

IMPACTFUL COMMUNITY-BASED LITERACY PROJECTS

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**FOREWORD BY
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Foreword

Literacy Is Life

In 2013, the philanthropist David M. Rubenstein established the Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program to “honor nonprofit organizations that have made outstanding contributions to increasing literacy in the United States or abroad.” In this way, the awards illuminate the importance of literacy while also showcasing and disseminating innovative and effective methods across the states and around the world that promote literacy.

Like the awards that inspired her book, the goal of professor of education and library science scholar Lesley Farmer is to “facilitate worldwide literacy.” Not only has she created a compendium of Literacy Awards winners, providing a helpful overview of each winning project, she also embeds each project within a frame of “community literacy”—noting that the most effective and sustainable projects share a commitment to community-based needs and participation.

While the first thing we may think when we hear the term *literacy* is early reading and the ABCs, Farmer makes clear that literacy is much more than foundational reading skills. For one thing, literacy has innumerable manifestations. The term transcends print and now includes media, health, and information as well as cultural, fiscal, ecological, emotional, and recreational literacy. Clearly, literacy is multifaceted and shaped by the context in which it occurs. Each specialized literacy represents a constellation of highly specific and often complex knowledge. As Farmer notes of health literacy, it “may be as

simple as reading food and medical labels and as complicated as determining health insurance options.”

And if we examine the United Nations’ *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, as Farmer does, we see the broad impact of literacy. This United Nations Agenda includes seventeen goals, which provide a road map for our survival—everything from ending poverty and hunger to providing sustainable housing. Achieving all seventeen depends on robust literacy.

Given the importance of literacy to our lives, Farmer’s exploration of the many functions and manifestations of literacy is both alluring and helpful. Farmer also includes a practical guide to initiating your own literacy project. How do you plan a literacy project, conduct a needs assessment, establish the goals and objectives of your literacy project, and identify and target your audience? What does the research say about productive literacy partnerships? Farmer helps detail the steps needed to create an effective and sustaining project in your own community.

Ultimately, Farmer’s book is likely to spark a deeper understanding of literacy in its most exalted state: as a tool for self-discovery; for development of the mind and heart; literacy to develop the intellect and knowledge of the world; literacy for liberation. This is the indispensable role of literacy we need to embrace in our schools, in our communities, and in our civic life.

Farmer serves on the Library of Congress Literacy Awards Board. She is well acquainted with deeply compelling efforts underway across our states and around the world to make literacy accessible to all. As you read her book, you will revel in the many manifestations of literacy around the globe—and the projects in place meant to promote literacy. Consider choosing one or more to support—or, using Farmer’s blueprint as your guide, create your own. Our lives depend on literacy. Indeed, as Farmer suggests, literacy is life.

—DR. LOIS BRIDGES, VICE PRESIDENT AND
PUBLISHER, SCHOLASTIC PROFESSIONAL

Introduction

Words, words, words! They are all around us: in signs, in mass media, in stores, in the workplace, online, at school, in games. The effective use of language is vital for communication and is the basis for literacy. As such, literacy constitutes a basic learning need and is considered a foundational skill for civilization. Literacy enables people to access and comprehend information that helps them participate effectively in their societies. Nevertheless, literacy is not easy to define. Nor is literacy a universal ability.

UNESCO (2004) defines literacy as

the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written (and visual) materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society (p. 13).

The term *literacy* takes on different connotations when translated (UNESCO, 2006). For instance, in several countries the term is generally *alphabétisme*, which seems to limit the concept to one of a writing system, such as learning one's ABCs. Other nations associate literacy with the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic. France uses the term *littérisme* to describe what is often defined as *functional literacy*: the ability to read and write simple text for

everyday life—which leads into UNESCO’s more advanced definition, adopted in 1978:

A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community’s development (p. 1).

In some cases, functional literacy is linked to economics or community development: a person’s function within society.

In turn, people who are functionally illiterate cannot use reading, writing, and calculation to develop themselves or to engage in activities that need literacy to function. An illiterate person cannot read or write simple text for everyday life (UNESCO, 1978). Thus, functionality implies a higher level of competency.

As for people who are aliterate, they have the ability to read, but do not have the habit or desire to do so. For such people, reading is often slow and frustrating. Usually aliteracy does not address writing. It tends to occur more often in the developed world than in developing worlds (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004).

The concept of literacy has also changed over time. For instance, the term *literate* comes from the Latin word meaning “educated,” “learned,” or “one who knows the letters” (such as the ABCs). An underlying assumption was that literacy was associated with human-recorded information, as opposed to oral transmission. As novels became popular in the late eighteenth century, literacy was associated with acquaintance with literature. A century later, literacy signified the ability to read and write. Indeed, the concept of writing was originally not part of the definition of literacy, since writing materials were scarce; writing was a separate skill of scribes. In fact, the first recorded information was to keep inventory of merchandise. Early on, writing was used as a mnemonic to remember spoken words such as songs and drama. Nowadays, literacy may be considered as a range or continuum of communication practices that may include additional formats beyond text such as numbers and images. In fact, the term *literacy* has been used as a general catchall to mean “access, understand, use, communicate and generate” with whatever type of knowledge or format, including visual, media, digital, health, information, fiscal, ecological, cultural, emotional, and recreational.

In its conceptualization of literacy, UNESCO (2006) parsed literacy into four aspects:

- An autonomous set of reading, writing, and oral skills that build from phonetics and orthographic systems of recording knowledge; numeracy is usually considered a supplemental skill.

- Situated application, which reflects socially contextualized practice, unlike the concept of a universal, culturally neutral set of skills.
- A learning process rather than a product or result, with the idea of active, socially situated experiences of internal and external dynamics.
- Text, which focuses on subject matter, genre, and structure (e.g., newspapers versus magazines).

