

The Morning Message in Early Childhood Classrooms: Guidelines for Best Practices

Barbara A. Wasik · Annemarie H. Hindman

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Abstract The Morning Message is a commonly implemented activity in early childhood settings, appearing as a part of the daily schedule in many classrooms. However, there is limited research on what are the most effective ways to use the Morning Message to promote print awareness. The goal of this paper is to present suggested guidelines for implementing the Morning Message in early childhood classrooms based on print related research. Ten guidelines for supporting effective implementation of the Morning Message are discussed.

Keywords Literacy skills · Morning message · Teacher professional development · Print awareness

Today is Wednesday and we will be making stone soup. All the spinach, succotash, and the stones will be put in the pot to make a super lunch.

Introduction

The Morning Message, such as the example above, is a commonly implemented activity in American early childhood settings, appearing as a part of the daily schedule in many classrooms. However, with the evolution of the Morning Message over time, it appears that there is considerable variability in how the Morning Message is used in early childhood classrooms to scaffold children's writing

and understanding of print. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the goals of the Morning Message (Graves 1994; Graves and Kittle 2005; Wells 2009), review research on print and writing that is relevant to the Morning Message, and present guidelines to support the effective use of the Morning Message in classrooms serving young children.

Description of the Morning Message

The goal of the Morning Message is to expose children to print in meaningful ways, to help children witness the process of translating speech into print, and to demonstrate for children that print carries meaning. In addition, the Morning Message can help call attention to specific letters, letter sound relationships and how letters put together create words that are read. Ultimately, these efforts at modeling writing and speech-to-print translation can be an effective method for teaching young children about the use of print and, eventually, preparing them to learn to read.

The Morning Message can take several forms, but typically it consists of one or two sentences publically constructed by the teacher, by the children, or through interactions between the teacher and children. The Morning Message is usually presented in a large group at the morning meeting or at Circle Time, when the class gathers to discuss what will happen during the school day and/or to reflect on an important event from the day before. The Morning Message sentences generally communicate information about something that will occur in the classroom that day, or about a topic related to the curriculum or recent learning experiences of the classroom that have personal relevance to the children.

Within this blueprint, there are two critical components of effective Morning Message delivery. The first is that the message provides opportunities for children to actively

B. A. Wasik (✉) · A. H. Hindman
Temple University, Pennsylvania, PA, USA
e-mail: bwasik@temple.edu

A. H. Hindman
e-mail: ahindman@temple.edu

participate in the construction of print, thinking carefully and explicitly about letters, sounds, and conventions of print. Notably, although the teacher and children cooperatively construct the message, it is critical that, in preschool classrooms where the vast majority of children are still developing literacy skills, the teacher does the actual writing of the message. In doing so, she can accurately model many important aspects of print (discussed below). Second, to capture children's attention and foster understanding of the content of the message, the message should contain information that has personal relevance for the child (Graves 1994; Wells 2009).

However, in our work in early childhood classrooms (Hindman and Wasik in press), we have observed great variability in how the Morning Message is actually implemented. For example, some teachers have constructed the message with the children, while others have presented a message already written for the children to "read." Further, some drew a great deal of attention to the print of the message, whereas others fostered little print-related discussion. Finally, some created many opportunities for children to voice their own thoughts about the message, whereas others encouraged few contributions from children.

In trying to better understand what strategies for Morning Message implementation would be most effective, we sought to review the empirical work on the Morning Message. Unfortunately, although the Morning Message is a mainstream activity in most early childhood classrooms, there is very little research conducted on the impact or benefits of the Morning Message on children's learning (Hindman and Wasik in press). This paucity of information contrasts with the rich literature on activities such as book reading or teacher-child conversation and makes it challenging for teachers to know what to do to support children's learning. The first purpose of this paper is to discuss the limited research specifically conducted on the Morning Message, as well as research on children's exposure to print that is indirectly related to the Morning Message. The second purpose is to suggest research-based guidelines for the Morning Message that will help teachers effectively implement this activity to maximize young children's access to, awareness of, and learning about print.

