

## Supporting *The Literacy Loop* in Every Classroom:

### A Planning (and Evaluating) Guide for Early Childhood Administrators (and Teachers)

“Literacy is a complex process involving multiple interactions between different aspects of supporting knowledge and specific accomplishments along the developmental continuum.”

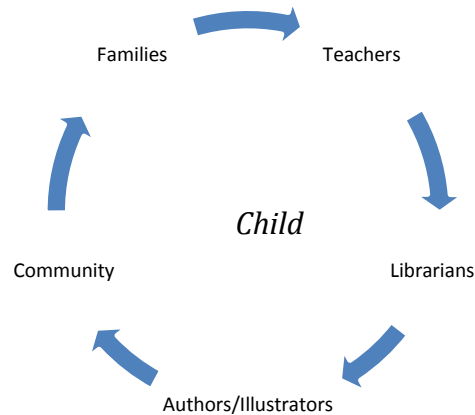
... *Assessing and Guiding Young Children's Development and Learning*, by O. McAfee, D.J. Leong, 2007, (*A Framework for Early Literacy Instruction*:

[http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/Literacy/4006CM\\_EL\\_framework.pdf](http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/Literacy/4006CM_EL_framework.pdf)).

*The instruments provided here are meant to be a guide in planning and later in assessing results-driven integrated and developmentally-appropriate literacy instruction in preschool through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. They are meant to be an informal but carefully designed and research-based device to help administrators plan and evaluate the level and quality of instruction AND family engagement in individual classrooms. As such, they assist both administrators and teachers in moving from this guide to topics of discussion in the review conference. They reveal patterns which can help define overall staff development needs. For those individual teachers interested in raising their level of expertise, these tools can assist in self-evaluation.*

Too often, schools and school districts spend funds exclusively on staff development related to curriculum delivery. The end result of this approach is that many teachers are able to delivery the specific curriculum accurately but students only gain cursory skills or show little interest in instruction rather than growing as learners and problem-solvers. By strengthening teaching, students are more likely to meet standards and perform well on assessments but, just as importantly, students are more likely to embrace learning.

... Cathy Puett Miller, AKA The Literacy Ambassador<sup>®</sup>



## What is The Literacy Loop?

If any child has only one of the five elements of the literacy loop present in his/her life, that child's potential is compromised. Yes, strong classroom instruction is important, but if it is the only element available, it will be doubly hard for that child to blossom and thrive, not to mention the frustration and stress present in the life of that teacher.

Think, in contrast, of students who receive a rich variety of support from multiple elements. More partners with diverse approaches create collaborations. Craft your school community to offer those multiple levels of support.

A note on family engagement: Over 30 years of research tells us that families can make a difference. If you plan carefully, you empower them, not through expecting them to understand or replicate the instructional piece that your teachers have been professionally trained to deliver, but as the partner who provides real-life, engaging and meaningful activities related to the academic standards. Everyone can tell a story; sometimes we must start there.

## THE PLANNING STAGE

Planning and assessment are natural partners but they take time. Each hour spent in planning will mean greater efficiency and better results in the classroom with your teachers and children.

1. Start with your end goals,
2. Break them down in to mini-goals with benchmarks
3. Decide which strategies and techniques you will use to enforce each
4. Go back to the literacy loop image and incorporate on a regular basis the inclusion of your partners.

### **Keep in mind how children learn best**

This document will focus on emergent literacy but certainly the concepts can be applied to other domains of learning. Be sure that in any planning you do, you remember that young children learn quite holistically, rather than in segmented structured environments. Literacy instruction can literally happen anytime during the day in the midst of exploration with science, free choice play time and even during lunch.

Begin by asking these important questions (perfect for strategic planning meetings as a way to start important discussions which help you define what instruction looks like at your facility):

- Are students the center of everything we do at my school? (Be critical; if a single activity does not move students toward mastery of standards or essential, it is not worth our time.) That doesn't mean it has to be overly-structured or boring.
- Are students at this school exposed not only to excellent literacy instruction but to carefully selected supplementary activities and experiences which broaden their knowledge and their world? Name at least three that you will instigate during the coming school year (think community resources/no or low cost and grants in this time of economic challenge).
- Does my school have *specific* strategies and techniques, readily available to teachers, to engage the larger community and families in literacy learning?
- Does my school integrate specific time into teacher's, staff's and parents' schedules for interaction with one another to reinforce the "literacy loop" concept?

