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AUTHOR McGill-Franzen, Anne; And Others  
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ABSTRACT

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Anne McGill-Franzen  
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*CELA*

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National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement

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National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement  
University at Albany  
State University of New York  
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York 12222

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## **Learning to Be Literate: A Comparison of Five Urban Early Childhood Programs**

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The present study is a description of literacy development in five urban preschools. Classroom observations, transcripts of classroom interactions and participant interviews, and curricula materials and related documents constitute data sources for the evidentiary base. Using naturalistic inquiry and case study contrasts, we found patterns of variation in the resources available to the children from low-income families who attended private-not-for-profit preschools with religious or institutional affiliations and those who attended publicly funded preschools. In publicly funded preschools children had less access to print knowledge and to culturally relevant literature. We argue that many poor children are socialized to practice a different literacy, one that offers limited experiences with books and is less connected to personal and community identity. The findings of the study challenge assumptions underpinning publicly funded early childhood programs, namely that such programs provide a more equitable foundation for literacy and schooling for children of low-income families.

Children's earliest experiences with books and print lay the groundwork for success in school and, in recognition of this, national leaders recently have called parents to task for not reading to their children. Commenting on the poor showing of America's youngest children—especially minority children—in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Education Secretary Richard W. Riley urged parents to "slow down the pace of your lives and help your child grow" (Daily News Service, 1993). In the present study,<sup>1</sup> we looked inside several publicly-funded and private-not-for-profit preschools to examine each *school's* contributions to early literacy development. Given recent research findings that demonstrate the positive impact schools can have, even in the absence of home support (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995), we expected to find preschool programs that supported children's earliest experiences with literature and print, particularly programs serving families with limited economic resources.

The focus here is not the literacy development of children,<sup>2</sup> but rather the *opportunities* for literacy development available in different programs for 4-year-olds. Whether these

preschool classrooms were affiliated with Head Start, public school, the university, social services, or religious and charitable organizations did not seem significant at the outset. We sought diversity in the children's backgrounds and, perhaps, difference in the literary environments of the classrooms. We found diversity, but sadly, we also found pervasive segregation by social class and race, and with the segregation, "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991) in the literary experiences offered in preschool programs for poor children. Taking a wide lens first, we contrast the *resources* in terms of books and literacy activities of three publicly funded preschools serving predominately economically disadvantaged and working class African American families with two private preschools that are more ethnically and economically heterogeneous. Next, we describe in some detail how children are socialized to practice *different literacies*—the cultural habitus (Purves, 1993) that gives shape to text selection and the interactions surrounding text readings and writing within each of the five preschool settings.

## THE STUDY

Five preschools were selected because they were representative of the types of programs available in the mid-sized city of the study: they enrolled at least some low-income children; they served diverse communities within the same city; and they were regarded as good programs by experts in the field. Each of the three publicly funded preschools enrolled over 90% African American children, with the majority of families meeting the federal poverty guidelines. Children attending the two private preschools were predominately Caucasian and Asian (there were no African American children, but there were immigrant children from Africa and the Caribbean). The private preschools enrolled children of low-income student families; working class and professional families; and families who were recent immigrants, many of whom were learning English as a second language.

After we obtained entry to the preschools, the teachers helped us identify focal children to observe in a longitudinal study<sup>3</sup> of the influences of classroom experiences on the development of literacy and literary understandings. Teachers nominated "average" children, that is, neither the most precocious nor the neediest children in the group, and we selected 22 focal children from among those who returned permission forms. With a few exceptions, the focal children's histories spoke of economic struggle, recent immigration, or limited proficiency in English (See Table 1).

Thirteen of the focal children were African American. The African American children and two Caucasian children attended one of three publicly subsidized preschools located in their neighborhoods. These preschools were funded by federal, state, and county money (or some combination thereof), and included a Head Start class, a public school prekindergarten, and a developmental child care center. The programs were free (or heavily subsidized) for participating families. The other children lived in the same city as the African American children, but not the same neighborhoods, and they attended two private urban preschools.

Of these nine children, three (including a Russian child and an Israeli child) attended a religion-affiliated preschool; and three (including a Chinese child and a Chilean child) attended a university-affiliated day care center. Many of the immigrant children were learning English as a second language and many of their parents held low-income jobs and/or student subsidies. The majority of the immigrant families received some level of tuition support for their children's private preschool program.

