

## EMERGENT LITERACY OF FILIPINO PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been increased interest in exploring the extent to which literacy develops prior to school instruction. Teachers and other researchers have observed children as they read books and used pencils and crayons to express their meanings. Their observations have allowed them to speculate that children even before the age of five know a great deal about written language.

Children come to school at age five or six with a wide variety of reading experiences. Some have books to read or have books read to them at home, at day care centers, or at nursery schools. Almost all interact with meaningful print in the environment, through experience with milk cans, television commercials, candy wrappers, instructions for games, and mail from relatives.

Goodman et al. (1980) beginning in 1973 conducted informal investigations with young children to discover questions about print that are most easily understood by preschoolers. They said that surrounded by the printed word, children become aware of many of the uses of written forms and begin to make sense of print and to experiment with communication through writing.

Some children receive direct reading instruction before school; however, most interact with print in a natural, almost incidental manner (Goodman et al., 1980). During these print interactions, children learn that print carries a message and some of these children begin to read on their own (Smith, 1976).

This perspective of reading development can be traced back to the writings of Harriet Iredell (1898, cited in Goodman, 1986), a Pennsylvania teacher, who wrote an article about her study of common reading and writing experiences that children were immersed in before they came to school. A key notion of this theory is that reading is a written language process which is learned naturally in much the same way as oral language. Researchers who hold this view study individual children, ask what children know about reading, and see how their knowledge can be most naturally extended. Children become aware of print when it serves a function for them and when they use print in personal, contextually embedded ways.

### METHODOLOGY

#### The Study

The purpose of this study is to build on and extend this growing base of information about emergent reading.

The study was conducted at the PNU Center for Teaching and Learning to explore

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preschoolers' awareness and responses to environmental print, their attitudes and concepts about reading and writing, and their knowledge of and familiarity with print in books. The use of contextual cues surrounding print and the children's use of terminology related to literacy were also noted.

The information from this study can be utilized to help make transitions into reading in school easier for children. By making school literacy an extension of natural language learning begun at home, beginning reading instruction can improve. In addition parents can be helped to see their roles more clearly in the development of literacy in their children.

Findings from the study cannot be statistically generalized to large populations due to the small number of subjects. But it gives information on what some children can do and thus provides a significant base for understanding literacy development.

### Subjects

Twenty one children served as subjects — seven at each level, Nursery (four year olds), Junior Kindergarten (five year olds), and Senior Kindergarten (six year olds). Personal data information for each child was provided by the teachers. The data include the child's name, date of birth, place of birth, languages spoken by each child plus the occupation, educational level, and languages spoken by parents or guardians. Additional information concerning those living in the home (siblings, grandparents, foster parents) and the home environment (TV in the home, etc.) was also collected.

All subjects were attending the kindergarten classes at the Center for Teaching and Learning of the PNU College of Education. They come from middle class families, with parents working as teachers and employees of nearby government agencies like City Hall, Congress, and Department of Tourism. They all speak Filipino at home though most of them can understand English. The children were brought to the Language Study Center for data collection.

### Tasks

Five tasks were administered to each child. The first three tasks, under the Print Awareness Task, were designed to reveal the subjects' print awareness and use of contextual supporting cues. Labels, carefully chosen from an array of household and food products, were mounted on bond paper and presented one at a time to the subjects. In the first task, the whole label was presented. For example, subjects were shown the complete front panel of a Colgate box. The same labels were presented again in Task II. They retained their stylized print and color but were stripped of all familiar accompanying pictures and designs. In Task III, all supporting context — pictures, design, color — was removed from the original labels except the graphic unit itself which was printed in manuscript form in black ink on white oslo paper. The tasks were presented a week apart.

In the fourth task the subjects were interviewed to find out their concepts of reading and writing and their attitudes toward these two activities. A writing sample was also collected. The fifth task, the Book Handling Knowledge Task, was designed to reveal the subjects' knowledge and use of print in books.

### **Procedure**

The five tasks were administered to the subjects with a one week interval between tasks. Present during each session were the researcher, an observer, and the subject. The observer recorded the observations. The researcher interacted informally with the children before each session, in order to do away with any anxiety or shyness on the part of the children. Each session was tape recorded. Ideally, the tasks should have been videotaped but lack of funds did not allow this.

