CHAPTER 1

Where Reading and Writing Begin

As another day begins, children arrive at their preschool. Four-year-old Gretchen stands in the doorway, head bowed, eyes aimed at the floor. Her mother nudges her gently and says, "Go ahead. Tell your teacher."

GRETCHEN: I got stitches. (*Walks through the doorway and turns her head to expose the right side of her chin.)*

TEACHER: (*Looks at stitches and also notices a bruise above her right eye.*) What happened, Gretchen?

GRETCHEN: I falled.

TEACHER: You fell? Did you fall someplace at your house, or did you fall at the park across the street?

GRETCHEN: In my room. And I can't jump on my bed anymore.

TEACHER: Oh, you fell while jumping on your bed?

GRETCHEN: I falled on the rocking chair.

TEACHER: Oh, you fell off your bed while jumping on it, and you hit the rocking chair?

GRETCHEN: I can't jump on the rocking chair anymore.

TEACHER: (*in an incredulous tone*) Did you try to jump from your bed to a rocking chair? (*Gretchen nods.)* Oh, my. So, you tried to jump into a rocking chair, and then what happened?

GRETCHEN: I, I, like this (*using hand motions to trace her fall's trajectory*), and then the . . . the . . . the rocking chair . . . the rocking chair, like this (*using hands again to indicate object falling over)*,

and the thing on the . . . that thing on the . . . on the bottom . . . the chair, the rocking chair hit my eye (*hand up to eye)* and my chin bumped the floor and bleeded (*hand on chin)*, and then my mommy came and I had to sit in my car seat for the hospital.

TEACHER: So, you jumped up off your bed into the rocking chair, and then the rocking chair fell over, with you in it. When the rocking chair fell over, you fell onto the floor, and the bottom part that makes the chair rock hit you in the eye, and then your chin hit the floor. Is that what happened?

GRETCHEN: Yes, yes, and then I had to . . . had to . . . had to go to the hospital and they did stitches. My mommy took me.

TEACHER: Your mommy came to your room and then she took you to the hospital?

GRETCHEN: Yes, and my brother.

TEACHER: Oh, your brother went, too. Well, I'm sorry that you hurt yourself and had to have stitches. I bet you were scared.

GRETCHEN: Yes, I was.

TEACHER: That would be a wonderful story for our class book. Maybe you'd like to draw some pictures about falling and going to the hospital to get stitches, and I could write down what you say. Then, we could add this story to our class book. What do you think?

Gretchen does not answer. By this time, several children have gathered around to listen to the news, and Gretchen's best friend is clutching her hand. As the children head to a table to play, they continue talking about Gretchen's adventures the night before.

Gretchen's experience was a topic of conversation several times throughout the day. Other children told of similar experiences, and a hospital theme emerged in the dramatic play center. The children took the roles of parents, calling the doctor, taking sick children to the hospital, and warning about dangerous activities such as jumping on beds and running out into the street. As the children played, they created stories, pulling from their own experience to create fictionalized roles for themselves and the dolls serving as their "children."

UNDERSTANDING EARLY LITERACY

What do these conversations between Gretchen and her teacher and then with other children have to do with the emerging print knowledge that is the topic of this book? We would contend, "Everything!" For all children, literacy begins with

language (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). In fact, both reading and writing are particular specialized forms of language use.

Gretchen never composed a written account of her fall and stitches for the class book. Four-year-olds have a strong desire to tell all about something or to capture events in play, but less interest in creating a record of experiences once the story has been told or reenacted. They do not yet realize that written records help people save, recall, and share past experiences. However, Gretchen's teacher understood that talking about events and creating related scenarios in play help children like Gretchen to convey their intentions—their meanings. Although Gretchen did not actually record her experience in writing, these early social interactions with interested adults and peers help children learn to think and compose—an essential element in writing. And as children listen to the stories told by their teachers and friends, they learn how to extract meaning from the language of others—an essential element of reading. In fact, there is indisputable evidence that oral language and literacy learning are intricately connected (Biemiller, 2003; Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Pilonieta, Shue, & Kissel, 2014; Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2009; Scull, 2013).

Making Sense of Early Reading and Writing Processes

Certain areas of development have direct links to children's success in early reading and school readiness. Oral language, concepts of print, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge have strong scientifically based research support as predictors of early literacy success (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2009; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Some children are able to gain abilities in each of these as they interact with print in their environment and engage in extended language interactions with others, but most will need the assistance of knowledgeable adults who call their attention to specific aspects of written language. Gretchen's teacher did just that when she invited the child to create a page for the class book.

