

CHAPTER 1

What Every School Leader Needs to Know About How Young Children Learn

The purpose of this chapter is to provide all school leaders—whether teachers, literacy coaches, or administrators—with the essential understanding required to develop effective literacy programs for three-, four-, and five-year-old children by addressing these two big questions: How do children learn? What are the essential qualities of a good literacy program?

The school leader will be introduced to the young child as a learner and the qualities to look for in literacy programs designed for young children. For if our goal is to positively affect the learning of young children, then the adults responsible for the education of young children have to understand the characteristics of learning in the early years—and that begins with the recognition that young children think, learn, and behave differently from older children and adults, and literacy programs that work for older children are not well suited to younger children.

YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN . . . DIFFERENTLY

Young children respond to open spaces by running to fill them up, to suggestions to pretend to be a snake by getting down on their bellies and making an “ssss” sound, and to building materials by attempting to pile and topple a tall structure.

Early educators and parents find out very quickly that they have to anticipate how young children are likely to respond to particular opportunities in order to effectively plan for eventualities. Educational theorist Kieran Egan (1997) describes three- and four-year-olds as prelinguistic (intuitive) and somatic (bodily-kinesthetic) beings. Children of ages three, four, and five years do not think in logical sequences; instead, they intuit meaning and respond with their bodies. Open space, such as a playground, a gymnasium, or a long open hallway, is interpreted as a place to be filled with big movements—such as running. A tower of blocks is ready to be knocked down with a kick or a hit. Active imaginations encourage young children to respond to almost any suggestion by playing the part.

Young children’s evolving understanding of the world is also prelinguistic (intuitive) and somatic (bodily-kinesthetic). They learn through the somatic sensations of touch, gesture, building, manipulation, and movement that includes running, dancing, pretending, and role-playing. Their thinking occurs through their actions. Consequently these actions and experiences influence the development of more advanced neural pathways in their brain.

Many theorists have contributed to our current understanding of how young children learn and the characteristics of the stages of learning between ages three and six years (cognitive, social, moral, intelligence, language). In this first section, the reader will be introduced to some of the most significant theorists and their contributions to the field of early literacy.

Cognitive Learning

From theorist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) comes a foundational understanding of the cognitive capacities of children ages two through seven (what he called the preoperational stage). Young children are considered to be egocentric in their thinking, meaning they think

others think like they do. Between the ages of four and seven years, they employ mental activities to solve problems, although their thinking is still largely intuitive: They are not conscious of their thinking or how they arrive at particular conclusions.

Piaget defined the concept of schema as an internal representation of the world based on external experience: This mental organizational or conceptual framework is the base from which new experiences are either assimilated or accommodated. The concept of schema has helped us understand the role that experience and background play in children's learning.

It is during the preoperational stage that children begin to represent their world using symbols that include words, pictures, and numbers. Young children develop the capability to pretend and assign living attributes to inanimate objects. Pretending is the necessary early stage of representation that later leads to using pictures, numbers, letters, and words to represent objects and ideas.

When developing programs for young children, it is important to design literacy experiences that create relevant literacy schema (e.g., through buddy reading), provide opportunities for representation of ideas through play and use of other symbols (e.g., through projects), and leave space in schedules for intuitive problem solving (e.g., through investigations). Examples of what this looks like are found in Chapter 2.

Social Learning

From theorist Erik Erikson (1902–1994) we are provided with insight into the stages of social learning: what he called “virtues” developed from social tensions. Depending on how responsive the early environment has been to a child's physical and emotional needs for food, comfort, and loving human contact, the child from birth to age two years will have navigated the trust-mistrust stage (the first stage of social learning) with either a sense of trust, security, and optimism or insecurity and mistrust. This is important to note because the outcome of this learning determines the approach children will take to the next phase of their learning.

Between the ages of two and four years, young children's social learning is focused on autonomy versus shame or doubt. During this stage, young children are motivated to try new things and to imitate adult behavior. Their desire to be autonomous

means they will struggle at times against the rules set out by adults and are prone to tantrums and stubborn refusals when they do not get their way. This stage presents an ideal time for children to learn appropriate independence—to toilet and dress themselves and to learn small chores and basic routines.

