Early Literacy Instruction

Learning to read is the critical task of early schooling and the foundational skill for all curricular learning. Teaching children to read has long been the subject of a “great debate” (Chall, 1967) centered on the relative efficacy of a code-based versus a whole language approach. The code-based, or phonics approach views ‘cracking the code’ of the alphabetic system as the essential task of early literacy learning, and calls for explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, decoding, and word recognition (Adams & Bruck, 1995; Moats, 1998). By contrast, the whole language approach views reading as a developmental, meaning-making activity, and focuses on constructive interaction with varied reading materials, including literature-based texts (Goodman, 1965; Weaver, 1998).

Recent research lends support to ‘balanced literacy instruction’ that incorporates features of both approaches (Xue and Meisels, 2004). These studies also indicate that phonemic awareness is best developed in conjunction with letters, and phonics is best taught in the context of meaningful reading and writing activities. It appears then, that balanced literacy instruction promotes children’s literacy development as well as their motivation to learn.

The Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy, the New Brunswick Department of Education and many school districts are collaborating on a large-scale study to ensure that struggling young readers receive the support they need to achieve reading skills commensurate with their verbal ability. The project entails a comprehensive monitoring and assessment system that tracks each student’s reading growth trajectory with interventions implemented in kindergarten for children experiencing difficulties. The research not only aims to help young children learn to read, but further stands to inform our understanding of literacy development and the variables that exert the most influence as children evolve from pre-emergent to fluent readers.


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