

THIRD EDITION

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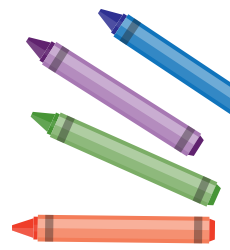
Literacy Beginnings

A Prekindergarten Handbook



Fountas & Pinnell
LITERACY™

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Section 1

Living and Learning in the Prekindergarten Classroom

STRONG, LITERACY-RICH PREKINDERGARTENS ARE joyful, busy places where children, through play, develop relationships, explore, negotiate, and learn. In our increasingly complex world, prekindergarten teachers face new challenges in creating classrooms that remain play-based yet also prepare students for the literacy-rich world in which they live. This section begins by capturing a typical day in the prekindergarten classroom of three-year-old Jamal and four-year-old Rachel. We then describe several ways to develop a warm, stimulating, and respectful community in a prekindergarten classroom. We also discuss how to promote constructive learning through inquiry. The section concludes with a description of the organized and engaged learning environment in which Jamal and Rachel are flourishing. We suggest a general framework for a literacy-rich prekindergarten, including sample schedules and ideas for infusing the prekindergarteners' day with literacy.





CHAPTER ONE

Growing Up Literate

Prekindergartens for the Future Generation

*“If we teach today, as we taught yesterday,
we rob children of tomorrow.”*

—John Dewey

TODAY’S PREKINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM is different from yesterday’s. Formerly, prekindergarten curriculum consisted mainly of play, snack, manners, story time, and rest period, with music and art added. All of these continue to be important, but today, rich literacy experiences are woven throughout, providing many opportunities for learning through play. For example, children may “read” books or newspapers in the house corner, use menus in pretend restaurants, observe and even create signs in pretend stores. The playtime and social training of traditional prekindergartens has not been replaced but rather infused with literacy.

Children’s play reflects the world around them—a world that teems with print. Three- and four-year-olds naturally begin to absorb and recognize the print they see every day. They notice symbols and signs for their favorite restaurants, point out letters in street signs, connect pictures and print on menus, find the cereal they like in the supermarket. All of these actions are signs of children’s growing literacy development (Burns and Griffin, 1999). In today’s prekindergarten, teachers work to be intentional as they read aloud, inviting children to discuss stories and share their thinking. They encourage children to label their drawings and

paintings and compose and make their own books even before they can write conventionally. They plan sequences of activities that encourage inquiry—talking, observing, wondering, and exploring focused topics of interest. All of these changes mean greater opportunities for expanding thinking and language as children grow up literate in our schools. Long before entering school, most children encounter a great deal of meaningful print in their homes and communities. Many families regularly read stories aloud to their young children and encourage them to use magnetic letters or write to accompany their drawings. Environmental print is everywhere. Television, computers, smartphones, videos, and DVDs introduce new experiences and ideas. Many young children have an amazing degree of tech savvy, beyond that of some adults! Children are curious about literacy and will naturally engage with reading and writing in a playful way if it is presented not as hard work but as an interesting part of their physical and social world. Enjoyable real-life experiences with literacy are part of high-quality prekindergarten classrooms. For those children who have not had many opportunities with language or print in the home, the prekindergarten classroom can level the playing field by creating those opportunities in school.

The Emergent Reader and Writer

In preschool, children are helped to make meaning and comprehend their world. Their experiences provide a foundation for language and literacy development that will continue throughout the grades.

Clay (2001) described how young children develop systems to process “nonvisual information” prior to schooling. At home with their family and in their community, they learn how to use the system of oral language. They

also learn how to understand stories, build their background knowledge, know what many words mean, and recognize many objects and places that are foundations for learning more. In order to engage with print, children learn how to interpret symbols (“visual information”) and build a literacy processing system. By linking their oral language system to the symbols that represent the language, prekindergarten teachers can help children build on their existing systems and add new ones by providing a variety of opportunities to interact with print.

The Developmentally Appropriate Prekindergarten Classroom

While acknowledging that prekindergarteners live in a far different world today, we also want to take care that the language and literacy experiences we provide at school are appropriate for the young children we are teaching. Many years ago, some assumed that prekindergarteners were not “ready” for literacy. This “readiness” view assumed that until children were physically and neurologically mature enough, exposure to reading and writing was time wasted and could even be harmful. We now know that exposure to rich literacy experiences throughout early childhood has a tremendous positive effect on young children, and delaying these kinds of experiences until children are of school age can severely limit ultimate achievement (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

Developmentally based early childhood programs place the learning of the child at the center. This view contrasts with a fixed curriculum, which provides a sequential list of language or literacy skills through which each child will pass. Forcing young children to sit through meaningless drill would indeed be harmful. Instead, children need to explore. In place of a rigid, developmentally inappropriate curriculum, we need to

provide a truly child-centered, literacy-rich prekindergarten experience. The foundation of our teaching is our understanding of the unique development of each child, as we bring our instruction to the cutting edge of that child's development. We provide opportunities for growth while carefully observing children's language, reading, and writing behaviors.

