

# Teachers' Thoughts on Teaching Reading: An Investigation of Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Literacy Acquisition

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**Abstract** Teachers' assumptions about teaching and learning have a critical impact on pedagogical practices. This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of early childhood educators regarding children's acquisition of literacy in an attempt to gain a picture of current instructional practices. Prekindergarten through second grade teachers ( $n = 76$ ) responded to the Literacy Acquisition Perception Profile. Responses on the reading readiness and emergent literacy subscales served as the dependent variables in a series of ANOVAs conducted with educational level, teaching assignment, and teaching experience as the independent variables. Results revealed a statistically significant difference [ $F(4, 65) = 3.31, p = .03, \eta^2 = .17$ ] between the teachers who had 6–10 years of experience and more than 21 years, with teachers who had 6–10 years clearly ascribing to reading readiness as the preferred way of teaching reading over teachers with 21+ years. This finding may be attributed to many teachers with more than 21 years experience having received initial teacher training during the late 1980s and early 1990s when an emergent literacy perspective, a departure from the traditional view of reading readiness, was the predominant view. It is posited that differentiated instruction rather than the application of a single instructional approach fully grounded in a particular perception may be the best approach to facilitating young children's literacy acquisition.

**Keywords** Teacher perceptions · Literacy acquisitions · Early childhood · Emergent literacy · Reading readiness

## Introduction

Early literacy instruction is a hot topic in today's educational circles. The emphasis on young children's acquisition of literacy and educators' differing views regarding this process, however, is old news that has once again entered the limelight. For decades, American educators have engaged in an ongoing debate over how to most effectively teach children to read. The long-standing point of contention over what constitutes appropriate literacy instruction in preschool and primary classrooms has once again entered the spotlight. A report by the National Council on Teacher Quality (Walsh 2011) fueled a dispute among scholars referred to as the "reading wars" (Straus 2013) when several literacy experts accused the council of promoting an old and narrow idea that direct instruction of phonics is the best way to teach reading. After years of controversy, there is still no universal agreement among researchers and practitioners regarding best practices in teaching children to read. Some still conceptualize literacy acquisition as a set of pre-determined, discrete skills transferred from a teacher to a student. Others argue from the perspective of social constructivism and a belief that literacy is learned as a result of socioculturally constructed meaning through everyday literacy activities (Kim 2011). These two major, disparate perspectives of early literacy continue to influence policy and instructional practices.

## Skills-Based Reading Readiness Perspective

The skills-based, reading readiness approach (McMahon et al. 1998; Morrow and Dougherty 2011) promotes a systematic, explicit approach to teaching literacy. The emphasis on direct instruction is portrayed through the use of highly structured, skills-based readiness programs (Crawford 1995;

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Sippola 1994). Relying predominantly on teacher-led, whole group instruction, this behaviorist view reached levels of great popularity following the early research of Durkin (1970, 1974), that provided empirical evidence for the notion of essential and definable prereading skills.

The original intent of reading readiness grew out of the maturationist theory of learning (Mason 1977; McMahan et al. 1998). This theory advocated waiting for the child to mature to a point in which he or she was ready to learn new concepts and skills. However, the theory as it applied to reading quickly shifted and was interpreted as that period when the child can be approached with reading preparatory activities and reading instruction (Downing and Thackeray 1971). Instead of waiting for a child to be *ready*, the term reading readiness became synonymous with teaching a set of prerequisite skills regardless of the child's maturation and ability to learn the skills. The definition of reading readiness by Harris and Sipary (1985) demonstrates how the opposing views of maturationist and behaviorist learning theories became entwined: "Reading readiness may be defined as a state of general maturity based on aptitudes and learned knowledge and skills which allows a child to learn to read under given instructional conditions" (p. 33).

Teachers and researchers began to critically examine the assumptions surrounding the necessity of skills acquisition in learning to read during the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the reading readiness skills approach to instruction began to wane. In its place were new theories, consistent with current research on how children learn. First appearing as an ERIC term in 1987, the concept of "emergent literacy" recognized the value of children's initial efforts to engage in reading and writing activities. This recognition of the importance of young children's attempts to engage in literate behaviors began to have a profound impact on the literacy strategies being developed and implemented in early childhood classrooms of the late twentieth century.

