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ABSTRACT

When teaching beginning reading, the use of certain children's stories, called predictable books, can yield higher reading comprehension skills, provide excellent practice for sight words, and teach good oral reading skills. A nurturing classroom environment is an important component of an effective beginning reading curriculum. An effective learning environment would provide: neat, orderly surroundings; a classroom library with bookshelves and comfortable seating; a well-supplied writing center; and a colorful and attractive decor. Among the guiding principles for a literacy-rich environment are: (1) acknowledging and using children's prior knowledge about print; (2) recognizing individual differences and developmental levels; (3) arranging the classroom for learner movement and learner interaction; and (4) reading quality literature, including poetry, aloud to children every day. Surrounding children with poetry will ignite their interest in it. Having a variety of collections on hand, in print and on tape; inviting readers to class or having children read poetry to each other; and encouraging children to both collect poetry and to write their own are some suggestions to enhance students' love for rhyme. Teaching specific information about stories, authors, poems, and poets is vital. Within their classrooms, children are members of a community of readers and can be bonded by shared literary information. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

Using Children's Literature to Build Literacy:

A Cooperative Learning Approach

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Emergent literacy refers to the increasing awareness of the print world as young learners observe and experiment with the reading and writing process (Smith, 1991). Beginning in infancy, children have numerous occasions to witness interactions between members of their families and the print environment. They see their parents reading a newspaper, paying bills, or making a grocery list. They see an older brother or sister reading the back of a cereal box, writing out valentines or invitations to a birthday party, and reading the directions to play a new game or put a model together.

Through vicarious experiences, young children begin to conclude that what may look like scribbles and squiggles on paper to them may evoke strong emotions in someone else. Witnessing a parent's response to an unusually high phone bill or seeing someone laugh out loud at a novel reinforces the notion that what is written has meaning. The child is learning that reading and writing are tools for communication. Through this natural, emerging process, the young learner gains the confidence that he or she will need in order to become an active participant in the world of reading and writing.

Young children also become familiar with print outside their homes. They quickly learn to read environmental print, such as labels and fast-food signs. Given paper and pencils, they will model writing behavior. As the desire to communicate and to make sense of and control their world inspires the child to learn to talk, seeing

the possibilities that reading and writing afford can stimulate a desire to master these skills during the school years.

Children who have been read to and who have had opportunities to interact with reading and writing in a variety of situations come to school and formal instruction with many advantages. Their progress in reading and writing will be enhanced if early school experiences include the best of what happened at home. Children who have not shared these early literacy experiences will benefit from the teacher who takes the most beneficial preschool experiences and incorporates them into the beginning reading curriculum. For these students, to be placed in a rigid, skill-oriented program will mean skipping many important steps in the process of becoming literate. Morrow (1988) finds that five-year-olds who have the opportunity to hear a story repeatedly and to interact verbally with the reader increase the quality of their responses to the story and are subsequently able to focus on the meaning and intricacies of print. For children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the method of interactive rereadings of stories is the most effective.

Teaching Reading with Predictable Books

We know that children learn to read by reading. Like any skill, the more we practice it, the better we become. Unfortunately, in the past it has been difficult to figure out how we could teach children to read by reading when they could not yet read. The use of certain children's stories, called ***predictable books***, has allowed teachers to involve children with wonderful stories in their beginning school experiences. By involving children in activities that simulate the best of what occurred

with their parents or another adult during lap reading, we can teach children to read with the most productive method. The following elements of storybook and lap reading identified by research and observation as most conducive to early reading would become the core of the reading curriculum: a nurturant environment; the opportunity to hear a story more than once; and verbal interactions before, during, and after reading.

Bridge, Winograd, and Haley (1983) compared groups of first-graders who were taught with basal readers to those taught with predictable books. Children reading predictable books learned more sight words, were better able to use context to determine an unknown word, and had more positive feelings about reading out loud. Using predictable stories also yielded higher reading comprehension skills (Deford, 1981). The benefits of teaching beginning reading with predictable books are numerous:

1. The child is exposed to wonderful literature. Predictable books include many of the best books available for children today. The importance of quality literature when children are still forming their attitudes about reading cannot be overestimated. The milk companies are right about "the formative years." We want children's initial experiences with reading to be interesting and rewarding and to instill in them a desire for more (Rhodes, 1979).
2. Predictable books can be read over and over and still be enjoyed (Sulzby, 1985). Since one of the components of teaching reading with literature is that the story is read many times, we need a story that can bear repeating. Just as

the child begs the parent at home to read a certain book again and again, he or she will want to hear and read these books repeatedly. And for the teacher who has to listen and read again and again, it helps when the story is good.

