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Effective Elements of Early Literacy

Kenny's Story

Using the ELLCO Toolkit gives educators and researchers a concrete way to examine the literacy-related features of classrooms. One of the goals of the ELLCO Toolkit and its user's guide is to help early childhood educators improve the quality of the literacy and language learning taking place in their classrooms by providing a better understanding of what promotes this learning. Whether used before or after the ELLCO Toolkit is administered, Kenny's Story can help teachers and observers grasp the context for and importance of observing and rating literacy-related practices and materials in a classroom. Kenny's Story can function as a starting point from which teachers brainstorm how to improve practices and foster children's early experiences with language and print, either after the ELLCO Toolkit has been completed or while teachers engage in self-reflection about classroom practices.

Kenny's Story is a fictional account of a young African American boy who attends kindergarten in a large, urban public school. The account describes the nature and content of some of his early literacy experiences, beginning with a "picture" of Kenny and his friends engaging in typical emergent literacy behaviors during free play in their classroom. This opening vignette is followed by a review of research that articulates the importance of early literacy

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experiences and ways that early literacy can be facilitated in classrooms and schools. This synthesis includes sections on the following:

- The importance of early literacy experiences

- Approaches to fostering early literacy

- Critical features of early literacy learning

- The transition from emergent to conventional literacy

- The importance of individualizing early literacy experiences (including approaches to assessment and the role of special services)

- Early literacy learning beyond the classroom: home–school connections and community-based programs

This synthesis is designed to provide classroom teachers, specialists, and administrators with a brief but comprehensive portrait of essential elements of early literacy learning, interspersed with vignettes about Kenny as a means of illustration. We begin in the classroom and extend to the worlds of school, home, and community. In a final section, we present a summary with suggestions for practice and policy for teachers and administrators.

One day in the middle of their kindergarten year, Kenny, Jordan, and Luis were playing with large hollow blocks and a variety of plastic reptiles (snakes, lizards, dinosaurs, and so forth) in a corner of their classroom. As their teacher, Ms. Ford, walked by, Kenny told her that they were building a "tricky maze" for his snake. Ms. Ford noticed that the boys had propped open a book of mazes and were actively discussing how to make the blocks look like the maze they had chosen. As they worked, they returned again and again to the book, often tracing the pattern of the maze with their fingers.

When Ms. Ford announced that it was clean-up time, there was a loud protest from the block corner. "We're not done yet!" the boys yelled. "Yeah, the snake might escape," said Kenny. While the other children began to clean up, Ms. Ford helped the block builders brainstorm some ways to preserve their project. The boys decided to make a sign for the block construction and, at Daily News time, to tell the other children what they were working on. Kenny ran to the writing center and returned with a clipboard, paper, marker, and tape. While Ms. Ford waited, Luis and Jordan sounded out and wrote down their message:

"S N A K M A Z. D N T R E K" (Snake maze. Don't wreck)

Kenny watched and then proudly taped the sign to the blocks.

Later, at Daily News time, the three boys stood in front of the class and explained the snake maze project. Kenny held the maze book

> open to the page with the "tricky maze" and traced it with his finger, showing and telling how the shape of the maze made him think of his snake. They were making the maze with blocks, he said, so that they could put the snake in it to see if it could figure a way out. Luis and Jordan held up their sign and read it to the group, then returned it to the structure.

This vignette demonstrates emergent literacy in action in a typical kindergarten classroom. As these boys played and interacted with each other and with their teacher, they engaged in a wide range of behaviors, many of which reflect their growing understanding of the functions and nature of reading and writing. They understood that signs could convey important messages, that spoken words can be written down and read, and that words are made up of sounds that correspond to written symbols. *Emergent literacy* is the phase of literacy development during which young children come to understand the many features and functions of the spoken and printed word. During this period they do not read and write in conventional ways, but through their attempts at reading and writing and their language, they reveal their emerging understandings of literacy.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES

Research on children's emergent literacy has identified several fundamental features of early literacy acquisition:

- The process of "becoming" literate begins very early in life, long before formal instruction typically occurs.