While the pages that follow will focus on children's developing awareness of print and the foundational concepts they must learn if they are to become successful independent readers and writers as they move through elementary school, it is important to keep in mind that literacy learning never happens in the absence of interesting things for children to read and write about. Children who practice naming and writing the alphabet letters through rote, repetitive activities devoid of any meaningful context are not likely to retain or apply their understanding of the alphabet over time. On the other hand, children who are excited to document for themselves and their parents the progression of stages they observe as a caterpillar metamorphoses into a butterfly will be eager to use their emerging knowledge of print so that they can share their new insights.

A well-equipped science and discovery center in a preschool classroom and a teacher's sharing of books related to the artifacts found there, for example, will

prompt many children to engage with print in meaningful ways. Figure 1.1 shows a simple center created to accompany children's study of shadows and reflections within the *Opening the World of Learning* curriculum (Schickedanz & Dickinson, 2005). This center invites hands-on exploration of science concepts while also providing opportunities to engage with print through topically related picture books and writing materials. Classroom activities related to both science and social studies content can be especially enriching of children's knowledge bases and provide them with interesting ideas to read and write about. Rich, intriguing content is the key to meaningful reading and writing in preschool.

Standards for Early Literacy Learning

Teachers' awareness that children Gretchen's age need to be challenged to engage with print has emerged over time as standards for early literacy have been promulgated. Over the past few decades, there have been a number of standards movements aimed at improving academic achievement for children in American schools. Many of the early movements focused on achievement levels for children in elementary grades and high school. Over the past two decades, however, standards have also emerged for young children, particularly in the area of early literacy.

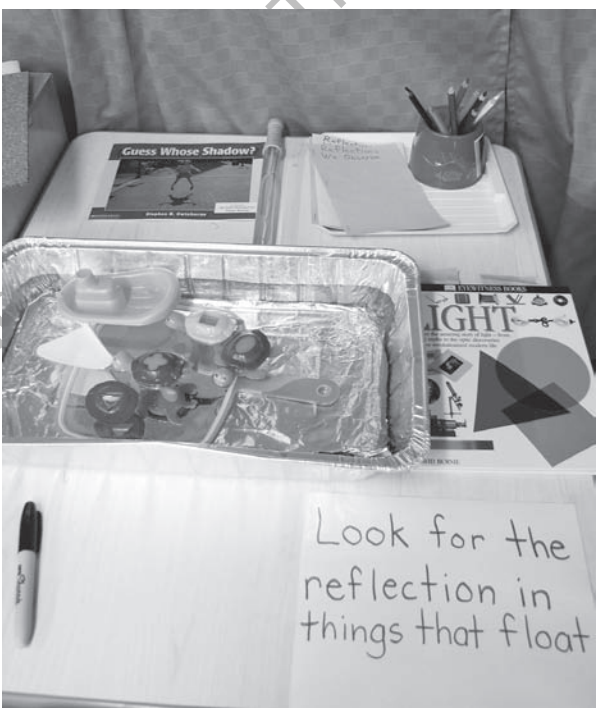

FIGURE 1.1. A thematic discovery center invites writing.

When they came to prominence the United States, preschools were seen primarily as a place to socialize young children into classroom culture. Thus, significant emphasis was placed on engaging children in free play for much of the day, albeit enhanced with educational materials typically not found in homes. Even as preschools came to be viewed as places to foster school readiness, notions of readiness were most often limited to helping children learn to use writing implements, recognize colors and shapes, and perhaps recite the alphabet and count from one to ten. Beginning in the 1990s, however, policymakers began to attend to the growing body of early literacy research demonstrating children's interest in and ability to learn about written language. The National Academy of Sciences was charged by the U.S. Congress to undertake an analysis of that body of research and mine it for scientifically supported practices that, if implemented appropriately, could prevent children from experiencing later reading difficulties (Snow et al., 1998).

Partly in response to that panel's efforts, the focus of early literacy research and preschool instruction shifted to much more intentional teaching of early literacy (Casbergue, 2010; McGee & Casbergue, 2011). Organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the International Reading Association (IRA) worked together to develop standards for early literacy learning and teaching (IRA & NAEYC, 1998) that fit within the framework of developmentally appropriate practice for young children (NAEYC, 2009). These standards encompassed a full range of literate behavior, including reading and writing.