### **Data Analysis**

All responses for each task were categorized for statistical evaluation. Frequencies and means were calculated for the categorized responses. Comparisons were drawn between tasks and ages.

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## Results and Discussion

The table below shows the findings for Tasks I, II, and III.

Table 1: Results of Tasks I, II, III

Task 1 Percentage of Responses	Avoidance	Appropriate	Generic to Specific	Parallel	Related Concept	Function	Non-Print Related	Print Related	Unrelated	Uncodable
<b>Toothpaste</b>	Nurs.	19	14	48	14	5	0	0	0	0
	Jr.K	14	29	29	24	0	0	5	0	0
	Sr.K	5	62	14	19	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Soap</b>	Nurs.	0	21	19	5	0	48	0	7	0
	Jr.K	21	29	17	5	7	0	17	5	0
	Sr.K	10	60	24	0	0	10	0	0	0
<b>Shampoo</b>	Nurs.	14	9	55	0	0	14	0	10	0
	Jr.K	17	2	55	7	17	0	0	0	0
	Sr.K	7	57	31	4	2	0	0	0	0
<b>Packed Food</b>	Nurs.	5	9	32	0	25	11	11	4	4
	Jr.K	7	4	39	14	21	0	11	0	0
	Sr.K	18	43	11	11	7	0	0	0	0
<b>Food Chain</b>	Nurs.	10	81	0	0	10	0	0	0	0
	Jr.K	14	71	0	10	5	0	0	0	0
	Sr.K	10	90	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Drinks</b>	Nurs.	10	24	62	0	5	0	0	0	0
	Jr.K	5	12	43	17	24	0	0	0	0
	Sr.K	7	48	31	7	14	0	0	0	0
<b>Candies</b>	Nurs.	0	0	83	0	12	0	0	5	0
	Jr.K	0	12	76	0	0	0	12	0	0
	Sr.K	10	69	12	5	7	2	7	0	0
<b>Medicine</b>	Nurs.	0	0	38	0	52	0	5	0	5
	Jr.K	0	5	24	14	19	24	0	14	0
	Sr.K	5	24	24	5	14	0	0	0	0

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<b>Task II Percentage of Responses</b>	<b>Avoidance</b>	<b>Appropriate</b>	<b>Generic to Specific</b>	<b>Parallel</b>	<b>Related Concept</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Non-Print Related</b>	<b>Print Related</b>	<b>Unrelated</b>	<b>Uncodable</b>
<b>Toothpaste</b>										
Nurs.	24	0	0	5	0		14	0	14	43
Jr.K	29	5	0	10	0		14	29	14	0
Sr.K	0	71	0	33	0		0	0	0	0
<b>Soap</b>										
Nurs.	31	0	0	0	0	29	0	10	0	26
Jr.K	43	33	10	0	0	0	17	14	0	0
Sr.K	12	71	0	0	0	7	2	2	0	0
<b>Shampoo</b>										
Nurs.	14	29	0	0	0	33	17	2	5	0
Jr.K	36	0	17	0	14	2	14	17	0	0
Sr.K	5	48	21	14	2	0	7	17	0	0
<b>Packed Food</b>										
Nurs.	57	4	0	0	0	0	14	7	0	18
Jr.K	46	9	18	0	0	0	14	14	0	0
Sr.K	32	39	0	0	0	0	0	25	0	0
<b>Drinks</b>										
Nurs.	29	0	7	0	0	0	24	0	0	4
Jr.K	50	10	17	0	0	2	21	2	0	0
Sr.K	9	45	2	4	0	0	14	19	0	0
<b>Food Chain</b>										
Nurs.	0	57	5	0	0	0	0	24	0	14
Jr.K	0	57	43	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sr.K	14	57	0	0	0	0	14	14	0	0
<b>Candies</b>										
Nurs.	24	2	5	0	5	0	17	0	19	29
Jr.K	48	7	19	0	0	0	26	0	0	0
Sr.K	21	52	0	0	0	0	14	12	0	0
<b>Medicine</b>										
Nurs.	43	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	48
Jr.K	71	0	29	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sr.K	11	57	0	0	0	0	14	14	0	0