These perspectives reflect the complexity of literacy and acknowledge how different cultures and nations might interpret literacy. In this book, UNESCO's definition is used, focusing on textual information so as to provide a baseline of literacy initiatives.

WHY IS LITERACY IMPORTANT?

While the oral tradition continues to exist and be recorded for posterity, comprehending and acting on textual information is necessary in almost all aspects of vocational and personal success, from applying for a job to reading medicine directions.

As early as 1948, the universal right to education, including free education at the elementary or fundamental level, was expressly stated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The 1995 UNESCO Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically focused on children's education as a chief means to participate as active and responsible citizens. At that point, of the 130 million children with no access to school, 63 percent were girls.

In 2018 the International Literacy Association (ILA) asserted that children have a basic human right to read. This right also means that children have the right to access print and digital texts, and can choose what they read. They also have the right to supportive reading environments and reading instruction. The ILA considers this issue one of equity and social justice, especially as 250 million children worldwide cannot read at a basic level; the result is that these children will have fewer options in life and will be more likely to be excluded from society. Reading, the ILA says, not only improves children's critical thinking and expands their knowledge base, but it also helps them build compassion and empathy because it exposes them to different experiences and points of view.

In examining the United Nations' (2015) *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, one can see the impact of literacy on the seventeen goals:

1. End poverty: access to economic resources requires literacy to use them.
2. End hunger: ensuring safe and nutritious food requires literacy to read labels, recipes, and agricultural manuals, as well as to market foods and invest in the food sector.

3. Ensure healthy lives for all: access to health information and resources requires literacy to use and communicate them.
4. Ensure quality education for all: access to information, including educational opportunities, requires literacy to gain knowledge and skills.
5. Achieve gender equity: effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership requires literacy for access to—and leveraging of—information, resources, education, and communication.
6. Ensure water and sanitation for all: effective management of water and sanitation requires literacy to access and use information and resources.
7. Ensure affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all: access to—and management of—energy requires literacy to access and use information and resources.
8. Promote inclusive, sustainable economic growth with decent employment for all: economies need literate employees to work knowledgeably and productively.
9. Build infrastructures, promote industrialization, and innovate: increasing enterprise and providing supporting infrastructures requires literacy to develop, produce, and market goods and services.
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries: education, economic opportunities, and civic engagement requires literacy to access and leverage them.
11. Make human settlements safe and sustainable: housing, basic services, and transportation requires literacy to access, develop, and use them effectively.
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production: managing natural resources requires literacy to access information and use it to optimize resource use.
13. Combat climate change: literacy is required to access information about climate change and have the skills to address it.
14. Conserve marine resources: managing resources and addressing adverse effects (e.g., pollution, extinction of organisms) requires literacy to access and use relevant information.
15. Manage terrestrial ecosystems: managing resources and addressing adverse effects (e.g., land degradation, extinction of organisms) requires literacy to access and use relevant information and resources.
16. Promote peace and justice: literacy is required to ensure civic participation and to promote and enforce the rule of law through access to information and effective communication.
17. Strengthen global partnership for sustainable development: literacy is required to gain expertise and resources to invest international support.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

UNESCO (1958) has promoted literacy for over fifty years through its Initiative for Literacy and other campaigns. The years 2003 to 2012 were declared the United Nations Literacy Decade as a means to focus on this global issue, especially as it applies to women. While literacy rates rose 2 to 3 percent over all by 2013, nine hundred million people still lacked basic literacy skills, and the rate for women did not change.

While UNESCO's 2017 statistics about basic literacy look promising, with an 86 percent global literacy rate and a narrowing gap between men (90 percent) and women (83 percent), that still leaves 750 million illiterate persons, with women constituting 63 percent of that population. Drilling down, statistics reveal that almost half of the global illiterate population live in Southern Asia. Moreover, the majority of people in twenty countries within sub-Saharan Africa are illiterate. In those two geographic regions, women ages 15 years and older are a fifth less likely to be literate than men of the same age. On a more positive note, these areas also have witnessed the greatest increase in youth literacy over the last fifty years: an 89 percent literacy rate in Southern Asia and 75 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, both of which regions also reflect a shrinking gender gap.

Canada's Literacy Foundation (2017) succinctly summarized negative consequences of illiteracy at the levels of the individual and society as a whole. For individuals, illiteracy can lead to:

- Less ability to access and comprehend needed information, such as health advice
- Less access to lifelong learning opportunities
- Fewer options for employment, especially for higher-paid professional jobs
- An unstable financial situation
- Lower self-esteem and more loneliness
- Poorer decisions

At the societal level, illiteracy can lead to:

- Workplace vacancies for trained personnel
- Less effective use of personnel
- Lower workplace productivity
- Lower GDP
- Greater health costs
- Less civic engagement

In short, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION FOR ILLITERACY?

Ah, if there were a simple, no-fail solution to illiteracy, the world would be a better place. Frankly, literacy is a complex process. Several individual preconditions are necessary for literacy: working memory, sensory and perception skills, cognitive and motor skills, even social skills. The external environment also has to support literacy: a print-rich environment with material that is developmentally appropriate and in the mother tongue. An intelligent agent has to link the person to the material and guide the reading process as well as provide opportunities and incentives to practice literacy behaviors. While literacy is often considered the job of formal education, these preconditions start as early as birth. Especially as the body is conditioned to process certain learning opportunities at optimal times, such as second-language acquisition, providing those learning experiences and appropriate support in an optimum situation can be problematic. Especially as individual characteristics, environments, and unique events shape learning, it is hard to imagine coordinating these conditions on a national or international scale.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

No perfect scenario actually exists. However, identifying and optimizing conditions that facilitate—and impede—literacy are key. Providing opportunities to access reading materials is key. Providing trained personnel to support the reading process is key. Motivating individuals to learn how to read is key. Providing incentives and opportunities to practice and improve literacy behaviors is key. All of these issues exist within situational and cultural contexts, at the same time valuing and empowering individuals to make positive literacy decisions. While society cannot control any individual completely (nor should it), it can provide a choice of material and human resources that align with and support individual choice and action. Such efforts can be done systematically to help the largest applicable population possible. Here is where models of effective literacy efforts come into play. And here is where community makes a critical difference.

