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Implications of the Michigan Definition of Reading for Quality Early Childhood Programs: Ages 0-8

Michigan Reading Association

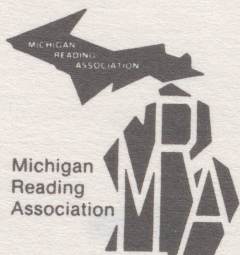
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Position Paper



IMPLICATIONS OF THE MICHIGAN DEFINITION OF READING FOR QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS: AGES 0-8

The Michigan Reading Association supports and encourages appropriate reading instruction at all levels. Concerns about the intense pressures from parents, community, and from within the school for (1) formal academic skills development programs and (2) early formal reading instruction brought about the formation of the Early Childhood Committee.

Research has demonstrated that learning is a complex process. Learning results from the interaction of children's past experiences, maturation, and a stimulating environment.

Quality Early Childhood environments which lead children toward reading and language success should:

1. emphasize expansion of background knowledge, language development, listening and thinking skills, social and emotional development, and perceptual motor abilities throughout all areas of the curriculum;
2. emphasize creative and developmentally appropriate education of the whole child;
3. emphasize child-initiated and adult-facilitated learning through: Play, experimentation, concrete meaningful experiences and active participation with literature; as well as interaction with language, other children, adults, and the environment; and
4. reflect the fact that a child's positive self-concept is an essential ingredient for learning.

HOW DOES THE QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM INCORPORATE THE NEW DEFINITION OF READING?

(Definition: Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation.)

The Michigan Department of Education in conjunction with the Michigan Reading Association prepared this "new definition of reading" in 1983. This definition, based on recent research, provides educators with a new look at the reading process and provides direction for reading instruction. Because it is quite brief, the full meaning may be obscure to those attempting to use the new definition for the first time. A more detailed explanation which highlights the key elements of the definition and focuses on strategies found in good early childhood programs follows.

"CONSTRUCTING MEANING" is a critical component for early childhood educators. One of the assumptions underlying the new definition is that the ultimate goal of reading is the ability to construct meaning. We now know that meaning cannot be passively extracted from the text but that readers **actively** construct or create meaning from the **interaction** of their prior knowledge, their understanding of the author's message and the setting in which the text is read. Thus, the definition emphasizes the interactive, constructive and dynamic nature of the reading process.

This construction of meaning takes place with prereaders throughout the day as they listen to books read aloud, see varieties of labels, watch dictation and write for themselves.

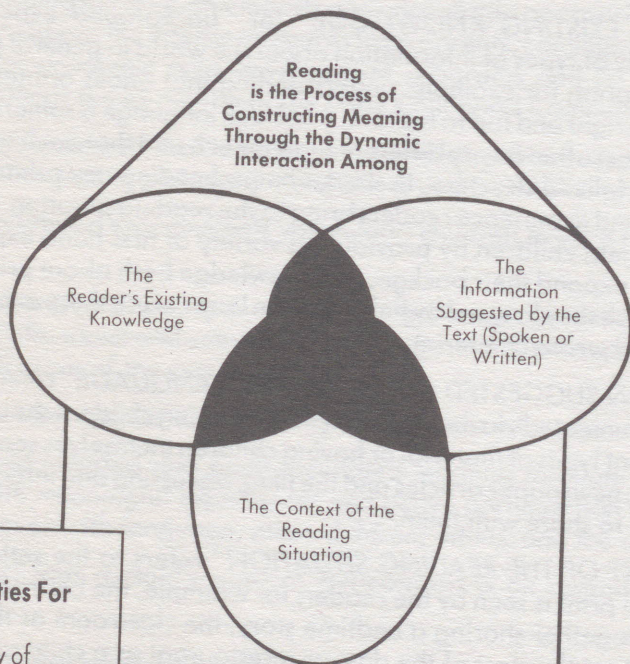
Beginning readers must learn immediately that reading is more than decoding. When reading proceeds letter by letter or word by word, comprehension is difficult if not impossible. Using materials that are relevant to young children and that use whole meaningful text helps facilitate reading for meaning.

Successful construction of meaning (comprehension) of the printed page is made possible if readers are able to **employ and integrate** ("DYNAMIC INTERACTION") **three** types of information.