## **Methods and Analysis**

The study reports descriptive data gathered during the children's year in preschool.<sup>4</sup> There are four sources of data analyzed here: (1) in-classroom observations including time by activity segments (experienced by the focal children); (2) transcribed audiotapes of classroom literacy interactions; (3) transcribed debriefing interviews with focal children and teachers at the time of the observations and of parent interviews twice a year; and (4) documents including state, federal and local guidelines for program curricula and philosophy, classroom curriculum materials, children's work, and books. Using naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and case study contrasts (Yin, 1984), these documents, interviews, and observation data were analyzed for patterns of variation across preschool sites.

Each of the children was observed for a whole day at least twice each month. We took running field notes and transformed field data into an abbreviated Student Observation Instrument (SOI) that captured time by the activity segments in which the focal children participated. Using teachers' labels for their activities and observers' running field notes as starting points, we developed a taxonomy of activities and interactions for coding the SOI. In order to compile our time analysis on literacy, we loosely defined literacy activities as any interactions with books or about books, including any writing, copying, scribbling, or talk about print. The children's interactions around text were audiotaped and transcribed, including teachers' story reading and instructional talk, and these transcripts were analyzed

for qualitative differences in questioning and responding behaviors (Florio-Ruane, 1991; Langer, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 1983; Cazden, 1988). In addition, we used categories developed by Martinez and Teale (1993) and Dickinson and Smith (1994) to describe teachers' storyreading styles and analyzed the teacher and student interactions around text for evidence of cognitively challenging talk. Each transcript was coded twice, discrepancies were coded a third time, and differences resolved.

Children's written work, texts read or enacted, assessments, curriculum materials, and other relevant documents were also collected. Books on display in classroom libraries and, where appropriate, center or office libraries were counted and described according to topic, genre (narrative or expository), and difficulty. We viewed text difficulty not only as a linguistic construct, but as a social construct as well, one that is dependent on the background and culture of the reader, the supportive language of the teacher and the text, and "the nature of the understanding expected" (Purves, 1991, p.167). In general, books that deal with themes close to childhood experiences are thought to be easier than imaginative tales.

Simple descriptive statements with few words and repetitive language that are supported by explicit illustrations are easier than longer, more complex stories, with event sequences and other elements of narrative form (Peterson, 1988). Unfamiliar vocabulary and the concepts represented by these words also make books hard for children, but teachers can mitigate this difficulty and other difficulties posed by children's limited experiences through dialogue about the texts. By inviting children to talk about texts in terms of their own understandings, by responding to children's questions, and by facilitating connections between the text world and that of the child, teachers can make challenging books accessible (Nystrand, 1991). Difficulty resides not necessarily in the text itself, but in the thinking about the text (p.142); in our excerpted descriptions of the books selected for the children and read to them, we attempted to capture both dimensions of text difficulty. In addition, the number of titles on display at any one time for children to read and handle in classroom libraries was tabulated, as was the total number of book titles made available to children over the course of the year in classroom libraries.<sup>5</sup>

The analytical framework for organizing the study draws upon the work of Snow et al. (1991), who found that classrooms offering high instructional support in literacy to low-income children could compensate for an impoverished home environment, and the work of sociolinguists, such as Green, Kantor, and Rogers (1991), and Florio-Ruane (1991), who hold that children's day by day experiences within particular classroom communities shape their cumulative understandings of the uses, purposes, and possibilities of written language.



Our interpretations were also influenced by the work of theorists in the developing area of critical literacy, particularly studies of children's responses to literature (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996) and the African American aesthetic experience (Mason, 1983; King & Mitchell, 1990). In a recent study of the ways children transform ideas about themselves and the world through reading and writing, for example, researchers McGinley and Kamberelis (1996) identified a number of personal, social, and political categories for describing children's uses of literacy within one elementary classroom community. The focus of this analysis is not on the children's responses per se, but rather on rich description of texts selected and the talk that surrounds read-alouds in particular preschool communities. The critical literacy perspective that we employ in our interpretation suggests that literacy is a process of "coming to self-consciousness" (Mason, 1983, p.10) - not only discovering, but also creating oneself - and that classroom opportunities to link literature to the lived experience (King & Mitchell, 1990, p.82) can help create a sense of ethical and political responsibility to support community values and transform society.

