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Chapter 1

Early Literacy Targets

As former preschool educators, we are in awe of the work that early childhood educators do every single day with our youngest students. We remember days when there was so much pressure to get a number of observations done in time it seemed like we just could not keep up. We remember morning meetings when every child in the room was sick or tired or both. We remember excitement-filled days when a class visitor was coming to teach us about a job in the community and we just could not seem to settle down enough to listen. We also remember the joy that came when a child who really struggled with the letters of the alphabet proudly identified his name in a book. We as teachers play a critical role in children's motivation, skill development, and ultimate success in the process of becoming a reader. The role comes with quite a lot of stress!

The pressure we put on ourselves stems from the knowledge that all children who begin the primary grades with a solid beginning in oral language and vocabulary, phonological awareness, alphabet awareness, concepts of print, comprehension, and writing are able to apply these skills with improved academic outcomes (Adams 1990). The stakes are even higher for children living in poverty, who experience multiple disadvantages when it comes to preparation for and attainment of knowledge and education (Dickinson, McCabe, and Essex 2006; Hart and Risley 1995; Neuman 2006). Further, low-income children who do not attend preschool or attend low-quality preschools are more likely to experience higher high school dropout rates, decreased job opportunities, a lower quality of life, and a higher probability of becoming involved in crime (Schweinhart and Weikart

1997; Schweinhart et al. 2005). Thus, it is not an exaggeration to state that early childhood education has consequences throughout one's lifetime.

The good news is that although teachers are under an incredible amount of pressure, many resources exist to help them with their important work, including this book. Drawing from our personal experiences and conversations with colleagues, we address each of the components necessary to lay a solid foundation for all students' literacy development. We hope that you are able to make connections between our classrooms and yours in order to find practical tips for literacy instruction.

In this book, we think about four types of instruction that can help you educate successfully in your classroom, whether you are a preservice teacher in a teacher education program or an inservice teacher reflecting on your practice and pursuing a professional development plan. Four types of instruction contribute to our thinking about teaching: (1) standards-based instruction, (2) evidence-based instruction, (3) assessment-based instruction, and (4) student-based instruction.

In today's context of the Common Core standards movement we cannot escape, nor should we, the influence of standards on our teaching practice. We feel grounded when we align our instruction to standards, confident in the knowledge that we are teaching something meaningful. Evidence-based instruction refers to teaching methods that have a track record of research to indicate effectiveness. When there are so many instructional activities available online, it is important to be a critical consumer, using scientifically based reading research as a litmus test for use in our classrooms.

We also believe in using informal assessment as a tool for guiding, planning, monitoring, and reflecting on student learning. In our own work, we use assessments to tell us what students know, how much they have learned, what they still need to learn, and how we can best help them reach their learning goals. Finally, student-based instruction reminds us to engage students in learning by considering their interests and motivations. When planning high-quality literacy instruction for our students, we juggle our knowledge of standards-based, evidence-based, assessment-based, and student-based teaching to inform our work. Let's show you what we mean about how each type of instruction can serve as a resource to you as you build children's literacy foundations.

Standards-Based Instruction

In this era of high-stakes testing and accountability, teachers must base their instruction on standards. This seems like a straightforward statement; however, it becomes infinitely more complex when considering the number of standards that exist in education today.

Historically, teachers have had to most closely address the individual state standards adopted by the department of education in the state in which they teach. States have the

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prerogative to adopt their own standards and develop assessments around them in order to measure student outcomes. We say historically because recently the Common Core standards movement is veering away from a model in which individual states set their own standards and toward a common set of standards that states can opt to adopt. At the time of this publication, the Common Core standards are still optional, with many states choosing to adopt them as a replacement for their state standards. The Common Core standards are in many cases more rigorous and demanding than previous state standards, causing heartache and frustration as teachers and schools make changes in instructional practices to meet the new demands.