The most recent standards movement in the United States led to the creation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors' Association & Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010). The CCSS language arts standards do not address learning in preschool, however, and focus most strongly on older children's comprehension of different kinds of texts, their ability to identify evidence for conclusions about what they read, and their understanding of sophisticated vocabulary. The CCSS standards for writing largely address older children's ability to compose essays in response to the fiction and nonfiction they read, and compose persuasive and argumentative texts. They do not address the early development of print concepts or children's emerging experimentation with composition that are the primary focus of this book.

While the CCSS do have potential to impact notions of school readiness, preschool teachers are much better served by looking to the national early literacy standards noted above and to the standards set out for young children by their own states or countries. Because this book focuses most closely on children's print knowledge and writing development, we do not specifically address the standards for language development, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension. Those standards and strategies for supporting language, vocabulary, and comprehension development are addressed fully in the companion text in this series

(Roskos, Morrow, & Gambrell, in press). We have condensed information from many sets of early literacy standards related to learning about print in Table 1.1 to illustrate typical standards and learning experiences for supporting preschool children's development of print concepts.

Concepts of Print

The term *concepts of print* refers to children's knowledge of the functions of print and how print works. This includes an understanding that books are read from front to back; an awareness of how print is placed on a page; and an understanding that print carries meaning, has a variety of uses or functions in our lives, and is speech written down. In order to make sense of print, one also needs to understand directionality and comprehend both the concept of word (words are composed of letters and separated by spaces) and the concept of letter (letters have distinct shapes, have names, and form words). Teachers help children learn these concepts through repeated exposure to and guided activities with books, charts, Big Books, and various types of functional print, and through demonstrating writing and inviting children themselves to write. Her teacher's suggestion that Gretchen create a page for a class book was one such invitation.

TABLE 1.1. Typical Standards and Learning Experiences: Concepts of Print

Standards	Learning experiences
• Understands that print is used for different functions. • Understands that speech can be written down. • Understands that print carries a message. • Understands that illustrations carry meaning but cannot be read. • Understands that books have titles and authors. • Understands concepts of word—letters are grouped to form words, and words are separated by spaces. • Understands concept of directionality—front to back, left to right, and top to bottom movement on a page. • Understands that letters function differently than numbers.	• Observes varied uses of print for various purposes (e.g., shopping lists, recipes, and other simple directions, and letters and messages) and participates in their creation and use. • Observes adults writing as they say the words aloud (write aloud). • Participates in composing process by offering ideas and language for others to write down. • Attends to print during Big Book activities. • Refers to books by their titles; is beginning to understand that a book represents a person's ideas and that this person is the author. • Engages in opportunities to draw and "write" independently. • Observes and follows along as adults track print from left to right while reading aloud; browses through books from front to back. • Participates in opportunities to write his or her own name and brief messages.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. It is one level of phonological awareness, the general understanding that words consist of sounds. Phonemic awareness requires more specific skills than other levels of phonological awareness; these skills link more directly to phonics, which relates sounds to the letters that represent them. Instruction in phonemic awareness may, at times, involve the use of print. That is, it may include linking a letter or letters to sounds in spoken words as they are stressed or isolated by an adult.

Children demonstrate their knowledge of the beginning levels of phonological awareness when they:

- Identify and make oral rhymes (e.g., "I can bake a chocolate [cake]." "The cat wore a [hat].")
- Identify and work with syllables in spoken words (e.g., Jess [one clap], Becky [two claps]).

Children demonstrate their knowledge of finer aspects of phonological awareness (phonemic awareness) when they:

- Identify and work with onsets and rimes in one-syllable words (e.g., the first part of *dog* is /d/: the last part of *cat* is /at/).
- Attempt to write words by using a letter to represent a sound heard in the word (e.g., *b* for *baby*, *o* for *ghost*).
- Recognize when several words begin with the same sound (e.g., "Wee Willie went walking"; "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers").
- Identify words that begin with a specific sound (e.g., match and sort pictures according to initial sound).

Phonemic awareness activities are most effective when children are taught to manipulate phonemes and to anchor or code these phonemes with letters. This is sometimes referred to as "phonological awareness with a phonics connection" (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003; Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Table 1.2 shows typical standards and learning experiences for supporting preschool children's development of phonemic awareness.