From age three and a half years to formal school age, children are learning the social skills of initiative versus guilt. The healthy child learns to imagine, to cooperate with others, and to lead as well as follow. The challenged child is fearful, lacks social skills, depends on adults, and is limited in play skills and imagination.

A well-designed literacy program for young children acknowledges the need for children to be in a caring environment that supports their basic needs for warmth, nutrition, and comfort as well as appropriate autonomy and initiative. Young children need positive role models, choices, and opportunities, as well as time to try on new roles and behaviors without undue criticism. A literacy program that provides young children with rich experiences and gives them opportunities to represent their own evolving understanding of the world (e.g., through visual arts, drama, and music) allows young children to experience autonomy and satisfaction in themselves and in learning. Documentation and displays of children's thinking as outlined in Chapter 2 acknowledge this learning in visual and tangible forms.

Moral Learning

From theorist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1958) we discover stages of moral development based on his redefinition of Piaget's work. Kohlberg proposed that through their life experiences, children develop understandings of moral concepts such as justice, rights, equality, and human welfare. He determined that the development of moral judgment occurs over time and progresses through levels and stages. During the early years (the preconventional level) egocentrism limits the ability of the child to consider another's perspective. Actions are not so much determined by whether they are right or wrong as by the consequences. Children initially fear and avoid punishment, and this later translates into self-interest. Actions are morally relative, and children will interpret something for which they are punished as bad or wrong. Children follow the rules when it is in their best interests and negotiate deals in their favor.

According to Kohlberg, the way to teach morality is through moral dilemmas. Good literacy programs are those that are responsive to young children as developing moral beings and that provide opportunities for children to experience moral dilemmas and the tensions of good and evil, for example, through classic stories and mythic role plays as suggested by Egan (1997) and discussed in more detail later.

Learning to Be Intelligent

Theorist Howard Gardner's (1943–) study of children's styles of learning eventually led to the development of a theory of intelligence defined as a variety of styles used to solve genuine problems and make judgments that are valued in particular contexts or cultures (Gardner & Hatch, 1989).

Gardner's (1983, 1993) theory of multiple intelligences has transformed our thinking about intelligence; once limited in scope to language and mathematical proficiencies, we now understand intelligence to include multiple ways of knowing, which we all possess in various configurations. These ways of knowing include linguistic (words), logical-mathematical (reasoning), spatial (images, pictures, dimensions), bodily-kinesthetic (somatic sensations), musical (rhythms and melodies), interpersonal (bouncing ideas off others), intrapersonal (deeply internal), and naturalist (environmental orientation).

Young children need to have opportunities to re-present their growing knowledge of the world through multiple modalities. For each of the intelligences, there are particular ways of thinking and a particular approach to solving problems. Gardner (1993) calls these approaches "dispositions of learning." He recommends that children have opportunities to work with materials that evoke and provoke thinking along different lines. To be truly literate, young children need to apprentice in the literacies of all disciplines, including science, mathematics, art, technology, mechanics, music, history, social science, environment, and language and to learn from people who act as models or mentors and emulate these ways of thinking.

Having visitors perform tasks such as cooking, building, painting, or singing, while audibly describing what they are doing and thinking, using the rich language of their discipline, allows children to imitate these models as apprentices and build their intelligence as young children.

Language Learning

If we think of literacies as languages of different disciplines, we can apply our understanding of how children learn language to help us design literacy programs that encompass many different literacy forms. The environment plays a key role in determining the language or languages a child will learn. According to linguist Noam Chomsky, babies are hardwired to learn all languages; however, particular sounds, words, and phrases are reinforced by the world around them, determining which will eventually get used. Through exposure to a particular culture with particular languages, children's brains selectively delete some of this capacity, narrowing their imitation and learning to the language of the culture in which they are raised (Cogswell, 1996).

