing as well as reading, we note that oral language skills are crucial prerequisites to good reading outcomes, and that learning to read in a non-proficient language can pose particular challenges to children, and to the design of early childhood educational programmes. Finally, we noted that given our global emphasis in this
volume, we must acknowledge culture fully in understanding early literacy development. The majority of children engaged in early literacy are likely learning to read in a language that is not their mother tongue. Different language environments and different scripts to be learned make early literacy learning more complicated than some Western models of literacy might have us believe. Much more research on this topic is required before researchers can easily isolate all the cognitive and linguistic, not to mention motivational, components required for optimal literacy learning.

References