Within each content area or discipline, professional organizations also publish content standards for educators (See Figure 1.1). While you as a teacher may not be required by your school or district to address standards of professional organizations in your teaching, we believe that they offer a wealth of knowledge. Since the standards are developed by the leading researchers and educators in a specific field, they often represent the most well-researched and reasoned standards in the content area. For literacy education specifically, we look to the National Council of Teachers of English for specialized content standards to inform our work.

Professional Standards	Professional Organization
Principles and Standards for School Mathematics	National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)
Next Generation Science Standards	National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)
NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts	National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
National Standards for Social Studies Teachers	National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)
National Standards for Physical Education	National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE)
Developmentally Appropriate Practice	National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Figure 1.1 Professional Educator Standards

When we use standards-based instruction, the standards tell us *what* to teach. This is comforting because we do not have to make anything up. At the same time, it can be overwhelming to look at the standards to see all that we are responsible for teaching in the scope of a grade level or one school year.

Evidence-Based Instruction

If the standards tell us *what* to teach, then the evidence base tells us *how* to teach. As educators today, we are lucky to have billions of teaching ideas at our fingertips on the Internet. By simply googling a concept you need to teach, you can instantaneously find

hundreds of ideas that can be adapted to meet your needs. Our preservice teachers are simply enamored with Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers, finding cute and creative ideas to engage students in learning. However, this tremendous resource can also be a pitfall. Just because an instructional idea exists does not mean that it is good. We constantly have to remind our students that while the lesson activity they found may be cute, it may not be instructionally sound. Nothing can replace evidence-based practices for developing students' understanding.

Evidence-based instruction is that which has proven itself effective in teaching children based on the outcomes of experimental research. We were introduced to this concept as graduate students in education. Our mentors, experts in their fields of education, led us to read and then conduct our own research in evaluating the effectiveness of different instructional methods. A well-designed experimental study can inform practicing educators, helping us to make decisions about which methods are most effective in accomplishing our work in the precious amount of time we have children in our classrooms. In our minds it is clear—why would we ever use untested methods when teaching our students? We are unwilling to take the chance of using a teaching method that may not work.

Thus, the question for us quickly became: where do we find evidence-based practices? Figure 1.2 summarizes several useful resources for locating best practices in literacy instruction for primary grades. Of course, the main reason for writing this book was also to serve as one of these resources. It was our aim to identify and describe for you the evidence-based practices we ourselves have had success using in the classroom. We look to this book as a summary of many evidence-based practices that are effective in developing students' early literacy.

Assessment-Based Instruction

While the standards base and evidence base exist independently of our students, the assessment base is intimately connected to them. Assessment is the root system of effective instruction. Teachers who use assessments to determine instructional needs, create instructional groupings, and reflect on what is and is not working to revise instruction know how useful assessment-based instruction can prove. Indeed, in today's classroom, it is hard to imagine a teacher who is not in some way using data from assessments to plan his or her instruction.

In literacy education, we use several types of assessments for instructional decision making (Walpole and McKenna 2007). First, screening assessments can be useful at the beginning of the year to determine if there are any general reasons to be concerned about an individual student's literacy development. If the screening assessment results in no

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whether children are making progress toward individual literacy goals and then to create new goals once initial goals have been met. This process of assessing and reassessing to plan instruction is the heart of differentiated instruction (Walpole and McKenna 2009).

Finally, teachers also use outcome assessments to determine whether the literacy program meets students' needs. Typically, these measures are useful in their ability to provide a big-picture view of the program's effectiveness. Results of outcome assessments may lead you to question the core reading program your grade-level team uses or the structure of your literacy block.

Because a variety of assessments tell us different things about students and their literacy learning, assessment-based instruction can tell us both the *what* and the *how* of teaching (see Figure 1.3). Data can tell us the specific literacy skills that students still need to develop, making up the *what* of our instruction. Data can also indicate whether our instruction is effective before we have wasted too much time using something that is ineffective for a particular child or group of children. Thus, we see assessment-based instruction as an invaluable piece of our thinking about teaching.