What, then, is a community? It consists of people with characteristics in common, be they locational (such as a neighborhood or online game), cognitive (such as interests), or psychological (such as culture or values). Cultures, be they a social group or a profession, have a set of norms, beliefs, and institutions. In contrast, a community reflects a localized set of relationships and shared assets within a particularized environment. Community-based literacy efforts have a better chance of succeeding because they are not mandated from an outside body or a group that does not understand or have power within the community. A community-based effort not only provides the environment and expertise for literacy education, but it also provides

authentic opportunities to practice literacy behaviors and to support and guide those behaviors.

For these reasons, this book focuses on community-based literacy efforts.

HOW THIS GUIDE CAN HELP

This book was inspired by the Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program and its applicants. Each year the applications are analyzed to discern trends and identify factors that distinguish honored projects from other efforts. The analysis also collates the research that grounds the projects, which then builds the conceptual foundation for future literacy initiatives (Library of Congress, 2019).

These projects and accompanying analyses offer proven practices that can facilitate new literacy projects around the world. More specifically, one of the factors that was common to most effective and sustainable literacy projects was community-based needs and participation. Therefore, this book focuses on these kinds of literacy efforts. To this end, the book promotes blending universal findings such as early literacy benefits and fundamental reading skills along with culture- or community-specific sensitivity and leveraging to optimize results.

Chapter 1 explains universal steps to literacy: how people learn, generic reading skill development, human developmental issues, and habits of literacy.

Chapter 2 outlines literacy projects in terms of their characteristics and discusses research-based factors for impactful literacy projects.

Chapter 3 focuses on literacy partners, starting by discussing the nature of groups and the basics of partnerships. Then it describes specific types of partners: families, schools and universities, libraries, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit entities.

Chapter 4 details a variety of literacy issues: personal, social and community-based, cultural, linguistic, educational, technological, economic, and political/governmental.

Chapter 5 discusses associated applied literacies: health, fiscal, environmental, media, and cultural.

Chapter 6 details how to plan literacy projects, starting an action research approach. It gives advice about planners, needs assessment, goals and objectives, literacy review, target audience, project personnel, resources, setting and timing, communication, support, implementation, communication, and continuous assessment and improvement.

The conclusion suggests next steps: building capacity, empowering the community, and sustaining a culture of literacy.

Sample community-based literacy projects from Library of Congress Literacy Awards honorees and representative resources are found throughout the book.

The fundamental hope and goal of this book is to facilitate worldwide literacy. Each person has the ability to contribute to this effort, and together we can succeed.

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1

Steps to Literacy

Understanding how literacy is acquired can help communities optimize their efforts. As mentioned in the introduction, literacy is a strictly human endeavor of conscious learning. It reflects a complex set of skills that involve several parts of the brain, sensory organs, motor skills, and emotions. Even with UNESCO's broad definition of literacy, reading remains the foundation skill. Therefore, this chapter discusses the general elements of learning, and then focuses on learning how to be literate in terms of reading. Literacy is a lifelong activity that reflects human development changes, so these factors are also addressed.

HOW PEOPLE LEARN

What is learning? Fundamentally, learning consists of change: of disposition and behavior. Learning requires accepting new information and integrating it into existing personal mental schemata, which can be acted on. From the day of birth, people learn, sensing and interacting with their environments. Technically, people can learn until the day they die. While learning is often

associated with formal education, potentially it can happen anywhere, anytime. In every case, though, all individuals are ultimately responsible for their own learning in that no one else can learn for them. Learning is truly a self-monitoring activity that changes over time.

For learning to take place, individuals have to sense and perceive the information from the external environment, be able to process it internally, and act on it. Learning involves the brain's sensory cortex in getting information, the nearby integrative cortex for making meaning of information, the frontal integrative cortex that creates new ideas from the meaning, and the motor context, which acts on the ideas. Learning also changes the brain by practice as neurons connect and grow through repetition. Neurons signal connections called synapses, which are strengthened via chemicals that effect the emotions. The body's feelings differ with the cognitive experience, from pleasure to despair, so teachers should try to stimulate positive feelings by appealing to potential learners' interests and aiming for satisfying experiences (Zull, 2004).

In addition, several theories explain how people learn, taking into account the environment and the people therein (Tompkins, 2018). *Constructivist learning theories* posit that individuals are motivated and active learners, that they relate new information to prior learning, and that they organize and integrate information in schemata. *Interactive learning theories* focus on what people do: they read, drawing on prior knowledge as they read text and use word-recognition skills and comprehension strategies to understand what they read. *Reader-response learning theories* assert that readers create meaning as they read, and vary how they read depending on their purpose. *Sociolinguistic learning theories* state that thought and language are interrelated, and that social interaction is key in learning.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN READING?

What is involved when reading? The simple answer is: becoming aware of text/reading material, sensing the material, decoding the symbols, processing the information, comprehending the information, evaluating the information, deciding what to do with the information, and acting on that decision.

