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Shifting Images of Developmentally Appropriate Practice as Seen Through Different Lenses

by David K. Dickinson

Three position statements are reviewed with respect to their changing treatment of literacy: two versions of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). Such position statements are then compared to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation Criteria and Procedures (1984, 1991a), the NAEYC Guide to Accreditation (1985, 1991b, 1998), and the two major research tools used to assess the quality of early childhood classrooms: *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale* (Harms & Clifford, 1980; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998), and *Classroom Profile* (Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 1987). While NAEYC has dramatically changed its recommendations regarding the importance of direct literacy instruction, accreditation procedures and research tools pay very little attention to such instruction. Programs can be accredited and even rated superior despite failing to provide the kind of rich language and literacy environment researchers have demonstrated to be necessary in order that all children learn to read and write. Alternative approaches to evaluating language and literacy instruction are described.

Research-based assessment and accreditation are the means by which policy change gets implemented in education. This article documents a rather wide gap between current research on early literacy development and both National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) program accreditation standards and current research tools designed to assess variations in preschool program quality. Currently, researchers can give favorable, even high, ratings to classrooms that only minimally or sporadically support language and literacy acquisition. Programs can receive NAEYC accreditation with minimal such support. In short, a program can be judged to be of high quality despite the fact that it only marginally provides what young children need in order to become literate. These shortcomings are especially noteworthy given that recent policy initiatives such as the Reading Excellence Act, the report on *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and the report of the National Reading Panel (2000) identify teaching children to speak, read, and write as national priorities. Unless research tools and accreditation practices are modified to register the kind of instruction that promotes language and literacy growth, the current enthusiasm for early childhood programs as a means to improve literacy may be undermined as preschools fail to achieve the desired impact on early literacy achievement levels.

History of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

To anyone in the early childhood field, the phrase "developmentally appropriate practice" (DAP) brings to mind the enormously influential statement of what counts as DAP that was initially published by NAEYC in 1987 (Bredekamp, 1987). This position

statement was one of several important efforts that formalized a set of beliefs present in the early childhood world at that time. Before 1987 NAEYC also issued its *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures* (NAEYC, 1984) and, one year later, its *Guide to Accreditation* (NAEYC, 1985). These three NAEYC publications articulated what counted as appropriate practice with young children and translated this vision into review and self-study procedures employed by thousands of preschools. At the same time, the research community drew on a similar body of research and received wisdom as it developed research tools to describe classrooms. The result was two widely used tools, the *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale* (Harms & Clifford, 1980), and the *Classroom Profile* (Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 1987). The distillation of research and practical wisdom that occurred in the mid- to late 1980s was important because it provided professional standards for practitioners and usable, comprehensive tools for researchers. These efforts represented a remarkable convergence between the practitioner and research worlds.

However, since the 1980s this unanimity of outlook has begun to unravel as ideas of what is developmentally appropriate practice have undergone significant change with respect to literacy and cognitive learning more generally. There have been positive changes in the NAEYC view of DAP, with these being seen in the 1997 version of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and the 1998 position statement on literacy that NAEYC released jointly with the International Reading Association (IRA & NAEYC, 1998), but relatively few changes in research tools and accreditation guidelines.

Papers published in this section analyze trends, policies, utilization, and controversies in educational research. They do not necessarily reflect the views of AERA nor are they endorsed by the organization.

The Changing Face of Literacy Research

Dawning Awareness

The 1980s was a pivotal time for developmentally appropriate practice and a time of dawning awareness of the early phase of literacy development. It was at this time that research tools were constructed and the first statement of developmentally appropriate practice was released. Therefore, it is useful to have a sense of the status of research on early literacy at that time.

In the 1980s the study of emergent literacy was beginning to flourish as researchers were recognizing developmental sequences that reflect children's efforts to construct literacy. By the early 1980s considerable work had been done on children's writing (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1975; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Read, 1971). This work made clear that children enjoy writing and that they progressively construct understanding of conventional forms drawing on their own analysis of the sound system and their growing knowledge of conventional print forms and the link between oral language and print. Description of emergent reading sequences was also underway (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Harste et al., 1984; Sulzby, 1985), and the importance of selected dimensions of oral language use was also being discussed (Dickinson, 1987; Snow, 1983; Snow & Dickinson, 1991).

