

Fostering Early Literacy Using the MAcC Model

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Abstract

Waiting to begin teaching children how to read until age six may be too late given the sensitive period for language acquisition that occurs between the ages of three to six. Scientific research on early language learning supports the contention that when given materials that can be touched and felt, strong foundational learning can occur that allows children to quickly and easily master concepts often thought to be too advanced for children of the preschool years.

The art of presenting opportunities for language learning to preschool children lies in careful observation of the child's natural interests and abilities. When lessons are carefully timed to respond to a "teachable moment", learning occurs quickly and easily. Conversely, modeling a fascination with the sounds of words and their meanings, can be a powerful tool in capturing the interest and imagination of young children, thereby furthering the growth of their vocabulary.

Providing a series of "conceptualized abstractions" in a coordinated and artful manner as well as allowing the child to freely choose when, how long, and how often s/he engages with these materials, has proven to be a powerful method to lead young children to learn to read before the age of six.

Introduction

"The years prior to kindergarten are among the most significant in shaping a child's foundation for learning and school success. Research has shown that a child's learning begins at birth, and takes shape as children are nurtured, challenged, and engaged in high-quality learning environments and in relationships with parents and other caregivers.

A robust body of evidence and research demonstrates that high quality early learning programs help children arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. Disadvantaged children who have access to such programs – from birth through age 5 – are more likely to improve their cognitive, social, emotional, and language development. Later effects of high-quality programs are well documented to improve academic achievement, reduce the need for special education, increase employment and earnings, reduce crime and delinquency, and ultimately increase international competitiveness.

The MACC model of education is characterized by multi-age classrooms, a special set of educational materials, student-chosen work in long time blocks, a collaborative environment with student mentors, absence of grades and tests, and individual and small group instruction in academic and social skills.

“Eight evidence-based principles for optimal education” are described by Dr. Angilina Lillard and are true of the MACC Model of education:

- 1) Learning is easy when movement is engaged with thinking.
- 2) We learn best when we are interested in what we are learning about.
- 3) Extrinsic rewards reduce motivation and level of performance once the rewards are removed, therefore, we do not use them.
- 4) Children thrive when they feel a sense of choice and control.
- 5) We learn best when our learning takes place in meaningful contexts.
- 6) Children can learn very well from and with peers; after age 6 children respond well to collaborative learning situations.
- 7) Children thrive on order, routine, and ritual.
- 8) Authoritative parenting and teaching styles are associated with better child outcomes (vs. authoritarian, permissive or neglectful).

Authoritative = assured, confident, assertive

Focusing specifically on the development of literacy in the classroom, I will describe several essential aspects:

Environment

Central to the MACC Model is the creation of a prepared environment. Children develop more fully in a physical space that is sized to their bodies, meets their physical needs, requires movement, is set up in an orderly fashion, and provides many attractive choices for activity. A classroom’s furniture (tables, chairs, shelves) is sized to the child. Everything the children need is sized to their bodies and hands and within easy reach on low shelves.

Montessori Educational Materials

Dr. Maria Montessori researched the work of other doctors interested in the optimal growth and development of children. Two French doctors, Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin, had experimented with children with learning impairments and developed materials made of wood for the children to handle when presented with the concepts of circle, square, and triangle, for instance (among others). Montessori copied these materials and designed new materials based on her own ideas to be constructed out of wood, as well.

Whenever possible the materials were designed to include a “control of error” – by using the objects the children would readily identify when they had made a “mistake” and be able to correct it without intervention by the teacher.

These materials are designed to be durable, and attractive. The children are invited to touch and explore these “conceptualized abstractions” after being given a lesson by the teacher.

Preparation of the Child for Language Learning

Before children are given the material designed specifically to teach them to read and write, they are presented with activities that develop their ability to successfully perform academic tasks. Called the “exercises of practical life”, their aim is multi-fold:

- 1) Learning to care for the self (zipping a zipper, tying a shoe, hand washing, sewing a button, food preparation)
- 2) Learning to care for the environment (watering the plants, sweeping the floor)
- 3) To develop control and coordination of bodily movements both large and small (transfer activities, walking the line, carrying trays, polishing)
- 4) To develop a sense of orderliness in how the presentations are given to the child and in how carefully the environment is prepared
- 5) To develop the child’s concentration by presenting materials that readily capture the interest of the child and that embody increasingly more complex sequences of activity

Preparation for Writing

After the muscles of the hand are developed through the use of the practical life activities (pouring, tweezing, buttoning, etc.) and many materials with small knobs (puzzle maps of the countries of the world) with a particular emphasis on the three-finger grip – the thumb, index and middle finger.

When some degree of mastery of the three-finger grip is evident, the child will be introduced to the metal insets. These shapes and their inset frames are traced using colored pencils. Appropriate pencil grip is thus used as a means to create something with artistic appeal without the requirement that the child copy letters or other symbols at this point.