### Emergent Literacy Perspective

Emergent literacy describes a child-centered, meaning-making approach to early literacy learning (McMahan et al. 1998; Morrow and Dougherty 2011). This perspective, rooted in the concept that young children learn best through natural exploration and play-based experiences, has a long history. Introduced and advocated by educational pioneers such as Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey, this view was applied to literacy learning with much success. The work of constructivist learning theorists Jean Piaget (1983) and Vygotsky (1962/1988) provides additional support for the concept that children's learning occurs, in part, through social interactions with significant people (Clay and Cazden 1990).

The groundbreaking work of New Zealand scholar Marie Clay in the 1980s drew the attention of scholars and

practitioners. Clay (1975) was among the first to suggest that literacy learning begins before children receive formal instruction. She also promoted the idea that reading and writing were learned concurrently and interrelatedly, rather than sequentially. The term "emergent literacy," coined by Clay (1966) has become universally accepted as a view which accepts and legitimizes children's early, nonconventional reading and writing behaviors.

Clay's theory gained support in the late 1980s with the publication of a position paper by the National Association for the Education of Young (Bredenkamp 1987). This position paper gave rise to the term "developmentally appropriate practices." Such practices include the integration of literacy experiences into the environment to prompt children's use of language. These practices teach literacy concepts, such as print awareness, comprehension, and reading skills within the context of the child's work and play (Wolfe and Nevills 2004). This view of literacy learning is based on the precept that symbolic thinking is the cornerstone of meaningful literacy learning (Gallas 1994) while acknowledging that teaching isolated skills is still a part of the bigger literacy picture (Narey 2009). According to van Kleeck and Schuele (2010).

One general conclusion of this body of work suggests that, in their everyday informal interactions with print used by adults in their worlds, in the context of sharing books with adults, and in their own explorations with writing, children become aware first and foremost that print is meaningful and useful. These attitudes and beliefs lay important foundations for children's eventual transition to conventional reading and writing (p. 344).

In 2000, the publication of a report in the United States by the congressionally mandated National Reading Panel caused the pendulum to swing once again (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2000). Similarly, an inquiry into literacy by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education in Great Britain resulted in the report *Teaching Children to Read* (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2005) noted phonics as an essential methodology in teaching reading. As a result, the return to phonics instruction and emphasis on phonemic awareness again became the predominant focus of literacy learning.

### The Influence of Recent Legislation and Current Practices

Reading First, a major part of No Child Left Behind legislation (2001), gave increased prominence to teaching reading according to a narrow, direct instruction phonics curriculum (Gamse et al. 2008). Although no research supported the claim that a lack of instruction during early

childhood could jeopardize future literacy achievement, an emphasis on skills-based teaching returned (Barnett 1998). New advocates of a skills-based perspective sought no compromise with the emergent literacy philosophy. Instead, these policy makers equated an emergent literacy approach with wasting valuable learning opportunities, thus, providing a disservice to young children. As a result, learning standards and accountability policies designed to enhance children's early reading skills have been imposed on educational programs beginning with preschool (United States Department of Education 2002).

As of 2007, more than three-quarters of the 50 United States had some sort of early learning standards for the years before kindergarten causing a blurring of the boundary between preschool and elementary classrooms (Copple and Bredekamp 2009).

Although most early childhood educators recognize that some skills (such as the identification of letter shapes and names) are important (Helm and Katz 2010), they reported feeling pressured to focus primarily on intensive drill and practice of isolated skills (Jeynes 2006) rather than an emergent literacy approach. The stresses of accountability have dramatically increased in recent years leading to more direct instruction, which is in direct opposition to developmentally appropriate practices that have become widely accepted as best practice in early childhood programs (Bodrova and Leong 2005).

Some veteran teachers, recognizing the push-down of curriculum, have criticized federal, state, and district curriculum expectations and questioned the appropriateness of rigid standards for 5 year olds (Shaughnessy and Sanger 2005). Yusufi and Enesi (2012) concluded that an early childhood teacher in Nigeria should be an authority in phonics. A recent study by Al-Momani et al. (2010) revealed the lack of value some early childhood educators in Jordan placed on natural, spontaneous interactions with print in the home. Interview results revealed that kindergarten teachers consider parental involvement as unhelpful since they view parents as unqualified persons to take a role in teaching reading.

Current American instructional practices of concern include excessive lecturing to the whole group, fragmented teaching of discrete objectives, and insistence that teachers follow rigid, tightly paced schedules (Morrow and Dougherty 2011). Nitecki and Chung (2013) found that many of the preschool teachers observed in their study felt the need to address standards through direct instruction. This left few opportunities for child choice and initiative. Preschool teachers continue to feel "caught in a tug-of-war between direct instruction and play to nurture the school readiness of young children" (Tullis 2011, p. 26).

