Review of The Kindergarten Book: A Guide to Literacy Instruction

Marcy B Zipke, Providence College

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/marcy_zipke/5/

A comprehensive compilation of the research on early literacy would be impossibly large. That said, Marilyn Duncan does an excellent job of synthesizing the essential literacy research in *The Kindergarten Book: A Guide to Literacy Instruction*. None of the theory or research here is new. Instead, Duncan supplements foundational pedagogical theory with case studies and practical advice. This means that *The Kindergarten Book* will be most useful to those who teach, or are about to teach, kindergarten.

On the other hand, anyone with an interest in five-year-olds and how they learn to read and write can learn from *The Kindergarten Book*. Although she has extensive experience as a teacher developer, consultant, and editor, Duncan regards herself primarily as a kindergarten teacher. Her prose style is friendly and straightforward. She does not assume her readers have a background in education or prior knowledge of teaching techniques.

The book begins with an introduction to Duncan’s classroom. It is seven months into the school year and the children are settled into their routines. Every day these kids enter the classroom and choose for themselves which literacy activities they will participate in first. They list, on a special chart supplemented with pictures, in which order they will read or write, listen to a book on tape, practice their spelling or handwriting, tell stories, do word work, or investigate something. They then embark on these activities independently while Duncan circulates and performs informal assessments. When the independent work is finished, she gathers the children together in order to model story writing for them. This day in the life of her classroom (in which the children are perfectly behaved and largely autonomous) that Duncan narrates sounds a bit unrealistic to the jaded reader. At the same time, her classroom sounds like a lovely place where children would want to learn. The kind of classroom all teachers should aim to create.

As she takes us through her classroom, Duncan lays out the components of literacy. She describes what the kids need to be able to do and how best to teach listening, reading, speaking, presenting, and writing skills. It is especially important to note that the instruction is differentiated for each child. This is a difficult, but not impossible task, and Duncan does an admirable job of illustrating how it is possible to stay on top of what each child knows and what he/she needs to learn next. In addition to the activity centers and whole-group instruction, the kids work in small reading groups and often receive one-on-one instruction. With high expectations of her students and much practice in their day-to-day routines, Duncan is able to manage her class without material rewards or behavior management techniques. A section on organizing the learning spaces illustrates how to arrange the classroom to meet every need and mood.

Duncan’s is a child-centered approach that incorporates many of the ideas and theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978). For example, the activity center with tools such as magnifying glasses and tweezers that encourages investigation provides an authentic reason for utilizing literacy skills. The children ask questions and form hypotheses—what does the classroom’s pet lizard like to eat?—and then investigate the answer with books and models. The answers they discover can be recorded and their experiments labeled. In this way, the children acquire new vocabulary, apply their literacy knowledge to content areas, practice their presentation skills, and more. As Duncan notes, kindergarten is not just preparation for life to a five-year-old, *it is real life* (p.129). Another example of the influence of Vygotsky’s work on the kind of constructivist classroom found here is in the social nature of the work. Vygotsky argued that learning is the process of taking information from the more experienced other and transforming it into internalized knowledge. This is accomplished through student talk and teacher modeling and scaffolding. Literacy is learning through immersion rather than memorization.
This immersion philosophy, in which the students are encouraged to think of literacy activities as the norm (as, indeed, they are for adults), means that phonics is not taught in isolation. Neither is it ignored, however. Duncan defines phonics as the relationship between letters and the sounds of spoken language and makes a point of explaining that her students do need direct and systematic phonics instruction. This instruction happens naturally, as needed, in the context of spelling instruction or small group mini-lessons when there is a common stumbling block.

Finally, *The Kindergarten Book* ends with a rumination on the importance of early childhood education in laying the foundation for all of our future learning. Duncan calls it “a sad irony” that we value higher education more seriously than that of our youngest children. Good kindergarten teachers are one of our most valuable resources; this book aims to help those teachers become even better at what they do.

**References**


**Reviewed by Marcy Zipke, PhD candidate at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Marcy’s specialization is literacy processes and instruction. Her research is on the contribution of metalinguistic awareness to reading comprehension. She has worked as an adjunct instructor of literacy and social studies courses as well as a substitute teacher at the preK-5 level.**