Invited Dialogue

Nurturing Young Children’s Literacy Development through Effective Preschools, Practices, and Policies: A Conversation with Dr. William H. Teale

Jennifer D. Turner

This article features a discussion with Dr. William H. Teale about how young children become literate. Drawing on decades of research, he describes how preschool classrooms, practices, and policies can expand the literacy repertoires and nurture the literacy lives of young children.

This issue of *Language Arts* features a conversation with Dr. William H. Teale about early literacy learning, the intersection of technology and literacy education for young children, and effective preschool policies and practices. Dr. Teale is a professor of Education and Director of the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has published widely in scholarly journals and books and has presented papers and colloquia in more than 25 countries around the world. Dr. Teale has worked with numerous school systems across the United States and internationally to develop curriculum and programs focused on early literacy learning and teaching. He recently served as President of the International Literacy Association (ILA), he is a member of the Reading Hall of Fame, and he has served as a consultant for Sesame Street and Head Start. An active NCTE member, Dr. Teale is a former editor of *Language Arts* as well as a former Trustee for the NCTE Research Foundation, and has served on the Elementary Section Steering Committee, the Elementary School Booklist Committee, and the Commission on the Education of Teachers of Reading.

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Jennifer D. Turner (JDT): Thanks again for speaking with me today. Could you begin by talking about what an emergent literacy perspective is and why it’s so important in working with young children?

William H. Teale (WHT): Emergent literacy re theorized, if you will, is the process that children go through in becoming literate. A number of aspects about that process were reconsidered and changed as a result of emergent literacy. First, it’s really clear that learning to read and write starts very early in life. Before emergent literacy, there was this notion that children need to attain either some specific chronological or mental age or a certain knowledge base before they could start to learn to read. Now we know that’s absolutely not true. Virtually all children in a literate society begin learning to read and...
write as early as they’re exposed to those literate practices.

Emergent literacy also shows us that those beginnings to literacy start in the everyday interactions of children in their homes, in their communities, and in their preschools. The environment is a really important part of how children become literate, and emergent literacy reinforces the notion that literacy is a social process. Literacy is not a set of skills to be learned but a tool that mediates the activities of our everyday lives. No matter whether we’re 6 years old or 60 years old, literacy helps us get things done in our lives (Teale, 1982).

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Finally, emergent literacy is now a recognized stage in development. This concept hasn’t been around that long, but it’s now widely adopted. So, as a recognized stage in development, emergent literacy has implications for how adults help children develop and move along to more conventional reading and writing, including using media. When adults think about early literacy development in an emergent way, it gives them some ideas about what kinds of activities are helpful to children.

JDT: Do you mean reading aloud to children, for example?

WHT: That’s interesting that you bring up reading aloud because for 40 years, the mantra’s been that it’s the most important thing you can do. And that’s probably still true, but I think we know a lot more now. It’s great if parents read to their children; it’s great if preschool teachers read every day to children. But reading aloud is not some sort of magic bullet. Some parents think, ‘Read to your children, and that’ll take care of it.’ No, it’s more about how literacy becomes part and parcel of the everyday activities of children. So whether adults are home cooking in the kitchen, or families are out for a walk in the neighborhood or in the park, there are ways that they can make reading and writing part of a whole range of activities that children are doing.

JDT: So what is the role of children’s literature in the literacy development of young readers?

WHT: Books for children are really important and are critical in terms of providing experiences, perspectives, language, and ideas. As former President of the International Literacy Association, I received numerous requests to give talks. I decided on this one title for a talk: Mission Impossible... Becoming Literate without Literature. The question is: Is it possible for children to become literate without literature? Look at all these leveled readers and controlled vocabulary books. With these materials, I could get a child to develop decoding skills. I could probably even get the child to develop reasonably good comprehension skills. But the content is missing.

I fundamentally don’t have a problem with leveled readers and decodable books. I think they make a contribution to children’s early literacy development. But let me use a dietary analogy. Reading only leveled readers is like existing on airplane food. It’s not going to kill you. You probably won’t die from it. But who wants to eat airplane food? Authentic, high-quality children’s literature brings in the content that’s going to excite children and get them interested. Content is what keeps children reading and sustains their pleasure in terms of becoming literate. That’s the difference between literacy learning and becoming literate.

