



What Counts as Literacy in Early Childhood?

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Abstract: Issues of literacy development are a major source of worry to American educators. Worries about whether U.S. children read well enough emerge every time results of an international comparison are published. Many of the provisions of the No Child Left Behind legislation are directed toward more stringent assessment and more effective instruction in literacy. Concerns about school readiness have led to interest in the quality of preschool programs, to the expansion of preschool programs designed as prevention or intervention efforts for children of low-income parents, and to movements toward publicly financed kindergarten classrooms for four-year-olds, to provide more time for children to acquire the skills they need for school. Is all this attention really justified? What kinds of literacy skills do young children possess, and what is the evidence that those levels are unsatisfactory? The focus of this chapter is literacy, in particular a consideration of the many and varied child capacities that have been identified as related to literacy outcomes among children under the age of eight. The argument I will make is that conceptions of literacy, and definitions of what counts as literacy, vary enormously, and that those varying conceptions are reflected a) in divergent claims about how well children are doing, b) in differing conclusions about whether some early childhood accomplishments really matter to later literacy development, c) in differing foci for the design of early childhood education and intervention programs, and d) in varying emphases on skills selected for inclusion in the assessment of literacy in the early childhood period. I start with a brief description of children's literacy development—what the mythical 'average child' can do at ages up through grade three. Then I turn to a description of the disagreements among literacy researchers, the issues that divide them and that lead them to differing conceptions of literacy itself. I elaborate those differences by describing how they shape their advocates' answers to key questions about the central topics of interest: preschool literacy accomplishments, precursors to later literacy development, design of prevention/intervention programs, and assessment.

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