The period between eight months and six years of age marks a particularly rapid growth in language acquisition. It is estimated that by the time a child is three years of age, he or she understands 1,000 words or more and will acquire an average between 1,500 and 2,000 words before he or she is four years of age. With access to new words on a daily basis, the average child of three years has the capacity to learn four to six words a day. By the time a child is five years of age, the child's vocabulary has doubled, to between 4,000 and 5,000 words. This same child is likely to acquire another 3,000 to 4,000 words that year alone. Children's receptive vocabulary is much larger than their expressive language. By the time children enter formal school, they are using many different forms of communication to get their messages (thoughts and emotions) across. These messages can often be delivered without words. This example comes from a classroom of four- and five-year-olds.

Oliver skulks down the hall following his line of classmates, fist raised and finger pointed. Putting his hands together he takes aim. "Put that gun away!" I tell him, and he points his finger down, sticks it into his pocket and walks on.

Oliver, normally a timid child, does not always express himself well using words. It takes an astute observer to understand the

ways he is communicating and to recognize the thinking that is going on without words. All too often, adults who do not recognize the capacity of the young mind assume that without words there is little thinking going on. Like their communication, young children's thinking is all action. We see this later when children begin to learn to read: They vocalize.

A well-designed literacy program recognizes that the building blocks for later literacy begin with rich literacy experiences that cross discipline, build vocabulary and background knowledge, and exemplify what it means to be able to effectively communicate in many modalities.

PLAY: A WINDOW INTO CHILDREN'S THINKING

Play is children's thinking made visible. For this reason, the observation of play is important to adults who want to understand what children are thinking, what they understand, and what they are in the process of learning.

Ben finds a stick on the ground and picks it up. He pokes it into a mud puddle and by dragging it creates a little river. Lunging forward, he stabs the stick into the air like a sword. Raising the stick above his head, he waves it like a flag. He drops the stick and jumps over it with both feet, leaving it behind him on the ground.

Play usually begins with an object and an action. When Ben uses a stick to represent something other than a stick, he imagines. The ability to imagine changes Ben's relationship to reality. What starts as action on objects, ends in imagination, the development of a higher mental function. According to Vygotsky (1978), "The old adage that children's play is imagination in action can be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and school-children is play without action" (p. 94). The latest research continues to link pretend play to the development of cognitive capacity. The value of play, besides the inherent value granted to it

by young children, is that the complexity of play challenges the mind (young or old) to think and process in new and different ways, which leads to changes to the composition of the brain.

According to researchers Bergen and Coscia (2001), “Pretend play engages many areas of the brain because it involves emotion, cognition, language, and sensorimotor actions, and thus it may promote the development of dense synaptic connections” (quoted in Bergen, 2002). Pretend play requires the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically; it is furthered by interactive social dialogue and negotiation; and it involves role taking, script knowledge, and improvisation. Many cognitive strategies are exhibited during pretense, such as joint planning, negotiation, problem solving, and goal seeking.

Play takes many forms. Young children play with sounds, words, language, and music. Dress-up and pretend, drama, and movement are forms of play that draw children of three, four, and five years of age. Another form, typically found in early years classrooms, is play with different media. This form is particularly rich from an educational point of view because it makes children’s thinking visible. Media that are easily manipulated, such as clay, paint, sand, and water, attract young children for this reason—they get to see their own actions on the world and thus their thinking becomes visible.

In the art area, Rachel is painting at the easel. She starts by painting a yellow sun, a red brick house, then people. She adds clouds and drops of rain, then more and rain until she has covered the entire page with blue paint. The sun, the house, and the people are no longer visible. When asked about her painting, she describes it as a rainstorm.

In this example, Rachel’s imagination leads and is led by the malleable paint medium that allows her to transform it and her thinking. Typically, children go through stages of manipulation with media based on their exposure and regardless of their age (adolescents must go through the same early stages with unfamiliar building materials as do four-year-olds). When children have opportunities to experience and play with a rich array of media over time,

their expression of ideas and emotions develops both in complexity and sophistication. In early stages of painting, children will be able to represent only what their minds and their experiences allow; over time they will be able to control and determine end results.

For school leaders and classroom teachers, play is a tool we can use to assess what a child is thinking and a means for us to get the inside track on what the learner knows and is able to do.