3. Predictable books provide excellent practice for sight words (Bridge & Burton, 1982). Teaching children to memorize sight words can be a frustrating experience. These so-called glue words that make up the majority of the words we encounter in reading often have little meaning on their own and do not conjure up a visual picture when encountered in isolation. Words such as *on*, *was*, *from*, or *because* take their meaning from surrounding words and have little in the way of distinguishing features or uniqueness that makes them easy to recognize. Like all books, predictable books contain these same words and the children learn to read them in a supportive context.

4. Reading comprehension—the goal of reading instruction—can be emphasized (Lauritzen, 1980). In order for us to ask children to discuss a story, there must be something to the story to begin with. A justifiable criticism of basal readers in the primary grades is that the stories are merely collections of words and sentences with little plot or character development. There is nothing to be learned or experienced. It is critical that beginning readers recognize that reading can never be separated from meaning. We cannot wait until children know all the words before we start asking them to think about what has been read; making sense of print must begin with early reading.

5. Good oral reading skills are easily taught (Lauritzen, 1980). Because children will be reading stories with delightful dialogue and linguistic devices that appeal to their preference for rhyme and rhythm, the dreaded sing-song voice we so often associate with oral reading in the early grades can be extinguished. The first person who reads each story orally is the best model of good reading: the classroom teacher.

6. Predictable books provide excellent opportunities for writing activities (Cullinan, 1987). Once children have read a predictable story, the language format of the book lends itself to writing activities that are an integral part of reading.

7. Since the stories are filled with action and dialogue, predictable books lend themselves to creative dramatics. Experiences with dramatizing a story help children remember it and understand it (Pellegrini & Galda, 1982). Many of the folktales that are predictable can easily be dramatized or reenacted by using puppets or flannel figures.

8. Children have the opportunity to read what they often call "real books." The sense of accomplishment children feel when they finish an entire book is invaluable. When these books are the same ones they see in stores and libraries, their vision of themselves as true readers is enhanced. Few adults would consider a skill mastered if they could do it only in a classroom under direct supervision.

9. Predictable books allow the child to learn to read by reading. The predicting cycle (sampling, predicting, and confirming or rejecting) that is necessary for

making sense occurs (Smith, 1979). Children hear a bit of the story, have an idea of what the next word or phrase will be, and then listen to see if they were right. By using books that are predictable, we have removed an obstacle for young readers; the language patterns of these stories provide security for beginners. When children know what word will come next, they can focus their energies on the print and make the connection between the spoken word and the written word.

The Classroom

The physical structure of the classroom is an important component of an effective beginning reading curriculum. The environment should be warm and should look inviting; it should be a place where a child chooses to spend time. Consider the following:

1. There must be a classroom library. One part of the room, generally a corner, must be designated as the library. A rug or carpet is an asset, and comfortable seating (rocking chairs, beanbag chairs, or pillows) will help this corner look inviting. Few adults who read for pleasure sit upright in a chair at a desk; most of us prefer to be curled up in chair, sprawled on couches, or snuggled in beds. Although not necessary, old bathtubs, seats from junkyard cars, and bunkbeds make excellent reading spots.

   It is helpful if the library can be partially enclosed. Bookshelves or bookcases can form walls. Picture books should be displayed with their covers showing. Plastic crates or cardboard boxes can also hold books. Magazines

and newspapers are important components of the literate environment and need a designated place in the library. Book posters can transform even the most sterile cement blocks. The classroom library must be kept neat; children need to learn that we care for books in a way that is different from toys. Books are not to be dumped in corners or piled on shelves. Children can assume the responsibility for maintaining the order of the library.