1. "*THE READERS EXISTING KNOWLEDGE*" (or "*background experience*") which includes a variety of types of information about the world in general plus knowledge of the world of print; for example, understanding that books printed in English are read from left to right and top to bottom, that book language is sometimes like spoken language but most often is very different than speech and that each type of literature has its own specialized structure. In short, comprehending any printed text depends on the background experience readers bring to the reading situation. Early childhood educators can help children by providing a variety of first-hand experiences which enable them to expand their background knowledge both about print structure and the world in which they live and by helping them learn to use these experiences as they discuss and read written material.
2. "*INFORMATION SUGGESTED BY THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE*" refers to the author's message communicated via the text. Teachers of young children should assist them by reading different types of material or having children themselves read different types (fiction, poetry, newspaper articles and the like), discussing and interpreting what the author wanted to share with them.
3. "*THE CONTEXT OF THE READING SITUATION*" refers to the setting (place, time, mood) in which print is seen by the reader; for example, the bedroom as parent and child snuggle together sharing a bedtime story, the classroom as the teacher reads announcements at the start of the day, or a restaurant as a child reads a menu. The setting can add meaning to the text; the more meaningful and text-related the setting, the more likely the reader will comprehend the text.

Teachers of young children play a vital role in implementing the new definition of reading. Even toddlers can understand the differences in text types and can "*write*" and experience print in many forms. As young children meet print in all forms and as language is developed through meaningful conversations, storytelling and music, teachers use activities to help children construct meaning in both oral and print form. Teachers must continue to provide their pupils with a variety of first-hand experiences to build their store of background knowledge. Positive daily experiences with literature, writing, exploration, experimentation, and questioning provide children with opportunities to predict and to confirm that print is oral language written down and that written language can be read and understood.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE MICHIGAN DEFINITION OF READING FOR QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAMS



Curricula Includes Opportunities For Children To:

1. Participate in a variety of experiences.
2. Develop, practice and expand spoken language and thought.
3. Develop and practice thinking skills through listening, speaking, reading, writing and dramatizing.

Curricula Includes Opportunities For Children To:

1. Experience reading and writing in a variety of places and for a variety of purposes.
2. Experience reading and writing as an integrated part of the total curriculum.

Curricula Includes Opportunities For Children To:

1. Develop the concept of story.
2. Experience various forms of print.
3. Develop concepts about print (left to right, top to bottom, etc.)
4. Develop the concept about the organizational patterns of texts.
5. Express themselves through writing.
6. Experience various forms of literature.

APPROPRIATE PRACTICES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD READING

Consistent with the Michigan Reading Association position statement on early childhood reading and the Michigan Department of Education definition of reading, the MRA Early Childhood Committee outlines the following recommendations:

I. Broaden the concept of reading readiness.

Reading readiness is on-going; each level of reading has prerequisite skills and abilities. Reading readiness is more than dealing with the alphabet, sound/symbol relationships and other prereading skills in isolation. It includes expansion of language and background experiences, listening and thinking skills and concept development. It provides opportunities for children to express themselves in both oral and written form, to participate in shared story experiences, and to develop a desire to read.

Appropriate Practices

1. Children experience reading and writing as an integrated part of the total curriculum. Teachers and children explore information and materials related to topics, experience learning through events and materials and record their experiences. Activities such as sociodramatic play, making a newspaper or researching a topic help children understand the functions of print.
2. Children have broad, first-hand experiences which familiarize them with the meanings found later in printed form and have a wide range of direct experiences that provide a link to story topics, characters, settings, feelings, or activities (existing knowledge).
3. Children have daily opportunities to use language meaningfully. Teachers consciously model meaningful language, listen and respond to children's talk, engage children in conversation, and encourage vocabulary expansion.
4. Children practice predicting and confirming as they listen to predictable stories and actively explore and interact with materials and ideas at centers in all curriculum areas. Questions are asked that encourage thinking, such as, "What would you have done?" "Why do you think...?" "What do you think will happen next?"
5. Children develop an awareness of the elements of story structure (schema), including setting, characters, theme, and plot. These are developed by hearing stories read or told many times, drama-