- Becoming literate takes place as children use oral language, reading, and writing in their play and to communicate with family, teachers, and peers.

- Attitudes and knowledge that develop during the emergent phase help children benefit from subsequent literacy instruction and support their long-term development.

Most children enter school with a wide range of emergent literacy experiences. Children who enter school with many diverse experiences with print, storybook reading, and complex oral language learn to read and write more readily than children with fewer, less diverse experiences. Numerous research studies have demonstrated that differences in the quantity and quality of children's early interactions with specific print-related and oral language experiences predict early school success (Copeland & Edwards, 1990; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995; Hart & Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983; Smith & Dickinson, 1994; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Early experiences with oral language, reading, and writing vary considerably from one child to the next, often reflecting important social and cultural differences (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983). Differences in the quantity and quality of children's early literacy experiences strongly affect children's readiness for school-based reading and writing tasks (Teale & Sulzby, 1989). In fact, despite years of research and intervention, the group still most at risk for school failure is young African American boys. Research suggests two potential reasons for the perpetuation of this cycle of failure:

1. There are significant and meaningful differences among children in their language and literacy skills at school entry. These differences can be traced to socioeconomic status, race, and gender, though these attributes may also be confounded (Hart & Risley, 1995; Morrison, 1997; Vernon-Feagans, 1996).

2. The structure and culture of formal schooling builds on majority students' existing knowledge and skills but does not build similarly on minority students' knowledge and skills (Delpit, 1995).

According to Delpit (1995) and others, it is the responsibility of educators to reverse this cycle of failure through deliberate actions within and outside of the classroom.

APPROACHES TO FOSTERING EARLY LITERACY

Teachers in the early school grades face a unique challenge. They are responsible for a group of learners who come to school with different early literacy understandings and experiences. Discovering and supporting each child's emergent literacy skills and ensuring that all learners develop particular literacy skills are critical challenges. These challenges require knowledge of how young children develop, of classroom organization that can support and encourage a range of literacy understandings, and of teaching strategies that can facilitate specific skills relevant to later reading and writing. These tasks are more difficult when children are known to be at risk for problems with literacy achievement, have specific language or learning disabilities, or are learning English as a new language. Each of these factors can significantly affect early literacy learning.

Following Kenny in his kindergarten experience provides a profile of some challenges that a teacher might face in supporting a child known to be at risk for difficulty with learning to read and some strategies that can encourage his or her emerging interest in literacy.

The transition report from Kenny's Head Start program had characterized him as an active, observant learner who enjoyed hands-on activities, dramatic play, and sharing personal information with others. The report also noted a lack of interest in more specific early literacy activities, such as reading books on his own, scribbling, or writing his name. At the beginning of the school year, Kenny's behavior in his kindergarten classroom was puzzling and problematic for Ms. Ford. The word *active,* used in the transition report, seemed an understatement, as Kenny appeared to flit from one activity center to another without really engaging in activities or interactions with peers or teachers. The only activity center that captured his sustained interest and activity was the block corner, where he would build large structures and direct other children to help him. Journal writing and large group meeting times were very difficult for Kenny. Ms. Ford's anecdotal notes reflect her increasing frustration with Kenny's behavior:

September 26—Kenny worked with Jordan and Luis in the big blocks. I intervened twice to protect children from falling blocks.

September 30—Kenny wouldn't sit with the group during Daily News time. Sitting in my lap helped somewhat.

October 4—Kenny won't even try to write during Journal time. He seems bored with drawing and is constantly wandering around to see what other children are doing.

October 8—All week Kenny has been deliberately singing in a loud voice during Journal time. This is disruptive for us all.