When children are engaged in play with different media, we pay attention to their communication, including their acts of representation and their experiments with language. What are children representing through their play? Is there an attempt to do something new and inventive or to use more sophisticated vocabulary? When children play with mathematics materials, such as blocks, what words do they use to describe their actions or their construction (height, width, depth)? Through their actions, what do they show us about their understanding of the relationships between the various sizes and shapes?

If we think about language and literacy as developing along continuums from simple to complex, featureless to descriptive, basic to imaginative, indiscriminative to insightful, then how would you describe the child's use of language? Conceptually what does the child understand, what may be missing in his or her thinking, and how could his or her thinking be enriched or expanded?

Knowing what to do and how to support children's literacy development requires teachers who are astute observers interested in understanding and advancing children's learning about themselves and the world.

YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGE THROUGH SOCIAL INTERACTION AND INTELLECTUAL PLAY

According to Chomsky, learning the language of one's culture is a very complex process, requiring enormous creative and innovative potential, a genetic potential that is engaged with the right mix of social interaction and intellectual play (Cogswell, 1996).

It is only through active involvement with their environment (people, places, and things) that young children can construct meaning of the world in which they live.

Language is much more than sounds and words. Language is the tool of communication that we learn from the culture in which we live in order to engage others in social discourse (Vygotsky, 1978). Listen in as an infant “communicates” with her mother.

Three-month-old Mia responds to her mother Christina’s smile and “hello baby” by moving her hands and producing an “ooo” sound, much to the delight of her mother, who smiles and repeats the sound “ooo.”

This interaction between Mia and her mom is a great example of social discourse. Young Mia wants to respond and has constructed a way of greeting her mother, one that goes beyond simply replication of sounds or a word, one that is filled with the animation and excitement at engaging with someone she knows and loves.

Young children learn to use different sounds and actions to elicit social interaction of different kinds; they cry to be picked up, smile to engage, and point to acquire.

In effective literacy programs, teachers engage in intellectual play with young children—extending their understanding—by providing the materials and means to explore their ideas, bringing new vocabulary into their play, and making authentic links to literacy.

LANGUAGE: THE EARLY FRAMEWORK FOR LATER THINKING

According to Vygotsky (1962), internal thought develops in a social context out of oral language. Vygotsky’s book, *Thought and Language* (sometimes translated as *Thinking and Speaking*), establishes the explicit and profound connection between speech (both silent inner speech and oral language) and the development of mental concepts and cognitive awareness. According to Vygotsky, inner speech is qualitatively different from normal (external) speech. Language starts as a tool external to the child used for social interaction and as a kind of self-talk or thinking aloud. Gradually self-talk is used more as a tool for self-directed and self-regulating behavior.

Damia is traveling in the car with her grandmother, who points out the window at the scenery. Damia is interested in birds, so her grandmother points out different kinds. “Look at the birds, aren’t they wonderful?”

“Aren’t they wonderful?” Damia repeats and then to herself, “One more time, aren’t they wonderful?”

In the end, “oral language and social speech becomes inner speech” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 57).

The speech structures, mastered by the child, become the basic structures of his or her thinking. For instance, around the age of two years, the child learns that everything has a name, so each new object presents the child with a problem and that is to name it (Yardley, 1988). Early words and their meanings are the embryos for concept development.

How children think, and thus the language they use, is largely a function of the activities practiced within the social institutions of the culture in which they grow up—in other words, what they are exposed to. Those individuals who are significant to children, such as parents, teachers, and peers, have important roles to play in setting the stage for the development of young children’s language and consequently the structure of their thoughts.

The structure of the language that a child habitually uses also influences the way the child perceives the environment. The structure of the language, the words the language has (or does not have), the importance placed on those words, and the meanings they convey provide a lens through which we view the world and can talk about it. Consequently, the more expansive the language base, the greater potential for more precise and more diverse thinking.

When children enter preschool or school, their world expands and so should the opportunities for them to discover, through language, more about their world and the people in it. The school leader has a key role to play to ensure that the language experience in schools is rich and complex, furthering children’s understanding of the world and how it works. It starts with an understanding of the vast potential of the learner to learn. It happens by the selection of experiences, activities, and models that provide learning that is rich in nuance and meaning.