Inappropriate Practices

1. Reading and writing are only taught at scheduled times with the focus on isolated skills such as letter recognition and formation of letters. Print strategies are not used in other curriculum areas or at other times of the day.
2. It is assumed that children are ready for formal reading because they have had previous preschool experiences.
3. A major portion of the child's day is spent passively sitting and listening. Opportunities for meaningful child-to-child dialogue, such as centers or cooperative work groups, are not provided.
4. Children have few opportunities to make predictions or express their own opinions. Teachers do not facilitate activities which promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
5. Stories are read without discussion of story scheme or without opportunities to discuss, respond to the story, or participate in follow-up activities. Storytime is not a scheduled daily activity.

tizing stories, dictating personal stories, comparing and contrasting different versions of the same story, and retelling stories with the flannel board characters, puppets, and other manipulatives.

6. Children learn conventions of print through the use of big books, language experience stories, observing dictation, experience charts, and story reading. Beginners learn that one reads from left to right and top to bottom, when to turn a page, that a book has a beginning and an end, and that print is meaningful and related to things in the world.
7. Children are exposed to a variety of types of literature that are carefully selected and preread by the teacher. Teachers read to the whole class and to small groups daily.
8. Children develop an awareness of phonics and its usefulness through interactions with whole, meaningful text (stories, complete sentences, songs, poetry, invented spelling, children's writing, etc.).
9. By participating in a multitude of communication opportunities, children understand the connections among reading, writing, listening, speaking, and dramatizing and view themselves as communicators.
6. Conventions of print, such as reading from left to right and top to bottom, are not stressed. The emphasis is only on decoding.
7. Read-aloud books are selected haphazardly. Storytime is sometimes deleted from the daily schedule to make time for direct instruction.
8. Children are always taught phonics as a separate subject, isolated from whole, meaningful text.
9. Reading and writing activities are emphasized, while listening and speaking are neglected. Due to this neglect and the teaching of reading and writing as separate subjects, children fail to see the relationship among the language arts.

II. Allow for individual differences in child growth, development, culture and learning styles.

The teaching of reading should reflect the personal learning styles, culture and language of all children. It should facilitate individual pacing and continuous progress from grade to grade, and avoid lock-step placement in reading and language arts materials.

Appropriate Practices

1. Teachers expect children to have different levels of ability, development, and learning styles. Teachers accept these differences by designing and implementing appropriate activities for all levels.
2. Each child's culture, expressive language and dialect is respected and is used as a base for language and literacy activities.
3. Children's progress in reading is continuous and is facilitated by providing materials at a variety of grade level designations.

Inappropriate Practices

1. All children are expected to perform the same tasks and achieve the same narrowly defined, easily measured skills.
2. Children are expected to use "standard English" exclusively and are expected to conform to a singular value system.
3. The grade level of materials is determined by publishers with little consideration for individual progress. Children are required to use structured materials at the grade

level determined for their chronological age.

III. Allow for flexibility in type of instruction and age for beginning instruction in reading.

Children are ready to benefit from reading instruction at varying ages and stages of their development. Highly structured formal tasks are not effective for children. Creative, child-oriented activities are always more appropriate.

Appropriate Practices

1. As an alternative to whole group instruction for all preschool and primary grades, the teacher provides a variety of centers which are interesting and meaningful to the children. Centers might include sociodramatic play, science, math, listening, reading, writing, art, music, geography, local history, current events, etc.
2. The teachers build instruction upon what children already know about oral language, reading, and writing. The focus is on meaningful experiences and language for both readers and non-readers.
3. The teacher identifies those children not ready to read and provides them with further concrete experiences while stressing language development, auditory and visual skills, and perceptual skills. With readers at all levels, the teacher provides many and varied materials at their appropriate level.
4. To assess and facilitate children's involvement with materials, teachers move among groups and individuals. Teaching strategies are varied to meet many learning styles.
5. Children learn to be risk-takers when they have opportunities to communicate what they know, think, and feel. Teachers provide these opportunities and accept that there is often more than one answer.