### **Preschool Settings: Isolation by Race and Class**

As discussed earlier, most of the observed children, regardless of race and religious or ethnic affiliation, were from low-income families. In order to be eligible to attend the publicly funded preschools, families had to be receiving welfare benefits or qualify as working poor by having income levels below the federal definition of poverty. By contrast, the majority of children in the private religion-affiliated preschool were not low-income children, but middle-class children whose families practiced the same religion as the children we were observing. Nonetheless, there were several children from low-income immigrant families in the center. The children in the university day care center were primarily students' children. At this center, the largest minority was Asian, although there were children from all over the world, and approximately half of the children there were also learning English as a second language. Thus, the publicly funded preschools served predominately African American children from the same inner city neighborhoods, the religion-affiliated preschool served a regional religious community with some immigrant ESL children on scholarship, and the university day care served the often low-income but relatively well-educated multi-cultural and multilingual student community. Teachers and teacher assistants in both the private preschools and the publicly funded prekindergarten were college graduates. In two publicly funded preschools, one teacher was a college graduate (a two-year degree) and the

other had finished high school. Two publicly funded preschool teachers were African American and one was Caucasian. The private preschool teachers were Caucasian. All teaching assistants were African American. The African American teachers lived in the same urban neighborhoods as the African American children. Likewise, the private preschool teachers lived in the communities they served. In preschools which were segregated by ethnicity and/or class, the children, and to some extent their teachers, were isolated from the larger urban community.

## FINDINGS

### Resources in Books and Time for Reading

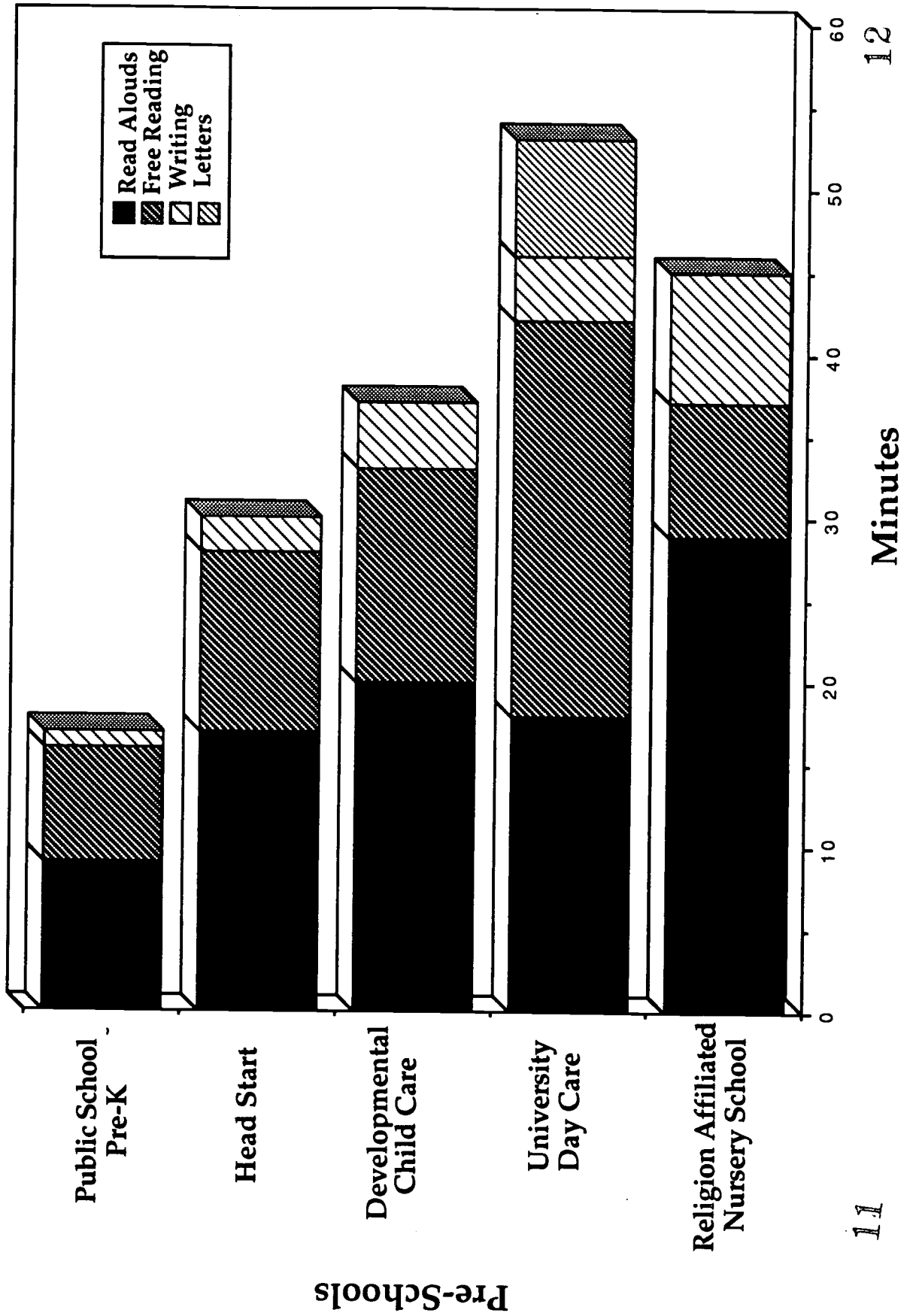
In general, the children spent much less time than we had anticipated in literacy activities. Depending on the preschool program, the average time children spent in literacy activities ranged from about 20 minutes a day to a little less than an hour - not long at all when we consider that some children were in these programs for up to nine hours each day. Children listened to teachers read stories aloud during group time but teachers rarely read stories to one child alone or even pairs of children.