Far reaching negative consequences have been expressed in regard to the return of a skills-based reading readiness approach. According to Blank (2012), "Framing early

literacy learning as direct instruction of isolated skills typically results in a very narrow approach to learning to read and communicate clearly" (p. 3). There is also concern that the emphasis on reading instruction is curtailing valuable experiences such as problem solving, rich play, collaboration with peers, opportunities for emotional and social development, outdoor/physical activity, and the arts. In these high-pressure classrooms, children are less likely to develop a love of learning and a sense of their own competence and ability to make choices, and they miss much of the joy of childhood learning (Wien 2004).

## Purpose and Significance of Study

Teachers, whether they are novices or seasoned professionals, enter the classroom with assumptions about teaching and learning (Bondy 1990). A growing body of research (Kim 2011; McMahon et al. 1998; McLachlan-Smith and St. George 2000; Miller and Paige-Smith 2004) has identified teachers' knowledge and beliefs about children's early literacy learning as having a critical impact on pedagogical practices. The issue of differing approaches to early literacy instruction is by no means limited to the United States. These studies are international in scope including work with young Korean-Canadian children as well as kindergarteners in New Zealand. Lynch (2009) interviewed preschool teachers in a large multicultural area of central Canada who noted concern over the variation in practices for fostering print literacy development. This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of early childhood educators in a southeastern state regarding children's acquisition of literacy in an attempt to gain perspective on current teachers' acceptance of contrasting viewpoints and, as a result, a picture of instructional practices in today's classrooms. Specific research questions are as follows:

1. Do early childhood teachers' perceptions of literacy acquisition differ by educational level?
2. Do early childhood teachers' perceptions of literacy acquisition differ by grade level taught?
3. Do early childhood teachers' perceptions of literacy acquisition differ by amount of teaching experience?

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

A quantitative, descriptive research model was used to investigate early childhood (prekindergarten through second grade) teachers' (n = 76) perceptions of literacy acquisition. Survey method, which "provides a quantitative

or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell 2003) was employed. Participants in this study were 76 predominantly female (99 %), European American (68 %) prekindergarten through second grade teachers from various public elementary schools located in a single southern Alabama school district. Total teaching experience ranged from zero to over 25 years with 39 participants (52 %) having between six and 15 years of experience. Most (26) participants (35 %) reported having 0–5 years of experience teaching at their current grade level. Participants’ grade level assignments are as follows: 11 prekindergarten, 28 kindergarten, 19 first grade, 18 s grade. Thirty-nine teachers (52 %) held an advanced degree as follows: 35 Masters, three Educational Specialists, and one Doctorate.

Participants were invited and consented to voluntarily participate in this research project. There were no direct benefits or risks for participating, and no incentives were provided. All participants were at least 19 years of age and were informed that they could withdraw from participation at any time without consequence.

### Instrument

A two-part survey was specifically designed to accomplish the objectives of this study. The first part collected demographic information from participants, and the second part contained 20 literacy acquisition items distributed among two domains—reading readiness skills and emergent literacy.

### Demographic Items

This demographic section of the survey solicited information on respondents’ gender (male, female), age (20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50+), ethnicity (European American, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, Native American), current teaching assignment (prekindergarten, kindergarten, first, second), teaching experience (0–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, 21–25, 25+), and educational level (Bachelors, Masters, Educational Specialist, and Doctorate). Several categories were created for current assignment (PK/K and 1st/2nd), teaching experience (0–10, 11–20 and 21 or more), and education (BS or advanced degree) to examine if teachers’ perceptions of literacy acquisition are affected by the age level of the children taught, amount of time one has been teaching, and/or level of education. It was posited that possible differences in perceptions could exist among recently educated, novice teachers and those teaching for many years who may have been initially certified in a teacher preparation program grounded in a different theoretical base.

### Literacy Acquisition Perception Items

The Literacy Acquisition Perception Profile (LAPP), developed by McMahon et al. (1998), was used to determine teachers’ perceptions of literacy acquisition. The LAPP yields a separate score for each of its two subscales—reading readiness skills and emergent literacy. The reading readiness skills (RR) subscale score is calculated by summing the values for each of the 10 reading readiness skills items (Items 1, 3, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18). Reading readiness skills subscale items are presented in Table 1.

Likewise, the emergent literacy (EL) subscale score is calculated by summing the values for each of the 10 emergent literacy items (Items 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 19, and 20). Emergent literacy subscale items are presented in Table 2.