Inappropriate Practices

1. A major portion of class time is spent in whole group, teacher-directed activities. Centers are not recognized as being valuable for preschoolers and primary grade children.
2. All children participate in a program which focuses upon whole group instruction in isolated skills with commercially prepared workbooks and ditto sheets. Children's existing reading skills are neither acknowledged nor expanded.
3. All children are engaged in the same structured reading activities. Those children not making expected progress are sent to remedial classes. Advanced readers are confined to their grade level texts.
4. Teachers dominate the environment by talking to the whole group rather than by observing and noting individual responses to reading situations.
5. Teachers sometimes fail to respect the prior knowledge and personal feelings of the child. Children are expected to answer questions according to a predetermined set of standards developed by the publishing companies and included in curriculum guides.

IV. Select materials to reflect curriculum objectives and children's needs.

The materials selected for use with children should reflect knowledge of curriculum objectives and understanding of child development. Early childhood programs should be

equipped with concrete and manipulative materials as well as other instructional materials which are consistent with the developmental needs of children. These materials would replace symbolic and abstract workbooks and worksheets.

Appropriate Practices

1. Prior knowledge is enhanced through problem solving with real objects. For example, letters might be learned through the manipulations of playdough and letter-shaped cookie cutters, and properties of matter might be learned through weighing objects in a balance.
2. Children have ready access to a classroom library center containing classic tales, recent writing, picture books, poetry, informational books, and realistic stories.
3. Taped stories are readily available in a listening center so that children can hear stories more frequently, and can enjoy following along in their own copy.
4. Teachers provide a variety of materials for creating and initiating print. Manipulatives such as magnetic letters, rubber punch-out letters, and small chalkboards provide opportunities for experimentation. A writing center is established which contains, for example, an assortment of plain and lined paper, pencils and erasers, markers, a typewriter or a word processor.
5. Reading and writing opportunities are apparent in all situations where "real" materials are provided; for example, menus and pads for writing orders in a restaurant center; typewriter, word processor and envelopes in a research center; and graph paper and markers in a weather station.

Inappropriate Practices

1. Background knowledge is primarily fostered through interactions with abstractions such as pictures, symbols, and verbalizations.
2. Reading materials are limited in quantity and genre, and children do not have opportunities to browse and study books in the classrooms.
3. Taped books are not used or are not used on a regular basis. Funds are not available for commercial sets and teachers do not have time to prepare their own.
4. Writing implements are unavailable, except when passed out by the teacher for specific, teacher-directed activities. Experimentation with typing, letter writing, etc. is discouraged or no time is provided for writing activities.
5. Centers contain no print or writing materials.

V. Use evaluation for positive monitoring of child progress and programs.

Evaluation and screening methods should allow the school to adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of individual children rather than limit the child or force adjustment to the prescribed school programs. Informal assessment activities that consider the child's total development provide valuable information in a less stressful situation. Test results should be reported and interpreted to all concerned in language that is meaningful and easily understood.

Appropriate Practices

1. Assessment of beginning reading and writing skills considers many variables

Inappropriate Practices

1. Assessment of beginning reading and writing skills is limited to a test of letter

such as observations about existing knowledge and enjoyment of literature, facility with concepts about print, interest in learning how to read, attempts at invented spellings, and letter recognition and letter-sound relationships.

2. Any assessment must be developmentally and culturally appropriate. Evaluations take into consideration the child's total development and cultural experience and their effect on the reading process.
3. The selection of evaluation measures should be based on the objectives of the instructional program.
4. Student evaluations form the basis for program evaluations as teachers monitor student progress and consider adaptations or changes.
5. Teachers share results of tests with parents using language that is easily understood. Parents and teachers understand that standardized tests cover only certain skill areas.

names, letter-sound relationships, or list of sight words mastered.

2. Assessment is narrow in scope. Evaluations do not consider developmental rates and cultural differences. Evaluations focus only on reading and writing skills and label children as "failures" who do not read at "grade level."
3. Evaluation measures are not coordinated with objectives. Commercial reading tests are allowed to determine teaching practices.
4. Evaluations are recorded in student folders but are not used by teachers to modify the curriculum.
5. Teachers neglect to share test results or discuss limitations of standardized tests with parents.