JDT: I really appreciate your idea that texts should be rich with content, as well as idea-rich and complex. Text complexity has become a huge buzzword, especially for elementary teachers. What should teachers consider when using complex texts in primary classrooms?

WHT: To me, rich text means complex text. The approaches taken to text complexity often focus on the Common Core, which has given us lexiles. But lexiles aren’t the critical thing for text complexity. I think text complexity is more about the ideas in the text that we can think about and talk about. In a piece that Jessica Hoffman, Kathleen Paciga, and I wrote for The Reading Teacher (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman,
2007), we argued that there is an achievement gap because there is a curriculum gap. If you look at early childhood classrooms—and specifically I’m thinking about kindergarten, first grade, even second grade—the curriculum has narrowed down to literacy and math. Some people think science and social studies aren’t important for little children because they believe that they will get that content in the intermediate grades or even middle school. What’s extremely problematic there is that the children who depend upon school the most for becoming literate are really the ones who are getting shortchanged. It comes down to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

Let’s say the curriculum focuses on getting children to be able to decode, recognize words, and comprehend texts. The problem is, by the time those children hit third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, they haven’t had much content, and they haven’t developed the background knowledge and vocabulary that they’re going to need. So they need science and social studies in pre-K and in kindergarten. It becomes a huge factor as children go up through the grade levels, and unless teachers are paying attention to text complexity and content from day one in school, we’re just setting children up for failure.

**JDT**: So what can we do in preschool classrooms to set children up for success? Based on your research in centers of early excellence (Teale, Hoffman, & Paciga, 2014), what features of pre-K–2 classrooms bolster children’s background knowledge and help them to become literate?

**WHT**: We actually conducted several studies as a result of Early Reading First grants that we had over a seven-year period. We had three different grants specifically targeted for preschool classrooms that were in “low income” neighborhoods. We worked mainly on the west and south sides of Chicago, and we largely did professional development work. It was intensive work with a small number of classrooms, and it involved two components.

One component was changing mindsets and raising expectations by infusing literacy into the everyday activities of the classroom—very similar to the ways we talk about infusing literacy in the home (McKay & Teale, 2015). All of the teachers read aloud to their children, but then the question was, “How are you reading aloud to your children? How do you get maximum impact from those read-alouds?” So some of our work focused on taking existing activities and ramping them up. For example, how can you ask interesting questions? How can you get children more involved in the read-alouds that you’re doing every day? Teachers questioned everything from what books they chose to what counts as a high quality book to how to get children interested and engaged to the maximum. How do we build classroom libraries so that teachers are thinking about diversity in a number of ways? Is there a range of texts in the library for different difficulty levels? How do we think about multicultural diversity within classroom collections? How do we think about genre diversity?

**JDT**: Excellent points. What’s the second component?

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**WHT**: In some schools, the principal says, “Oh, preschool, I don’t know what to do with them, I’ll let them do their own thing.” It’s like the preschool is not really part of the school. So whatever professional development the preschool teachers get, it’s either hand-me-down professional development or it’s “Oh, the district is going to give them this.” But the school leadership is not thinking in terms of the P–3 continuum, so the questions become, How are we going to connect teachers in the primary grades with the preschool? What makes sense for helping these preschool children grow? In some cases, we actually saw kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade classrooms that were in pretty good shape, but the preschool was like a different country.

**JDT**: That’s so unfortunate.

**WHT**: Yes, it is. So we worked on a number of things with those preschool teachers. How do we do good read-alouds? How do we get good materials into the classrooms? Another thing we
found was that these teachers did whole-group activities, and they did individual center activities, but no small-group work. So we worked on how to create centers that truly engaged small groups of children in activities that involved literacy. There are some preschool teachers who plan for centers based on what they want to put in the center, not what the children want. That was a huge issue that we worked on endlessly. We wanted the teachers to say, “Let’s think about what kinds of things children are actually going to want to do there.” We said to the teachers, “We’re going to give a lot of freedom at the center, and we’re going to do a lot of play, but let’s think about how we can at least minimally structure it in ways that have a productive focus on language and literacy.”