Lessons about the sounds that make up words are given in parallel to the metal insets as the child moves toward the mastery of writing the written word. With the teacher as the active interface between the child and the basic consonant and vowel sounds of our language, games are played using objects to isolate and help the child identify the discrete sounds in our language. “I spy something that begins with the sound ‘c’. Which object on the mat starts with the sound ‘c’?” The teacher may also simply engage the child in a meaningful conversation and invite the child to pay attention to specific sounds: “This

morning I had banana bread for breakfast. Do you hear the sound “b” in banana and bread? Do you want to see how we write a ‘b’?

Then a sandpaper letter ‘b’ will be presented for the child to see. The sandpaper letters are just that: letters cut out of sandpaper and glued to a smooth wooden board. The children are shown how to trace the letter (which is in the correct manner for writing the letter) and, simultaneously are given the sound the letter makes. Repetition of this tracing movement ‘fixes’ the memory of its shape in the child’s memory.

When the association between sound and symbol is mastered by the child for almost all of the basic consonants and vowels, the moveable alphabet will be introduced. The moveable alphabet is a collection of 26 letters made from wood or plastic. They are colored red for the consonants and blue for the vowels as are the sandpaper letters. A large box holds them for the children to access readily using a mat rolled out on the floor.

Objects whose spelling consists of three phonetic letters (like ‘cat’ or ‘jet’) are placed on the mat and sounded out. The letters are taken from the box and laid on the mat beside the object (encoding). Eventually the child can spell out phonetically a story of his/her own creation. The child is now ‘writing’ without having to use a pencil, sparing themselves the extra burden of having to accurately reproduce the shape of the letter by hand as well as identify the sound needed to spell the word.

Preparation for Reading

As you can easily realize, the sandpaper letters and moveable alphabet not only prepare the child for writing by also reading as well. When the sounds are identified (decoded) and are blended together, the child comes to realize that a word has been uttered. Words strung together in short phrases, longer phrases and then complete sentences, mean that the child is now reading.

This phonetic approach to reading (supported by Montessori materials) proved to be extremely successful when first introduced in Italy because of the very phonetic nature of the Italian language. Soon after being introduced to these materials, the children ‘exploded’ into reading every word they saw around them. When presenting English to children, an additional group of phonemes must be introduced before complete mastery of reading is accomplished (sh, ee, ay, tion, silent letters, etc.).

Phonetic readers are introduced to the children when they are ready for them (Bob Books, for example). Sight words are presented as they are needed for success in reading these books via separate lessons and the children take off into the world of reading!

Stepping Forward and Stepping Back

Insight from Life-long educator, Teresita Leimer

In the book, "[A New Culture of Learning](#)," by [Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown](#) (highly recommend this book), they state the following:

For most of the twentieth century our educational system has been built on the assumption that teaching is necessary for learning to occur. Accordingly, education has been seen as a process of transferring information from a higher authority (the teacher) down to the student. This model, however, just can't keep up with the rapid rate of change in the twenty-first century. It's time to shift our thinking from the old model of teaching to a new model of learning.

In my workshops, I do everything I can to tailor the content to the questions of the participants, not the aspirations of myself. This creates an environment that can be unpredictable for me but hopefully, leads to deeper learning for the participants. I jokingly say that "if this is boring it is your fault because it is based on what you want to know." The learner drives the learning.

There are times I show some use of technology. I was once guilty of going at a snail's pace to do my best to people understood the step-by-step directions of any given software or website. The problem with that approach is for the majority of participants, I am going too slow, while a large portion of the group it seems to be too fast, while some don't care. It would also have people check out mentally from the session because no matter what technology I would show, many would think "Why?" which is a legitimate question. Tapping into my inner Simon Sinek, **if people don't understand "why" the "how" and "what" doesn't matter.**

Now, I zip through things for a few reasons:

1. To show how quickly things can be done.
2. To show "value" to participants.
3. To put participants in a situation where they know they will have to figure things out on their own.

The first two often make sense to people but many struggle with the third. If I go through every step, people learn dependency. But what happens when the “teacher” is gone? People that are determined will find a way so if you can show value in both the process and product of learning.

All of this doesn't mean a teacher shouldn't focus on delivering content or walking through a process with their students. It is more about finding those times where we free our students to figure things out on their own. A challenge of teaching in our world today is knowing when NOT to help, understanding that this will lead to something much more powerful in the future.

From “[The Innovator's Mindset](#)“:

Inspiration is one of the chief needs of today's students. Kids walk into schools full of wonder and questions, yet we often ask them to hold their questions for later, so we can “get through” the curriculum. We forget that our responsibility isn't solely to teach memorization or the mechanics of a task but to spark a curiosity that empowers students to learn on their own.

To wonder.

To explore.

To become leaders.

We forget that if students leave school less curious than when they started, we have failed them.

As educators, we sometimes need to deliver content and transfer skills, but other times, we need to inspire our students to figure out their own way. Sometimes we step forward, and sometimes we step back, but both steps are part of the artistry of a great teacher.

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