Learning to read exemplifies myriad processes, starting with brain activity (Sousa, 2016). The visual aspect of reading begins with the eye sensing the orthographic components, such as printed characters, through the optic nerve, which carries nerve impulses through millions of nerve fibers to the visual cortex, located in the back of the occipital lobe. Then the information travels to the left fusiform gyrus, which stores the information as symbols. To process the visual information, a ventral pathway connects the visual cortex to the temporal lobe (located toward the front on the left side), which recognizes objects; a second, dorsal, pathway links to the upper back parietal lobe, which locates objects. Then the frontal lobe comes into play to govern

CODE: REWRITING THE STORY FOR GLOBAL LITERACY

CODE (Canadian Organization for Development through Education) has been “removing the barriers to quality education for the world’s poorest and most marginalized children and youth for almost sixty years” (Library of Congress, 2017, p. 10). CODE started in a Toronto church basement as a donated-book program and now works with Canada’s First Nation Inuit and Métis communities, and has even expanded to the Caribbean and eight African nations. Since 2019, Reading CODE has trained twenty-four thousand educators and reached a million students.

CODE’s core literacy program is based on the idea that “for children to grow up into literate, independent, informed decision-makers who can think critically and successfully navigate the world around them, they need sustained access to relevant, quality reading materials and to benefit from skilled teachers.” To implement this idea, CODE incorporated international experience and learning theory in its “comprehensive readership approach,” or Reading CODE. While each county implements CODE in light of its own culture and language, Reading CODE takes a universal approach by:

- Valuing and building on prior experiences and knowledge, and encouraging children to explore, engage with, and reflect on the world around them.
- Developing and making available culturally relevant books and learning materials in the local language by local authors and publishers.
- Providing professional development for educators to ensure that they can use the materials effectively and can access locally developed educational materials for differential learning.
- Partnering with in-country teams to build capacity for sustained local publications and educator training (Library of Congress, 2017, p. 10).

language comprehension. The limbic system is also involved, responding to experience over time.

Although reading is typically associated with visual processing, phonological processing—the ability to manipulate the sounds of language—is also key. The sensory cortex takes in the ear’s hearing. The temporal lobe decodes and discriminates sound. Broca’s area of the frontal lobe governs language comprehension. The angular and supramarginal gyri link different parts of the brain to form words from sight and hearing. Fortunately, the oral and written language parts of the brain are close to each other. All of this happens in less than half a second.

The process of reading also improves the brain (Burns, Blaine, Prietula, & Rye, 2013). It heightens brain connectivity. It increases the central sulcus—the region governing primary sensory motor activity; reading action in a book actually leads to experiencing the sensation, which is called *grounded cognition*. Reading rewires the brain and creates nerve fibers that speed the transmission of

nerve signals. Reading also increases the brain's capacity for memory because it gives more time for processing and imagining a story, unlike watching or listening to media. Because reading is a sequential activity, unlike looking at a painting, it expands attention span because it forces the brain to connect a sequence and make meaning of it; in that respect, reading on the internet tends to build short-term memory, but it can split one's attention.

WHAT SKILLS ARE INVOLVED IN LEARNING TO READ?

Reading Readiness

Even before individuals start to decode words, they need to be reading-ready with a set of conditions and skills that start even before birth. That entails brain development: the ability to sense the environment, store information, and process it. It requires motor skills such as eye-tracking ability, hand-eye coordination, distinguishing left from right, and bilateral integration (such as clapping). It requires cognitive and executive functions such as using working memory to remember words in sequence, having inhibitory control to minimize distractions, and thinking flexibly to interpret meaning accurately. It requires oral language skills, including understanding and using language to describe and deal with directions. It requires social skills such as joint (shared) attention and communicating information to others.

What can people do to help preschoolers improve their reading readiness? Here are some developmentally appropriate activities.

- Listen to sounds in the environment: in nature, words, stories, songs.
- Make sounds: model how sounds are made with the mouth.
- Sing songs and make up poems, especially ones that rhyme or have alliteration.
- Explain vocabulary.
- Play games such as “I Spy,” especially if they involve wordplay or word patterns.
- Look at reading materials together: picture books, alphabet books, concept books, magazines, newspapers. Ask questions and converse about what is happening in stories; choose materials that interest the child.
- Identify sounds in words: beginning sounds and associated letters such as D: daddy, dog, dirt.
- Beat out syllables in words.
- Label children's drawings.
- Create shopping lists together and draw pictures beside the items; read items in the store.

- Ensure a nutritional diet, daily exercise, and adequate sleep. Check eyesight.

YAYASAN SULINAMA

Yayasan Sulinama (YS) is a nonprofit local development organization whose vision is to improve the lives of the people of Maluku and beyond in Indonesia through programs devoted to community development (social, economic, health), education, literacy, and language development. YS believes it can achieve this vision by equipping the community with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for a successful life. (Library of Congress, 2017, p. 12)

YS has been working primarily with private preschools in central Maluku to help underserved low-income families who could not otherwise pay for early education. YA works to prepare these preschoolers cognitively and physically to enter primary education (Library of Congress, 2017, p. 12).

Fundamental Reading Skills

What characteristics define skilled readers? They can read long passages of text quickly and effortlessly. They engage with, and make meaning of, a variety of texts while adjusting their reading strategy to match the type of text and purpose. They share and self-regulate their reading. More basically, they value reading. People tend to become skilled readers through initial pleasant experiences with text and stories, much exposure to texts and stories, and a desire for more pleasurable experiences through hearing more stories and reading independently, practicing lots of listening and reading, gaining self-confidence as a reader, and wanting to do it more (Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006).

Several fundamental skills are needed in order to become a skilled reader (Hess, 2007; National Reading Panel, 2000):

- Phonological awareness: recognizing and working with sounds in spoken language
- Phonemic awareness: hearing and working with individual sounds in words (i.e., phonemes)
- Phonics: understanding the alphabetic or orthographic principle that a writing system represents the sounds of a spoken language
- Decoding: using visual, syntactic (sentence structure), and semantic (context) cues to make meaning from words and sentences
- Fluency: reading accurately at an appropriate rate, with suitable expression. Fluency is needed for comprehension and motivated reading.
- Vocabulary: understand the meaning of words

- **Comprehension:** making meaning of the text by drawing on their experiences, vocabulary, language structure, and reading strategies.