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<b>Task III Percentage of Responses</b>		<b>Avoidance</b>	<b>Appropriate</b>	<b>Generic to Specific</b>	<b>Parallel</b>	<b>Related Concept</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Non-Print Related</b>	<b>Print Related</b>	<b>Unrelated</b>	<b>Uncodable</b>
<b>Toothpaste</b>	Nurs.	29	0	0	0	0	0	19	10	14	38
	Jr.K	57	0	0	0	0	0	29	14	0	0
	Sr.K	14	57	0	14	0	0	9	9	0	0
<b>Soap</b>	Nurs.	31	0	0	0	0	14	0	0	19	38
	Jr.K	64	10	0	0	0	0	26	0	0	0
	Sr.K	14	52	0	0	0	12	14	7	0	0
<b>Shampoo</b>	Nurs.	24	0	17	0	0	14	0	0	10	36
	Jr.K	45	2	19	0	17	0	0	17	0	0
	Sr.K	14	43	17	0	0	0	17	31	0	0
<b>Packed Food</b>	Nurs.	43	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	36
	Jr.K	68	7	14	0	0	0	0	7	0	0
	Sr.K	36	32	21	0	0	0	0	11	0	0
<b>Food Chain</b>	Nurs.	48	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	33
	Jr.K	76	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sr.K	33	81	0	5	0	0	0	5	0	0
<b>Drinks</b>	Nurs.	33	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	19	33
	Jr.K	40	5	29	0	10	17	0	0	0	0
	Sr.K	12	45	7	0	0	0	0	14	0	0
<b>Candies</b>	Nurs.	31	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	26	29
	Jr.K	76	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sr.K	41	52	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
<b>Medicine</b>	Nurs.	33	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	24	38
	Jr.K	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Sr.K	33	67	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

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Summary of Responses in Three Tasks	Avoidance	Appropriate	Generic to Specific	Parallel	Related Concept	Function	Non-Print Related	Print Related	Unrelated	Uncodable
<b>Task I</b>										
Nurs.	7.25	19.5	42.13	2.38	13.63	9.13	2.00	2.63	1.75	0
Jr.K	9.75	20.5	35.38	11.38	11.63	3.00	3.50	4.50	0	0
Sr.K	9.0	56.63	18.28	6.38	5.50	1.25	1.25	1.87	0	0
<b>Task II</b>										
Nurs.	26.75	11.50	3.12	0.62	0.62	9.75	12.75	5.38	6.00	22.75
Jr.K	40.35	15.12	19.12	1.25	1.75	0.50	11.12	9.50	1.75	0
Sr.K	13.00	55.0	2.88	6.38	1.25	1.00	8.13	12.37	0	0
<b>Task III</b>										
Nurs.	34.00	0.00	6.25	0.00	0.00	3.50	2.38	19.0	35.13	0
Jr.K	65.75	9.00	7.75	0.00	3.38	2.13	6.88	0.0	0.00	0
Sr.K	24.62	52.52	5.00	2.37	0.00	.50	5.00	0.0	0.00	0

### Task I

There were three toothpaste labels, six for soap, six for shampoo, three for packed food, three for food chain, six for drinks, six for candies and three for medicine. Table 1 shows the percentage of responses for each level: *Nurs.* for Nursery, *Jr.K* for Junior Kindergarten, and *Sr.K* for Senior Kindergarten. The tape recorded responses were categorized into 10: *avoidance* or no answer, *appropriate* for the correct identification, *generic to specific*, for general specific response like soap for Breeze and other brand, *parallel* for citing other brand of the same product like alternating Colgate with Close-up, *related concept* for answers related to the label like ham for corned beef, *function* for citing the use rather than the name like *pansabon sa katawan* for soap, *pang-inom* for drinks, *panggamt* for Tempura, *non-print related* for letters, words that are not related in print, *print-related* like *snip* for *nips* and *unrelated* for answers like Hershey to Loviscol. Mumbling sounds and funny answers showing boredom or joking like mentioning classmates' names, for labels they could not identify, were placed under *uncodable* column.