THE INTELLECTUAL BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG CHILDREN

The meaning that children attach to words changes over time with experience and reflection on experience. This is beautifully illustrated in the following example.

Victor, age 6, learning that it was his principal's birthday, asked, "How old are you?"

"How old do you think I am?" the principal countered.

"Seventy-two, like my mom," he responded.

"Seventy-two?" the principal exclaimed in shocked tones.

Victor paused and reconsidered, "I mean . . . twenty-seven."

Children may attach the word *dog* to all four-legged animals, such as cows, and it is not until they have many experiences with four-legged creatures that they begin to refine their understanding of this word, by narrowing it to a specific species. As adults, we often assume that the meanings of the words we use are shared. We assume, incorrectly, that the child understands what we mean. And when children use a word, we assume that they have acquired the common cultural meaning of the word. However, children begin using words whether or not meaning is attached to them.

In a game of make-believe with Chris, I am sent away.

"Banished," I tell her grandfather.

Later he asks Chris, "Who was banished?"

"Sharon was."

"What does banished mean?"

"I don't know," Chris says.

For the most part, meaning starts with experience that becomes a memory or an image associated with a word. For example, the word *home* conjures up very different images for different people. Meaning also depends on the context in which the word is used. The word *blue* has many variations in tone and hue and is also used to describe a feeling, as in “feeling blue,” or an event as “out of the blue.”

So in school, if we teach *blue* simply as a word without its rich context, we simplify the word in ways that strip it of its possible meaning. We face the same dilemma when we teach the concept of shape and number. For example, if we use only one example when we teach the concept of three-sided shapes, the child’s mental image of the concept of triangle is quite limited.

Literacy programs for young children must present the nuances of meaning in language, replicating the richness of conversation rather than lecture, allowing children the opportunity to try on new words and phrases to modify and revise word meaning over time while recognizing that these opportunities are the framework for children’s later thinking about math, science, and more.

Opposites as a Way of Thinking

Young children first structure their physical world by opposites (hot/cold, big/little, soft/hard, crooked/straight, sweet/sour) as a way to orient otherwise bewildering, complex phenomena and bring order to their world (Egan, 1997). Egan cautions us to treat this categorization not as simple but as fundamental for understanding underlying issues and forces. He puts it this way: “Wisdom lies not in the knowledge of many things but the perception of the underlying unity of warring opposites” (Egan, 1997, p. 43).

Knowing that children think this way provides us with clues to effective classroom practices for educating young children. Providing experiences with a wide range of interesting and malleable media and exposure to stories that have universal opposites as central themes, such as male/female, brave/cowardly, good/bad, and permitted/forbidden, are perfect venues for children to explore opposites and opposing forces.

For only once children have categorized by opposites can they begin to understand degrees and variations. For example, a child may use the words *fast*, *slow*, and *speed*. However, to the child,

speed means fast like a fast car. The child may not have a concept of velocity or variations in speed. In order to assess the child's understanding of the word, adults working with children have to pay close attention to both how words are used and what the child means by them.

Exposure to the experience and language of degrees and variations is important not only for expanding young children's understanding of the world but also for the language that describes it. For example, teachers of young children intentionally expose children to play with water that is hot, cold, tepid, warm, soapy, colored, and so forth. They provide opportunities for children to watch boiling water and learn about steam and evaporation, for if children don't experience these distinctions, they are not going to be able to talk, think, or write about them later.

Symbols Galore: More Than Print on a Page

Symbols are a form of shorthand that stands for the real thing.

Yardley (1988, p. 19)

In school, teachers typically think of symbols as pictures and print. However, to a young child, a symbol is anything that represents something else and is not the real thing. For example, in dramatic play, children use many symbols to represent other things: A block can be a phone, and beads can be food. When encouraged to play with symbols such as words, numbers, signs, diagrams, maps, songs, patterns, photos, miniatures, replicas, and other objects as intellectual toys, children develop deeper conceptual understandings.

If we want the child to know about something, for example Africa, then a picture, a book, or words won't do; the child must experience the real skins, fabrics, songs, and dances to understand something of the place. Trivializing or oversimplifying with the intent to teach limits comprehension (Yardley, 1988). The consensus in the research is that forcing the memorization of symbols before understanding risks conceptual understanding.