Then, in early October, things changed. On the way to school one morning, 5-year-old Kenny found a small snake, which he brought to school in his backpack. Kenny didn't think his parents would let him keep it at home, so Ms. Ford arranged for him to keep it at school. After a large-group discussion, it was determined that no one in the class knew much about snakes. Because reptiles were a topic covered in the kindergarten curriculum, Ms. Ford decided to pursue Kenny's interest more fully. During their next scheduled meeting, Ms. Ford asked the reading consultant to help her find some literacy resources that included snakes. The following week, the classroom aide took a small group of children, including Kenny, to the library. They returned with a number of books, which they added to their classroom's Lending Library. Kenny and others used the illustrations in the books to identify their snake, determine what was needed for its habitat, and figure out what and how much it needed to eat. Ms. Ford read several of the books aloud during small-group reading times, and Kenny borrowed the books to take home and look at with his parents.

Ms. Ford noticed a dramatic surge in Kenny's interest in reading and writing activities since he had brought in the snake. His flitting from activity to activity now included stops at the Lending Library, where he actively used the library books as references in his play

with blocks, sand, playdough, and other materials, returning to them frequently to look at pictures of snake habitats and eating preferences. During journal writing activities, Kenny would now draw pictures of his snake and was beginning to show interest in writing the words *my snake* to accompany his drawings. During Author's Chair activities (part of a process approach to reading and writing in which the children read their writing to a group and received feedback for revisions), Kenny shared his drawings and made up humorous oral stories to accompany them.

At the suggestion of the reading consultant, Ms. Ford designated Kenny the resident "snake expert," and other children came to him with questions and ideas about his snake. Becoming an expert on snakes facilitated Kenny's vocabulary development; he readily used such words as "reptile," "habitat," "hibernating," and "vertebrate." Along with the rest of the class, Kenny started a Word Box that contained these and other "snake" words. During his individual sessions with the reading consultant, Kenny used the computer to conduct research on snakes, composed simple snake stories that he could read aloud, and helped create the Snake Maze Game, which enabled him to practice phonemic segmentation skills.

This vignette illustrates many ways in which a child's interests can form the basis for literacy-related activities, even for a child who initially shows minimal interest. It would be difficult (if not impossible) for a teacher to build on the idiosyncratic interests of each child in the classroom, but using interests that are common to a small group of children or that tie naturally to required elements of the curriculum can be an effective technique.

In this vignette, the key to Kenny's increased participation in early literacy activities was his own interest in snakes, supported by the intentional organization of the classroom and teaching strategies that facilitated his involvement with reading and writing. The organization of the classroom supported Kenny's functional uses of literacy materials, including open-ended materials such as blocks, sand, and playdough; a classroom Lending Library accessible to children; readily available writing materials; and a computer. Ms. Ford, working closely with the reading consultant, used several specific teaching strategies that supported Kenny's emergent literacy skills, including reading aloud to small groups; focusing on specific, content-relevant vocabulary; journal drawing/writing; dictation; computer-generated stories; and Author's Chair reading/feedback sessions.

CRITICAL FEATURES OF EARLY LITERACY LEARNING

Research on emergent literacy, particularly from the field of early childhood education, demonstrates that effective early literacy programs integrate high-quality early childhood practices with specific language and literacy materials

and strategies (International Reading Association [IRA] & National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1998; Madison & Speaker, 1994; Mason & Allen, 1986; Robinson, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). Children in the early school grades learn best in environments that provide age-appropriate and individually appropriate educational practices that are sensitive to cultural, ethnic, and gender differences among children (NAEYC, 1996; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1995). These environments include multiple opportunities for children to select and pursue ideas and activities independently or in small groups. Organization of the classroom environment into learning centers is an effective technique that supports this goal, as children are encouraged to select activities within centers that allow them to practice and develop a range of skills in all developmental areas. An integrated thematic curriculum also supports children's learning and literacy development, as children are encouraged to follow a single theme for several weeks or longer, with multiple subject areas and skills woven into the theme. As the vignette demonstrated, Kenny's interest in snakes led him into several subject areas (language arts, science) that included skills such as reading for information; writing fact and fiction; making hands-on science explorations of habitats; and acquiring specific, content-relevant vocabulary.

