

Research-Based Curriculum

Language, Literacy, and Learning:

Early Childhood Themes



Complete Supplemental Program

Based on Respected Research & Literature

Research-Based Curriculum

Language, Literacy and Learning: Early Childhood Themes

Introduction

Early childhood education has been proven to have positive, long-lasting effects on children. Numerous longitudinal studies have shown that children who receive educational services prior to kindergarten enter elementary school more prepared than their peers who have not received early childhood education. A meta-analysis published in the *American Journal for Preventive Medicine* shows that children receiving early childhood education outperform other students in academic achievement test scores, school readiness test scores and IQ test scores. Moreover, they have fewer grade retentions and a lower rate of placement in special education (Anderson, Shinn, Fullilove, Scrimshaw, Fielding, Normand, & Carande-Kulis, 2003). These gains also lead to higher levels of post-secondary education and job attainment in adulthood (Barnett, 1995).

Early childhood education clearly plays an important role in the development of children. While most research on early childhood education has taken place in just the last 30 years, research on early childhood development began in the early part of the 20th Century. Studies by Piaget, Vygotsky and others have formed the foundation of our understanding of early childhood teaching and learning today. More recently, research on the development of language and literacy among young children has influenced the development of education programs and curricula for preschoolers. Indeed, the term *preschooler* has become a misnomer, as we have come to understand the importance of play and exploration in young children's learning. In the last decade, more emphasis has been placed on developing children's literacy skills.

This new focus came after the federal report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, was published. The authors indicated that preschool programs successfully mediated other areas of children's development such as nutrition, but did not help children develop the language and literacy skills necessary for school success (National Research Council, 1998). As a result of this report, curriculum materials for early childhood education are now designed to develop academic readiness by focusing on children's language acquisition and early reading development. ***Early Childhood Themes*** provide teachers with standards-based resources and lessons to develop children's language and literacy skills. Additionally, the materials develop students' understanding of content-area concepts in mathematics, science, and social studies. Activities are taught through music, rhyme, and rhythm, and include gross motor development as well.

Early Childhood Literacy

Language Acquisition and Development

The acquisition of language begins at birth with infants having sophisticated language recognition skills by just four months of age (Hespos, 2007). Biological researchers have found that children learn the intonation patterns of the native language spoken around them (Hespos, 2007). Children’s language continues to grow with maturity, but environment also plays an important role in their language development. Children who grow up in language-rich homes have vocabularies that are much larger than those who don’t (Hart & Risley, 2003). Hart and Risley found shocking results that were widely publicized suggesting that children in language-rich homes enter kindergarten with 20,000 word vocabularies compared to just 5,000 word vocabularies for those exposed to less language during the preschool years. These findings have led to renewed calls for the development of early childhood literacy.

Decades of research suggest that children start developing early literacy skills through their day-to-day experiences in a print-rich literate society (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, 2002; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1982). Children’s prior knowledge of print in the environment—signs, billboards, logos, and functional print that saturate their world—can be used by teachers to make a meaningful bridge between what children already know and what they encounter in the school curriculum (Christie et al., 2002; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003). Teachers can assist young children to become proficient readers and writers in many ways. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2001) suggests the integrated use of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the following ways:

- Provide social experiences for using language purposefully.
- Use reading and speaking to support oral language and vocabulary development.
- Build on children’s experiences.
- Provide opportunities to write.
- Play with language to develop phonemic awareness.
- Build knowledge of letters, sounds, and words.

Early Childhood Themes provides multiple opportunities in the interactive lessons for students to use speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the contexts listed above.

Language, Literacy and Learning: Early Childhood Themes was created to support early childhood educators in developing young children’s language. The program bolsters language development through stories, songs, poems, vocabulary activities, and even through wordless picture books. Each unit includes a song or rhyme book with accompanying audio available on the audio CD included. Songs and rhymes provide students opportunities to develop speaking fluency, learn pronunciation of new words, and to practice using vocabulary in context. The audio CD models fluency and pronunciation, while making it easier for educators to incorporate this important element

in their instruction. These elements will naturally engage and excite students. A lap-sized wordless photo book is also included in each unit that can be used with an entire class during a shared lesson with six regular-sized copies of the same book for children to use independently or in a small group. The use of actual photographs in these books is not only engaging, but it helps children learn new vocabulary. For example, the *Weather* wordless book includes a complete lesson plan for the teacher to read the wordless book with the children. The lesson plan includes steps for generating language and discussion about the pictures in the book, while teaching and modeling academic vocabulary.