Words, by their nature, are limited. We know that words play only a small role in our communication—tone, facial expression, and body posture communicate much of what cannot be said. Through creative work and movement, children are more readily able to communicate their ideas. Children must be allowed to develop all means of expression, including music, movement, and art.

The Big Questions

In a kindergarten class, as the children are gathering on the carpet for a circle time, a young boy looks up at his teacher and asks, “You are not the boss of everything, right? There is still God and Jesus?”

Young children ask the most difficult questions. At the age of three years, they ask questions such as “Why is the sky blue?” and “What happens when you die?” and “Where do I come from?” Contrary to the jokes made about adults responding to children’s questions about where they came from by explaining about procreation (providing much more information than children really want to know), young children are sincerely interested in exploring the big questions. Children themselves bring many experiences to such discussions and much of these can be shared in a very matter-of-fact way. For example, a discussion of the death of a goldfish leads to conversations about the death of dogs and grandparents and the rituals of death and burial—things that children themselves have experienced. Young children’s explanations, however, have elements of fantasy mixed in. For example, they may endow the dead with magical and supernatural powers. Their questions are the beginning stage of explicit inquiry. In her books, *Wally’s Stories: Conversations in the Kindergarten*, *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play*, and *Kwanzaa and Me*, Paley (1981, 1992, 1995) discusses young children’s growing understanding of concepts such as fairness, magic, and race and presents them in the context of a literacy-rich environment of inquiry.

The Role of Imagination and Magical Thinking

Between the ages of two and seven years, children think mythically. Their natural draw to fantasy, talking animals, and animals dressed in human clothing engaging in human activities is a further differentiation from opposites (Egan, 1997). Their apparent magical thinking is a way of making meaning and developing rules about how the world works.

Listen to young children's stories and self-generated narratives and you will recognize the story structure as having been built around the universal opposites of brave/cowardly, security/fear, love/hate, happy/sad, dominate/subordinate, rational/emotional, aggressive/passive, public/private, health/sickness, and poor/rich. We can use these opposites as vehicles to provide much richer curriculum than our current "intellectually impoverished set of topics focusing on local trivia and 'hands-on' activities" (Egan, 1997, p. 44). For we see binary opposites expressed beautifully and dramatically in the stories (folk tales and myths) of traditional oral cultures, which make these the perfect vehicle for capturing children's attention and imagination in the exploration of language. Young children understand concepts such as freedom and oppression because they experience these in the worlds of their family, classroom, and playground.

In the early years, story can be used to approach concepts and ideas typically reserved for later grades, such as history, science, and math, providing a rich foundation at a time when children clearly relate to and understand the underlying dichotomies provided through opposing forces. By using story as a teaching strategy, teachers can move beyond the simple traditional lessons on local community helpers to historical understandings of conflicts between races and nations (Egan, 1997).

We have the opportunity to provide children with a rich array of means to communicate ideas, including drama, dance, art, and music, as well as traditional modes of math, science, reading, and writing. Providing opportunities for children to express themselves through each of these means engages many intelligences and learning styles and allows children to exhibit their strengths as well as providing them with alternative languages to communicate their thinking and

their feelings. The following is an example of how the elements of opposites, story, symbol, and expression might be used to create a meaningful literacy experience for young children.

When reading familiar tales such as “Three Little Pigs,” the children create dramatic renditions of the anger of the wolf at being tricked, the fright of the pigs at losing their homes, as well as the expression of aggression and fear through movement. When the children reenact the story, words are held up as signs, ONCE UPON A TIME and THE END, embedding the meaning for the child with this experience and providing them with a tool they can use in other contexts.

Mythic Thinking: Story and Metaphor

The ability of young children to use and understand metaphor furthers our understanding of how they use language to make sense of their world in ways that take them beyond what is apparent to new levels of understandings. Gardner and Winner (1979) found that children aged three and four years fashion more significantly appropriate metaphors than children aged seven through eleven years. Preschool children’s ability to use metaphor even exceeded college students’ ability. Young children use metaphor effectively to help them understand something new or relatively unknown. Although their ability in this area surprises us and exceeds our expectations for young children, it explains why young children love stories so much.