Alphabet Knowledge

Letter name knowledge, or alphabet knowledge, is an excellent predictor of success in early reading. The fluency (accuracy and speed) with which children recognize letters gives them an advantage in learning to read. Letter names are part of the language used to talk about reading and writing. Alphabet knowledge often

TABLE 1.2. Typical Standards and Learning Experiences: Phonemic Awareness

Standards	Learning experiences
• Builds on understandings associated with phonological awareness, such as ability to recognize and produce words starting with the same sound. • Has the general understanding that letters represent the sounds that make up spoken words (alphabetic principle). • Begins to make some sound–letter associations.	• Observes others as they segment spoken words into their individual sounds and use letters to write the sounds. • Selects letters to represent individual sounds that a teacher has segmented in a spoken word. • Selects a letter to represent an individual sound (usually at the beginning of a word) that he or she has segmented in a spoken word.

indicates children's interest in learning how letters and sounds relate to one another and helps them remember how words are spelled. Some researchers suggest that alphabet knowledge is a by-product of extensive early literacy experiences. Therefore, simply training children to recite the alphabet or memorize letters without providing learning in a larger literacy context has proven unsuccessful as a predictor of beginning reading success (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Piasta & Wagner, 2010).

According to Burns and colleagues (1999), "By the end of kindergarten, children should be able to name most of the letters of the alphabet, no matter what order they come in, no matter if they are uppercase or lowercase. And they should do it quickly and effortlessly" (p. 80). At the preschool level, children are now generally expected to know *at least* 19 uppercase letters as indicated by the most recent benchmarks set by the federal Early Reading First initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Often children attend first to the letters in their own names. Parents and teachers should expand children's knowledge of the alphabet by providing opportunities for children to learn letter names as part of a variety of rich literacy and oral language experiences. Table 1.3 shows typical standards and learning experiences for supporting preschool children's development of alphabet knowledge.

BALANCING ATTENTION TO PRINT AND MEANING

This book focuses on how preschool children develop knowledge about print that they will eventually use to read and write independently. While we specifically target print knowledge, it is important to keep in mind that literacy is language. Reading and writing are attempts to extract and convey meaning using symbols on a page. It does a child little good to recite letters of the alphabet if he or she doesn't know what letters actually are or how they are used to understand and convey

TABLE 1.3. Typical Standards and Learning Experiences: Alphabet Knowledge

Standards	Learning experiences
• Notices and is able to name letters that begin common logos and names of friends and family members. • Understands that letters of the alphabet are special visual graphics that have unique names. • Identifies at least 19 upper-case letters of the alphabet. • Identifies at least 12 lower-case letters of the alphabet. • Identifies letters in his or her own name.	• Uses magnetic letters or tiles for play and exploration; plays with alphabet puzzles. • Has experiences with alphabet books. • Discusses letter names in the context of daily meaningful activities. • Observes and participates in experiences where letter names are linked to writing names and other meaningful words.

messages. And while children certainly need to recognize and form the letters of the alphabet, it is equally important for them to learn how to use those letters to share their thoughts.

Young children themselves intuitively balance their attention to print and meaning. Preschoolers often create large quantities of writing that involve no composing. When children write without composing, they simply explore the physical forms of writing. Figure 1.2 shows writing of this kind created by a 4-year-old. When the teacher asked the child to tell her about his writing, the child said, "It's nothing." Apparently, the child was simply practicing some of the letters in his name (*ADAM*), or stringing letters together to create something that looked like writing, not attempting to communicate a specific message.

In another example, Figure 1.3 is a single page of a 14-page "storybook" written by another 4-year-old. Although the child said it was a storybook, it had

FIGURE 1.2. Writing without composing.

FIGURE 1.3. A preschooler's page of a storybook.

no specific story. This child, too, was simply creating an artifact that resembled a storybook. He even drew a line down the center of each sheet of paper to indicate where the bound pages of an actual book come together!

Figure 1.4 is a child's experiment in making a lot of letters and letter-like forms, none of which represented any thoughts. Figure 1.5 shows a child's "words," which were not any words in particular. These mock words were the products of the 4-year-old's experimentation with putting letters together to make collections that look like words.

Creating print markings is a skill that develops in conjunction with a child's budding picture-making skills. Development in both domains proceeds by leaps and bounds between 3 and 5 years of age. Three-year-olds, especially, often combine both writing and picture marks in the same performance. As Howard Gardner noted in *Artful Scribbles: The Significance of Children's Drawings* (1980), these combination pieces typically do not convey a message. Instead, children use these to inventory many of the graphic forms they have in their repertoires. Figures 1.6a and 1.6b are examples of this kind of performance. Each was produced by a different young 3-year-old.