As the nature of emergent literacy was beginning to be described (Teale & Sulzby, 1986), there was growing recognition of the impact of home environments on children's early literacy growth (Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Durkin, 1966; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983). Surprisingly, relatively little serious attention had been given to classroom environments. It was only in the later 1980s and early 1990s that researchers began investigating preschool classrooms and identifying classroom features that support the emergence of early literacy. It was this later work that led to recognition of the impact of classroom organization and materials on children's growth in reading and writing (Morrow, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1992, 1993, 1997; Schickedanz, 1986; Vukelich, 1994). Awareness of the importance of literacy-based teacher-child interactions also began to increase (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Morrow, 1990). Thus, when the first statement of develop-

mentally appropriate practice and the associated guidelines were being formulated and major research tools developed, there was growing recognition that literacy began to emerge during the preschool years, but minimal understanding of how classrooms support its emergence.

Heightened Awareness, Growing Consensus

Since the late 1980s, there has been an emerging consensus that the early years are critical to children's later literacy development (Scarborough, 2001; Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). A wealth of data now points to the importance for reading achievement of the early ability to identify letters (Adams, 1990; Stevenson & Newman, 1986; Stevenson, Parker, Wilkinson, Hegion, & Fish, 1976; Scanlon & Vellutino, 1996) and of children's writing and emergent spelling (Torgeson & Davis, 1996; Richgels, 2001). Extensive research documents the importance of phonological development (Adams, 1990, 2001; Goswami, 2001). Furthermore, growth across these areas is linked and mutually reinforcing (Adams, 1990; Dickinson, McCabe, & Anastasopoulos, in press; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Finally, the place of oral language in early literacy is becoming more apparent, with the importance of having a varied vocabulary being highlighted (Tabors, Beals, & Weizman, 2001; Metsala, 1998, 1999) in addition to skill constructing and comprehending extended discourse (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Research on children's development has outpaced work on the impact of classrooms and homes on children's emerging abilities, but sufficient work has been done to support the research-based statement on early literacy of the International Reading Association and the NAEYC (1998). This statement reviews research that reveals the beneficial effects of classrooms that are rich in print and books and organized to encourage children's engagement in literacy-related activities (see also Morrow, 1991, 1990; Strickland & Morrow, 1989, 1988; Roskos & Neuman, 2001). Other recent research highlights the beneficial impact on children that results when teachers use varied vocabulary, read and discuss books, and engage children in intellectually stimulating conversations (Dickinson, 2001a; Hart & Risley, 1992, 1995; Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001).

Taken as a whole, research conducted over the past thirty years has amassed more than adequate evidence to support programmatic guidelines that clearly lay out the expectation that teachers provide children varied ways to engage in uses of print, guide children's engagement in literacy activities, and actively support their language growth.

The Changing Vision of Developmentally Appropriate Literacy Practices

At the heart of the notion of developmentally appropriate practice is the belief that children's development should be taken into account as adults interact with children, structure their time and space, and plan activities for them. While this core belief may not have changed much over the past 20 years, there have been major advances in research that have affected interpretations of what is and what is not appropriate practice.

Consider the rationale for the initial release of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1986). The first two sentences of the rationale read as follows: "In recent years, a trend toward increased emphasis on formal instruction in academic skills has emerged in early childhood programs. This trend toward formal academic instruction for younger children is based on misconceptions about early learning" (Elkind, 1986, cited in Bredekamp, 1987, p. 1). Later, in the Introduction to the 4-5 year old section, appears the following statement: "Curriculum issues are of particular concern to early childhood educators in light of the increasingly wide-spread demand for use of inappropriate formal teaching techniques for young children, over-emphasis on achievement of narrowly defined academic skills" (p. 51). Once again David Elkind is cited.

