



## Book review

**Literacy leadership in early childhood: An essential guide**, D.S. Strickland, S. Riley-Ayers. Teachers College Press, New York (2007)

### Early childhood leaders and literacy

Early literacy consists of those skills young children (age 0–6) acquire via formal and informal instruction in language, reading, and writing. It is important for all those working in the early childhood field to understand how early literacy skills develop because such skills are one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of children's long-term academic achievement (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). It is not only teachers who play a critical role in fostering early literacy, but also other professionals in the early childhood education field, such as school administrators, because they design the larger school environment, set school procedures, and provide teachers with professional development opportunities. *Literacy Leadership in Early Childhood: The Essential Guide* is a practical resource for these other professionals who are instrumental in promoting children's early literacy.

School administrators, such as principals and assistant principals, may find this book helpful because most of them come to the field knowing very little about early literacy given that many were trained to work with children in grades K–12. For those without training in early childhood education, the interactions that promote early literacy might be overlooked because these instructional interactions often take the form of pretend play, drawing/painting, fine-motor activities like threading beads and building blocks, and shared-reading. This book will help administrators who do not have formal backgrounds in early childhood education because it provides a basic overview of early literacy and child development. In fact, the authors devote Chapter 2 to discussing how all domains of child development (social-emotional, physical, and cognitive) work in conjunction to promote early literacy. This background is needed in order for leaders to understand how to better mentor teachers to plan classroom activities, how to structure the school environment, and how to promote home literacy activities among families.

The authors recognize how important the home environment is to fostering literacy by devoting Chapter 8 to the topic of home–school connections. Home literacy activities, such as dyadic shared-reading, are important and well researched aspects of home literacy instruction, but leaders must also acknowledge – and appreciate – other forms of home instruction that stem from other culture's language traditions. The population of the United States has changed with the increasing numbers among the Latino and Asian populations, so that now larger numbers of children speak English as a second language (Kids Count, 2007). The home literacy activities ethnic minorities engage in may be different than shared-reading, but their home activities are still relevant and useful (Heath, 1994; Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1996). In order to help leaders navigate the task of bridging the home–school literacy connection in a culturally sensitive manner, the authors have provided a detailed strategy for planning a family literacy event that can be modified for use with families from all ethnic backgrounds.

School is another important literacy environment. In fact, it is where children receive most of their formal literacy instruction. During the 2005–2006 school year, approximately 71% of American 4-year-olds were enrolled in some type of pre-kindergarten program (Barnett, Hustedt, Hawkinson, & Robin, 2006). Almost all of these pre-kindergarten programs follow their state early learning standards. State early learning standards contain detailed descriptions about what children should know and be able to do in terms of literacy and other developmental domains. The authors explain that most of these early language and literacy standards fall into the realms of oral language, alphabetic code, print-knowledge, and writing. They then go on to explain the content of these realms in more depth and provide suggestions for best practices. They also provide a self-assessment that leaders can use to ask themselves questions like: "How familiar am I with the early learning standards in my state?" and "How well do our current assessment practices and measures link to district and state standards?" Unfortunately, the authors do not acknowledge the other realms of literacy interactions, such as peer-play and pretend play, and such an oversight could inadvertently leave professionals with the impression that early literacy development only takes place in the context of adult-mediated instruction.

Assessments are another key aspect of literacy development that leaders must consider. The authors explain that in this current educational reform environment the expectations for both children and teachers have increased. There is a growing

mandate for accountability and assessment. To begin to help early education leaders meet these demands, the authors suggest principles for assessment that professionals should consider (see Chapter 6).

Chapter 7 presents suggestions on how to guide early childhood teachers' professional development. Early childhood teachers need to be literate so that they can be knowledgeable about child development, plan and structure classroom activities, and assess children's progress. Researchers from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment examined the literacy levels of early childhood professionals working in Head Start, public school pre-kindergartens, child care centers, and family child care homes in California. Their results showed that the literacy level of these educators varied widely. One-third of the educators in this sample of approximately 100 had limited literacy skills, meaning they did not possess the literacy skills to complete everyday forms like child care regulations, individual education plans, or written health and safe guidelines (Phillips, Crowell, Whitebook, & Bellm, 2003). Such findings highlight how important it is to consider teachers' literacy levels when strategizing about ways to enhance children's literacy. Strickland and Riley-Ayers give a detailed checklist to help an early childhood leader design an effective professional development plan for teachers.

This book is an informative and needed tool in the field and can serve as a valuable reference for school administrators who are operating pre-kindergarten or Head Start programs within their elementary schools. It contributes to our knowledge of literacy development because it addresses the challenges early childhood professionals face when promoting literacy in the modern age. Today, what it means to be "literate" constitutes more than being able to read. Nowadays, literate citizens must not only be able to read and write, they must also be able to surf the web, send emails, and upload video clips onto Utube. Literacy is a social and cultural skill that is ever-changing, but it continues to be the primary way that humans learn to function in society and remain connected to each other. Perhaps an African American college student explained it best by saying, "Literacy is the door to the world." (Qualls, 2001, p. 15).

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