Assessment Types	Description
Screening	Determines if there are any general concerns in students' literacy development
Diagnostic	Determines deficits in students' literacy development
Progress Monitoring	Determines if students are learning what is being taught during instruction
Outcome	Determines if the literacy program is effective for meeting students' needs

Figure 1.3 Four Assessment Types Informing Literacy Instruction
Adapted from Walpole and McKenna (2007)

Student-Based Instruction

The last piece of the puzzle is specific knowledge about our students. We tell our preservice teachers that this is the human element that makes it so that teachers cannot be replaced with robots in the future! In order to be an effective teacher, you need to engage students in the learning process. Engagement and motivation require capturing the hearts of our students. Teachers do this with their enthusiasm. They read aloud from their favorite books. They are excited about learning new words. Teachers also do this with their knowledge

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of individual student interests. We know our students. We know who likes reading fiction and who prefers reading informational texts. We know the student who likes sports stories and the student who is captivated by poetry. We know which authors all students will fall in love with. We also know which instructional methods will work with students this year versus last year.

As much as we rely on standards, research, and data to inform our practice, we also believe in teachers' professional expertise and knowledge of their students. This personal understanding makes teaching a profoundly human process. Without the human element in teaching, you cannot capture your students' attention and engage them in the process of learning.

Early Literacy Components

We have just outlined the four principles of instruction that we adhere to in our practice. You will see us discuss these principles as we progress through the book. We have organized the remaining chapters around the major skills that children must develop in order to become successful readers and writers (See Figure 1.4). The structure of each chapter includes discussion of the standards base, evidence base, assessment base, and student base that inform our thinking of the specific literacy skill under consideration.

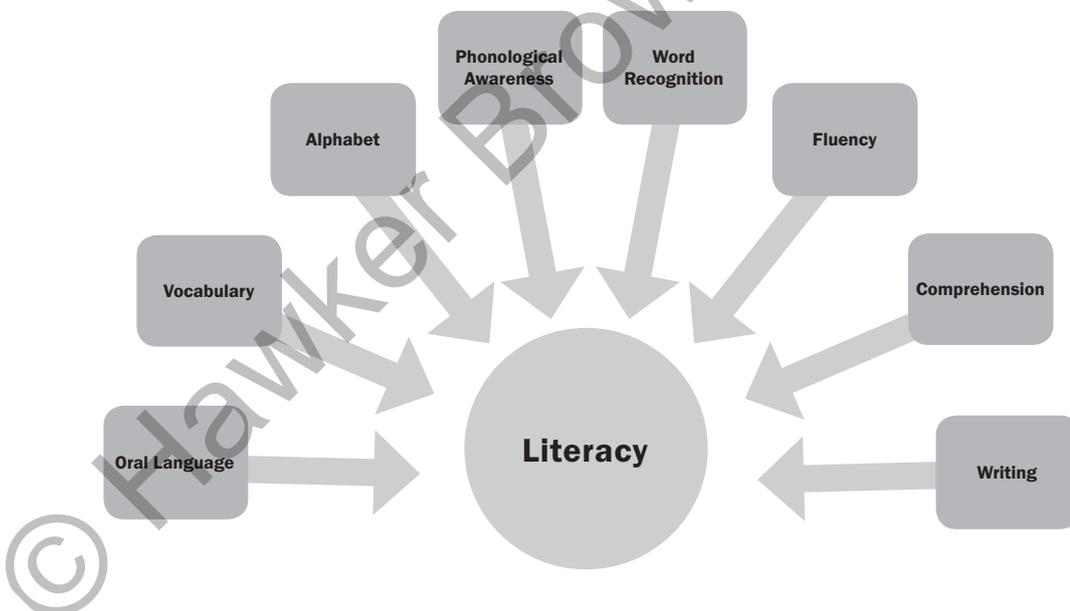


Figure 1.4 The Components of Early Literacy

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Chapter 2 describes the need for children to develop a strong foundation in oral language, a skill that helps with later word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, and writing. Within the chapter we discuss components of oral language, teaching methods for developing it, and ways to assess students' progress learning it.