Ten years later a remarkable change is evident in the revised DAP (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Gone are the alarmist concerns about academic pressures, replaced by discussion of increases in the diversity of populations served, with reference to the importance of Head Start and welfare reform efforts. Building on advances in research in the previous ten years, there is discussion of the impact of early childhood programs and concern about shortcomings in their quality (p. 6). Thus, in-

stead of being a bulwark against overly academic pressures, DAP now is at least partly viewed as a means to ensure that disadvantaged populations receive high quality programs.

The changes in the rationale for DAP are reflected in suggestions for practice. In 1987 teaching was described as follows: "The correct way to teach young children is not to lecture or verbally instruct them. Teachers of young children are more like guides or facilitators." (p. 52). Ten years later the danger of lecturing to children is not mentioned; instead, teachers are warned about failing to challenge children adequately and reminded of the need for intellectually engaging classrooms. This shift toward asserting the value of teaching is even more clearly evident in the emergent literacy position statement, which begins by asserting that, "It is essential and urgent to teach children to read and write competently" (p. 31). Later it cautions, "Among many early childhood teachers, a maturationist view of young children's development persists despite much evidence to the contrary" (p. 31).

The shifting view of teaching was perhaps prompted by noteworthy changes in how literacy is viewed, with the real change occurring in the practices that were deemed inappropriate. Of particular note are the changes in statements related to the developmental appropriateness of isolated letter recognition. This area is important because letter identification is a strong predictor of later reading (Adams, 1990), and letter knowledge is known to foster growth of phonemic awareness (Ehri & Wilce, 1985). The 1987 version of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* marked as inappropriate "isolated skill development such as recognizing single letters, [and] reciting the alphabet" (p. 55). Similarly, it asserted that "Activities designed solely to teach the alphabet, phonics, and penmanship are much less appropriate." The revised version of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* shifts ground, stating that it is appropriate that "Children have opportunities to develop print awareness . . . and understanding of the various uses of the written word, while learning particular letter names and letter-sound combinations and recognizing words that are meaningful to them" (p. 131). Finally, in *Learning to Read and Write:*

Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, a statement issued jointly by the International Reading Association and NAEYC (1998) (referred to here as the "Joint Statement") completed the about-face regarding the appropriateness of encouraging children to attend to letters: "Teachers will often involve children in comparing letter shapes, helping them to differentiate a number of letters visually. Alphabet books and alphabet puzzles . . . may be key to efficient and early learning" (p. 34). Thus, between 1987 and 1998, the vision put forward by NAEYC of appropriate practice related to literacy has undergone remarkable change.

In addition to these notable changes, the newer position statements continue to recommend certain aspects of practice that support literacy. For example, in the 1987 and 1997 versions of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Early Childhood Programs* and the Joint Statement, high value is placed on letting children "see how reading and writing are used," on providing experiences to build language skills (e.g., reading aloud, field trips, drama), and on allowing children to experiment with writing.

The Need for Parallel Changes in Accreditation and Research Tools

Whereas there is an interesting story to tell about the emerging position statements put forward by NAEYC with respect to literacy, there is no such story to be told about accreditation or research tools.

Accreditation Guidance

In 1984 NAEYC published its *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures*, an overview of the criteria used for NAEYC accreditation. The *Guide to Accreditation*, used to guide programs through accreditation, was first published in 1985. Both volumes were revised in 1991 and again in 1998. These volumes do not reflect changes in DAP that keep pace with the changes just described in position statements related to literacy.

The *Guide to Accreditation* (NAEYC, 1985, 1991b, 1998) contains one particular phase that involves classroom observation and on which I will focus. The latest version of this tool has 70 items divided among five scales. Programs employ this tool by reviewing the description of the items provided and the accompanying *Ac-*

creditation Criteria and Procedures and assigning themselves a score from one to three. The *Guide to Accreditation* indicates how items should be scored in two ways. For some items it lists valued behaviors or materials, but does not provide explicit guidance regarding how many such examples must be present for a score to be assigned. For other items there are "indicators," which are behaviors or materials that must be present if the highest score is to be awarded.