Curriculum and instruction in the early grades lay the groundwork for children's later attitudes toward learning and for the acquisition of skills necessary for reading and writing. The integration of appropriate early childhood curriculum and early literacy instruction serves two important functions: It supports children's adaptation to the expectations and structures of schooling, and it focuses children's learning on early reading and writing. Many teachers are aware of organizational structures that support children's development and learning in general. Fewer teachers are aware of the specific emergent literacy skills necessary for later reading and writing success. Emergent literacy research has articulated six specific, interrelated structures that are the foundation for subsequent reading and writing success (Gunn et al., 1995): awareness of print, relationship of print to oral language, understanding the structure of texts, letter knowledge, ability to use decontextualized oral language, and phonological awareness.

Awareness of Print

Becoming aware of print is one of the first steps toward later reading and writing. Awareness of print includes understanding the conventions of print (e.g., visual appearance, organization on a page, chunking of letters into words) and the purpose and functions of print (e.g., words convey messages and meanings). At very early ages, children become aware of conventions of print because symbols, signs, labels, notes, lists, magazines, and books are everywhere and convey important information (Neuman & Roskos, 1993). Children recog-

nize symbols very early; rare is the child who doesn't recognize the *M* in McDonald's. In addition, daily interactions with adults who use and point out the printed word support children's awareness of the functions of print (Delpit, 1995; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Morrow, 1990; Morrow, Strickland, & Woo, 1998; Neuman & Roskos, 1997).

Relationship of Print to Oral Language

A second key to later reading and writing is recognition of the relationship between spoken and written language. Young children learn that oral language and printed language share similarities; one can be roughly mapped onto the other. This is clear when children pretend to write and make one mark for each word that they speak (Adams, 1990). Children also become aware of differences between spoken and written language. Writing is visual, speech aural; speech is used primarily in face-to-face communication, whereas writing is used when speaker and writer are not both present. Reinforcement of these differences occurs through participation in conversations, story readings, and meaningful uses of writing (Mason & Allen, 1986; Morrow, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1997).

Understanding the Structure of Texts

Understanding the structure or characteristics of texts is a third key to later reading and writing success (Gunn et al., 1995; Mason & Allen, 1986). Definitions of what constitutes a "good story" vary considerably within different cultures, but certain structural elements, such as temporal markers, are features that remain consistent (Michaels, 1981; Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Through repeated exposure to oral and written stories, both at home and in classrooms, children learn that texts have particular characteristics, such as setting, plot, organization, and characters.

Letter Knowledge

Knowing the names of letters and learning the sounds of letters is a strong predictor of later reading success (Ehri & Sweet, 1991). Through interactions with print, children learn that there are individual units of print called *letters.* In addition to sources of print in the environment, many children learn letter names and symbols through incidental or deliberate exposure to the alphabet song or letter blocks and books and through television shows such as *Sesame Street.*

Ability to Use Decontextualized Oral Language

Another key to later literacy success is the ability to use oral language in specific ways. Common school-based oral language tasks, such as telling a personal story, giving explanations, analyzing texts, defining words, and making predictions, require the speaker to use language in a decontextualized manner. This type of talk, in which the speaker and audience share only limited background knowledge, requires the speaker to use more explicit referential and syntactic devices to convey meaning (Snow & Dickinson, 1991). Skill in using decontextualized language has been shown to be related to children's success on tests of print skills, vocabulary, and early reading (Beals, 1993; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Smith, 1996; Smith & Dickinson, 1994).

Phonological Awareness

Finally, children develop the ability to consciously reflect on and manipulate the sounds of language and to separate sounds in spoken words from sounds in written words; this ability is called *phonological awareness* (Smith, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995). Unlike the other literacy structures, phonological awareness skills are less likely to develop through incidental exposure (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Yet, phonological awareness skills, such as sound–symbol correspondence, rhyming, and phonemic segmentation, are critical elements of early reading and writing (Gunn et al., 1995; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Snow et al., 1998; Wallach & Miller, 1988).