The Value of Learning about Print in Preschool

A sizeable body of research has shown that exposing children to print at an early age is helpful in many aspects of learning to read (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP] 2008; Snow et al. 1998). In particular, although most children will not encounter instruction in decoding (or sounding out) new words until kindergarten or first grade,

they can begin to build foundational knowledge in preschool that will later help them take advantage of this instruction. Such foundational understandings include the alphabetic principle, or the knowledge that letters represent sounds and, ultimately, spoken words; concepts of print, including the directionality of reading and writing and the purposes of punctuation; alphabet knowledge, such as the names and shapes of letters; and sound awareness, or the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds in words. Together, these skill sets pave the way for children to learn about concepts of print, word learning and decoding and, thus, to learn to read in the early grades of school.

Mounting evidence suggests that young children's learning about letters, sounds, and print is best fostered through explicit attention to these concepts; in other words, most children will not master the complex code of the English language without clear instruction in this content (Foorman et al. 2003). However, it is important that this instruction be delivered through engaging, interactive, and age-appropriate, playful tasks around meaningful texts (Neuman et al. 1999). If young children are to attend to and remember this instruction, they must enjoy learning about print and recognize the relevance and value of these concepts for their own lives. Thus, storybook reading, games, conversations, and text explorations such as the Morning Message have come to be preferred as more "developmentally appropriate" ways of teaching about print than drill-focused activities such as worksheets and flashcards.

Research on the Morning Message

To date, limited work has specifically examined the role that the Morning Message plays in young children's learning. Within this research base, most work provides teachers with guidance on using the Morning Message. For example, Labbo (2005) suggests that word processing on computers be incorporated as an effective tool in creating the Morning Message. Fewer studies on Morning Message have provided a description of how teachers actually use this activity, or how specific Morning Message practices matter for children. One study by Mariage (2001) examined teachers' practices regarding the Morning Message in a second-grade setting, describing how one teacher views Morning Message as a collaborative activity that can serve as a "microcosm of the entire writing process." Specifically, in her classroom, the students draft a Morning Message, which the teacher and children then edit and revise together, focusing on improving the content and technical aspects (e.g., punctuation, capitalization). This work is intriguing; however, it was beyond the scope of the study to examine how widespread these practices are or how they affect children's skills.

Another foundational study by Kawakami-Arakaki et al. (1988) described how one laboratory school and one public school used the Morning Message with young children. The findings indicated that the Morning Message was an activity that was easily adapted to the routines of the classroom and widely accepted by teachers. Moreover, teachers generally used the Morning Message to promote print awareness. However, Kawakami-Arakaki et al. (1988) also documented great variability in how teachers implemented the Morning Message in these two schools. Similar variability was identified in a recent study by Hindman and Wasik (in press), which showed that even when preschool teachers attended a workshop and received coaching on the Morning Message, they differed from one another in the messages that they wrote and in what they said about these messages. Together, these findings imply that not all early childhood teachers are doing the same thing under the umbrella of the Morning Message, and that as a consequence, not all children are receiving the same opportunities to learn about print. These results also raise questions about which strategies are most effective at raising children's language and literacy skills.

Research on Effective Exposures to Print for Young Children

As outlined above, there is currently no research that specifically examines classrooms with and without the Morning Message and examines the impact that this activity, or even particular approaches to this activity, could have on children's acquisition of print-related knowledge. Other research in the field of early literacy, however, can indirectly help answer this question and guide early childhood teachers in optimizing the effectiveness of the Morning Message.

Constructing the Morning Message

Research on early writing suggests that it is better for teachers to construct the message in front of children rather than simply present children with a pre-written message. In this way, teachers can model the complex process of text construction (Essa and Burnham 2009; Sulzby 1992). Specifically, children can observe the teacher as he or she thinks about what the message should say, sounds out words, chooses and constructs letters, and places punctuation marks in appropriate spots. Further, to the greatest extent possible, teachers should engage children in the message construction, allowing them to suggest letters and words. In this way, teachers can not only model print construction for children, but help them model these

concepts for one another and start to build identities as beginning readers and writers.