Chapter 3 considers vocabulary, or students' understanding of the meaning of words. In this chapter we discuss types of word knowledge, how to select words for instruction, methods for instruction, and informal assessments of vocabulary knowledge.

Chapter 4 explains the importance of alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. Children must have a well-developed understanding of the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they make in order to learn to read. In addition, students who have the ability to manipulate the sounds in oral language can apply this skill to decoding words encountered in print. In this chapter we discuss several instructional methods for building children's understanding of the alphabet and the sounds in language.

Chapter 5 describes word recognition, specifically how students begin reading by sounding out words phoneme by phoneme and slowly transition to fluent reading. Within this chapter we discuss the phonics knowledge students need to apply while reading and how teachers can teach this knowledge in engaging and effective ways.

Chapter 6 tackles reading comprehension strategies. The reason we teach oral language, vocabulary, alphabet, phonological awareness, word recognition, and fluency is to build successful text comprehension. Thus, in this chapter we focus on how to help readers understand what they are reading.

Literacy also includes learning to write. Chapter 7 summarizes what we know about how children learn to write and how we as teachers can support students' work as developing writers. Reading and writing instruction work well when the connections between the two processes are apparent.

Chapter 8 takes a step back from the individual components of literacy to examine global classroom routines and schedules for fitting all your instruction within a reasonable time frame. We are aware of the incredible pressures teachers are under to make it all fit! Therefore, in this chapter we illustrate the logical connections that can exist within the components. We hope to leave you feeling reenergized in your understanding and passion for teaching literacy in the primary grades!

The Structure of This Book

Within each content chapter we follow a consistent format to help us organize our information on the literacy skill under consideration. First, we think it is important to begin with a brief description of what the literacy skill is and why it is important in the process of creating a reader and writer. Next, we present multiple research-based strategies for

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targeting the literacy skill in the preschool or primary grade classroom. When we selected instructional methods for inclusion in this book we made every attempt to include instructional activities for a variety of classroom contexts, including whole-group and small-group settings, play-based centers, and independent practice opportunities. While the list of instructional methods is not meant to be exhaustive of all the possibilities, our goal was to present the strategies with the most evidence from research to recommend to teachers. In order to facilitate your use of many of the instructional resources, we have re-created the figures in larger format in the appendix.

In order to bring one of the instructional activities to life for the reader, we have included within each chapter a classroom vignette. Our vignettes are based on our own classroom experiences developing literacy skills with preschool and primary grade students. The created dialogue in the vignettes is to serve as a guide for what the instructional method might look and sound like when used in a real classroom setting.

It would be impossible to teach the skills we have outlined in this book without a collection of high-quality children's fiction and informational texts. Each of our chapters includes a table of suggestions for the books we use to target each skill. For example, we love using the Elephant and Piggie series by Mo Willems to develop students' oral reading fluency. At the same time, we would never attempt to model comprehension strategies without a copy of *Owen* (1993) by Kevin Henkes. We could not possibly list all the great children's books we know and love. However, we did try to include a collection of books that represents a variety in old and new and fiction and informational texts.

In today's modern classroom, technology integration is also an important aspect of instructional decision making. Therefore, within our discussion of each literacy skill we have included suggestions for meaningful use of technology to develop students' knowledge and skills. We have included a variety of web-based technologies, including games and educational apps for use on computers or tablets. We see many of these technologies being useful as additional forms of practice developing a literacy skill either in the classroom or at home.

We know literacy development takes time and repetition. Therefore, our instruction cannot simply be confined to the classroom alone. Instead, we need to engage parents and caregivers in the work of fostering their child's literacy in the home. Each chapter includes ideas for meaningful homework activities and routines that are engaging and productive.

Lastly, each chapter also includes discussion of informal and formal assessment techniques for each literacy skill. Part of planning deliberate and focused instruction is knowing the needs of our students. This knowledge can only come from assessment data. However, assessment need not always be formal and standardized. Indeed, some of the best assessments for instructional planning are informal and curriculum-based. We hope