FROM EMERGENT TO CONVENTIONAL LITERACY

Emergent literacy results from children's active construction of conceptions of print—how it works and is used. It develops without direct instructional efforts. As children begin to acquire conventional literacy, the playful, self-motivated approach to literacy seen in this emergent phase continues but is augmented by a new, intentional focus on the forms of print and language. Most children do not spontaneously move from the emergent phase of literacy acquisition to conventional literacy without thoughtful, direct instruction and opportunities to read appropriate materials that support their beginning decoding efforts (Ehri & Sweet, 1991). In order for children to master conventional writing and reading, or to "crack the code," they need to deliberately take a highly analytic stance toward print and language (Adams, 1990; Delpit, 1995).

Thus, teachers in the early grades strive to find a balance between building an emergent curriculum that supports children's development and interests while at the same time supplying necessary exposure to specific skills. As the foregoing review of emergent literacy research suggests, the most critical outcome of early literacy instruction is learners who want to read and write. This motivation results from children's internalization of the functions of reading and writing and their own desire to become fluent readers and writers. Classroom environments, materials, and interactions that support purposeful uses of literacy provide the foundation for children's subsequent motivation to master the intricacies of conventional reading and writing.

Conventional reading and writing build directly on emergent literacy skills and insights but have distinct features as well. For example, reading includes the complementary skills of efficient decoding and ongoing comprehension (Adams, 1990). Writing includes mechanics, spelling, and construction of semantically connected texts for multiple purposes and audiences. Children's proficiency with each of these features is influenced by the combination of their emergent literacy skills and the nature of the instruction they receive in school.

Recognizing the role of instruction in supporting children's movement into conventional literacy brings to the fore a debate that has long raged in discussions of early literacy and reading instruction: What is the place of specific skills instruction in early literacy programs? Marilyn J. Adams, in her comprehensive book *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (1990), argued convincingly for two points: 1) Emergent literacy experiences (like those described previously) are necessary precursors to children's understanding of the functions and uses of reading and writing and form the meaningful basis on which teachers build instruction, and 2) there is a great need for specific instruction in phonological awareness skills, word recognition, and spelling patterns, the goal of which is to help all children become fluent processors of written language.

The debate about specific skills instruction continues, not because the need is not recognized but because of the inherent diversity of instructional approaches and the competing demands of classroom teaching. Adams (1990) and others have concluded that a comprehensive, integrated approach to early reading is most effective. This includes elements of a "whole language" approach—such as environmental exposure to print functions and purposes, extensive oral language opportunities, shared and individual reading of a broad range of texts, and process and focused writing. This method should be coupled with elements of a more "traditional" approach—such as instruction in specific skills and opportunities to read varied texts, some with controlled vocabularies. Presentation and rehearsal of skills, in the absence of purposeful, personally meaningful literacy activities, is not warranted by research or by anecdotal reports of effective practice.

The importance of these points, taken together, has become evident in professional organizations concerned with children's literacy development.

For example, in their joint position statement, the IRA and NAEYC (1998) asserted that "learning to read and write is a complex, multifaceted process that requires a wide variety of instructional approaches." There appears to be general agreement among reading researchers and teachers that meaning-based approaches and specific skills instruction are mutually dependent, intertwined features of successful approaches to early literacy.

INDIVIDUALIZING EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES

An essential element of teaching is the ability to meet the diverse learning needs of the group while providing appropriate instruction for individuals. For children known to be at risk for literacy failure, those with specific learning difficulties, or those learning English as a new language, achieving a balance between meaning-based methods and skills instruction is especially challenging.

Adams (1990) and others (e.g., Snow et al., 1998) have argued that specific skills instruction is especially critical for children considered at risk for literacy difficulties. Some skills, such as recognizing letters, rhyming words, and matching sounds with symbols, are staples of early literacy curricula. Other skills, such as attending to the mechanics of reading, developing comprehension strategies, and increasing spoken vocabulary, are less common in early literacy instruction. The argument for providing instruction in specific skills and extensive reading opportunities is partly based on the finding that classrooms with high proportions of students at risk actually spend less time in reading activities, which may unwittingly perpetuate patterns of lower achievement (Allington, 1991; Delpit, 1995). It is also based on the findings from Juel, Griffith, and Gough's (1986) longitudinal study of children's acquisition of reading and writing skills in the primary grades. This study found that having opportunities to read texts with controlled vocabularies is an important determinant of children's progress.