In Task I the Senior K subjects were ahead in giving the appropriate response for each label category compared to Nursery and Junior K levels. For identifying soap labels, the Junior K Ss had 48% mentioning more on functions and only 29% gave appropriate responses. When it came to packed food all levels had more percentage of answers under Generic-Specific or Related Concepts. As expected the Food Chain (Wendys, McDonald, Jollibee) received more appropriate answers. When asked how they knew the answers, they told stories of their visit to the place. For drinks, although a majority were able to recognize labels, a great percentage among the Junior K and Senior K just answered *juice* or *pang-inom*. For candies, two-levels Nursery-83% and Junior K-76% answered either *candy*, or *chocolate* to all the labels while the Senior K have 69% for appropriate answers and only 12% under Generic - Specific. For medicine most of the answers were under Generic - Specific saying *vitamins*, *gamot*. Take note that for Related Concept the findings are: Nursery = 52%, Junior K = 19%, and Senior K = 14%.

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## Task II

With less contextual support of the print material, appropriate responses dropped for each label category: Nursery from 14% to 0%; Junior K from 29% to 5%; and Senior K from 62% to 41%. A majority of the Ss' answers in Task II fell under non-print related and print related. The children spelled the words either correctly or incorrectly. Some tried to read the syllables like Sa-fe-gu-ard or Ti-de. The 4-year olds (Nursery) alternated letters *o* with *a*, *w* and *n*, *l* and *I*, *b* and *d*. They all called toothpaste *Colgate*. The uncodable responses of Nursery and Junior also increased.

## Task III

In responding to manuscript labels, appropriate responses fell and avoidance answers in all labels increased. The non-print, unrelated, and uncodable responses increased among Nursery subjects.

## Comparison by Age Groups

In Task I the 4 year olds (Nursery) probably relied more on the supporting contextual clues to derive meaning than the older children. Note that all the three groups gave very few print-related responses. When the full context was available, children ignored specific letters, and paid attention instead to the *meaning* of the item.

In Task II print related and non-print related responses were greater for the Nursery and Junior K than the Senior K pupils. All the three groups tended to make more print related responses such as naming letters or syllables like the following:

Wendys	Wa
Lucky Me	Lu, Lu-ki
Corned Beef	Ko-ro-ned
Colgate	C-o-l-g-a-t-e
Breeze	Bre-e-z
Tide	Ti-de, Tid

In Task III, there were more avoidance responses than appropriate answers. The five – six years olds (Junior K and Senior K) produced more print related responses than the four year olds (Nursery). In this task there were no cues other than the words themselves, and while few children at any age level in the study responded exactly or appropriately, most of them named the letters rather than attempting a reading of the print. Examples of responses:

Item	Responses
H a p e e	n o d e e
G A R D	capital G capital O
	capital X capital A

**Task IV****Concepts of Reading**

The fourth task was an individual interview with the child to gain information about how the child would respond to questions about reading with no written material in sight. The following questions were asked in Filipino.

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Nakakabasa ka na?                  | “Do you know how to read?”             |
| 2. Sinong nagturo sa iyo?             | “Who taught you how to read?”          |
| 3. Bakit gusto mong matutong bumasa?  | “Why do you want to be able to read?”  |
| 4. Nakakasulat ka na ba?              | “Do you know how to write?”            |
| 5. Bakit mo gustong matutong sumulat? | “Why do you want to be able to write?” |
| 6. Sinong nagturo sa iyo?             | “Who taught you how to write?”         |
| 7. Sumulat ka nga.                    | “Write something.”                     |

Most of the children answered that they could not read but they knew the letters. Only two Senior K pupils responded that they could read. These were the pupils who read the printed words in Tasks II-III by syllables. It seems that the majority of these children had already developed the notion that they didn't know how to read, that reading was hard to learn, and that somebody especially the parents had to teach them how. When asked how they were able to read the labels, they said that they saw them on TV or they used them at home. Some complained that their parents had not yet taught them how to read. When asked if they read in school they answered that they spelled and wrote letters. This shows their notion of reading, that is sounding out and copying the letters. But when asked if they knew how to write, everyone responded affirmatively.