### **PLANNING WITH YOUR CURRICULUM**

As publishers produce more complex and comprehensive curricula, planning can become easier. But remember curriculum is a merely a tool; it should never replace a teacher's or administrator's professional knowledge. If you use a published curriculum, be sure to:

- review the teacher's guide. Satisfy yourself (with involvement from your teachers) that it covers the entire developmental spectrum for the age children being taught (in the area of literacy, the National Early Literacy Panel's findings are helpful: <http://www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf>).
- refrain from relying too heavily on the curriculum's scope and sequence of instruction as your only guide; make sure you understand how young children grow (the joint

position statement on Learning to Read and Write from the National Association for the Education of Young Children AND the International Reading Association will help you - see <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSREAD98.PDF> ), as well as *Before They Read*, the book created for both preschool and kindergarten teachers (available from [www.maupinhouse.com](http://www.maupinhouse.com)), and access the early learning guidelines (ELGs) that each state created as part of the *Good Start, Grow Smart* federal initiative, your state kindergarten standards, Head Start Guidelines, and best practices. These each have a segment on Language or Literacy.

## PLANNING WITHOUT A CURRICULUM

### Additional Resources Especially for Practitioners

- *Teaching Our Youngest: A Guide for Preschool Teachers and Child Care and Family Providers*

Available at <http://www.edpubs.org/webstore/Content/search.asp>

*What Works Brief 3: Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules*  
*Training Module 1: Classroom Preventive Practices— Promoting Children’s Success*

Available at <http://www.csefel.uiuc.edu>

*Emerging Literacy: Linking Social Competence to Learning*  
*Linguistic Diversity and Early Literacy: Serving Culturally Diverse Families in Early Head Start*

Available at <http://www.headstartinfo.org/publications/catalog/index.cfm>

Effective planning of any sort, I repeat, must be supported by an understanding of the spectrum of growth. Not every child will be at the same place in every learning domain. Emergent literacy skills do not develop in isolated linear ways although we can identify elements in a common order. For example, most children learn to rhyme before they can identify isolated sounds associated with letters. As more attention is placed on learning sounds and letters in isolation, children may be able to recite the letters and their corresponding sounds with some accuracy before they learn to rhyme. Both come before manipulation of phonemes.

Differences do exist normally in preschool or kindergarten. Some children are stronger in the physical/motor area, some in language, others more advanced in social and emotional maturity. Elizabeth Graue, a professor of early childhood education, is also associate director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin says it this way: “Kindergarten goals, while clear, can’t be childproof”.

Think of the spectrum of phonological awareness. Researchers refer to it as a “pool” with shallow, intermediate and deep levels. You can find more details about the skills that fall generally within each level in this pool in the award-winning book, *Before They Read: Teaching Language and Literacy Development through Conversations, Interactive Read-alouds and Listening Games* (<http://maupinhouse.com/index.php/before-they-read.html>).

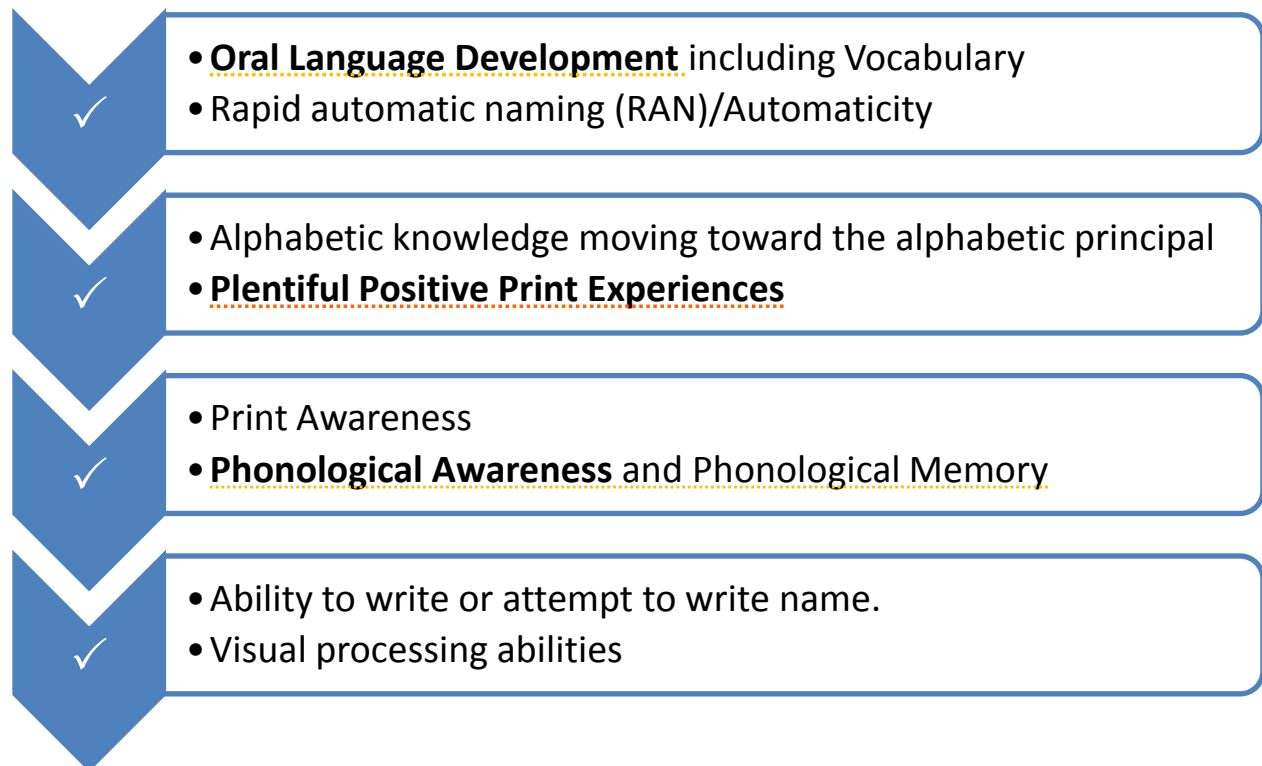
*“Children who are immersed in activities that combine active experiences, rich conversations and print-related activities are apt to develop the foundational skills required to become successful readers and writers.”*