In terms of how the brain is involved, when it processes the same configuration of letters repeatedly, it starts to store them as a single unit of information. By chunking these letters (such as words), the brain uses less processing space so it can decode automatically and concentrate on comprehending ideas, as well as incorporating syntactic and semantic understanding (Sousa, 2016).

READING INSTRUCTION

Reading is a learned skill that takes place throughout life in many settings. While the underlying skills are universal, how people teach and gain these skills differs by personal, cultural, and environmental factors.

How Do People Acquire Reading Skills?

Every human has a basic desire to have their needs met. Children are especially dependent on others, and quickly learn to communicate their needs physically—by body language (paralanguage) and sound—with the expectation that someone will respond and meet their needs, be it food, safety, or comfort. Spoken language is the default first two-way communication channel; individuals who are deaf tend to use visual means to communicate, which is why parents are urged to use sign language as early as possible. In either case, natural language precedes written language. Mimicking and working with daily natural language lead organically to syntactic knowledge and skills of structuring sentences used by significant people who are nearby.

The link between first language and written language requires some deliberate action, although not necessarily formal education. For instance, by reading aloud to a child, the reader is modeling how print symbols are associated with language. As for directly linking spoken and written words, finger-tracking words while reading aloud provides a visual cue for the relationship between spoken and written words (prephonemic awareness). Visually linking sign language to written words works in a similar fashion, although it usually requires two people or a digital solution. At the other end of the scale, identifying individual letters or other orthographic characters and sounding them out demonstrate an aspect of phonics; shaping those letters adds a valuable kinesthetic dimension to the process. All these actions constitute reading-readiness actions.

More sophisticated reading skills may be subject-specific, such as chemistry lab reports or musical scores; specialized vocabulary and writing conventions must be learned. More advanced reading skills for diagnosing and

addressing specific reading problems generally call for trained expertise, frequently supported by tested curricula. As many basic literacy projects have found, one does not necessarily have to pursue a college degree to support struggling readers. Instead, targeted training for specific populations can suffice, especially for one-to-one efforts (Culatta, Hall-Kenyon, & Black, 2013; Jacob, Armstrong, & Willard, 2015). The fact that a person cares enough to provide regular personalized reading coaching as long as needed helps establish a trusting relationship with the reader, facilitating an emotionally pleasant and successful reading experience.

General Effective Reading Instructional Practices

VISUAL LANGUAGE AND VISUAL LEARNING (VL2)

VL2 is a Science of Learning Center in the United States, funded by the National Science Foundation and Gallaudet University. VL2 researches the impact of visual processes, visual language, and visually based social experiences on language and literacy development in children, especially young deaf visual learners. Motion Light Lab (ML2), one of VL2's four hubs, is a space where digital technology enhances immersive learning experiences with creative literature. Motion Light Lab then draws on VL2 research to develop resources, such as VL2 Storybook Apps, and runs the VL2 Storybook Creator program (Lamolinara, 2018).

Some practices to help individuals gain reading literacy skills apply to most populations and environments. The following strategies are research-based and well-tested over time (Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007; Gambrell & Marinek, 2019; Zelman, Daniel, & Hyde, 2012). They target teachers—a term used very broadly here to encompass people who have responsibility to help others develop literacy skills.

- Create a high-quality, relevant, and varied print-rich environment that fosters literacy motivation.
- Ensure positive adult-child relationships.
- Incorporate several texts that build on learners' prior knowledge, expand vocabulary, and allow learners to choose texts.
- Model skillful reading, such as fluency in reading aloud, asking reflective questions, self-regulating, and talking about compelling texts.
- Broaden the definition of reading and literacy to include signs, graphs, comics, games, digital resources, multimedia, and so on.
- Teach purposeful, authentically meaningful reading.

- Provide both teacher- and student-led discussion of texts.
- Provide opportunities for independent reading.
- Balance meaning and skills.
- Balance whole language and skills-based approaches to reading.
- Leverage the reciprocity of reading and writing.
- Support and scaffold basic reading skills.
- Incorporate technology that links and extends ideas.
- Differentiate and personalize instruction using relevant assessments.
- Attend to the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of literacy.

CONTEXTOS

Contextos provides literacy programs to schools, prisons and communities in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Their Soy Lector (I am a reader) program trains teachers and other community members to facilitate reading and discussion by developing school libraries and providing targeted reading interventions. The Soy Autor (I am an author) program fosters critical literacy skills by supporting the writing of youth about their lives as impacted by violence. More than eight hundred memoirs have been published (Library of Congress, 2019).

DEVELOPMENTAL READING ISSUES

As people mature, they learn somewhat differently because of physical and mental changes as well as their accumulated prior experience and knowledge. Each stage in life offers unique opportunities to gain reading and more general literacy skills.

Early Childhood

By age 5, most children are able to develop conventional reading and writing skills, even taking socioeconomic status into account. The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identified six research-based predictive variables of later literacy development:

1. Knowledge of the alphabet and sounds of letters or other orthographic characters
2. Rapid automatic naming of letters or digits
3. Rapid automatic naming of common objects of colors
4. Writing one's name
5. Phonological awareness
6. Phonological memory

Research increasingly emphasizes the importance of early childhood literacy activities (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2006). Especially as the brain is more “plastic” before age 3, very early language-rich activities such as oral conversation, shared reading, and physically manipulating letter shapes all help the brain build and reinforce neuron connections. For instance, the act of exposing babies to two languages by 8 months sets the basis of fluency in both languages without an accent (Mustard, 2006). On the other hand, by 18 months, significant disparities in language processing and vocabulary are evident along socioeconomic lines—differences that can grow over time (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013). Other factors impacting children’s literacy development are health, geography, gender, and social norms (Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2007). Therefore, positive nurturing and early literacy practices can help equalize foundations for children’s life trajectory.