Finding Each Child's Learning Zone

The Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978, 1986) showed how teaching can lead development forward. He helped us understand that we can identify and intervene at a child's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) to help her develop new literacy competencies. The lower boundary, independent level, shows what a child can do alone. The ZPD has an upper boundary, assisted performance, which shows what a child can do in cooperation with a more knowledgeable other, the teacher. This is called the learning zone because it is where the teacher targets instruction and assessment (see Figure 1.1). Learning takes place as the child links what is known to new information and skills, and development moves forward. It happens every day—all day!

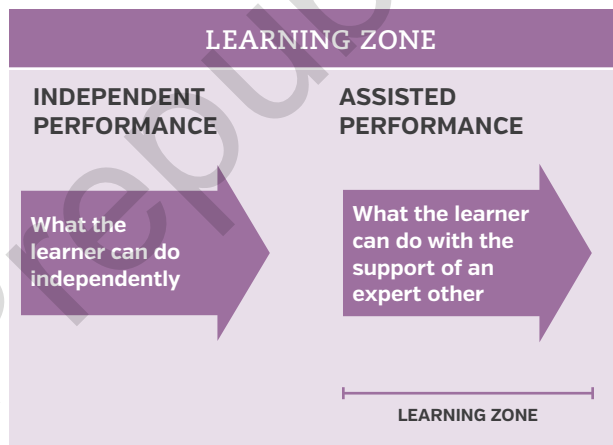


Figure 1.1 Learning zone

Prekindergarteners come to school with various backgrounds, personalities, and experiences—so the children in every class represent a variety of learning zones. Your challenge (and we hope great pleasure) is to observe each child's development and provide opportunities that lead learning forward and result in each child's unique pattern of growth. Parents naturally do this all the time without realizing it. A child learning to dress herself, for example, is not presented with a shirt and shorts and expected to struggle into them alone. Her mother might instead hand her the shirt with the sleeves positioned in such a way to make it easier for her to slide her arms in on her own. "That's right," she might say, "push those arms through!" As the child takes in the mother's instruction, she becomes more able to do the task alone. The support given is not so much that the mother has taken over the task but not so little that the child is frustrated. This balance is what we aim for in teaching young children.

A joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, adopted in May 1998, provides this rationale for providing instruction in prekindergarten classrooms:

The ability to read and write does not develop naturally, without careful planning and instruction. Children need regular and active interactions with print. Specific abilities required for reading and writing come from immediate experiences with oral and written language. Experiences in these early years begin to define the assumptions and expectations about becoming literate and give children the motivation to work toward learning to read and write. From these experiences children learn that reading and writing are valuable tools that will help them do many things in life. (3)

In the position statement, these two professional organizations recommend:

- Reading aloud to children and setting up a rich classroom library.
- Creating an environment that includes many signs and labels. Enhancing children’s exposure to and concepts about print through the use of big books.
- Helping children learn the alphabetic principle (the fundamental insight that there is a relationship between letters and sounds) by providing opportunities for them to explore letters and sounds in many ways.
- Helping children learn about the sounds in words (phonemic awareness) through language play, games, rhymes, and rhythmic activities.
- Giving children regular opportunities to express themselves on paper (drawing and writing) without demanding “correct” spelling and proper handwriting.

The *Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum* comprises many lists of basic understandings that we can expect young children to develop by the time they enter kindergarten if they have strong adult support. These understandings bridge curriculum areas. The categories include: Interactive Read-Aloud; Shared and Performance Reading; Writing About Reading; Writing; Oral and Visual Communication; Technological Communication; and Phonics, Spelling, and Word Study. The continuum is designed to guide planning and teaching. The Online Resources also include a wonderful list of poems, rhymes, and songs, and a list of read-aloud text sets to use throughout the year for three- and four-year-olds. Section 8 includes starting points for several engaging, age-appropriate inquiry projects, and thirty-five simple lessons to help get you started with shared reading, interactive writing, and other literacy activities. Some of these lessons can be used over and over with different materials.