It is the oral structure of stories, including rhythm, myth and metaphor, and the underlying conflicts, that captures the imagination of the child. We can safely conclude that to reach the young child, using these forms is the best approach. Educators must ensure that language opportunities enable young children to express their unique perceptions and consciousness. Language can also be a tool to enrich and enlarge their understanding and their aesthetic experience. The discipline to learn the conventions of language must be weighed against the freedom to play with and explore the limits of these conventions. The sensitive teacher recognizes that it is through play with the language and language structures of story that young children learn best.

EARLY LITERACY: IT'S MORE THAN SOUNDS AND LETTERS

By the time a child enters school he may already have a vocabulary of 10,000 words, a figure which doubles before he leaves primary school.

Yardley (1988, p. 11)

The rate of learning that occurs as children enter school is rapid. Yet the magical and fantastical thinking of young children tricks many adults into thinking that their thinking is simplistic and therefore instruction should be delivered in simple terms. Many literacy programs for young children focus on letters and letter sounds as the beginning step, and simple repetitive words such as color words and high-frequency words (*the, I, he, she, at*).

The difficulty with the simplistic approach is that it strips language and literacy of its rich meaning. Listen to a four-year-old's command of the language for a topic that he or she is fascinated with. Many a four-year-old boy can pronounce dinosaur names that adults struggle to pronounce. Not only is he likely to name the dinosaur correctly, he is likely to be able to provide you with details about its lifestyle, its unique characteristics, and its eating habits!

In order to develop rich programs and enriched literacy environments in school, school leaders need to be open to the potential of the young mind and think more along the lines of programs for the gifted and for enrichment, programs that include open-ended problems, and projects that engage higher level thinking.

Although the research related to play and cognitive development has been around for some time, it has had little impact on school practices. Time that may exist for play in schools is being eroded under the pressure for readiness for Grade 1. Complex social skills have given way to the teaching of isolated skills such as the alphabet, sounds, numbers, and colors. Principals need to be able to advocate for play as thinking and learning and to be able to differentiate meaningful play from time fillers.

Studies of the effect of play on literacy development indicated that embedding literacy materials within play settings shows increases in children's use of literacy materials and engagement

of literacy acts (Christie & Enz, 1992; Einarsdottir, 2000; Neuman & Roskos, 1992; Stone & Christie, 1996). For example, Vukelich (1994) found that kindergarten children's ability to read print embedded in the environment was increased, and Bergen and Mauer (2000, cited in Bergen, 2002) found that children who had high levels of play with literacy materials in preschool were likely to be spontaneous readers of place signs and have greater pretend verbalizations in a "town-building" activity at age five.

Leaders in early literacy should resist policies that reduce time for social pretend play experiences in preschool and primary grades and work to increase funding for research on play/cognition relationships in early childhood.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this first chapter, the salient characteristics of the young child (age three to six years) as a learner have been captured, and the features of a responsive early literacy program have been elucidated.

Literacy learning at this stage is often misinterpreted as learning about sounds and letters and high frequency words. It is so much more! Characterized by opposites, metaphor, story, and the big questions in life, the thinking and the rapid language learning that occur between the ages of three and six years is the framework for thinking and literacy learning in later years. Young children develop the dispositions that lead to proficiency in various literacy forms through play in a rich array of linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic experiences.

In this first chapter, the foundation has also been laid for identifying the qualities of a responsive literacy program, one that intentionally provides rich language experiences including modeling and engaging in literacy activities; building rich vocabulary from multiple disciplines; communicating through multiple modalities; using fantasy, story, and role play as the means to engage the young in moral dilemmas, binary opposites, and the big questions of life; and educating in the various dispositions required to readily engage in different disciplines, which include science, mathematics, arts, and languages.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- According to the text, what are the characteristics of the young child as a learner? What are the qualities of a responsive literacy environment?
- Identify some element in this chapter that you would like to learn more about.
- Compare and contrast what you have read in Chapter 1 to what we currently do or offer in our early years programs.
- Identify something that we could do in order to make our programs more responsive to the young learner.