Just as important is the local environment. Optimally, the home and childcare center should contain a variety of textual materials, such as books, periodicals, cards, games, captioned TV, and online materials. Libraries offer a way to provide a changing variety of free reading materials; they also demonstrate a positive societal practice of responsible resource sharing. Writing materials—paper, pencils, crayons—should be available. Additionally, manipulatable toys and household items such as utensils and boxes are useful because they help children develop motor skills; these items can also be labeled as another way to link objects with the written word.

Children should also have regular opportunities to experience other environments, which can broaden their background knowledge and vocabulary: stores, libraries, parks, repair shops, and so on. Taking public transportation can be a valuable learning experience and an opportunity to engage with authentic textual information.

Part of the environment is social: physical and language interaction, emotional bonding and support, and shared everyday literacy activities such as shopping and cooking. Modeling functional literacy and leisure reading also gives concrete evidence of the benefits of reading. Shared literacy experiences can be part of healthy habits too, guided by caring adults—preparing healthy foods and reading just before bedtime to ensure proper sleep. More fundamentally, parents and guardians know their children better than anyone else, and so can tap into their youngsters’ interests, needs, and capabilities better than anyone else in these literacy practices.

Family lap reading exemplifies how these components work together. Having quiet one-to-one time demonstrates an individual caring relationship, free from distraction. Choosing reading material that interests the child also shows caring. Reading aloud with adult and child looking at the text together reinforces joint attention skills. Furthermore, because the child can feel the sounds of reading as they reverberate in the body, the cuddling position evokes warm connections between reading and caregiving. Other good reading-readiness activities have already been mentioned.

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Yearly, Better Beginnings gives more than sixty thousand parents a new insight into reading with their children and shows them how to have fun reading to and teaching their children. Partnerships between child health nurses and schools enable every baby born in Western Australia and all kindergarten children to receive free picture books, and families get literacy information to foster shared reading and parental involvement. Libraries provide Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time programs, and Sing with Me reading packs provide parents with resources to use at home. (Library of Congress, 2017).

Although families constitute the first teachers, other informal educational experiences are valuable for preschoolers (Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, 2000; International Literacy Association, 2018). In these other settings, under the guidance of trained and caring professionals, youngsters can gain language and social competence with other adults and peers. Such settings can also stimulate and expand preschoolers' engagement with other developmentally appropriate literacy-related resources that might not be feasible at the home scale, such as collections of oversize books and puppets. High-quality preschool programs have low adult-child ratios to maximize teacher-child interactions and individualized support.

Such preschool programs typically include a literacy-based curriculum and structured time, both of which help youngsters become more school- and reading-ready. Typical activities that promote early literacy skills include story reading, wordplay, class conversations, identifying letters and words, prewriting, problem solving, imaginative drama, and playing "house" and other imitative life skills. High-quality programs also incorporate ongoing assessment and targeted interventions to help preschoolers have successful learning experiences. Such timely interventions are particularly impactful for disadvantaged youngsters. For instance, high-quality programs can help offset factors such as child neglect, parent illiteracy, and limited English-language proficiency (Currie, 2001) so that children can enter school more on a par with others.

The following digital resources offer useful strategies for early childhood literacy development.

International Literacy Association. (2019). *Digital resources in early childhood literacy development*. Newark, NJ: International Literacy Association. <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-digital-resources-early-childhood-literacy-development.pdf>.

- International Literacy Association. (2019). *Meeting the challenges of early literacy phonics instruction*. Newark, NJ: International Literacy Association. <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-meeting-challenges-early-literacy-phonics-instruction.pdf>.
- Learning Point Associates. (2005). *Reading: Birth to age 5*. Naperville, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED489505.pdf>.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2006). *A child becomes a reader: Birth to preschool* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/product/154>.
- Roskos, K., Christie, J., & Richgels, D. (2003). The essentials of early literacy instruction. *Young Children* (March), 1–8. http://www.providershelter.com/uploads/3/0/7/3/30737125/14-the_essentials_of_early_literacy_instruction.pdf.
- Zero to Three. *Early literacy*. <https://www.zerotothree.org/early-learning/early-literacy>.

Elementary-Age Children

Core reading practices are typically taught to elementary school children (middle childhood), as this period of human development offers an optimum window for learning such skills. Gerdes, Durden, and Poppe (2013) synthesized major developmental patterns for this age range. Elementary children can think abstractly and symbolically. They can plan and follow directions to achieve a goal. They can start to address complex problems based on concrete objects and events. They can understand the feelings of others. Older children want to master skills, both cognitively and physically, so this is a good time for them to hone advanced reading strategies and self-regulate their reading behaviors.

Recognizing this developmental level, the National Center on Improving Literacy (Reade & Sayko, 2017) identified the following reading stages:

- Early readers (typically ages 6 and 7): making words by linking speech sounds to letters; making sense of what they read
- Transitional readers (typically ages 7 and 8): using strategies to decode and read with understanding; reading like they talk
- Fluent readers (typically age 8 and older): reading independently and confidently; understanding longer, more difficult types of material.

In the United States, the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts* (National Governors Association, 2010) drives much of K–12 literacy instruction. The four main standards (p. 8) include:

- Reading: text complexity and growth of comprehension
- Writing: text types, responding to reading, and research
- Speaking and listening: flexible communication and collaboration
- Language: conventions, effective use, and vocabulary.

By grade 5 (typically ages 10 and 11), students should be able to (p. 10):

- Determine key ideas and supporting details, and make logical inferences.
- Analyze text structure and meanings, and assess how perspective and purpose shape textual content and style.
- Evaluate, compare, and integrate content.
- Read and comprehend literary and informational text independently.