In many schools, children receive individualized services through funded programs such as Title I or through specialists such as speech-language therapists, all of whom employ a wide range of techniques to meet their goals. Research on individuals who have special learning needs or who are at risk for academic failure demonstrates that when efforts are made to provide consistent, coordinated instruction, children are more likely to learn the skills they need to succeed in school (Bashir, 1989; Letsky, 1994; Rammler, 1993; Wallach & Miller, 1988).

Skills-based instruction, by a specialist or a classroom teacher, should be coordinated with an ongoing, appropriate curriculum that is based on a child's specific interests (Letsky, 1994). In Kenny's case, individualization of instruction was achieved through the coordinated efforts of his classroom teacher and the school's reading consultant. His interest in snakes was used as the basis

for a variety of activities that facilitated research skills, phonemic awareness, and reading practice. Effective individualization of early literacy instruction requires two elements: assessment and ongoing communication.

Early Literacy Assessment

Individualizing instruction requires a teacher to know the status of each child's early literacy knowledge. Daily interactions with children can help a teacher gauge awareness of print, understanding of texts, and alphabetic knowledge. Prior school records can be a valuable source of information about the child and his or her family, attitudes toward schooling, and academic progress. Informal assessment methods, such as anecdotal records, transcripts of conversations, reviews of drawings and writings, and checklists, are other important sources of information that can be used for initial assessment of general literacy knowledge and specific emergent literacy skills. They can also be used regularly to gauge the progress of individual children. When appropriate, formal assessments by teachers or specialists, such as the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test–Third Edition (Dunn & Dunn, 1997), the Concepts About Print tests (e.g., Clay, 1985, 2000), or the reading and writing sections of the Wide Range Achievement Test–Revised (Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984), can be used periodically to gauge a child's progress on standardized measures of vocabulary, early reading, and early writing.

Ongoing Communication

Individualizing instruction, especially for children at risk, requires ongoing, substantive communication among the classroom teacher, the child, the child's family, and any specialists who provide services to the child. When teachers, specialists, administrators, and families work together to communicate their goals and approaches, individual children are the beneficiaries. Efforts to provide consistent and coordinated instruction have been shown to be important correlates of children's literacy attainment (Bashir, 1989; Wallach & Miller, 1988). In Kenny's case, the classroom teacher and the reading consultant worked together to design and implement effective, inclusive strategies to strengthen Kenny's emergent literacy skills.

EARLY LITERACY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

As previously noted, the importance of communication and coordination extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom and school. Virtually all research

on early literacy describes the importance of family and cultural factors in early literacy attainment. Children come to school with vastly different exposure to and experience with print. Different cultures and different families value different forms of literacy—some focus on oral traditions, exposing children to complex story forms and a range of story functions (e.g., parables, fables, oral histories); others focus on complex, artistic written symbol systems (e.g., Japanese, Arabic); still others focus on "traditional" uses of reading and writing (e.g., bedtime stories, grocery lists). Efforts to understand and coordinate differing beliefs within the classroom are important to children's acceptance of school-based literacy learning (McCabe, 1996; McCabe & Bliss, in press).