The highest possible score on each subscale is 50. A high score on either subscale—Reading Readiness or Emergent Literacy—indicates a strong agreement with that perception of literacy acquisition.

In addition to undergoing construct validity procedures, assessments of test–retest reliability, concurrent and predictive validity, and internal consistency were performed (McMahon et al. 1998). Concurrent validity of the LAPP was examined with a sample of elementary teachers ( $n = 347$ ) who responded to the LAPP and the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) developed by DeFord (1985), which yields. A total TORP score represents a teacher’s orientation based on continuum ranging from decoding to skills-based to whole language (DeFord 1985). The results indicated a strong significant,  $r(1,346) = .75$ ,

**Table 1** Reading readiness skills (RR) subscale items

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1. In order to learn to read, a child needs to know the letters of the alphabet and the corresponding letter sounds
  3. Beginning reading and writing practices exhibited by young children result from direct instruction
  7. Oral reading mistakes should be corrected immediately
  8. Repetition of new vocabulary will guarantee their inclusion in a child’s sight vocabulary
  9. It is the teacher’s responsibility to control the child’s development in becoming a literate individual
  14. Proficiency in the basic reading subskills has to be acquired before one can act in a literate way
  15. Reading is essentially the mechanical skill of decoding, or turning printed symbols into sounds that are language
  16. The teaching of literacy must be systematic and sequential in operation
  17. When presented with an unknown word, children should be taught to sound it out
  18. Root words should be taught to beginning readers prior to inflectional endings
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**Table 2** Emergent literacy (EL) subscale items

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2. Becoming literate is a continuous, developmental process that begins very early in life
  4. Meaning, rather than phonic cues, should be emphasized during children's early experiences with print
  5. Beginning reading and writing practices appear naturally in young children with exposure to environmental print
  6. In order to become literate, young children must be provided with numerous and varied opportunities to read and write
  10. Learning to read is a social process often influenced by children's search for meaning
  11. Learning to read and write involves taking risks
  12. Opportunities for children to engage in reading and writing activities should be provided throughout the day in all areas of the curriculum
  13. Play is one of the best ways for young children to learn about written language
  19. Children acquire valuable information regarding written language when engaged in voluntary, spontaneous play
  20. Children acquire literacy as a response to printed language in their social environment
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$p > .01$ , negative correlation between TORP scores and RR subscale scores on the LAPP and a significant,  $r(1,346) = .32$ ,  $p = .0001$ , positive correlation between TORP scores and EL subscale scores. These results indicate that teachers with low TORP scores would score high on the RR subscale score of the LAPP, while teachers scoring high on the TORP would score high on the EL subscale of the LAPP (McMahon et al. 1998). Thus, the Literacy Acquisition Perception Profile was deemed valid and reliable for research purposes.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

The data of the study were gathered through an anonymous, 20-item electronic survey. Following IRB approval, the survey was distributed via Survey Monkey<sup>TM</sup> using teachers' email addresses that are available on the school district's website. No identifying data were collected, and participants were assured that survey responses would be used for research purposes only. The survey was sent to 271 prekindergarten through second grade teachers at 23 public elementary schools located within the same school district in southern Alabama. The school district covers a large geographical area and serves over 62,000 prekindergarten-12th grade culturally diverse students at 114 school sites (Philips 2012).

While researchers are increasingly using internet instruments for data-collection, web survey response rates are fairly low (Jin 2011) even when Internet access is not an issue. A meta-analysis based on 45 published and unpublished experimental comparisons between web and other modes (i.e., web, telephone, direct mailing, face-to-face, etc.) showed that

web surveys yielded an 11 % lower response rate than those of other modes (Manfreda et al. 2008). Our survey remained open for a three-week period and yielded 76 participants for a response rate of 28 %, which is consistent (range 18.50–43.50,  $M = 22.20$ ) for response rates of email surveys in the studies reviewed by Manfreda et al.

The data were screened for missing items. This screening revealed that the sample ( $n = 76$ ) contained five records with large amounts of missing data. As a result these records were excluded from the sample for analysis.

Correlations were calculated for the ten items that comprised each of the two subscales—reading readiness skills and emergent literacy. Items that had two or less correlations were excluded from the scale to create a truncated scale. For the reading readiness subscale, only one item (18. “Root words should be taught to beginning readers prior to inflectional endings.”), which had two correlations, was removed. Cronbach's Alpha for the 9-item truncated reading readiness subscale was .75. For the emergent literacy subscale, three items were removed following the calculation of correlations. Two items (4. “Meaning, rather than phonic cues, should be emphasized during children's early experiences with print.” and 5. “Beginning reading and writing practices begin naturally in young children through exposure to environmental print.”) were both only correlated with one other item on the scale. The third item (2. “Becoming literate is a continuous, developmental process that begins very early in life.”) had only two correlations. The Cronbach's Alpha for the 7-item emergent literacy truncated subscale was .71.