Print Referencing

Once the message has been written, research on how children's exposure to print impacts their early literacy skills sheds light on how teachers could talk about the message to build children's pre-literacy skills. Justice and colleagues (Justice and Ezell 2002; Justice et al. 2002; Justice et al. 2009) conducted a series of studies on print referencing and young children's responsiveness to print awareness. In print referencing, teachers use an engaging text (often a storybook) to highlight print for children. For example, teachers can pause while reading to point out letters of the alphabet (Adult asks, *Do you recognize any of these letters?*) and to draw children's attention to words on the page (Adult asks, *Can you find the words that look alike on that page?*). In a randomized control trial study, Justice and colleagues (2009) found that young children, in fact, did benefit from print referencing during storybook reading. Children whose teachers used explicit print referencing strategies showed larger gains on three standardized measures of print knowledge—print concept knowledge, alphabet knowledge, and name writing—and these effects were of educationally meaningful, medium size.

While this work on print referencing has focused largely on book reading, it is relevant to our understanding of the Morning Message because teachers could use the Morning Message text for many of the same purposes. Indeed, these findings indicate that print referencing can be used confidently as an approach for facilitating print knowledge in preschool-age children during a variety of activities, including the Morning Message.

Interconnection of Morning Message and the Larger Curriculum

In early childhood, most curricula are organized around units, themes, projects, or conceptual taxonomies, so that children can spend several weeks or even months studying a single topic, and all content areas (e.g., shared book reading, mathematics, science, transition activities, outside play, home connections) deal with the core ideas and topics from that unit (Katz and Chard 2000; Wasik and Bond 2001). This integration of activities around core ideas naturally reinforces key vocabulary and concepts, helping children better learn about, talk about, and ultimately remember these ideas. This evidence of the effectiveness of connections across the curriculum means that the Morning Message is most likely to support children's learning when

it incorporates target vocabulary and ideas from the larger curriculum and allows children to think and talk about these words and ideas in a new context. Although there are certainly reasons why the Morning Message might depart from a central theme or unit (e.g., a special event is occurring that day that the teacher would like to highlight), in general, children's learning is advanced when they receive multiple, meaningful exposures to new ideas, and the Morning Message can serve productively as one tool for creating this learning environment.

Guidelines for Morning Messages

Given the research on the importance of exposure to print for children's pre-literacy skills, the Morning Message can be an effective classroom activity. However, in light of the great variability that apparently exists among teachers in the implementation of the Morning Message (Hindman and Wasik in press; Kawakami-Arakaki et al. 1988), as well as the relative absence of empirical research on this topic, it is important to suggest some research-based guidelines for teachers to promote effective practices.

1. *The Morning Message should be connected to the classroom content or, specifically, the classroom theme, and communicate important information about the day's events.* The Morning Message should provide information that is related to the classroom theme, presenting or building on core concepts and ideas that the teacher is trying to communicate to the children. If the theme is winter, the teacher might comment in the Morning Message about the snow outside and how that is related to the book, *Bear Snores On* (Wilson 2002), which the class has been reading. Alternatively, the Morning Message might discuss the different states of snow (e.g., how a snowball melts into water), which the class has been exploring in the science center. In the latter case, the teacher might write a Morning Message such as: "We made a snowman out of the snow outside. When we took the snow inside to our warm classroom, the snow melted."

2. *The Morning Message should be constructed in front of the children.* It is important that the teacher model the formation of letters for the children to observe. It is equally important that the children see that letters are strung together to make words that can be read and carry meaning. As the message is being written, the teacher can identify the letters that she is writing and, when each word is finished, identify that particular word. This process can help children learn the connections between the individual letter shapes and letter names, and the association that letters comprise words. For example, in the message above, the teacher might begin by stating "w" and "e" followed by "we," and then "m" "a" "d" "e" "made," continuing in this vein throughout the message.

3. *The Morning Message should contain at least one key vocabulary word that the children are learning.* As part of the theme-related experiences such as book reading, new vocabulary words are frequently presented and explained to the children. The Morning Message provides an opportunity to use one or more theme-related vocabulary words, allowing the children to hear the word again in a different context and see another visual representation of the word. For example, in the message described above, the teacher reflected on the fact that children were learning about winter, snow, and melting, and included two of these words (snow and melted) into her Morning Message so the children had repeated opportunities to see, talk about, and use this key vocabulary.

