

In Saskatchewan, formal reading instruction begins in Grade 1. Research shows that the development of play skills forms the foundation of cognitive functioning that transfers to the process of learning to read (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006; Bodrova & Leong, 2001). In Kindergarten, direct reading instruction is not appropriate and puts excessive pressure on young children that can result in disengagement, inattentiveness and frustration with literacy learning (Alliance for Childhood, 2011). The motivation or disposition to learn to read is one of the most critical factors affecting the achievement of reading competency. This disposition is a goal of Kindergarten.

In Kindergarten, children are exposed to a variety of experiences rich in language and literacy. The Kindergarten year is the emerging-experimental phase where children express their identity and make sense of their world through emerging reading and writing-like behaviours. Through careful observation and other means of informal assessment, educators must consider what their children need in the environment that will allow them to achieve the outcomes of inquiry, play-based learning (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010).

“Play can become an important context for the discovery and exploration of reading and writing. It can provide a meaningful rich context for literacy engagement. Indeed, for young children it may be the place to play with print for a purpose”
(Neuman & Roskos, 1990).

Foundations for Literacy Learning

Children are born literate and capable.

The foundations for literacy are built upon the first interaction that a baby has after birth – the gaze and voice of the primary caregiver. In the infant stage, babies start communicating by cooing, smiling and crying. During the toddler stage, first words are spoken and decision-making skills are being explored and developed. The preschool years are a time when oral communication is strengthened through relationships, conversations and play. By the time a child is Kindergarten age, emerging literacy skills are rapidly acquired as the child develops a deeper understanding and enjoyment of language and print.

Children need to engage in language-rich, print-rich environments.

Large blocks of uninterrupted time for inquiry, play-based learning are necessary for children to develop their language and literacy skills. Dramatic play, creative arts and project-based learning contribute to emerging reading and writing skills that progress at a pace appropriate to the child’s developing skills and previous experiences. Environments reflect children’s identity, language and culture. Open-ended materials, a variety of text types interspersed throughout the classroom and experiences out of the classroom are essential to providing quality, enriching environments that always keep the child and the child’s perspective at the centre.

Children need oral language development opportunities and experiences in Kindergarten.

Kindergarten programs support children’s language development, build vocabulary and increase conceptual knowledge resulting in higher level language skills that lead to competencies in reading and comprehension. Educators are literacy models providing rich demonstrations, interactions and shared literacy experiences. Relationships with peers and adults are essential in supporting genuine conversations enabling children to express their ideas, ask questions and offer opinions about their interests and experiences. It is essential for children to have competency in their first language. When children are learning English as an additional language, it is important for families to maintain their first language to provide fluent language models at home for children. Children’s early language experiences provide a strong foundation for literacy development.

Children need high-quality shared literacy experiences and materials.

The ability to connect with text is an essential feature of becoming a reader for life. Opportunities to interact with varied text types facilitate children's ability to make sense of their world and make personal connections. Educators facilitate and guide literacy experiences through conversations, play, project work and quality literacy materials embedded in learning centres.

Children need literacy instruction that builds on what they already know.

Educators understand that children enter Kindergarten with a diverse set of experiences with text types and languages. Children are active learners, drawing on direct social and physical experiences, as well as culturally transmitted knowledge, to construct their own understandings of the world around them (IRA/NAEYC, 2009). Educators know the stages of children's reading and writing development; this knowledge enables educators to plan for meaningful and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Literacy instruction scaffolds children's learning by integrating literacy practices and skills with daily encounters. Rote memorization and isolated lessons have been proven to be ineffective ways by which young children learn (NAEYC, 2009; Schickendanz and Collins, 2013).

Children benefit when their families are engaged and explore literacy experiences at home, in school and around the community.

Educators encourage families to read, talk and sing daily with their children and model the behaviours of reading and writing. Families ensure that their children have access to various texts from a variety of sources. When families engage in literacy experiences at school, they are modelling the importance of literacy and helping strengthen children's views of and skills for reading and writing. When families access literacy opportunities in the community, such as public libraries, early learning centres and family literacy events, they are enriching and expanding children's experiences with literacy which directly influence life-long learning.