At the same time that children explore print and drawing simply to experiment with graphics, they are keenly interested in messages. They love to hear favorite books read aloud over and over, reveling in the humor of stories, eagerly reciting familiar refrains, and puzzling over how a beloved character might solve a thorny problem. They want to know what words in their environment mean, and

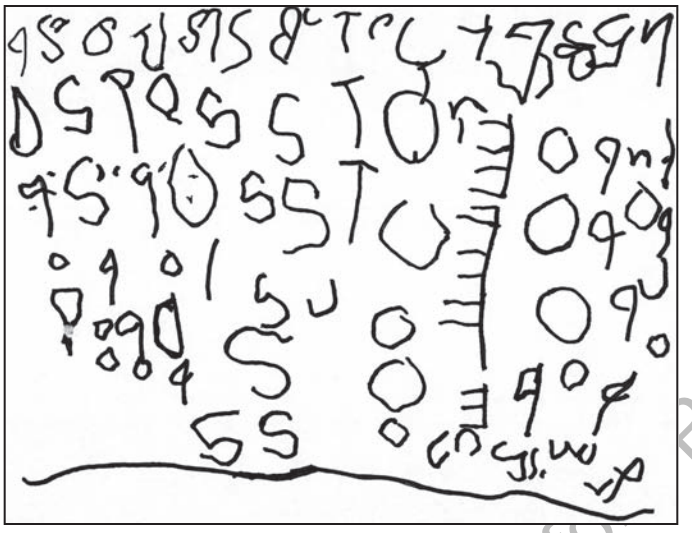

FIGURE 1.4. Experimentation with letters and letter-like forms.

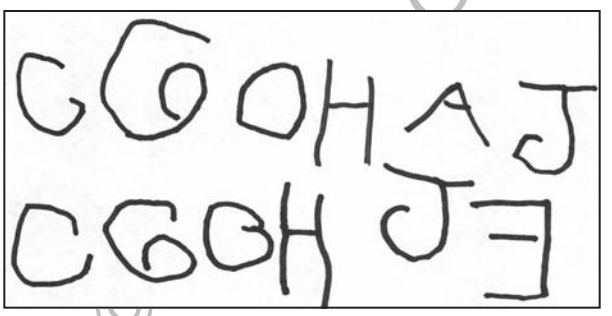

FIGURE 1.5. A preschooler's experimentation with words.

FIGURE 1.6. Preschoolers often combine drawing and writing.

they demand that adults read to them. The pleasure both teachers and children can derive from reading together is evident in Figure 1.7.

Preschoolers who understand that the print and illustrations in books have meaning also expect that their own writing can have meaning, even if they don't know what that meaning might be. Anyone who has worked with preschoolers knows the charming frustration of being asked by a child what his page full of scribbles and random letters "says." With appropriate support and modeling, preschoolers come to understand that actual messages can be written down, and that once written, those messages will always convey the same idea. This often results in requests for help creating notes and signs that can be used to convey children's important messages, whether those messages are expressions of affection for parents or pets, or prohibitions against knocking down a carefully constructed block structure.

Preschoolers' attention to both print for its own sake and to the meaning behind it underscores their natural inclination to balance attention to both print and meaning. Teachers need to nurture children's interest in both!

BRIDGING THE ORAL AND GRAPHIC WORLDS

From these descriptions of how children attend to and experiment with print, it should be apparent that one of the major tasks of literacy development for preschoolers is bridging from oral to written language. Gretchen's interaction with

FIGURE 1.7. Children are keenly interested in messages, whether they are reading or writing.

her teacher illustrated that children might have a lot of information they want to share, but at first they do so through oral language only. When preschoolers do use marks to convey meaning, whether in the pictures they draw or in the scribble writing they create, they often must tell us what their marks "say"—what they mean. Preschoolers cannot at first capture all of their thoughts and feelings in graphic form—their pictures and writing at first fall short of the conventional, and cannot easily be interpreted by others. Only with the help of their verbal explanations can others find out about preschoolers' intended meanings.

Beginning during the preschool years and continuing through kindergarten and the primary grades, children gradually become more skilled in both drawing and writing. Little by little, the marks children put on a page begin to stand more on their own to represent the messages they wish to convey. In this way, the graphic world becomes a bridge to the oral world because drawings and writing capture more of the meaning a child tries to communicate.

In a similar vein, when preschoolers first interact with books, they do not extract meaning conventionally from the print. In fact, their attempts to read are usually governed by pictures. Initially, they are unaware that the print on a page carries any meaning. It is not uncommon for children to inadvertently cover print with their hands as they lean in to look at pictures while someone reads to them. As far as they know, an adult reading a book need only look at the pictures to tell the story! They may be completely unaware of the print on each page.