Read-aloud times ranged from about 10 minutes a day in a half-day public school prekindergarten to approximately 30 minutes daily in the religion-affiliated nursery school (see Figure 1), which was also half-day, but for 3- and 4-year-olds. In addition, all children generally had opportunities to look at and read books independently or with their peers. Because teachers often used this type of "free reading" to help make transitions between activities smooth and relatively quiet, children were often asked to "get a book." Except for the university day care where children brought two books with them to their cots to read before nap (and therefore spent about 25 minutes this way), most of the children took 10 minutes or so to read books at different transition points throughout the day.

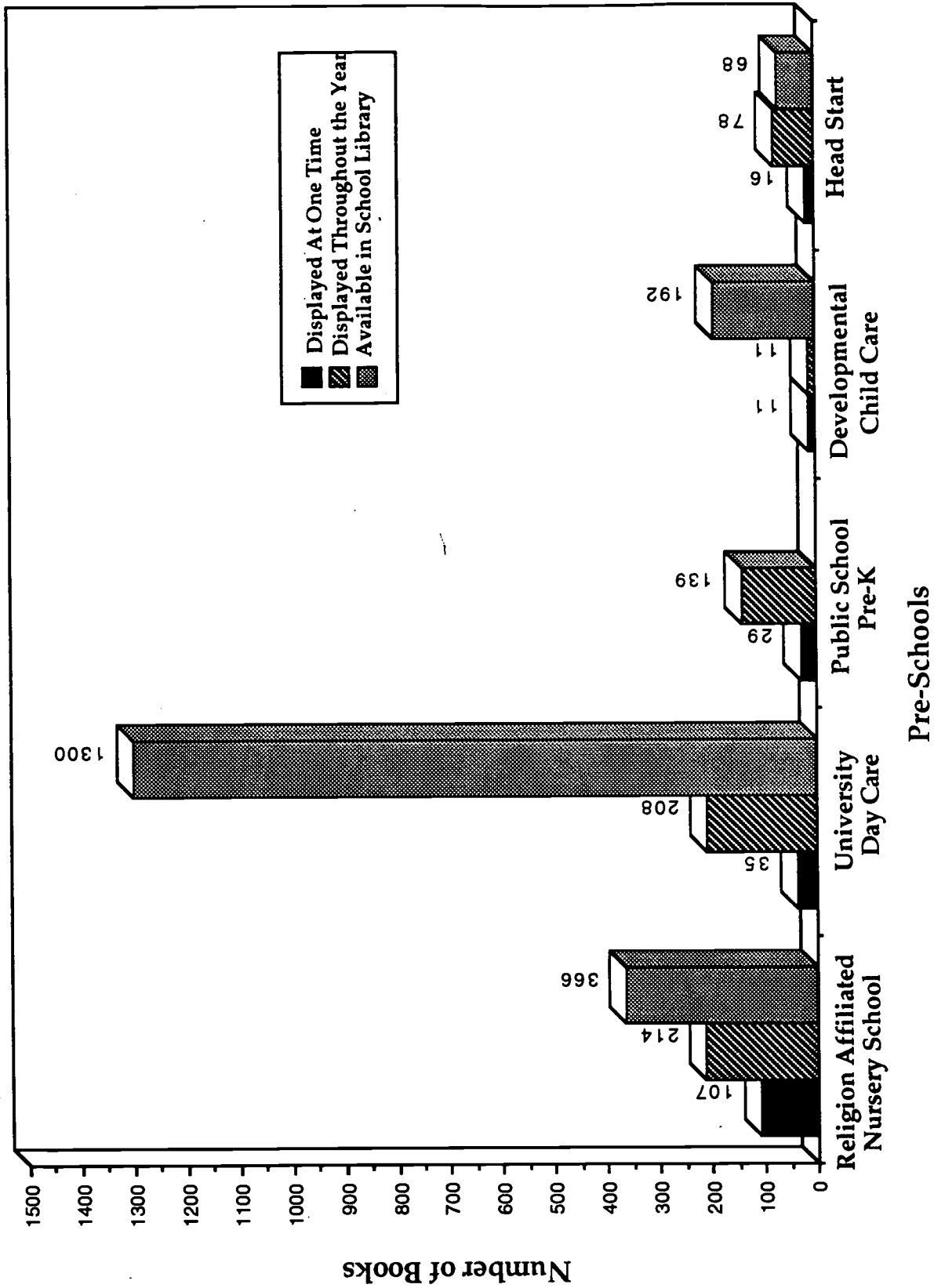
But, as discussed below, children in different settings (see Figure 2) had vastly different books available to them in terms of number of books, variety of genres, condition of the books, and themes presented.