Recommendations for Effective Emerging Literacy Practices

1. Classroom environments are language-rich and print-rich. Engaging conversations among children and with adults scaffold children's thinking and extend inquiry to provide enriching language opportunities. An expansive vocabulary and an understanding of how language is used are important for success in learning to read. Classroom environments feature a variety of high-quality text types that are thoughtfully presented to and accessible by children. Text types are meaningful and connect children to their culture, daily life, interests and inquiries. Children have many opportunities to explore text types through conversations and literacy-based play experiences. Examples of text types are as follows:

- Fiction/non-fiction books and oral stories;
- Real world literacy materials (e.g., grocery fliers, phone books, maps, calendars, blueprints);
- Writing materials (e.g., paper, clip boards, pencils, pens, crayons, markers); and,
- Digital materials (e.g., photographs, musical selections, video and web-based formats).

“Children take a playful approach to written language, pretending to write and read, and are able to recognize some words but without great consistency...the importance is that the child has a growing awareness of print literacy and feels comfortable with it” (Miller and Almon, 2009).

2. Approaches that promote language and literacy in holistic ways through inquiry and play. Educators value and allow large blocks of time for play. They articulate the importance of child-initiated play with the active presence of an adult to facilitate reading and writing skills. There is intentionality for playful learning of reading and writing skills, as well as focus on using language, learning about language, and learning through language (Government of Saskatchewan, 2010).

- Shared literacy experiences model meaning making from texts, make connections with prior knowledge and provide enjoyment of reading;
- Thought-provoking, extended conversations with peers and adults support the building of extensive vocabulary and complex language structures contributing to comprehension; and,
- Content-rich, knowledge-building experiences accessed through inquiry support children’s metacognition.

3. Educators and administrators understand language and literacy development of children. Understanding typical language and literacy development is essential in providing effective approaches that are age-appropriate and based on the strengths, interests and needs of children (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2002).

Continuum of Emerging Literacy Development



	Infant	Toddler	Preschool/Prekindergarten/Kindergarten	Grades 1, 2 and 3
Speaking	coos; babbles; cries	says first words; says 2-word phrases	speaks in phrases/sentences; takes turns; questions	storytells; inquires; predicts; infers; retells; reflects
Listening	listens to rhymes, songs, music, conversations, stories	understands words, phrases, conversations, stories	listens to various texts: rhymes, poems, songs, stories, , storytelling, digital media, conversations	listens to a variety of texts varied in length and purposes
Viewing	views board books, environment	identifies objects in texts & environment	identifies names, letters, environmental print	views books as sources of information & pleasure
Reading	observes illustrations	requests re-reading and re-telling of stories	makes up stories; explores books on own; identifies words that are meaningful	independently reads(home & school); understands different text types; reads visuals
Representing	imitates; signs; gestures	scribbles; copies	draws; creates; builds; paints; sculpts; dramatizes; sings; chants; records	re-enacts, displays, creates stories both orally and written
Writing	explores writing mediums and tools		engages in role-play writing; creates lists, signs, cards; copies letters, words or writing; prints name	attaches meaning to text; demonstrates interest in story structure

4. Educators are supported to implement high-quality practices and principles of emerging literacy learning and childhood development. Educational leaders at all levels understand the principles of early learning and recognize children as competent learners of language and literacy who bring valuable experiences to their learning (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009). Leaders offer professional learning opportunities and supports that align with the distinguishing features of emerging literacy learning. Leaders support and assist educators in articulating to families how language and literacy development is scaffolded through inquiry, play-based learning.

5. Families have opportunities to engage in their children’s language and literacy

development. Families are empowered when educators share information about language and literacy development and are supported to confidently embrace language interactions and literacy experiences with their Kindergarten children. Families are encouraged to speak their first language at home and are respected as fluent language models for their children. Educators develop a learning partnership recognizing the family as the first teacher and involve families in literacy experiences that are meaningful and respectful.

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