Leveraging developmentally appropriate literacy development patterns, teachers should provide opportunities for children to explore reading materials before giving them specific reading tasks. In that respect, teachers should also allow trial and error so children can identify and learn from their mistakes, which can help them gain a more accurate understanding of ideas. Teachers should start with concrete examples, such as experiential learning, before generalizing concepts.

In examining how reading is taught in elementary education, Snow and Matthews (2016) asserted that primary grades tend to focus on “constrained” skills—that is, skills with a finite end, such as knowing letters of the alphabet and common spelling rules. Open-ended, unconstrained skills such as vocabulary and background knowledge cover much more ground and build on experience. The researchers contended that sophisticated teacher talk—verbal stimulation, interaction, and feedback—and content-rich reading experiences should counterbalance set curriculum packages.

The digital resources on the following page offer useful strategies for middle childhood literacy development.

READING PARTNERS

Reading Partners provides research-based individualized reading support to identified elementary students by working with underserved schools in fourteen regions in the United States. The students get weekly one-on-one tutoring in a dedicated “reading center” space by trained community volunteers who use the Reading Partners curriculum. To ensure that students achieve grade-level reading skill, Reading Partners monitors student progress and program quality. (Library of Congress, 2017).

- Elementary school reading apps and websites.* (2019). San Francisco, CA: Common Sense. <https://www.commonsense.org/education/top-picks/elementary-school-reading-apps-and-websites>.
- Lane, H. (2014). Evidence-based reading instruction for grades K–5. Los Angeles, CA: CEEDAR Center. http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/IC-12_FINAL_12-15-14.pdf.
- Munger, K. (Ed.). (2017). *Steps to success: Crossing the bridge between literacy research and practice*. Geneseo, NY: SUNY. <https://textbooks.opensuny.org/steps-to-success/>.
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- N’Namdi, K. (2005). *Guide to teaching reading at the primary school level*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- Peace Corps Office of Overseas Programming and Training and Support. (2015). *The building blocks of literacy: A literacy resource manual for Peace Corps volunteers*. Washington, DC: Peace Corps. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED591328.pdf>
- Reading resources.* (2019). American Institutes for Research. <http://www.sedl.org/reading/framework/>.
- Torgesen, J., Houston, D., Rissman, L., & Kosanovich, M. (2007). *Teaching all students to read in elementary school: A guide for principals*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation. <http://www.fcrr.org/Interventions/pdf/Principals%20Guide-Elementary.pdf>.

Adolescence

As children reach puberty, they experience rapid and significant physical, psychological, and cognitive changes, which impact their literacy development (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). As their bones grow faster than their muscles, they may have coordination problems. Their physical development also impacts their emotional and social development—they need to belong but also to be independent.

Adolescent brains change as well, restructuring neural circuitry and developing the prefrontal cortex, which manages executive functions such as reasoning and decision-making. As a result, adolescents hone their abstract thought processes, higher cognitive function, and metacognition. Part of this internal development also intensifies adolescents’ curiosity and risk-taking behavior, sometimes without considering the long-term consequences. Adolescents can be very idealistic yet sarcastic, interested in social causes yet quixotic. Their moral development is typically the last part of their development

to adulthood, so they may struggle with moral dilemmas as they are trying to wend their way through their social morass.

By the time adolescents reach their late teens, they have more realistic self-concepts and stabler personalities. They are likely to establish independent lives and seek romantic relationships. They will soon be shouldering adult responsibilities.

Knowing these changes, teachers should provide adolescents with authentic, meaningful literacy experiences that employ active learning. The learning environment should promote freedom to explore independently and collaboratively, taking intellectual risks while also offering a respectful safety net. Learners need to have increasing opportunities for choice, authority, self-assessment, and responsibility. Teachers can show the benefits of literacy by presenting adolescents with social issues to research and grapple with, thereby providing the chance for self-reflection and consideration of a decision's consequences.

These specific literacy skills are most appropriate for adolescents: reading for purpose, exploring different points of view, contextualizing information, analyzing how different media formats impact meaning, building domain and cross-domain knowledge, consolidating ideas, manipulating and applying information, collaborating, self-expression, and honing metacognition.

Struggling and illiterate adolescent readers merit special attention because interventions at this point can shortcut possible adult disappointments (Allington, 2013). While adolescents tend to do fewer recreational reading activities in general, at-risk teens are even less engaged than their reading peers for several reasons: lack of self-efficacy, apparent lack of interesting material, lack of autonomy, lack of personal relevance, and personal issues (Dwyer, 2014). To help these adolescents, reading experts are needed to diagnose and provide personalized interventions. Fortunately, by adolescence abstract reasoning is usually in place and teens can process information more efficiently, which can shorten time for honing basic reading skills. Motivation is an important first step and can include demonstrating the concrete, contextual benefits of reading, such as better health, more job options, and more responsible consumerism. Teachers then need to collaborate with those teens to provide authentic literacy tasks that leverage relevant reading material of interest to teens—and chosen by teens. Teachers can also leverage social needs by calling on the influence of competent peer readers and incorporating technologies such as social media for self-expression and communication. In the final analysis, teachers should build on teens' assets rather than their deficiencies to optimize their capacity for self-empowerment and self-fulfillment.

The following digital resources offer useful strategies for adolescent literacy development.

REACH

Reach Incorporated trains teenagers as reading tutors for elementary children, most of whom are urban African Americans. Besides the afterschool tutoring, the teens also have the opportunity to get leadership training during the summer and connect with an adult mentor for college admissions help. In the summer program, some teens write and publish books, which are donated to schools and other organizations. (Lamolinaro, 2018).

Adlit. <http://www.adlit.org/>.

Association for Middle Level Education. <https://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/LanguageArtsandLiteracy/tabid/103/Default.aspx>.