The first of the five scales focuses on Interactions among Teachers and Children. It has 13 items, of which 9 deal either with provision of a warm, responsive environment or with supporting children's social and emotional growth. Only two items relate to language: 1) A-3a (p. 29), "Teachers speak with children in a friendly, positive, courteous manner"; 2) A-3b (p. 29), "Teachers talk with individual children, and encourage children of all ages to use language." The indicators associated with these items have three dimensions: (1) the value of frequent personalized interactions with children ("Speak with individual children often" and "Call children by name."); (2) broad guidance regarding interactional processes ("Ask open-ended questions; Include child in conversations; . . . Listen and respond to children's comments and suggestions."), and (3) suggestions relating to the content of conversations ("talk positively to children about family members, family events, traditions, and routines") (p.29). Although such behaviors provide a starting point for fostering language growth, the overall message is that such behaviors are enacted in the interest of building positive relationships. No mention is made of curiosity or intellectual challenge. While conversations that conform to these criteria may build a child's self-esteem, there is no guarantee that teachers also will view conversations as opportunities to stretch children's language by discussing topics that are removed from the here and now, using varied vocabulary, or expanding children's world knowledge, the kind of language that has proven beneficial to children's language and literacy development (Dickinson, 2001 b; Hart & Risley, 1992, 1995).

The next scale deals with Curriculum and contains 27 items that are appropriate for preschool children. Of these items, one item (B-7c, p. 38) addresses the need to en-

courage children to “Think, reason, question, and experiment.” Finally, B-7d (p. 39) addresses literacy directly: “Encourage language and literacy development.” This single item is accompanied by a long list of valued activities (e.g., reading books, writing experience stories, allowing time to talk, labeling things in the room, using a flannel board, and encouraging the child’s emerging interest in writing), but includes no indicators. Thus no guidance is given regarding which discrete behaviors to value nor is the number of valued activities required to merit a high score on this item given. Nothing in the preschool level addresses the need for teachers to display interest in having children identify letters, let alone having them read names, environmental print, or text. Furthermore, Curriculum items dealing with scheduling address broad aspects of classroom routines, such as the need for balance of indoor versus outdoor activities and teacher-versus child-initiated activity, but do not address the content of classroom routines. Thus, no mention is made regarding the need for regular time for book reading or time for curriculum-related group conversations. In the remaining scales, one of which examines space, no mention is made of literacy-related activity. Under Physical Environment, for example, no mention is made of the desirability of listening centers, reading areas, or writing tables.

The companion volume, *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures* (1991b, 1998) used by programs as they assign scores, provides little additional guidance that would draw attention to aspects of classrooms that specifically support language and literacy. Appendix A of the 1998 guide does provide observers with more details regarding the activities that count as examples of the type of activity valued by each item. For B-7d, the one item that addresses language and literacy, observers are directed to note whether or not staff engage in a number of oral language activities (e.g., reading books and poems, telling stories about experiences) and print-based activities (e.g., taking dictations, encouraging children’s interest in writing). The most noteworthy change from earlier versions is the mention of “forming letters, and using ‘invented’ spellings based on sounding out words” (p. 72). Nonetheless, these valued activities are again presented in an unordered list; no guidance is provided

regarding how many such activities are needed or how to weight those that are seen.

Curiously, it is only in kindergarten that observers are directed to note whether or not teachers “Actively work to increase children’s vocabulary every day” and “Help children develop book-handling skills and familiarity with the conventions of print” (p. 72). It is hard to grasp why the guide values support for children’s efforts to write letters at a younger age than that at which it supports intentional efforts to expand children’s vocabularies and foster book handling skills, two activities that also should be encouraged throughout the preschool years.