VI. Encourage communication and home/school coordination.

School personnel should make a concerted effort to communicate with parents and community about appropriate practices for children as they relate to reading and language development. This should facilitate coordination of practices in home, school, and community as the child is introduced to reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Appropriate Practices

1. Teachers make parents aware of the reasons for a total language program at school, and provide them with specific ideas for activities to carry out at home (reading books and children's writing, discussing art work, cooking activities, current issues, predicting outcomes in television shows, etc.).
2. Teachers make parents feel welcome in the classroom, and encourage them to read to children, to listen to children read, to help write journals, and to work in centers.
3. Teachers prepare newsletters or workshops that enable parents to understand that progress is not measured by the

Inappropriate Practices

1. Parents feel isolated from their child's school experiences, and receive limited information about helping their child with reading and language.
2. Parents need to schedule an appointment to visit the classroom. Classroom assistance is not encouraged.
3. Teachers rarely communicate with parents. Numerous worksheets are sent home.

number of worksheets their children bring home but by their children's enthusiasm for learning.

VII. Require knowledge of early childhood not only for teachers but also supervisory personnel.

Persons involved in decisions concerning curriculum, materials and teaching assignments for early childhood education should have knowledge of and experience in childhood development, early childhood education and reading and language development.

Flexible child-centered programs are, of course, more difficult to organize and implement than pre-packaged ones. In order to be ready to facilitate learning, teachers and supervisory personnel must be aware of child development and learning and how they relate to reading and language processes and be able to articulate the relationships.

Appropriate Practices

1. In an early childhood program, qualifications for teachers include one or more of the following:
 - a bachelor's degree in early childhood or child development
 - an elementary teaching certificate and student teaching/teaching experience with children eight and younger.
 - The Early Childhood Endorsement (ZA) added to an Elementary (K-8) Teaching Certificate.
2. The program is administered by an early childhood specialist or local school district administrator and teacher with experience in early childhood education and reading.
3. The instructional staff participate in ongoing professional development activities, including in-service training, professional workshops, courses at institutions of higher education, teacher exchange, observation, coaching, and other training experiences related to the field of language arts and reading activities appropriate for young children.

Inappropriate Practices

1. Teachers with no specialized training or supervised experience are viewed as qualified because they are state certified, regardless of the level of certification.
2. Administrators with no specialized training or supervised experience working with young children are viewed as qualified because they are state certified, regardless of the level of certification.
3. The instructional staff participate in only generic district-wide K-12 in-service sessions.

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Thank to the 1986-87 Committee: Jeanne Dobes, Glenowyn Jones, Mary Pine, Patti Rice.

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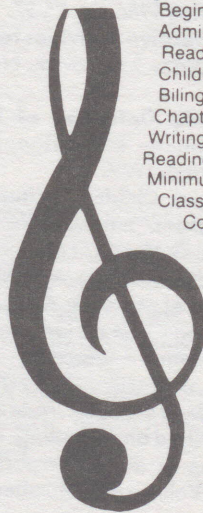
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IRA members will receive housing forms in December 1988. Preregistration materials will be mailed in January 1989. These materials will also be available upon request from IRA Headquarters, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19714-8139, USA.

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Program in Argentina Wins IRA Literacy Award

The National Literacy Plan of 1988 International Reading Association part of the International Literacy Year (September 8). The presentation took place in Paris, France. IRA President Koppman represented IRA at the National Literacy Plan of 1988.

1. Having mobilized the support of private institutions to launch a literacy nationwide survey, aimed at consolidating and enabling learners to understand their social rights and responsibilities.
2. Making effective use of radio broadcasts for instruction to those living in remote areas and other reasons to attend classes.
3. Establishing workshops to provide instruction in literacy to school drop-outs.

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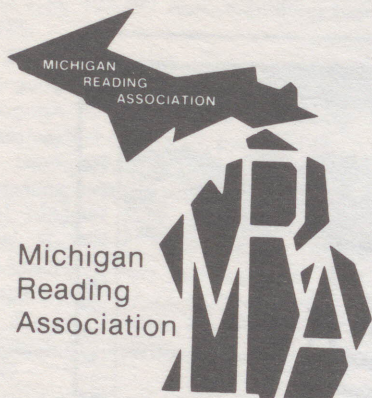
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