Statistical analysis of the data was conducted using descriptive statistics and a series of ANOVAs to determine if the teachers were teaching reading from the point of view of emergent literacy or reading readiness. The independent variables were educational level, teaching experience at current grade level, and total teaching experience. Statistical significance was determined if the  $p$  value was at an alpha level of less than .05.

## Results

### Educational Level

A one-way ANOVA was conducted with educational level as the independent variable and the truncated reading readiness and emerging literacy subscales as the dependent variable. No statistical significance was found for either subscale.

### Teaching Assignment

A one-way ANOVA was conducted with the grade level taught as the independent variable. There were no

statistically significant results in the one-way ANOVA for current teaching assignment for either the truncated reading readiness or emergent literacy subscale.

### Teaching Experience

A one-way ANOVA was conducted with number of years teaching experience at the current grade level as the independent variable with the truncated reading readiness and emergent literacy scales as the dependent variables. The omnibus result for the ANOVA showed a statistically significant difference [ $F(4, 65) = 3.31, p = .03, \eta^2 = .17$ ] for the reading readiness subscale on teaching experience at current grade level. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD were conducted to discover which level(s) of experience were statistically significant. The teachers who had 6–10 years ( $M = 36.4, SD = 1.12$ ) of teaching experience at the current grade level and more than 21 years at the current grade level ( $M = 28.80, SD = 2.24$ ) were statistically significant ( $p = .03$ ). The teachers who had 6–10 years teaching at the current grade clearly ascribed to reading readiness as the preferred way of teaching reading over teachers who had more than 21 years of experience. There were no statistically significant results for the emergent literacy subscale.

### Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered when examining the results of this study. A larger sample size would increase the precision of being able to generalize the findings to a larger population. The self-reporting nature of surveys is one limitation of this study. In addition, the researchers recognize that some items may have had multiple interpretations. Thus, the subjectivity in responding to questions suggests another limitation of the study and warrants some caution in interpreting the results.

### Discussion and Implications

The teachers who had more than 21 years of teaching experience at the current grade level were not as supportive of a reading readiness skills approach as those who had 6–10 years experience. This finding is interesting when considered in conjunction with the historical evolution of reading instruction in the United States. Emergent literacy was at the height of its popularity during the late 1980s and 1990s. As a result, this would have been the most likely time for emergent literacy tenets to have been advocated as best practice in teacher preparation programs. Teachers with over 21 years experience probably received their

initial certification 25–30 years ago during the time that reading readiness skills were not as strongly supported. The lack of a statistically significant result regarding years of teaching experience for the emergent literacy subscale could be attributed to the influence of more recent professional development and/or experience with curriculum changes resulting from increased academic expectations and high-stakes testing.

Despite the emphasis on comprehension of text and connecting reading to writing found in the newly adopted Common Core State Standards, direct instruction in phonics is being purported as the scientific approach to teaching reading (Greenberg et al. 2013). According to Massaro (2012), the latest empirical and theoretical research in several fields of behavioral science has hinted that children can learn to read with ease without being taught if an appropriate form of written text is meaningfully associated with their early life experiences. Such contradictory messages mandate that teachers critically consider all claims through a professional filter recognizing that approaches focusing on phonological decoding can and should vary. For some, particularly low-achieving readers, explicit word recognition and explicit reading comprehension training represent viable instructional options (Berninger et al. 2003) while a blended more inclusive model might be preferable in other situations (Morrow and Dougherty 2011). Morrow (2012) asserts that “there is no single method or combination of methods that teach all children to read” (p. 38). Rather, quality instruction should occur in literacy-rich environments, with social interaction, peer collaboration, and whole-class, small-group, and individual learning experiences where children are taught explicitly during small group instruction with time for exploration and problem solving (Morrow and Dougherty 2011), which may be particularly beneficial for young culturally and linguistically diverse children (Kim 2011). Thus, the focus on achieving the goal of “every child a reader” may lie in considering the best of both a reading readiness skills and emergent literacy approach. By facilitating early childhood educators’ use of differentiation rather than the application of instruction grounded in a single perception of literacy acquisition, literacy can be taught in an integrated fashion that is functional, related to real-life experiences, and meaningful for each child.

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