International Reading Association. (2012). *Adolescent literacy*. Newark, NJ: International Reading Association. <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/adolescent-literacy-position-statement.pdf>.

International Reading Association. (2019). *Engagement and adolescent literacy*. Newark, NJ: International Reading Association. <https://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-engagement-and-adolescent-literacy.pdf>.

Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy. <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/19362706>.

Moje, E., & Tysvaer. (2010). *Adolescent literacy development in out-of-school time*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York. https://www.carnegie.org/media/filer_public/97/16/97164f61-a2c1-487c-b5fd-46a072a06c63/ccny_report_2010_tta_moje.pdf.

National Council of Teachers of English. (2018). A call to action: What we know about adolescent literacy instruction. *Position Statements*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. <https://www2.ncte.org/statement/adolescentliteracy/>.

National Library. (2019). *Engaging teens with reading*. Wellington, NZ: National Library. <https://natlib.govt.nz/schools/reading-engagement/strategies-to-engage-students-as-readers/engaging-teens-with-reading>.

National Middle School Association. (2003). *This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents: A position paper of the National Middle School Association*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association. <http://www.amle.org/AboutAMLE/ThisWeBelieve/tabid/121/Default.aspx>.

The Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk. (2016). *10 key reading practices for all middle and high schools*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin. https://www.meadowscenter.org/files/resources/10Keys_Secondary_Web.pdf.

Young Adult Library Services Association. (2019). *Teen literacy*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association. <https://literacy.ala.org/adolescent-literacy/>.

Adults

Adults are more likely than minors to be illiterate, especially in developing countries where educational opportunities were less available in their youth or when economic constraints demanded that individuals seek work rather than education. In addition, females have been less likely to have access to education, or have been encouraged less to pursue it. Nevertheless, individuals can learn literacy skills even at an advanced age because the brain continues to change in response to behaviors. While communication between neurons and blood flow to the brain may decline, older people compensate with their experience-based knowledge, which provides context and linkages for learning. Rather, general health and physical limitations—such as hearing loss and lack of dexterity to handle reading materials—are probably the biggest barriers to literacy. On the other hand, such barriers may motivate elders more, and they may actually benefit more from literacy training than healthier peers (Dench & Regan, 2000).

Reading and general literacy skills remain, but lifelong language use and experiences can speed up interventions, just as they do with adolescents. Some factors to be considered in teaching adults is the reading material's semantic and syntactic complexity, its inference complexity, the amount of background knowledge needed, and textual features (Trawick 2017).

Because most adults who are engaged in learning reading and general literacy skills are motivated to do so, teachers should uncover that motivation and use it to design learning experiences, especially as adults want training to be practical and immediately applicable to their daily or economic life (Knowles, 2015). Thus, when working with adults to improve their literacy skills, teachers should leverage adults' experiences to help them link working vocabulary with the written word to solve problems rather than to memorize arbitrary content. For instance, if an adult wants to learn to read in order to pass a citizenship test, the teacher can use practice citizenship tests as a basis for reading materials and vocabulary building. Earning a GED (general education diploma) is another popular motivation, usually in order to get a job. In developing countries, adult literacy programs are becoming increasingly popular in the workplace in order to improve employee productivity. Depending on the local population density, teachers can provide classes for these kinds of goal-specific reading and literacy trainings, which then also offer opportunities to socialize—another important factor in adult education (Library of Congress, 2016).

The following digital resources offer useful strategies for adult literacy development.

Adult Literacy Tutors Association. (2011). *20 years of ALTA*. Port of Spain, Trinidad.

ALTA. <http://alta-tt.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FAW-ALTA-20th-Anniversary-FINAL.pdf>.

PROLITERACY

ProLiteracy has supported adult literacy globally since 2002, and almost a half century before that by its prior organizations Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America. Its core function is adult tutoring supported by evidence-based learning resources and high-interest publications. To that end, volunteer teachers get professional development and technical support. As of this writing, ProLiteracy works with partners in twenty-five countries, leads adult education research activities, and publishes materials in English and Spanish (Library of Congress, 2019).

- American Library Association. (2019). *Adult literacy*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association. <https://literacy.ala.org/adult-literacy/>.
- Center for the Study of Adult Literacy. (2011). *General adult literacy websites*. Atlanta, GE: Georgia State University. <http://csal.gsu.edu/content/resources>.
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- LINCS (Literacy Information and Communication System). <https://lincs.ed.gov/>.
- NCAL (National Council for Adult Learning). <http://www.ncalamerica.org/>.
- NCSALL (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy). <http://www.ncsall.net/>.
- Ohio Literacy Resource Center. <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Pubs/0600.htm>.
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <http://uil.unesco.org/literacy>.

HABITS OF LITERACY

As explained above, sustainable literacy development is a lifelong endeavor. While some principles are universal, strategies to apply those principles vary by individual, age, culture, environment, and situation. Age is especially important because it reflects not only changes in the brain and other physical aspects of the body but also the accumulating experiences of each person. Therefore, the teacher should find out about each person's characteristics, assets, interests, and needs in order to optimize the conditions and efforts for literacy development.

It should also be mentioned that literacy requires practice. Just because persons learn how to read does not guarantee that they will continue to read. Without a steady diet of reading materials and the habit of reading, competency can decline. Therefore, communities should make sure that their members have access to rich, relevant collections of reading materials. Communities should also provide social opportunities to share and create recorded information to improve that community (Palani, 2012). Such efforts are discussed in later chapters.

TALES & TRAVEL MEMORIES

Tales & Travel Memories offers one-hour thematic literacy programs for older adults with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Librarians and volunteers visit memory care facilities monthly with books and media about a destination in another part of the world, and engage participants cognitively and socially about the imaginary excursion. Pared-down Tales & Travel kits may also be checked out to individuals who want to provide this experience in a one-to-one setting (Library of Congress, 2017).

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