When asked to write, the four year olds produced scribbles and one drew a picture of her sister. All the five and six year olds produced either letters, words, or their own names. When asked to read what they had written, they just smiled and spelled the letters of their names. When asked why they wanted to read, their answers were mostly the same: to go to the next grade. But when asked why they wanted to learn to write, their answer was — *Para makabasa ako* “So that I can read.” Their notion of writing is it helps them to read.

**Task V****Book Handling Task**

This task was adapted from Marie Clay's concept about Print Test (1979). Its purpose is to find out if children have concepts about books, how they are used and the written language in books. Nine questions were asked of each subject and the answers were recorded by the observer. The researcher asked the questions in an informal way while conversing with each child. Table 2 shows their responses.

Table 2: Task V - Concepts about Books

	Nurs.		Jr.K		Sr.K	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Understands that a book is for reading	85%	15%	100%	0	87%	13
2. Is able to identify the front and back of a book	85%	15%	100%	0	100%	0
3. Is able to identify the top and bottom of a page in a book	71%	29%	66%	33%	100%	0
4. Knows where to begin reading on a page	42%	58%	100%	0	87%	13%
5. Knows that a person reads print not picture	28%	72%	83%	17%	75%	13%
6. Is able to turn the pages of a book properly	85%	15%	83%	17%	100%	25%
7. Knows what the title of a book is	0	100%	17%	83%	37%	63%
8. Knows what the author of a book is	0	100%	17%	83%	37%	63%
9. Knows what the illustrator of a book is	0	100%	0	100%	37%	63%

All the Ss understood that a book is for reading. Only 15% of the Nursery pupils and 13% of the Senior K gave other answers like *pangkvento*, *para panoorin ang picture*, *para pag-aralan*, *para kulayan*. Nevertheless, their answers were related to literacy. Only 18% of the 21 subjects in all levels were not able to identify the front and back of a book. All the Senior K pupils could identify the top and bottom of a page in a book. However 29% and 33% of the Nursery and Junior K respectively could not do so. When asked where to begin reading in a page, 100% of the five year olds (Junior K) knew where to start. But when asked to read the first word, they named its beginning letter instead. Only 42% of the three-four year old Nursery pupils knew where to start reading on a page. However, 87% of the Senior K were not paying attention to the question and instead pointed at the picture on the page. When asked to point to the story to be read, 72% of the Nursery Level pointed at the pictures and only 28% pointed at the print on the page. A majority of the Junior K (83%) and the Senior K pupils (75%) knew that the print and not the pictures was what should be read. When asked to turn the pages of the book, 100% of the Senior K knew how to do it, and 85% of the Nursery, and 83% of the Junior K showed a positive response to the task. However when asked about the title, author, and illustrator of the book, 100% of the Nursery pupils had no knowledge of their roles in the book. Only 17% of the Junior K level and 37% of the Senior K level knew about the title and author. As in the Nursery level nobody among the Junior K pupils and only 37% of the Senior K Ss knew the role of the illustrator.

The only outstanding difference between age groups for this task was in pointing to the exact place where to start reading. The three Nursery pupils (three year olds) pointed to either the picture or the print in general. When asked what is read, they pointed to the pictures and then to the print saying, *lahat iyan* "all of that." When asked if they could read the first word, all responded *Di ko alam. Hindi pa tinuro ni Mommy*. "I don't know. Mommy hasn't yet taught me." On the other hand, the Junior K pupils (five year olds) knew

where to begin reading and they were able to point out letters and words in print. They spelled the letters in the word but only two could decode the first syllable.

It was found that the more print-aware the children were, the greater their understanding of book handling. For example, the two Senior K pupils who exhibited the most print awareness in Tasks I, II, III pointed to the print and moved their fingers along the print (one in a right to left direction) and from top to bottom in the book handling tasks. The three three year olds who were least print aware, as demonstrated in Tasks I, II, III, had the least amount of book handling knowledge. The same is true with the two Junior K pupils (five year olds) who, like the four year olds, were least print-aware. These were the same who either did not name the labels, mumbled uncodable words or alternately said *shampoo*, *panlaba* "for washing," *I love you*, *I miss you*, and gave the names of their classmates in response to labels presented to them. They were also the pupils who were restless, bored, and saying *ang dami naman* "too many" when presented labels they did not know especially in Tasks II and III.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The conclusions of the study based on the analysis of the tasks described above may be treated as hypotheses.