4. *The Morning Message should be written at a level of complexity that is developmentally appropriate for children, keeping in mind that a classroom has young children who have very diverse levels of print and language acquisition.* One or two simple sentences are best to communicate a message. At the beginning of the year, depending upon the age and background knowledge of the children, sentences might be brief and contain up to five or six words. However, for more skilled children (e.g., older children, children with knowledge about print, later in the year), one or both of the sentences might be a few words longer (as in the winter Morning Message example above).

In addition, especially in the beginning of the year, the message should involve straightforward sentence structure. In clear, simple terms, the Morning Message should communicate the ideas and concepts intended for the children. The message "We watered our sunflower seeds. We measured how much the seeds grew," is a better message for beginning preschoolers than "We planted our sunflower seeds in orange tubs outside the classroom so they could get the morning sun and stay out of the way of bus traffic." The latter message may be appropriate for first graders who have more sophisticated understanding of complex sentence structure. However, simple sentences to communicate ideas are more effective with young children.

5. *The Morning Message can be generated by the teacher or by the children.* This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Morning Message. Many early childhood educators who subscribe to the constructivist approach to development believe that the message should come from only the children and represent their ideas. However, others think that the Morning Message should communicate specific ideas or events about the day and believe that sometimes it is appropriate for the teacher to generate the message. While both perspectives are valid, a teacher-constructed message can ensure that specific vocabulary and ideas related to the theme and concepts being taught in the classroom will be presented. For example, children could be provided with opportunities to

see vocabulary that appears in story books again in their Morning Message. Such teacher-driven, intentional teaching of vocabulary has clear benefits. However, it is certainly possible to realize many of these benefits in child-constructed messages, but if children construct the message, teachers need to support the message writing through careful scaffolding so that the message is connected to the classroom content.

For example, a message about the trip to the zoo the previous day may begin with one child saying, “We saw zebras at the zoo,” and another child saying, “We saw tigers.” The teacher may scaffold that message to say, “On our trip to the zoo we saw many animals. Two of the animals we saw were tigers and zebras.” This message honored the children’s comments by incorporating them into the message but included a broader statement about seeing many different kinds of animals at the zoo.

As mentioned previously, although children’s contributions to the Morning Message can be helpful in motivating children’s participation and in validating their contributions, the teacher needs to write the message to ensure that it models clear and conventional letter formation, spelling, and punctuation. This allows children to observe the teacher constructing letters and words in their correct form as they model the writing process. There should be other opportunities throughout the children’s day for them to write independently.

6. *During the Morning Message, teachers can model the thinking process that is a critical part of learning to write.* Teachers might begin by doing a “thinking aloud,” or verbalizing their thoughts as they work through the task. They might ponder aloud what the message should say, demonstrating for children that writing is preceded by careful consideration of one’s own ideas. For example, the teacher might say, “I want to write a message about the snow that fell last night, but I also want to tie the message to the books that we have been reading about hibernation. I could say, ‘Snow covered the ground last night. The bears are keeping warm because they are hibernating.’ This lets me talk about the snow and the bears, and also lets me use one of our new words, *hibernation*.” Teachers might also invite input from children on what the message should say, involving them in the process and allowing them to practice using language and translating words into print. For example, the teacher might follow up on her statement by asking, “So, the first word in our message will be ‘Snow’... what letters do we need to write? Can anyone remember, or find that word on our word wall?”

7. *The Morning Message should make connections to print and letter learning.* High-quality early childhood classrooms are filled with various types of print. The Morning Message can be used to reinforce letter learning by providing children with opportunities to identify the

specific letter that they are learning about in class. To make this happen, teachers must ensure that the target letter appears frequently in the message and must guide children to take note of the letter. For example, the message at the beginning of this article says, “*Today is Wednesday and we will be making stone soup. All the spinach, succotash, and the stones will be put in the pot to make a super lunch.*” In this example, the children were reading the book *Stone Soup* (McGovern 1986) but also learning about the letter “Ss.” To draw children’s attention to the target letter, the teacher wrote a message into which “s” figured prominently. In addition, she underlined that letter wherever it appeared. Alternatively, students can be asked to analyze the Morning Message and underline the letter that they are learning about for themselves, perhaps taking turns coming up to the message in front of the large group. Making this connection between learning letters and the Morning Message allows the children to see the teacher constructing the letter and making the corresponding sounds with the letter name and letter shape. By having children underline the targeted letter, children are better able to identify these focal letters in another context. All of these varying opportunities allow the children to engage with print.