2. There must be a writing center. A separate portion of the room should serve as the writing center. Like the library, it must look attractive to children. A variety of types of paper, note pads, pens, pencils, and erasers should be available. Envelopes, stamp pads and stamps, and liquid correction fluid are valuable supplies. A typewriter and a supply of typing paper will also attract children. Again, the children can assume the responsibility for maintaining the writing center and keeping supplies replenished.
3. Objects and furniture in the room should be labeled in order to capitalize on any opportunity to help children make the connection between the written word and communication.
4. Charts for language experience stories, poetry, and texts of predictable books are necessary.
5. The room should be colorful and attractive. Commercially prepared bulletin boards and learning displays should be avoided. Children's work should comprise much of what hangs on the wall or is displayed. Alphabet charts and

number lines made by the teacher will be much more interesting to the students.

6. The room should be neat and orderly. There is a tendency in all of us to collect far more than we could ever use. The environment is a contributing factor to the behavior of children. A room nearly suffocating in stacks of old magazines. boxes of unused materials. and faded art objects is neither efficient nor attractive.

7. The learning environment should nurture the tentative attempts of beginning readers and should be a supportive climate that encourages risk taking.

Guiding Principles for a Literacy-Rich Environment

- Acknowledging and using children's prior knowledge about print.
- Recognizing individual differences and developmental levels.
- Arranging the classroom for learner movement and learner interaction.
- Providing many models and demonstrations of different language forms.
- Reading quality literature aloud to children every day.
- Providing a flood of print-rich materials in learning centers.
- Accepting children's "errors" as a natural process of learning.
- Designing the curriculum around primary concepts and what we know about how children become literate.
- Learning more ourselves about language and literacy learning.

Sharing Poetry with Children

Since simply surrounding children with poetry will ignite an interest in it, the primary responsibility of the teacher will be to make a variety of poetry available to his or her students and to share it with them whenever possible throughout the day. Instilling a love for rhyme can be enhanced by the following suggestions:

1. Have a variety of collections on hand. The teacher will want to keep a section of poetry books in the classroom library. Many of the anthologies can remain all year, and poetry books dealing with specific subjects or times of year can be brought in as they become appropriate. The teacher may want to feature a new book of poems each week and display the book in a prominent place.
2. Have poems on tape. Since poetry was meant to be read out loud, having poems on cassette tapes allows children to hear their favorites again and again. Listening to a preferred poem and following along in a book reinforces reading skills and introduces children to wonderful words beyond their independent decoding ability.
3. Invite visiting readers to class. People from the community, parents, students from other classes, and school personnel make ideal readers of poetry. The teacher can set aside a specific time each week when guests come and read poetry they have chosen or something recommended by the teacher.
4. Share poetry throughout the day. Because of its brevity, poetry can be integrated into the school day. Each day can begin and end with a poem.

Poetry may also be used during the transition between subjects and included in study in the content areas.

5. Keep poetry on flip charts. The teacher can copy a poem each day on a flip chart. This allows children to reread poetry at their leisure and to enjoy the accumulated poetry the teacher has shared with the class. Hearing these works read out loud first provides a secure base for independent reading.
6. Focus on specific poets. As children come to enjoy poetry, they become curious about the poets. The teacher can select a poet whose work will be displayed and read during a certain period of time. While students learn more about the life of this person, they can begin to appreciate the individual sense of style each poet has. Children can also choose favorite poets and, working alone or in cooperative groups, present information about their poet to the class.
7. Share poetry with one another. As children become comfortable with poetry, they will want to read it to each other. A certain time each week can be set aside for these poetry-sharing sessions. Children can bring their favorite poems to read to one another, and they may want to present some of the works as choral readings or duets. On a rotating basis, children may read a favorite poem as part of the opening exercises each morning, after lunch, or to close the day.
8. Collect poetry. Although we would never want to force children to copy poetry, many of them like their own copy of favorite poems. Children can be given

notebooks in which they can periodically select poems they want to have on hand. By the end of the year, each child will have his or her own anthology. From time to time, children can take their poetry books home to read or can read them to other classes. These poetry collections can become part of the portfolios.

9. Encourage children to write poetry. Not long after children have rekindled an appreciation for listening to poetry, they will want to try a hand at writing their own. The wise teacher makes poetry writing an important facet of the writing workshop (Danielson & LaBonty, 1994).

Teaching specific information about stories, authors, poems, and poets is vital. Within their classrooms, children are members of a community of readers and can be bonded by shared literary information.

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