The *Guide to Accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children* also directs programs to focus on parental involvement. Specifically, 26 items deal with the relationship recommended between teachers and families. Not one item addresses the need to support parents’ ability to foster their children’s intellectual, language, or literacy development. While teachers are encouraged to use museums and libraries (C-10a, p. 63), no parallel recommendation is made for parents. Remarkably, teachers are not directed to encourage parents to talk with their children, let alone read with them, nor are such issues addressed in the *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures* (1998). These oversights are particularly striking given the long history of research demonstrating the importance of parent-child book reading (e.g., see reviews such as Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001) and parent-child conversations throughout the day (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

This gap between the DAP vision of appropriate practice reflected in the NAEYC/IRA position statement with respect to literacy and the accreditation process could well undermine some of the potential impact of educational reform efforts that are underway across the country. For example, currently the state of Massachusetts is spending millions of dollars on early childhood education, with one of the primary goals being to help as many programs as possible receive NAEYC accreditation. Accreditation is clearly a powerful lever that can be used to enhance the quality of early childhood practice, yet the tools being used are in serious need of revision in ways

that will bring them into conformity with recent research (e.g., Dickinson & Tabors, 2001) and the view of literacy espoused by NAEYC itself.

Research Tools

The view of classroom instruction and literacy embodied in the 1980s DAP statement was manifested in the two dominant research tools used to assess classroom quality, the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (ECERS) (Harms & Clifford, 1980), and the *Assessment Profile for Early Childhood Programs* (Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 1987). However, these tools, like the aforementioned accreditation tools, have not kept pace with research in the area of early literacy. Both of these tools have been of immense value to the field, being used in hundreds of studies of early childhood classrooms. I have used both tools and have found that they identify some important aspects of program quality. Also, I have presented findings to programs where practitioners have found them to be of considerable interest. Nevertheless, despite their strengths, both tools provide woefully slight information about aspects of classrooms that are directly linked to supporting early literacy.

The revised ECERS, the ECERS-R (Harms et al., 1998), almost completely ignores the place of print in the classroom. Of the 43 scales, none deal directly with literacy. No item addresses the presence of print in the environment, the provision of a place to write, or teacher modeling of uses of literacy. Four scales deal with language directly, and in one there is one reference to print, on the scale dealing with the extent to which staff “Encourage children to communicate.” This item becomes relevant only when raters are deciding if a classroom should receive a seven, the highest possible rating on the seven point scale. The relevant wording is “staff link children’s spoken communication with written language” (p. 24). Thus, the message is that only the most outstanding of programs should be expected to be striving to help children link meaning to written symbols.

The *Assessment Profile* (Abbott-Shim & Sibley, 1998), revised in 1998, has five scales and among its 60 items there are three that deal with print. In the Learning Environment subscale, one item requires that the classroom have “At least 3 different types of language materials” (p.3). Ma-

materials called for include a mixture of those that would foster oral language use (e.g., books, flannel boards, child journals, listening station) and others that could foster use of print (e.g., writing, writing paper, pencils). Thus, a classroom could receive credit for this item without having any print-related material in evidence. The Curriculum subscale has two items that directly relate to print: (1) "teacher acknowledges and encourages the child's attempts at, or demonstration of written communication" and (2) "Teacher writes words dictated by children, or children themselves write, to describe an experience and/or ideas." (p. 9). Thus, there is acknowledgement that teachers should model the use of literacy and encourage children's efforts at writing. Unfortunately, there is no indication of specific activities that teachers should engage in to encourage children to start writing (e.g., provide a writing center) and no valuing of teachers' efforts to help children become familiar with letters or the spelling of familiar words.

Of course general purpose tools such as the ECERS-R and the *Assessment Profile* cannot devote extensive attention to any one aspect of classrooms. Nevertheless, if these tools are to be used to provide programs with guidance with respect to the quality of their literacy practices, additional items seem warranted. In short, a gap has opened between the newer vision of DAP provided by position statements of NAEYC and these two important research tools. In contrast, in the mid-1980s the received wisdom regarding DAP, research tools, and accreditation standards was well aligned with respect to the important issue of literacy.