The Essential Role of Play in Learning

As we’ve already said, the rich literacy experience that we advocate in prekindergarten classrooms does not mean teaching children discrete prereading skills by drilling them in meaningless words or having them fill in worksheets. Nor should standardized tests be the basis for making decisions about young children’s education. We do not recommend eliminating or even reducing play.

Children, especially very young children, learn through play. Play enhances language and literacy learning. Unfortunately, children in some classrooms now spend far more time being taught and tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations (Miller and Almon, 2009). Miller and Almon claim that the need for raising test scores, accelerated by Reading First, pushed play out of kindergarten. They argue for the many benefits of play in kindergarten and also warn against prekindergarten following the “no-play” trend.

Play has a critical role in supporting the child’s social, emotional, and intellectual development. It is the basic activity of early childhood and is

essential for development and learning. Language and literacy, as well as science, social studies, mathematics, and the arts, support and enrich the young child's play. When young children play, they are self-motivated and actively engaged. They often engage in pretend play, or play that fosters symbolic development through fantasy. Play is the fuel for their growth, so the prekindergarten program is rooted in play to "lead development forward" (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Through play, critical understandings are gained. Play is an absolutely necessary component of any excellent preschool classroom.

A prekindergarten curriculum that values play needs to achieve an important balance between teacher-initiated and teacher-guided (structured) play and child-initiated and child-directed (free) play. Both are essential. Choice and ample time to complete activities are

critical for young children. Teachers need to design play activities that support language and literacy learning and are balanced by free play that emerges from children's interests.

Some children, especially if they have not had many literacy experiences prior to entering prekindergarten, need extra support in early childhood programs. They need a solid introduction to books so that they understand why written language is important. They need to engage in conversation and storytelling to expand their oral language. Songs and rhymes increase their awareness of the sounds in words. Above all, they need the opportunity to use language. All children need these opportunities, and it is possible to provide them within a rich and joyful prekindergarten environment in which reading, writing, and talking are part of play and often become play.





CHAPTER NINE

Supporting English Language Learners in the Prekindergarten Classroom

“The most supportive early literacy environments for ELLs focus on developing vocabulary, building oral language, and sharing literacy experiences.”

—Nancy Cloud, Fred Genesee, and Elyse Hamayan

MANY YOUNG CHILDREN ENTER prekindergarten classrooms having learned a first language other than English. We use the word learned consciously—whatever language they speak at home has been learned. Every child has learned a sound system and a body of meaningful words in their first language. They have learned the “rules” by which words are put together in sentences that are meaningful to speakers of the language. They have learned expressions that make language interesting and colorful. While the structures and systems of languages

might vary tremendously, the process and even the sequence of learning language are much the same all over the world (Lindfors, 1999).

The Literacy Continuum, PreK, presents curriculum goals across seven areas:

- Interactive Read-Aloud and Literature Discussion
- Shared and Performance Reading
- Writing About Reading
- Writing

- Oral and Visual Communication
- Technological Communication
- Phonics, Spelling, and Word Study

With the exception of understanding some particular word (phonics) structures, these behaviors and understandings are not particular to English. Whatever language children speak, they can build these understandings while engaging with texts written in their own language. English language learners (ELLs) are simultaneously acquiring a new language and building understandings of English as a written language. They are learning new vocabulary words and connecting them to concepts that they already understand as well as making new discoveries. Even more important than vocabulary, they are learning a new “grammar,” the rules by which sentences are put together.

In every instructional setting reflected in *The Literacy Continuum*, you can support the expansion of ELLs’ knowledge of English.

Through hearing texts read aloud and discussing them, learners have the opportunity to try out new language vocabulary and syntax. Shared and performance reading provides an authentic reason to use the same language structures over and over so that children can internalize them. Writing and oral expression make it possible for students to use what they know about English, and through phonics and word study they are helped to look closely at the features of print and become aware of sounds.

Unless you are providing a bilingual program (which we highly recommend), the children you teach will be learning to speak and eventually to read and write English. But they already know *a process for learning language*, and they are also expanding their home language. Everything you do will support this learning, and young children are incredibly fast language learners. We describe twenty suggestions and then summarize the important principles for working effectively with young English language learners (Figure 9.1).