It should be noted again that the subjects of the study may not be representative of all preschoolers in the Philippines but neither are they special or unusual.

### **Print Awareness**

- 1) Results of this study suggest that literacy development begins prior to direct formal instruction. All of the children in the three Kindergarten levels demonstrated some awareness of environmental print, and knew that the print and not the supporting contextual features tells the message. The same children who answered appropriately to print material embedded in a supportive context, tended to respond inappropriately to print stripped of context. Tasks II-III, which presented isolated manuscript words printed on bond paper, elicited letter calling, unrelated, and sometimes uncodable responses. The children manifested restless behavior and responded to the task as if they were meaningless and uninteresting.
- 2) Regardless of the degree of print awareness, the Ss had already developed attitudes toward learning to read. In Task IV, many answered that they wanted to read but they couldn't learn it without being taught. They were banking on their parents to teach them how to read. However, they could not explain orally their understanding of the function of reading. For them, learning how to read would enable them to go to the next level.
- 3) The Ss showed developing progress in learning how to read. Two Senior K pupils were well-ahead of the others. They were able to name all the labels in the three tasks. They showed decoding ability in Tasks II and III when they read the labels without the contextual features. Some of the Ss in the three levels decoded the printed word by beginning sounds of the letters, some by the syllables, while others spelled the words. There were others who just named

the letters they knew in each word. Most of those in the younger level just named the letters and when asked to point to the letters, they pointed at the wrong ones. This shows that the Ss were aware that words are made up of letters. There were two or three pupils who insisted on calling all letters capital. However, this ability to identify letters and words did not necessarily suggest an understanding of the function of print in connected discourse.

### Emerging Writers

When asked if they could write, nobody said they could not write. All of them were eager to write their names. The two Senior K pupils (6.5 years old) who could read the labels in the three tasks even wrote words like BIG, MAXX, and NIPS. The Ss seemed to have a more developed notion of the function of writing saying that they needed to learn how to write in order to read. It seems that there is a large amount of overlap between reading and writing, especially in the development of children's emerging literacy (Lalunio, 1998). Likewise, the younger children's writing samples which included scribbles, drawings, invented spellings, and conventional letters were manifestations of the children's transition into literacy.

### Knowledge of Print

The subjects' knowledge of print in books seems less advanced than their knowledge of environmental print. A majority of the three and four year old Ss did not indicate an understanding that the print rather than the picture tells the story. The five and six year old subjects who demonstrated knowledge of the function of print in books nevertheless indicated a knowledge of the form of print, i.e., pointing to letters, words, etc. Some children sounded out the letters but could not read the words. The six year olds who could read the words by syllables said that they didn't know what the words meant. Some listened while the story was being read but others showed restlessness suggesting that they would prefer the story to be told orally rather than read.

### Implications

1. Beginning reading and writing is a developmental process. The transition into literacy follows broad developmental patterns, yet is variable for each child.
2. Children come to school with some degree of print awareness.
3. Information about print that children already have when entering school is a necessary input in developing a curriculum for emergent readers.
4. Early experience with print is important in learning to read. The learning of literacy rather than the teaching of it needs to be the focus of the curriculum.
5. Providing a context for learning about print is necessary for emergent readers. Read-aloud activities and the like will provide more first-hand experiences with books.

6. Encouraging teachers to become observers of their students' development will make them appreciate the strengths and achievements of emerging readers and writers.
7. It is necessary that parents, curriculum writers, administrators, media practitioners, and other stakeholders see their roles clearly in the development of children's literacy.

In closing, more studies are needed to expand and refine our knowledge about the influence of our print-laden environment on written language development of the child. Some of the questions that emerge from this study are the following:

1. What features of written language do children attend to as they develop literacy?
2. What is the relationship between reading and writing in literacy development prior to instruction?
3. What is the relationship between oral language acquisition and the acquisition of literacy?

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