Literacy

Weather and After

Materials

- Weather book
- chart paper
- markers

Procedure:

- 1 Gather children together on the rug or in their chairs.
 - Tell them that today you will be sharing a book that has no words inside to tell the story.
 - Explain that they will be the ones to tell the story.
- 2 Show the cover of the book and read the title.
 - "The title of this book is *Weather*. What do you think this book will be about?"
 - Allow children to make predictions about the contents of the book.
- 3 Open the book to the title page.
 - "This page is the title page. It tells the title and author of the book."
 - "The title of this book is *Weather*. The author's name is Lee Aucoin."
- 4 Open to pages 2 and 3 of the book.
 - Have children describe what they see on these pages.
 - Ask them to predict what will happen after it rains.
 - Ask questions, if necessary, to prompt children. For example, ask "What will the ground look like?" and "What will the sky look like?"
- 5 Turn the page and have children compare the picture by telling what happens after the rain has occurred.
- 6 Continue with the remaining pages in the book.
- 7 Create a two-column chart with the following titles: *Weather* and *After*.
 - Have children name the types of weather shown in the book. List the types of weather in the first column.
 - Have them describe what happens after each type of weather has occurred. List the effects in the second column.

You may wish to use the interactive page-turning book of *Weather*. See the Teacher Resource file [weatherbook.html](#).

Extension

Create a similar class book. The book can be related to weather or can be about an event and after the event, such as recess and after. Use a digital camera to take pictures for the book. Have children dictate sentences to match the pictures.

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Reading

In the past, reading was not thought to start until students entered the first grade. However, researchers now understand that important pre-reading skills are learned at an early age. While many parents may declare their child a reader at age two or three when they recite every word in a book, researchers now know that this memorization of books by young children is still an important pre-reading skill. Through repeatedly reading the same book, children learn patterns in language and begin to connect print with sounds (National Research Council, 1998). Children also learn the structure of stories through such repeated exposure (Morrow, 1992). *Early Childhood Themes* includes a concept book, a traditional rhyme or song book, and a wordless photo book in each unit. The lesson plans use these books repeatedly to provide students with exposure to each book multiple times.

A shift in our understanding of young children's literacy development occurred in the late 1980s. Current research on early childhood literacy development indicates that reading, speaking, and writing develop simultaneously (Teale & Sulzby, 1989). Teale and Sulzby identify several characteristics of emergent literacy. Emergent literacy develops through

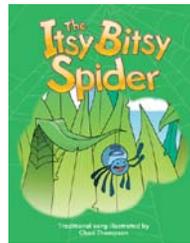
play and from real-world application. Children learn both reading and writing skills through active engagement, an especially important component of early childhood learning. Interaction between children and adults around print is also a crucial factor in the development of children’s literacy. Teale and Sulzby highlight the types of reading a quality early childhood instructional program should include:

Children's literature—everything from folktales and fables to contemporary pieces—should be the main reading fare. A special effort should be made to include expository books, too. Young children can learn much about how the world works from informational books, and as research has clearly shown, background knowledge and experience with processing expository text are critical to continued success in reading (Anderson et al., 1985 as cited in Teale & Sulzby, 1989, p.7).

The three types of books (concept, traditional song or rhyme, and wordless photo book) provide children with different genres of text related to the theme. Furthermore, the eight vocabulary concept cards included with each unit provide additional text with photos.



**concept book
(lap size)**



**traditional song
or rhyme book
(lap size)**



**wordless photo
book (lap size)**



**8 vocabulary
concept cards with
full-color images on
the front**

The report of the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) evaluated thousands of research studies to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations for effective reading instruction in America’s schools. They identified five essential elements that improve children’s reading achievement: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (NICHD, 2000). They argue that a balanced approach to teaching reading that includes all five elements is essential for improving the academic performance of America’s youth. Especially important for preschool children is the development of phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the understanding of sounds and sound patterns in language and includes the ability to manipulate sounds. The National Reading Panel authors (2000, p. 7) note, “[C]orrelational studies have identified [phonemic awareness] and letter knowledge as the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first 2 years of instruction.”