Our work in helping the teachers to restructure the centers thematically was very interesting. The housekeeping center should not stay up for the entire year. After a while, who wants to go there? So how do you restructure thematically? The restaurant center seemed easy to create, so teachers put some menus in there. But what we found really interesting was that some children had never been to a restaurant where someone put menus on the table, or where servers come over to the table and greet them. So then we had to figure out what kind of scaffolding would help the children. We talked about different restaurants. We knew the children were familiar with fast food restaurants where you walk up and order your meal, so we pointed out that at the center, there was another kind of restaurant where people sit down and look at a menu and order, and a server brings their food.

It was really eye-opening for us, because we hadn’t considered that in more socioeconomically distressed communities, there are different kinds of restaurants that people go to, but children may have experienced only some of those types. So how can you help children expand literacy practices in restaurants that may be unfamiliar to them? What’s great is that the children do get a sense of what it would be like at that new restaurant through the center at the preschool. They build language through that kind of play. I think that’s phenomenal.

**JDT:** You advocate for these kinds of preschool practices and experiences that help young children expand their literacy knowledge in your report, *Early Childhood Literacy: Policy for the Coming Decade* (Teale, Walski, Hoffman, Meehan, Whittingham, & Colaner, 2015). Can you give us a bit more detail on the topic of scale?

**WHT:** Well, the report was our foray into policy because, although we’ve done extensive work in professional development, we were frustrated trying to move toward larger-scale change. We have seen a lot of change by working with six or seven preschool classrooms, but when you are scaling up, policy becomes important because you begin thinking, “How should we think about early childhood literacy from a policy perspective? What is happening at the state level? What’s happening at the federal level?”

Policy has an impact on everything, even teacher professional growth. We can raise questions like, What’s the district policy for professional development? How is the state supporting professional development for preschool teachers? What about the education standards in the state? Rather than thinking about the preschool and the primary grades as separate educational entities, how do we develop a P–3 lens? How do we avoid narrow academic approaches to early literacy? How do we incorporate technology? How do we think about preparing school principals so that they can take a really thoughtful, systematic approach to preschool in their schools? All these issues are important once you start talking about policy.

**JDT:** Following up on your points about technology and policy for preschool children, what is the role of technology in early childhood literacy education?

**WHT:** I think technology is critical. Technology shapes young children’s literacy knowledge, their literacy skills, and their interests. In many respects, technology has actually redefined what it means to be literate. I mean, we’ve been talking to each other forever, but we haven’t been reading and writing forever. The earliest examples we have of writing come from somewhere between 3,000 to 5,000 years ago. Why did we invent written language? The answer to that gets us back to thinking about tools—because written language is a tool. We invented language because it helped, and we needed it to do things that we couldn’t get done without...
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it. This insight helps us move into a discussion about how the invention of written language changed the way human beings think. I think that what’s happened in technology over the last 30–40 years will change human thinking as much as the invention of written language changed human thinking. We can already see the signs that technology has had an impact on the way people do things, on how they think, and on what they need to know.

So, technology is critically important because it literally has redefined what it means to be literate these days. We can produce texts now that we couldn’t produce 20 years ago. Well, I guess we could produce them, but it was phenomenally expensive, and only people with certain equipment and tools and money could produce or access them. Now anybody can create a text that combines print with sound and with images, and that’s a whole new ballgame for us to think about. The other thing is, we say that children are digital natives because they’re growing up with technology. But are they really? All children are also growing up with print, but are they all literate?

So, technology is critically important because it literally has redefined what it means to be literate these days.

JDT: No, they’re not.

