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Literacy, Language and Emotional Development

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Introduction

Learning to read is the central achievement of early elementary schooling. Children bring with them experiences, knowledge and skills that facilitate their acquisition of efficient and accurate reading skills. The view adopted here is that children will spend their first three years of school learning to read, and then will start using reading to learn.[1] Moreover, accurate comprehension of written texts presupposes that children can read individual words effortlessly.[2] Early educators will want to understand what skills children need to ensure successful learning in grades one, two and three. This report will focus on early language skills that have been linked to efficient word reading and reading comprehension, namely children's awareness of the spoken language and their vocabulary. In addition, the report will present some of the limited evidence showing that the degree to which children learn to read successfully is linked to their self-concepts.

Subject

Successful and full participation in Western societies presupposes that individuals know how to derive meaning from written texts. Unfortunately, the latest statistics show that a substantial

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number of Canadians have poor reading abilities that can jeopardize their integration in the workplace.[3] Longitudinal studies have clearly shown that differences in reading performance are established early and remain relatively stable over time.[4,5] Most children who have poor reading skills at the end of grade one will continue to experience difficulties reading later on. It is therefore important to intervene early in the lives of children to prevent reading problems and their negative consequences.

Problem

Parents, educators and researchers share a common concern: how to ensure that every child can comprehend written texts efficiently and accurately.

Research Context

Researchers have adopted various methodologies to understand better how children learn to read. Although the choice of one particular methodology, its underlying assumptions and the findings it produces can lead to heated debates, practitioners are wise to examine the available research for converging evidence to develop sound practices. Converging evidence is obtained when observational, correlational, experimental and intervention studies point to the same conclusion.

Key Research Questions

A series of key questions continue to guide the research on reading that focuses on the transition from preschool to the early school years. Some of the most important questions are listed below:

1. What skills and knowledge do children bring with them that will facilitate the acquisition of reading?
2. What are the experiences that promote early literacy skills and knowledge as well as motivation to read?
3. How can we identify children who are at risk of having reading problems?
4. How can we intervene early in the lives of at-risk children to prevent reading problems?
5. What teaching methods are best suited to optimize the number of children who will learn to read successfully?

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An adequate presentation of recent findings on each of these questions is beyond the scope of the present chapter. Readers can obtain an excellent understanding of recent findings that address these issues by reading the article by Rayner et al.[6] as well as the 2008 report of the National Early Literacy Panel (US).[4]

Recent Research Findings

The view herein is that early language skills play an important role in the acquisition of reading, and that learning language and learning to read are related but distinct domains. Recent research findings pertaining to two language skills, phonemic awareness and vocabulary, are discussed below. In addition to these topics, some findings on the role of reading on children's developing self-concepts are discussed.

Phonemic awareness. Over the past 20 years, researchers have made important advances in understanding the role of children's awareness of the spoken language. The term phonemic awareness refers to the ability to identify, compare and manipulate the smallest units of spoken words — phonemes.[7] Most spoken words contain more than one phoneme; for example, *cat* has three phonemes and *spill* has four phonemes.

- There is some evidence that children first become aware of larger units of spoken language such as words within sentences and syllables within words; however, awareness of phonemes themselves is the best predictor of reading.[2,7,8]
- Awareness of phonemes measured in kindergarten is one of the best single predictors of reading at the end of grade one. Phoneme awareness is thought to help children learn to read because it allows children to understand that letters correspond to the sounds of spoken language.[7,8]
- Intervention studies clearly show that teaching phonemic awareness to young children benefits word reading as well as reading comprehension.[7,8] Intervention studies that included alphabet letters in activities on phonemic awareness were the most successful.[7]

Vocabulary. The ultimate goal of reading instruction is to ensure that children understand the texts they read. Comprehending written texts is a complex process that involves fluent word recognition as well as the activation of word and world knowledge, making inferences and integrating parts into a coherent whole.[2] Given this view of reading comprehension, children's

vocabulary is one component of oral language that is necessary to reading comprehension.[9]

- Children's vocabulary, measured in kindergarten, is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension in grades three and four.[10]
- Intervention studies show that teaching words presented in a text improves children's understanding of the text.[11]
- It remains to be demonstrated that improving young children's vocabulary skills will have long-term consequences for their reading comprehension.

Self-concepts. There is limited longitudinal evidence on how children's reading skills might affect their self-perceptions. The research is correlational in nature, but it is consistent with the view that children who read poorly tend to perceive themselves as less able and to be less motivated to read.[12,13,14] The longitudinal results suggest that early reading skills predict the development of self-perceptions and rather than the reverse.[14, 15] That is, all children tend to have positive self-perceptions as beginning readers, but these change over time. There is also some evidence showing that children who perceive themselves as less able tend to avoid reading or read less frequently.[15] In turn, reading less frequently further impedes the acquisition of efficient word reading and comprehension skills.[16] Although there is a need for converging evidence, these findings are in accord with the idea that it is crucial for young children to develop strong reading skills quickly.

Conclusions

The accumulated evidence suggests three things:

1. Children with stronger awareness of the structure of language will learn to read more easily than children who have weaker or no awareness of this structure. Most importantly, phonemic awareness can be fostered prior to grade one.
2. Children with stronger vocabulary skills tend to have better reading comprehension skills in grade three. Most importantly, vocabulary can be enhanced at home, in child-care centres and in kindergarten.
3. Children with weaker reading skills tend to have less developed self-concepts and tend to read less. This highlights the importance of early interventions to ensure that children start grade one with the necessary skills and knowledge to learn to read.

Implications

Parents and educators can promote the development of phonemic awareness and vocabulary in young children. They can do so by incorporating into their daily routines such activities as:

1. *Playing word games* that emphasize the structure of the language. There is evidence that introducing the alphabet along with word games can help children understand that words are made of individual sounds.[7,17] Finally, having young children explore the sound structure of words by encouraging them to capture the sounds they hear with their limited knowledge of the alphabet can also be beneficial.[18]
2. *Reading children's books*. There is sound evidence that young children can learn new words introduced by an adult while looking at pictures in books, or when the adult reads the text in the book. To ensure learning, it is important to read the same books more than once. Parents and educators can borrow children's books from their neighbourhood libraries.[19, 20, 21,22]

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