> On the day that Kenny brought the snake to school, Ms. Ford tried to call his parents to tell them about it. After repeated failed attempts to reach them by phone, she decided to send home a note. She never received a response. Ms. Ford was hoping to use Kenny's snake as the basis for encouraging home–school connections in general as well as concerning early literacy activities in particular. Kenny's Head Start transition report indicated that the family showed little interest in contact with the program and that it was difficult to contact them and schedule home visits with them. Despite these somewhat negative beginnings, Ms. Ford wanted to coordinate her efforts with Kenny's parents.
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> Ms. Ford was disappointed that Kenny's parents did not attend the Parent Evening at school. One morning, however, Kenny's father dropped his son off at school, and Ms. Ford took advantage of this opportunity to have a brief conference. Kenny's father reported that he and Kenny's mother worked several jobs and had very little time to spend with Kenny, except on Sundays, when the family went to church. He also shared the fact that the whole family was reliant on public transportation, making commuting to work and school very difficult and time consuming. During this conversation, Kenny's father spontaneously commented on Kenny's strong interest in snakes and other reptiles and said that they had videotaped several television shows on the subject.
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> After this indication of support, Ms. Ford looked for ways to continue home–school contacts. She sent home several books about snakes so that Kenny could share them with his family. She also encouraged Kenny to bring home the little "books" that he created with the reading consultant. When asked, Kenny reported that he read the books "lots of times" with his parents and his grandmother. Kenny also brought in one of the videotapes and shared it with the class.

This vignette demonstrates the need for persistence and multiple strategies in facilitating home–school connections: making repeated call attempts, sending things home, asking the child what happens at home and at school. It also shows that families have many agendas and constraints, which do not indicate lack of awareness or interest in their children's interests and progress in school. For example, Kenny's father was aware of his interests, had videotaped

relevant programs on television, and had followed through by reading the books and stories with Kenny. The vignette also points to the reciprocal nature of home–school relations. Kenny brought the snake to school in the first place, and he later brought in a videotape that was shared with his class. Fostering coordination of literacy programs at home and school is difficult but can be highly successful in supporting children's literacy learning (Dodd, 1996; MacFarlane, 1996; Morrow, Neuman, Paratore, & Harrison, 1995).

This vignette also highlights the fact that children's early literacy experiences occur within and outside classroom walls and in response to social, cultural, and technological factors. Schools and teachers are increasingly likely to provide programs that extend beyond traditional boundaries and that include family support, continuing education, health, and community service components. Although these new responsibilities are challenging, they also represent a potentially fruitful partnership that can support the long-term academic and literacy achievement of all children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR
TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND POLICY MAKERS

Implication: *Teachers in the early grades must combine deep understanding of children's development, appropriate organizational and instructional methods, and specific knowledge of literacy development in order to support children's acquisition of reading and writing skills.*

Kenny's Story has illustrated a range of techniques for supporting and facilitating early literacy in the classroom, from organization of the classroom into learning centers and encouragement of curriculum based on children's interests to teaching strategies such as reading to small groups, dictations, and sharing children's stories in an Author's Chair format. The vignettes about Kenny have also illustrated the contributions of emergent literacy research to current understanding of the specific skills that are the foundation for subsequent mastery of reading and writing: becoming aware of print, understanding the relationship between spoken and written language, understanding different text structures, recognizing letters, using decontextualized oral language, and gaining phonological awareness. These skills develop concurrently and interrelatedly through incidental and deliberate exposure in the context of young children's everyday lives and experiences (Heath, 1983; Mason & Au, 1990; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). They represent the integration of experiences with specific kinds of oral language, reading, and writing (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Hannon, 1995; Snow et al., 1998).

Although many teachers employ a range of effective organizational and instructional techniques, these techniques can only be successful when teach-

ers understand why and how they encourage children's overall development and literacy skills. Teachers must understand how oral language, reading, and writing experiences contribute to emergent literacy skills, which in turn influence later reading and writing development. It is the joint responsibility of teachers and school administrators to be sure that all teachers have the knowledge base and support necessary to implement effective early literacy programs. Ongoing, substantive professional development for educators is the key to meeting this responsibility.

Research on the growth of teachers as professionals indicates that three important factors influence the success of professional development activities: 1) The activities are relevant to the daily experience of teachers, 2) they respect and draw upon the professional knowledge of experienced teachers, and 3) they are supported institutionally through time and money allocations (Beattie, 1995; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Supporting and enhancing teachers' knowledge of effective early literacy practices must occur in response to their existing knowledge, practices, questions, and concerns. There are undoubtedly highly accomplished, effective early childhood teachers in every community whose expertise could be tapped for the benefit of others. Planning for, arranging, and engaging in professional development relevant to early literacy must be a cooperative endeavor among teachers, specialists, and administrators.