Connections can also be made between the Morning Message and children’s own writing. The teacher can refer to the writing of the Morning Message when they talk about writing in journals. The teacher can suggest that children reflect on the Morning Message and see if they can use any of the vocabulary in the message in their own writing. Making these connections helps children to understand the relationship between print constructed by others and their own writing, as well as to begin to think of themselves as writers.

8. *Teachers should ask questions about the Morning Message to promote conversation and language development.* The Morning Message should not be a static piece of print. Instead, it should be dynamic and potentially engage children in conversations about theme-related “big ideas.” For example, one message could read, “Today we are going to the recycling center. We brought paper and plastic that we collected to school and will take it to the recycling center.” After presenting the message, the teacher can ask the children, “What do you expect to see at the recycling center?” and “What do you think happens to the bottles and cans at the center?” Therefore, when teachers encourage discussion, the Morning Message can function as a springboard for conversations that allows teachers to hear children’s feedback on ideas related to the theme.

9. *The Morning Message can be connected to other classroom activities such as Center activities and phonological sensitivity activities.* The message about recycling can be connected to the science center, where the children are learning that when objects are recycled, they change

their shape and physical state. In a related sound awareness activity during Circle Time, the teacher could ask the children to identify the words in the Morning Message that begin with a particular sound, such as /p/. Once “paper” and “plastic” are identified, children can find other objects and words in the class that begin with the same sound as these two words. The message in the Morning Message can be connected to the larger theme or class project.

10. *The Morning Message can occur in either small or large groups.* The group size can vary for this activity, meeting in either small or large groups. During large groups, it may be best to focus on the content that the Morning Message conveys about the day’s events or theme-related ideas, alerting all children to this information at one time. In addition, the teacher may discuss the meaning of the message or specific vocabulary words with the children. For example, in a large group, the message, “Today we are going to the recycling center. We brought to school paper and plastic that we collected to take to the recycling center,” could focus on a discussion about what the children predict that they will see at the recycling center and what they already know about how things are recycled and reused.

In contrast, small-group activities may better lend themselves to discussions of specific aspects of print and letters. Using the same message, in small groups, the teacher can more easily ask children to identify where they would begin to read the message and to identify the specific letter “t” in individual words or even a specific word in the message, such as recycle. Thus, teachers might choose to revisit the Morning Message later in the day, setting up a space in the library center during free play or center time and inviting children to rotate through in groups of 3–4 to engage in more in-depth study of the print. Using the same message allows children to have repeated opportunities to explore similar words within a message with different goals.

Summary

The Morning Message is a common activity in early childhood classrooms, particularly in the United States. The seminal work of Graves and colleagues (Graves 1994; Graves and Kittle 2005) and Wells (2009) has suggested the important role of the Morning Message as it relates to oral language development, print awareness and writing. Yet, little research has explicitly examined the impact of this activity on children’s knowledge and acquisition of print, or drawn conclusions about how teachers could best use this activity. Based on related empirical studies concerning children’s exposure to print, 10 guidelines were extracted that suggest effective approaches for implementing the

Morning Message in early childhood classrooms. The goal of this work is to provide guidance for optimizing the use of the Morning Message in developing children’s knowledge about print and its relationship to speech.

As with all high-quality instruction, teachers need to design activities that meet the needs of their individual children. However, having simple guidelines that provide suggestions on how to optimize children’s learning can be helpful, especially given that the suggestions are based on related research. Providing young children with powerful language and pre-literacy experiences will help establish the important precursor skills that they will need to learn to read. Therefore, it is critical that activities that are intended to achieve a specific goal (e.g., raising print knowledge) actually include opportunities for children to learn about and achieve the desired goal (e.g., talking meaningfully about print). These suggested guidelines will help early childhood teachers promote print awareness and writing in an effective, developmentally appropriate fashion and to support young children’s knowledge about print.

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