Simmons, Gunn, Smith, and Kame’enui (1994) stress the importance of teaching letters and sounds for reading success. They suggest the teaching of phonemic awareness through segmenting and blending sounds. While the awareness of sound units in phonemes, syllables, and words is a strong indicator of later reading success, above all,

Academic Readiness

The current focus of education funding is on academic readiness. This places greater emphasis on language acquisition and early reading development in preschool and the primary grades. Research supports the belief that reading success by third grade leads to later academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Young children's early reading and writing proficiencies are, therefore, areas of great interest both to policymakers and early-childhood professionals. The Early Reading First guidelines (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) in *No Child Left Behind* include a program goal emphasizing oral language, phonological awareness, print

The Report of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) has generated new research in early reading. Despite the reading research base drawn on by the National Reading Panel, questions about young children's overall literacy development persist. How do children first begin to use written language? What can classroom teachers do to help all children be successful in unlocking the alphabetic principle and the code system of written language? Early reading is an interwoven web of experiences, one part of which is children's early exposure to print in their world. Some of the research generated by the National Reading Panel report suggests that supplementing and enriching the curriculum with activities using familiar print provides an "auditory and visual anchor to remember letter symbol and sound" (Christie, et al., 2002). By including activities with environmental print (the print found in a child's natural environment), teachers can provide opportunities for children to connect their prior knowledge to literacy experiences in school. Such experiences with familiar print assist children with word recognition and provide them with a sense of ownership when they recognize product logos and product labels that they see in their communities every day. *Early Childhood Themes* guides the early childhood educator with a variety of lessons and activities for enriching an existing comprehensive, integrated curriculum for young children. These lessons and the accompanying materials have been designed to help develop oral language, phonological awareness, concepts of print, alphabetic knowledge, and early writing skills in preparation for starting formal schooling.

Additionally, research shows that providing a strong connection between children's literature and concept instruction improves students' comprehension and engagement in learning (Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000; Guthrie, Anderson, Alao, & Rinehart, 1999). Well-known early childhood researcher, Lesley Morrow (2001), furthers this argument by suggesting that thematic instruction is one way to integrate concept instruction with children's literature. Morrow cites legendary educational researcher, John Dewey (1966), saying "With themes, children learn about their world by engaging in genuine projects that explore topics that interest and challenge them. They learn skills and strategies as they need them in their exploration of knowledge" (Dewey cited in Morrow, 2001, pp.2–3). Thematic instruction develops an inherent understanding of the relationship between concepts and domains.

Early Childhood Themes meets all of these recommendations by including thematic instruction that integrates mathematics, science, and social studies instruction with engaging interaction and play. Additionally, all of the materials are theme-related, and additional resources for expanding the themed instruction are included. All of these materials are designed to foster academic learning and improve young children's readiness and eagerness for elementary school.

Support for English Language Learners

Children are born with the ability to learn any language, but they begin to learn the patterns of the language spoken in the home within the first months of life (Hespos, 2007). Within the first year of life, children develop a stronger ability to identify phonemes in their native language, and their ability to recognize intonational patterns in other languages declines (Hespos, 2007). Changes in the American population in the last decade have led to increasing numbers of children born in the United States whose parents speak a language other than English in the home (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA], 2007). This provides a challenge for early childhood educators as they attempt to teach these students. Since preschoolers are still developing their native language skills, they are not classified as English language learners when the home language is not English. Rather, they are dual language learners, because they are, in fact, learning both English and another language at the same time.

Dual language learners require additional supports to help them develop their literacy skills in both languages. Fortunately, providing a language-rich environment in school can help children develop literacy skills in both languages (NCELA, 2007). Dual language learners use the literacy skills learned in one language to develop their skills in the second language. Recommendations by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2007) include providing children with extensive vocabulary instruction in addition to providing stress-free learning in which students become engaged in learning through play. *Early Childhood Themes* provides this kind of instruction.

Classrooms that support the literacy development of English language learners include students engaged in meaningful activities as well as cognitively demanding content while the teacher scaffolds content to ensure that students will learn successfully (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2002). Scaffolding in lessons, modeling effective strategies for learners to use, and vocabulary development instruction are vital for English language learners. It is important to pre-teach the words that are critical to understanding the text so that students are provided with a variety of ways to learn, remember, and use the words (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). It is not enough to simply expose English language learners to language-rich classrooms; they need "intensive instruction of academic vocabulary, and related grammatical knowledge must be carefully orchestrated across the subject areas for language minority students to attain rigorous content standards" (Feldman & Kinsella, 2005).