WHT: So what makes us think that children are automatically going to be digitally literate? I don’t care if children grow up with it. Granted, there are things these children can do with technology that are phenomenal, but they’re probably going to need somebody to help them learn how to get the most benefit from it. It’s not in our DNA to all of a sudden be able to use all this technology in ways that are productive and interesting. The term “digital native” implies that children are growing up with technology so they’re just going to pick it up. But technology is a tool. Literacy is a tool. Children have to learn to use them and, therefore, guess what? Parents are important. Families are important. Teachers are important. The kinds of experiences we provide in school are important for children. We need to really think closely about what we build into preschool, kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade experiences that can help children learn how to use technological tools in ways that are interesting and provocative and support them in becoming more critically literate (Paciga, Lisy, & Teale, 2013).

JDT: What do you mean by using technology to become “critically literate?”

WHT: I don’t advocate teaching technology for its own sake to young children. Rather, we should think about how to infuse technology into the everyday activities of the classroom in ways that will be interesting and help children learn. There are technologies that teach the alphabet, phonological awareness, etc., but those are usually the least interesting options; that can turn technology into glorified electronic workbooks. I mean, it’s great if a child gets really interested in an alphabet app, but as a preschool teacher, I’m not going to make that a center or a classroom activity. What I would do as a teacher is plan the opportunity to go outside in the spring and plant some seeds in the ground. We would talk about plants and growth cycles, and we would take the iPad or the phone out so we could take pictures of the children engaged in this activity. Back inside, the children could individually take one picture that they liked and either dictate or write something about that activity, as a kind of digital language experience. Teachers can post those on the website for parents to see, or children can go home and access the website and read it to their parents. So technology provides a way of connecting school with home. That kind of activity really helps children understand how technological tools can be used to get something done.

Another example is an activity like a study of our neighborhood, examining, say, the three murals that are down the street across from the supermarket. The children can interview people, and it’s not hard for them to take an iPad and record the interview. Then they could transcribe certain parts of the interview and edit down the video to create a really interesting digital archive that could be used in all kinds of ways.

JDT: I love that idea. It connects technology with social studies content and fosters an interdisciplinary approach to preschool literacy and language learning. It helps children see that they are members of a community, and there are all
kinds of literacies in our neighborhood that we all interact with and share.

WHT: Exactly. It’s also great for preschool teachers to use technology tools for science. Many preschool classrooms do a butterfly study. Well, why not document the study with technology? Then, at the end, children could create a book or a movie that demonstrates their learning.

JDT: As we come to the end of our time together, what future projects are you working on related to early childhood literacy?

WHT: I’m the director of the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and our biggest project currently is with Head Start. We don’t work in Head Start classrooms, but we facilitate the family and community engagement component of Head Start. We work with parents, grandparents, or whomever is taking care of the child, and we offer GED classes, financial literacy classes, and family literacy events. We run referral and information centers for parents whose children are on the autism spectrum and for teachers who have Head Start children in their classroom who are on the spectrum. In other words, it’s not enough for us to just do “family literacy” because there are so many stress factors in families, so we’ve tried to take a comprehensive approach. We interface with the people who are doing the classroom components, and we think about how we can serve families as broadly as possible.

I’m pretty excited about another project that we are just starting. This project is specifically focused on preschool through third grade and involves a grant to work in a Chicago West-Side neighborhood. We’re in eight schools right now, working with the principals to help them think about becoming instructional literacy leaders in their buildings. What can these principals do to build up the systems and structures in their schools that will result in enhanced literacy achievement for their preschool children?

It’s nice because we have one of the most progressive principal preparation programs in the country at UIC. Research clearly shows that the single most important factor in helping children increase their literacy achievement is the classroom teacher. But we also know that if a school is going to significantly impact students’ literacy achievement, the principal is absolutely central. It’s almost a bit of a paradox because, yes, the teachers are the most critical factor, but if the leadership in the school isn’t in place to help the teachers accomplish all they can, the needle on achievement won’t move. So we are trying to help principals think about what it takes to get their school running in terms of P–3 literacy instruction and literacy achievement.

JDT: Such exciting work! Thank you so much, Bill. I appreciate the time you spent with me today.

BT: Thanks, Jen. Take care.

References

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