Implication: *Consistent and coordinated early literacy instruction is important for all learners. It is critical for learners who are considered at risk for literacy failure, those with special learning needs, or those learning English as a new language.*

Kenny's Story has demonstrated the efficacy of professionals working together toward a common goal. The classroom teacher and the reading consultant used their knowledge of Kenny along with their own professional expertise to create a meaningful learning environment for one child.

Teachers must be aware of and employ appropriate assessment strategies to determine individual needs and to gauge the progress of their students. This is especially important when children first enter a school or classroom, to establish a baseline from which instructional strategies can be determined and progress measured. There are many ways to assess children's early literacy, from informal methods such as tape recordings and anecdotal notes, to classroom-based measures such as checklists and word boxes, to more formal methods that include, though are not limited to, standardized tests. When teachers are knowledgeable about children's development of early literacy and are aware of the many tools available for assessing early literacy, children will benefit (Genishi & Dyson, 1984; Mason & Allen, 1986; Shearer & Homan, 1994). As noted previously, professional development activities can support and encourage teachers' knowledge of appropriate literacy assessment methods.

Another point made by Kenny's Story is that efforts to coordinate instruction for individual children require teachers to have knowledge of the programs and services available to their students. This requires open, ongoing communication between specialists (e.g., reading consultants, speech-language therapists, early childhood specialists) and program administrators (e.g., Title I, special needs). When teachers, specialists, and administrators work together to share information and coordinate services, children are given clear and consistent instruction that works effectively to support their development (Bashir, 1989; Wallach & Miller, 1988).

As with professional development activities, efforts toward coordination and consistency of programming often require reallocation of time and money. Although this may prove difficult in the short term, research on school reform points to long-term benefits for teachers and students (Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Foertsch, 1992; Fraatz, 1987).

Implication: *Communication and coordination between school and home, and with community-based programs, is important to children's long-term academic and literacy attainment.*

Kenny's Story has touched on the potential strengths and difficulties of communicating and coordinating literacy efforts with families. Working effectively with families to support literacy requires teachers, specialists, and administrators to have specific information about the communities in which they operate, the families they serve, and the literacy practices valued within the community and families.

Home–school connections work in two directions. Teachers regularly attempt to keep parents informed through phone calls, newsletters, notes, and conferences. Some teachers invite parents to participate directly in classroom activities. As Kenny's Story has illustrated, families also support their children's development, although they may not directly inform their children's teachers about their activities and approaches. Just as teachers, specialists, and administrators must communicate and coordinate with one another, so too must teachers and families. Parents should have regular, consistent contact with and input in the school and classroom literacy program.

Kenny's Head Start program provided a transition report when he entered kindergarten. This is but one example of information that can be used to support children's development in a school setting. Community-based programs, such as preschool programs, adult literacy programs, and public libraries, are potentially rich sources of information and support that may be unknown or underutilized by school systems and teachers. It is the responsibility of school and district administrators to determine what community-based programs and services are available and whether coordination is desirable or possible and then to develop regular methods for sharing this information with teachers and specialists.

CONCLUSION

Kenny's Story and a synthesis of research, practical knowledge, and policy considerations have illustrated the essential elements that support young children's acquisition of early literacy skills. Effective programs require coordinated, consistent efforts by many people. Although individual teachers may provide the most direct experiences and instruction in early literacy, they do not, and should not, operate in a vacuum. There is an essential knowledge base that teachers must have in order to provide children with appropriate, integrated early literacy instruction. Teachers and specialists can employ a range of organizational and instructional techniques to meet the needs of all children. But above all, teachers must reach beyond the confines of their own classrooms to draw on the expertise of other educators, to communicate and coordinate with specialists, to bring families into the world of the school, and to connect with community-based programs. Teachers will only be able to do this with the help of administrative and institutional structures that support and facilitate their knowledge, skills, and outreach efforts.

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