Early Childhood Themes provides this kind of thorough vocabulary instruction to meet students' needs. The vocabulary flash cards include pictures of each term and full-color vocabulary concept cards provide pictures and text to help students understand key concepts. Even more importantly, take-home versions of the books for each unit provide an important link to the home environment and help parents enrich the at-home environment for students' literacy development.



It is clear that support for English language learners is crucial, as it gives them what they need to be successful in the classroom. Students need authentic opportunities throughout the school day to use and develop language through listening, speaking, reading and writing. The lessons in *Early Childhood Themes* provide these opportunities for students. Some additional effective research-based strategies that are integrated into the lesson plans in *Early Childhood Themes* are:

- Draw from learners' background knowledge. Prime their knowledge using realia, photographs, visuals, and hands-on experiences.
- Provide an overview of the material, and allow students time to preview it.
- Lower the affective filter by providing a stress-free classroom environment, where children feel safe taking risks and trying to use more advanced vocabulary or sentence structures.
- Frequently check students' understanding of the material being presented.
- Provide language stems to scaffold student's oral and/or written responses. For example, when making predictions about a new piece of text, write on the board or chart paper, "I predict that _____" in order to give students the language model needed.
- Provide multiple opportunities for interaction and discussion.
- According to Cummins (1981), children best learn the English language when they are actively involved in the process of communicating with one another.
- Model all desired behavior, including answering questions with complete sentences, thinking aloud when reading or writing, maintaining eye contact with a speaker, using reference materials, asking for clarification, etc.

Assessment

Assessment is important in any early childhood program. Often, reading difficulties in second language learners can be missed without proper assessment (NCELA, 2007). It is especially challenging to develop reliable assessments of early literacy skills. Researchers today suggest that early childhood educators supplement formal testing with observational assessments and logs of children’s behavior and work (Morrow, 2001). The results of the assessments can help teachers determine whether reteaching needs to occur for all or some students or time to move to the next concept/lesson. Several types of informal assessments are suggested for use in **Early Childhood Themes**. These include portfolios, observational checklists and rating scales, anecdotal notes, and frequency records. Templates for observational assessments are included in the Teacher’s Guide and on the CD-ROM for teachers to easily incorporate into their curriculum. The Observational Assessment Form on page 19 of the Teacher's Guide includes in a list of the objectives and standards from the lessons, so teacher can observe and assess measurable outcomes based on the skills and concepts taught.

Best Practices: Assessment (cont.)

Observational Assessment Form
Circle which type of observational assessment this will be:

Checklist —Check the box if the child can perform the task				
Rating Scale —Indicate a number from 1 to 5				
1	2	3	4	5
cannot demonstrate the skill	demonstrates few elements of the skill	demonstrates some elements of the skill	demonstrates most elements of the skill	demonstrates mastery of the skill

Frequency Scale—Indicate the child’s frequency in performing the skill: always, sometimes, never

Child’s Name _____ Today’s Date _____
Child’s Age _____

	Checklist	Rating	Frequency
	✓=yes	1-5	always, sometimes, never
Arts			
Moves his or her body in a variety of controlled ways			
Sings simple, familiar songs			
Engages in both fantasy dramatic play and dramatic play that is based on real experiences			
Uses a variety of basic art materials to create works of art and express ideas and feelings			
Language Arts			
Uses drawings to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas			
Uses forms of emergent writing to represent ideas			
Uses knowledge of letters to write or copy familiar words, such as his or her own name			
Uses emergent reading skills to “read” a story			
Knows that books have titles, authors, and often illustrators			
Knows that words are made up of sounds			
Listens to a variety of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, rhymes, and songs			

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Introduction

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Conclusion

Early childhood education is crucial to children’s development and future success. As our understanding of the components of effective early childhood education has evolved and grown in recent years, we are now able to provide more effective instruction for young children. **Early Childhood Themes** was created using a strong research base to provide teachers with the instructional curriculum they need to successfully develop emergent literacy skills in all children. The materials are engaging and motivate both teachers and students in the classroom. Most importantly, **Early Childhood Themes** will help develop a new generation of America’s youth to be prepared for K–12 learning and beyond.

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