Suggestions for Working with English Language Learners in Prekindergarten

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide a visual demonstration. 2. Keep language clear and simple. 3. Invite children to act out what they mean. 4. Engage children in conversation, but allow silence until the child becomes comfortable. 5. Check understanding. 6. Invite children to repeat the language of stories. 7. Provide “wait and think” time. 8. Avoid correcting children’s attempts at language. 9. Use repeated readings of read-aloud books, shared reading, and poems to give children opportunities to articulate book language again and again. 10. Explain the vocabulary words in texts as necessary. 11. Teach and check for understanding of academic language. 12. Value and encourage drawing and talking about drawing. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Have children repeat the messages they are attempting to write. 14. Help children create repetitive written texts so that they can articulate the same English language structures again and again. 15. Use previously written texts as resources. 16. Help children with the pronunciation of words, and teach them to say words slowly and accept approximations. 17. Learn as much as you can about children’s home languages and cultures. 18. Provide “hands-on” activities using letters and pictures. 19. Be sure that English language learners are in a position to hear and see everything while you are teaching. 20. Create strong connections with children’s homes [language and culture]. |
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Figure 9.1 Suggestions for working with English language learners in prekindergarten



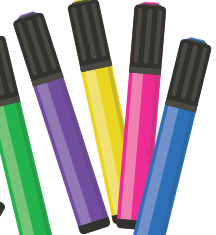
Section 5



Learning About Letters, Sounds, and Words

LEARNING ABOUT LETTERS, SOUNDS, and words is important to developing young readers and writers. This section provides many practical, easy-to-implement ways to support children in this learning. Through games, songs, and other playful experiences with letters throughout the day, children develop a strong foundation.

We describe many ways to use children's names, a powerful and highly engaging resource for literacy learning, as well as games that will help increase children's language and print awareness.





CHAPTER NINETEEN

Learning About Letters and Words

“To write messages the children must come to terms with the distinctive features of letters which make any one letter different from all the others.”

—Marie Clay

IN THE PAST, LETTER learning was sometimes thought to be the first step in learning to read. However, overwhelming evidence indicates that initial literacy learning is much more complex than learning the letters of the alphabet, and is hardly a step-by-step process. It is a highly demanding task of visual discrimination that takes place over a long period of time, the goal of which is fast letter recognition.

Letter knowledge is necessary, but it alone is not enough to learn to read and write. Much other learning takes place as young children become literate. Children will be

reading and writing stories long before they can identify all the letters of the alphabet.

Of course, as teachers, we still need to be sure that letter learning takes place. After all, letters represent the sounds in the words we say. In English, the relationship between sounds and letters is not perfect. One letter can represent one sound, as in the word *man*, where you can hear the three sounds represented by the three letters. But a sound can sometimes be represented by more than one letter, as in the word *through*. You hear only three sounds in *through*, but there are more than three letters. Also, a letter

can represent more than one sound—the letter *c* in the words *can* and *face*—and letters can also be “silent.” Readers and writers work out all these complexities over years as they learn how to look for patterns in written language.

In the past, “letter of the week” was a common practice in kindergarten, and even grade one (and in some prekindergarten classes) but teachers now realize the severe limitations of this practice. When you spend a great deal of time on “letter of the week,” many children work on letters they already know, while others see and study letters out of context. Sometimes children forget last week’s letter while working on this week’s because they are looking at one item at a time.

This practice does not reflect how children learn letters. First, “letter of the week” suggests that letters are learned first (and in sequence) and *then* children learn to read, when in reality all of this learning is taking place at the same time. The more connections children make between the multiple understandings required to read, the faster they learn. Rather than presenting letters sequentially, week by week, a much more effective practice is to help children *engage* with letters, to learn how to look at them, write them, play with them, and put them together to make words. They tend to learn first the letters in their names and in the names of family members or friends. Or they may learn the letter that is at the beginning of the name of a favorite restaurant or store.

Learning a letter is not a simple matter of saying the letter name and singing the alphabet song. Two kindergarten teachers, (Bell and Jarvis, 2002), wrote about “letting go of ‘letter of the week’” after they began to discover just how much literacy infused the life of their students before they walk through the classroom door. They found that they could support literacy development through a wide variety of authentic literacy experiences in their classrooms. For example, they could draw (and sometimes add print) to explorations in inquiry projects and

draw and write to tell about real experiences or to represent a favorite story. They could refer to simple recipes while cooking or make menus for a play restaurant. They could also make great use of all the print in the environment. Children see letters in meaningful places every day!