. . . Dorothy Strickland,

Distinguished Research Fellow at the National Institute for Early Education Research.

### Involve your staff in planning

In either case, use planning time as a tool for maturing the knowledge and experience of your staff. Assign each teacher one of the eight items on the list from the National Early Literacy Panel (see next page). Have him/her research best practices and research based ideas (many of which he/she can learn about in the Panel’s full report) to bring to the planning table.

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- **Oral Language Development** including Vocabulary
  - Rapid automatic naming (RAN)/Automaticity
  - Alphabetic knowledge moving toward the alphabetic principal
  - **Plentiful Positive Print Experiences**
  - Print Awareness
  - **Phonological Awareness** and Phonological Memory
  - Ability to write or attempt to write name.
  - Visual processing abilities

## PLANNING TO INCLUDE FAMILIES

Dr. Joyce Epstein indicates in her rich research on this subject that family engagement involves communication that is:

two-way    meaningful, and    frequent.

That takes planning too. With challenging schedules and busy parents, teachers must plan to systematically communicate with families to keep them informed of their child’s progress and to quickly address together any concerns in the child’s development. Just as with planning the instruction in the classroom, planning of this sort takes time.

One of the simplest ways to ensure the frequency necessary to build the working relationship which fosters a “literacy loop” is to regularly schedule parent-teacher conferences (at least three times a year). Your staff may need coaching on effective parent-teacher conferences and Teachervision provides extensive tools to help (<http://www.teachervision.fen.com/teacher-parent-conferences/resource/3713.html>).

An alternative is to schedule as part of the teacher’s planning a rotating prompt which reminds him or her to make an effort to speak with a family member during drop off or pick up. Discussing literacy development and making recommendations for fun, relationship-building activities at home gives teacher and parent common ground, a sense that they are working on the same skills in different ways to help a child grow. Literacy is a natural doorway to increasing parent engagement.

Here are a few other touchpoints to imbed in your overall yearly plan:

- ✓ get to know parents through informal events centered around the children,
- ✓ offer multiple opportunities,
- ✓ start a book club for families (virtual or face-to-face)
- ✓ ask parents how they would like to be involved (a novel idea), and
- ✓ remember that family engagement doesn’t have to happen at the school,
- ✓ engage those who are more involved in reaching out to those who aren’t.

## **DON'T FORGET YOUR OTHER PARTNERS**

Talk with your community librarian (or school media specialist) about the “literacy loop”. In less than 30 minutes the two of you can strategize about a few activities, regularly sprinkled throughout the year, which will support literacy growth and encourage partnerships between home, community and school. Here are just a few ideas to get your own creative juices flowing:

- Focus everyone on common themes and skills so that everyone in the loop is reinforcing just what the children need at any given time. Newsletters (or a quick email note) are a terrific way to communicate what is happening in your preschool or kindergarten classroom not only with parents but also your community partners.
- Invite your local literacy council, local community college, or United Way to send a volunteer on a regular basis (at least once a month) to read or have targeted conversations the students in your classroom (teach the importance of Tier II words to these volunteers – don't know what that is? Email [tla@readingisforeveryone.org](mailto:tla@readingisforeveryone.org) and ask). These organizations or their representative will often recruit and schedule for you.
- Involve family and literacy partners in searching out meaningful ways that they can step into the literacy loop. Concentrate on the central areas of:

rich, interesting conversations

delicious read alouds

play with patterns and sounds in the language (including singing songs!)

At TLA, Inc., we'd love to hear from you. Tell us what you learned in your planning process and how you are growing your literacy loop at your facility. You may do so via email at [tla@readingisforeveryone.org](mailto:tla@readingisforeveryone.org).

Need help in building these authentic partnerships? We stand ready to help. Begin by visiting [www.readingisforeveryone.org](http://www.readingisforeveryone.org) for additional resources.