Thus, the teacher's job is to expand children's awareness of print and help them make connections between oral and written language. In the following chapters, we accompany children on their journey from oral language to the beginnings of reading and writing. Actually, several journeys are described. As we have already suggested, a child's literacy development rests on the gradual coming together of various strands of knowledge and skills. One journey involves the child's first steps in moving from oral language and pictures to writing and reading print. Other journeys involve the child's movement from scribbles to recognizable alphabet letters, and from strings of letters to actual words created through growing awareness of phonological principles. There is also the journey from the understanding and creation of short, simple messages to messages that are reasonably detailed and coherent.

Subsequent chapters explore in detail the role of preschool teachers in helping children along these journeys. As the journeys are described, information about the settings in which reading and writing take place, and about the importance of support from both materials and people will be provided. Children must be assisted in many ways in making their journeys, if the story is to end as we would hope, with competent children, excited about books, full of ideas and eager to record them, and confident in their ability to read and write.

Most names used in this book are pseudonyms, except when we have obtained parents' permission to use children's images and writing artifacts. Descriptions of

students and teachers are composite sketches that represent real classroom situations that we have encountered in our studies.

Myths about Preschool Literacy

Preschool is too early to begin literacy instruction; young children are not ready to learn about print.

In this book, we demonstrate that children actually are keenly interested in print and very eager to learn to use it for their own purposes. Withholding opportunities for children to learn about print diminishes their interest and prevents them from developing age-appropriate skills that will contribute significantly to their ongoing literacy learning.

Preschool children should be allowed to spend all of their time playing. That is how young children learn.

It is true that play is a primary means by which young children learn. That does not negate the need for skillful guidance to shape children's interactions with print even as they play. Many of the strategies we describe in subsequent chapters offer ideas for enhancing children's play by providing opportunities for them to incorporate reading and writing into their play, and especially into their pretence. It is also true that even 4-year-olds participate with interest and attention in brief periods of explicit instruction, particularly in individual or small-group settings. We detail a number of playful lessons that teach children about print, as well as ideas for incorporating print knowledge into activities that transition children from one classroom event to the next. We honor the right of children to play, and demonstrate how developmentally appropriate literacy activities can extend and enhance their play.

Children need to be able to read before we expect them to write.

The brief overview of literacy development in this chapter illustrates that the journeys children embark on as they become both readers and writers are basically the same. Their primary task is to learn how oral and written language are connected. To do so, they explore how print works—how to recognize their names to locate their cubbies, how to write their own names to claim paintings they want to bring home, how to read simple lines of print in a morning message, or how to compose their own messages. They are as eager to write as they are to read, and print knowledge learned through one medium enhances the other.

IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, AND ACTION

1. Does your state, district, or school have preschool standards? If so, what are expectations for concepts of print, phonemic awareness, and alphabet knowledge, and how are you and your colleagues addressing them? Reflect on your classroom. Discuss the learning opportunities available in each category with your colleagues. Which items do you feel confident about? Which items need more attention? Use Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 as a guide.

2. The need to maintain developmentally appropriate practice while addressing accountability often leads educators to take sides between "what is best for children" and "what will further children's ability to demonstrate what they have learned." The discussion tends to dichotomize the way people think about literacy learning and promote misunderstandings about the distinction between what is important to teach and how it should be taught. Is this a point of tension in your school? If so, talk about what it means for helping children learn about print.
3. Widely accepted best practices in early childhood literacy education suggest that effective early childhood literacy programs:
   - Are grounded in what is known about children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.
   - Are planful and intentional.
   - Acknowledge and value differences among children.
   - Involve scaffolding children's experiences from the known to the unknown.
   - Engage children in ways that are meaningful and pleasurable.
   - Are developmentally appropriate.

   Read these descriptions and discuss them with your colleagues. What might these practices mean for your program?
4. As you review and discuss the language and literacy standards for your school or district, discuss ways to address them in an integrated way through content of interest to children. Social studies and science content provide an excellent vehicle for expanding children's background knowledge and their language and literacy skills. Try out some of the ideas discussed and share them with others.
5. Continue to follow up with the discussion regarding the need to reconcile perceived tension between developmentally appropriate practice and the demands for demonstrated progress. How are you and your colleagues maintaining an atmosphere of enjoyment and engagement in the literacy activities in which children are involved?

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