Learning to Look at Letters

Readers see letters as different from one another, but to young children, they may look pretty much alike—a lot of black sticks and curves. The child must learn to notice the *distinctive features* of a letter: what makes it different from every other letter. Look how little difference there is between these letters: *h, n, r, u*. Orientation also makes a difference—distinguishing between *d* and *b*, for example. If three- and four-year-olds make mistakes in using these letters, it does not necessarily mean that they are “seeing” the letters wrong, just that they do not yet see the importance of direction. It takes quite a bit of time to learn every detail of letter features.

Letter Learning

Systematic instruction in letter learning means planning a series of short lessons that show children how to look at letters, learn their names, and, over time, connect letters to the sounds in words. A minilesson for the youngest children is a very brief (around two minutes), focused introduction to a particular understanding, usually presented to the whole class. These lessons are conversational, include visual images and manipulatives, and are engaging to children (some examples are provided in Section 8: Name Puzzles, Name Poems, Name Chart, Tissue Paper Names, Making Letters Using Play Dough, Making Names Using Tactile Materials, Letter Exploration, Letter Sort, Alphabet Hunt, Alphabet Linking, Alphabet Nature Walk, and Alphabet Hide-and-Seek). You can also use

the contexts of shared reading and writing to demonstrate how to look at and use letter forms.

Supporting Children as They Learn About Letters

Quite a bit of letter learning takes place during shared reading and shared/interactive writing, as you help children notice and use letters that are embedded in meaningful text. That is important learning, but young children also enjoy playing with the letters themselves.

Tactile Experiences with Letters

Magnetic and foam letters are wonderful tools for young children. Students can sort and match letters (see Figure 19.1 and Online Resources). They can find the first letter of their names and eventually make their names or other words. They can point to the letters and name them.

Children also enjoy simple, clear letter cards. In the photograph in Figure 19.2, children are matching magnetic letters with letters on cards.

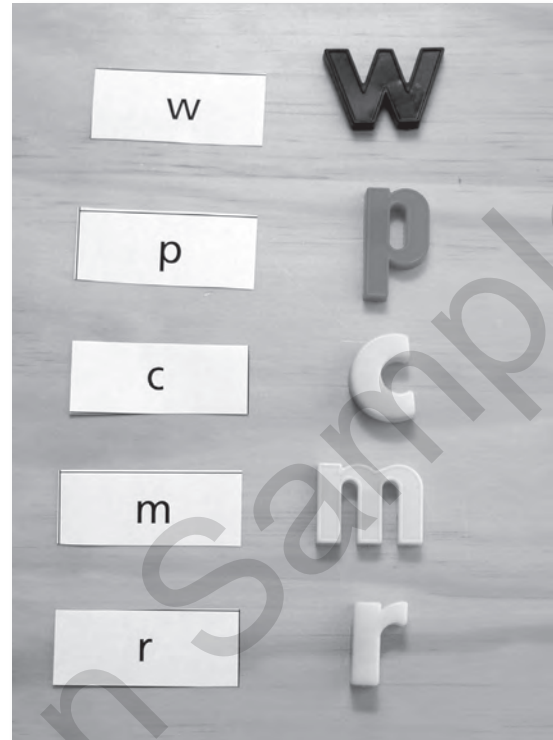


Figure 19.2 Matching letter cards with magnetic letters



Figure 19.1 Simple letter sort

Letter Charts

It will help to display some clear, simple alphabet charts in several areas of the classroom. Some of the more elaborate alphabet charts show letters shaped like animals or people or even letters wearing hats, presumably to make letter learning easier and more fun. There is no research to support this practice, however, and these devices can make letter learning harder because the shape of the letter is often obscured. Good sets of simple, plastic, multicolored magnetic letters and some simple alphabet charts with clear, black letters (see Figure 19.3 and Online Resources) work best, because the images are clear and uncluttered.

Inquiry Project

Community

8

Day 1

- **THE PEOPLE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD** Gather children in a group. Ask: *Who are some of the people you see in your neighborhood each day? What are some of the jobs that people in your neighborhood do?* Have children work in small groups or with partners. Have them role-play or use puppets to act out different neighborhood scenarios. (For example, going to the market to buy milk.)
- **BUILD A TOWN/CITY** Provide building materials such as Legos, blocks, empty shoeboxes, empty containers. Ask: *What does your neighborhood [community, town, city] look like? Are there tall buildings? houses? parks? playgrounds?* Encourage children to use the building materials to create towns or neighborhoods. You may also want to provide toy people/dolls for them to play with once their towns are built. Encourage them to interact with one another as they play. While they are playing, ask questions such as: *What is happening in this building? What is this person's job?* Alternatively, you may have children draw or paint a picture of their neighborhood, town, or city. This works best as a small-group activity.