The limitations of current research tools have been noted by researchers seeking to examine the manner in which early childhood classrooms foster early literacy development. For example, the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) research team has now augmented its battery of classroom assessments with a checklist used to identify literacy-related areas and activities. Similarly, with permission of the developers of the ECERS, a large longitudinal study being conducted in Great Britain has added additional items that focus specifically on literacy (Sammons et al., 2001). Also, in response to the need for tools for assessing the literacy support provided by classrooms, researchers at Ed-

ucation Development Center developed the *ELLCO Toolkit*, (Smith, Dickinson, Sangeorge, Anastasopoulos, in press). Such activities suggest that in the coming years literacy researchers and program evaluators will have tools available for examining the literacy support provided by classrooms.

The Policy Implications of Research Tools

The shortcoming in research tools in the area of literacy has the potential to have effects that reach far beyond the world of academic research. Head Start was reauthorized in the summer of 1999 with legislation that calls upon programs to ensure that children make appropriate literacy growth. This legislation drew on the National Research Council's *Preventing Reading Difficulties* (Snow et al., 1998), and set a number of goals for children in the area of literacy. Among these goals are requirements that children need to be able to identify 10 letters and make progress in development of phonemic awareness. Head Start programs also are directed to support children's interest in books and language growth. Furthermore, the programs are accountable for tracking children's growth and for ensuring that staff perform in accordance with Head Start guidelines.

If Head Start and community child-care providers are to take seriously the need to support children's early language and literacy needs, they must have tools that help them assess the quality of their programs in terms of children's emergent literacy needs. The urgent need for such tools is highlighted by an important ongoing effort. Data are being collected on a nationally representative sample of Head Start classrooms as part of FACES. FACES is a remarkable venture that is collecting information from families, assessing children twice a year, and conducting classroom observations to provide the Head Start Bureau with information about the quality of Head Start programs and the growth of the children who attend them (Resnick & Zill, 1999). Not surprisingly, FACES is using the ECERS and portions of the *Classroom Profile*—the two most well established tools. FACES has found that Head Start classroom quality is generally good (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2000), but that four-year-old children show almost no growth in letter identification skill (letter recognition and print concepts) (Zill, Resnick, & McKey, 1999).

Thus, while classroom quality is judged as being generally good, children are not showing growth in this aspect of literacy. These seemingly contradictory results are troublesome. They can be interpreted as indicating that Head Start classrooms do not have much impact on early literacy development. Alternatively, and even worse, they could be interpreted as evidence that children in these programs are not "ready" or able to show growth in literacy during the preschool era. A third alternative is that measures of classroom quality fail to describe adequately dimensions of classrooms that are important for children's early literacy development and therefore fail to identify those classrooms that are supporting children's literacy.

In closing, as the country increasingly emphasizes the need to support literacy development during the preschool years, the mechanisms that can help the preschool community provide needed support are lacking. While there is now a consensus between two leading professional organizations, IRA and NAEYC, with respect to literacy, their position statement has yet to find its way into the self-evaluation efforts that are required for NAEYC accreditation. Furthermore, efforts to monitor the quality of preschool programs are limited by the weakness of available research tools. The absence of appropriate guidance and support opens the possibility that programs will respond to the growing need to teach early literacy skills by adopting inappropriate practices from the primary grades. Conversely, the positive impact of some literacy-related program initiatives may be overlooked because the tools being employed are too global, insensitive to key developmentally appropriate innovations, or both.

NOTE

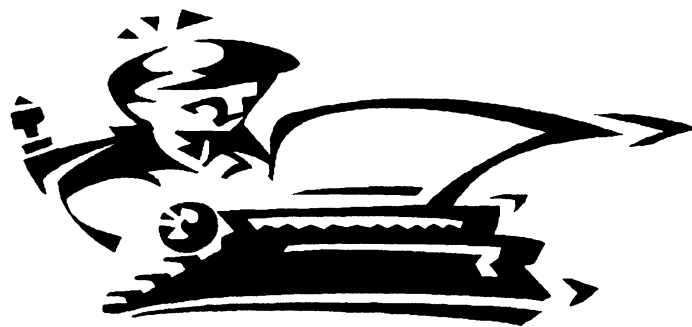
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