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Thoughts from the Editors

Baby Steps: Development as Incremental Process

Caitlin McMunn Dooley, Amy Seely Flint, Teri Holbrook, Laura May, and Peggy Albers

These days, sometimes child development gets lost in the midst of standards, assessments, pay structures, and curricular programs. Even the term “development” sometimes gets perverted to mean some set age- or grade-level requirement, even though most child-development researchers would agree that these predetermined levels rarely capture any individual child’s growth and progression. It’s time to reclaim the term “development” to mean a gradual progression—a process.

As any parent who has tried to potty train a child knows, children progress on their own schedule (listen to the Conversation Currents podcast, and you’ll understand this reference even more). We have yet to meet a child who can become potty trained on command or on someone else’s rigid time schedule. Yet so many children are eventually successful (thank goodness!). Likewise, literacy learning rarely adheres to a rigid time schedule, yet so many children—when given support and guidance—eventually do become readers and writers. And when they do not progress quickly, we can often blame the instructional environment more than an inherent lack of developmental ability within the child (Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 1997).

Learning earlier doesn’t mean learning better. Take reading, for example. Some children may learn to read simple text by age four. Others may learn by age seven or eight. Early reading acquisition—or, as Jackson (1988) put it, “precocious reading ability”—is neither indicative of extraordinary intelligence nor instructionally advantageous (Jackson, 1988). Indeed, most children eventually do learn to read through incremental strategic development that occurs as they engage in mutually enjoyable literacy practices with caring others.

Children make incremental steps toward literacy with each experience, each expression, each excited moment when they share stories and information. These steps happen at different times for different children. Researchers have documented these incremental steps across the many dimensions of literacy learning (e.g., see Christ [2011] for vocabulary development; see Dooley [2011] for insights on comprehension development). Indeed, many teachers, parents, and researchers believe literacy learning begins before schooling and continues to develop throughout schooling (e.g., Doake, 1985; Dooley & Matthews, 2009; Dooley, Matthews, Matthews, & Champion, 2009; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Goodman & Goodman, 1979, 2009; Siegel, 2006)—but it takes a special adult to recognize all of the wonderful knowledge and skills that children bring to their learning.

We believe that good teachers are adept at looking closely at children’s developmental progress. They align instruction and adapt it to children’s needs—providing instruction at just the right moment to nudge each child to the next level, whatever that may be. Of course, good teachers also know that development comes in fits and starts, and different dimensions of literacy development do not occur along parallel paths. Thus, we educators are enlivened by the challenge to constantly revise our knowledge about how to help children learn. That’s the juicy stuff of teaching—the fun of understanding kids and helping them along their unique developmental paths.

In this issue of Language Arts, we want to refocus on the big picture: children’s development.
Children’s cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development are essential to healthy living. And at the end of the day, isn’t all academic learning really just a means to growing healthy, socially adept, and emotionally aware individuals who can seek happiness by reaching their potential? How do we, as literacy and language arts educators, create environments where each child’s unique developmental needs are met as they reach their learning potential? The articles and departments in this issue help us to imagine these kinds of environments.

In “Critical Lessons and Playful Literacies: Digital Media in PK–2 Classrooms,” Nicholas Husbye, Beth Buchholz, Linda Skidmore Coggin, Christy Wessel Powell, and Karen E. Wohlwend demonstrate how filmmaking and play come together in a process of children’s multimodal storying. Even in preschool and early elementary contexts, young children can take on sophisticated compositions; however, they do so in unique, childlike ways. This multiple-case-study research helps us to see how young children’s filmmaking can be a means to creative, multimodal expression.

Teachers who want to transform curriculum to be accessible for children at all different developmental levels should read the article by Louisa Kramer-Vida, Roberta Levitt, and Susan Kelly. In “Kindergarten Is More Than Ready for the Common Core State Standards,” they argue that the CCSS can be met and exceeded through the use of writer’s workshop in kindergarten. Through a yearlong professional learning experience, a group of kindergarten teachers transformed their writing instruction and improved young children’s learning by adopting writer’s workshop.

Karen E. Wohlwend understands that teachers value developmental lenses; therefore, she presents a tool that she calls a “Spider Chart” for teachers to identify how children are developing as readers. Her article, titled “A New Spin on Miscue Analysis: Using Spider Charts to Web Reading Processes,” offers a way for teachers to record and analyze miscues that new readers make as they progress.

Featured in each November issue is the profile for the NCTE Outstanding Educator. This year, JoBeth Allen is honored for her leadership and commitment to exemplary language arts instruction. Inspired by JoBeth’s work and career, Carmen Tisdale presents an endearing portrait of JoBeth and her many talents.

Research and Policy department editors Randy Bomer and Beth Maloch discuss discussion. They write about how policies and standards help and hinder the opportunities for children to engage in discussions. They conclude with suggestions to help teachers become active advocates as they create time, space, and contexts for the development of rich literature discussions among children.


The 2012 Orbis Pictus Award winners are presented in the Children’s Literature department. Fran Wilson, Barbara Chatton, Jan Kristo, Deborah Thompson, Lisa Morris-Wilkey, Cyndi Giorgis, and Sue Parsons bring us the best of the best in nonfiction books for children. This award was established in 1989 by the Elementary Section of NCTE. Enjoy this year’s picks!

Conversation Currents features Jackie Marsh and Vivian Vasquez, both experts in early childhood literacy and language arts instruction. Marsh and Vasquez discuss their view of development and what is so important about children’s development as these young minds become literate in our digital world. As Jackie notes, attention to development means knowing a child well enough “to offer just the right instruction at the right time.”

We hope you enjoy this issue.
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