**Child development day care.** In one preschool classroom, which is part of a large publicly funded child development day care center established over 75 years ago to serve children of poor urban families, there were only about 11 books available for the children to touch all

# Time Spent With Text



# Children's Access To Books



year. These books were actually fragments of books—covers without the book itself, torn pages from books, or books with covers and pages missing. These books were stored in a cardboard box under a table piled high with accumulated bits and pieces of lessons, papers, broken toys, and so on. One child explained the box as "books other kids ripped." The teacher maintained a library of her own (approximately 133 titles of popular narrative texts, including several books by Ezra Jack Keats and Mercer Mayer) from which she selected her read-aloud books. Since the teacher had no book budget, these books were selected by the teacher as bonus books that accrued to her as a result of commercial book club purchases by the research assistant. These books, and those that the teacher purchased with her own money, were regarded as personal property and were off-limits to the children. The program director also maintained a small library of books (59) for teachers to use, but many of these titles were informational books on how to behave, such as Joy Berry's (1982) series: *Let's Talk About Throwing Tantrums*, *Let's Talk About Whining*, *Let's Talk About Being Rude*, and so on, or concept books about counting and the alphabet. Only two books were borrowed from this library over the course of the year; the teacher we observed did not borrow any. Children were not allowed to borrow books because teachers had to pay for any missing or damaged books that the school had purchased. Even though children attended school for about nine hours each day, there were no visits scheduled for the public library at any time during the year. Children were allowed to bring books from home to read during transition periods. Several children, including the children who were being observed, frequently brought in one or two books, often the same favorite two or three Golden Book titles of Disney stories, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (Menken, 1990). The children shared these "home books" with some of their peers since the 11 titles were neither enough to go around during "get a book" time, nor particularly appealing to the children. Having a book from home conferred status on the children who brought them, mainly because the other children had to negotiate with them for a chance to look at them.

**Public school prekindergarten.** Of the three preschools for poor children, the prekindergarten located in the public school had the largest number of books—a classroom library of about 170 titles. Because the supervisor would not allow any frayed books on public display, the teacher generally let children handle only the hard bound books (30) and kept the other paper back books out of reach (and out of sight) to preserve them. This classroom had a collection of big books with predictable text—for example, Pat Hutchins' (1971) *Rosie's Walk*, Laura Joffe Numeroff's (1985) *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, Esphyr Slobodkina's (1988) *Caps for Sale*, and traditional tales such as P. C. Asbjornsen and

J. E. Moe's (1991) *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*—that the teacher read aloud to the children during group time. There were also a few paperback copies of some smaller versions of these big books that the children were able to look at during transitions. Books in this classroom collection were ordered by the central administration of the school district, and the selections represented classical children's books such as those by Robert McCloskey as well as a few popular series books by Mercer Mayer and H. A. Rey. Children in this program were not allowed to borrow books from the classroom library or the school library, which they did not visit, nor were they ever scheduled for the public library, which was nearby. The teacher assistant did sign a small number of holiday books out of the public library in her own name for the children to peruse at Christmas. Otherwise, the same 30 or so books remained on display .

**Head Start.** Although established in the late 1960's, the Head Start program had the smallest classroom library at any given point in time, and only a few donated books were in the school library. However, the teacher and teacher assistant, themselves avid readers, took the children to the public library each week. The children typically spent an hour or two browsing, trading, and sharing books, usually settling down to look through Disney illustrated storybooks or the children's encyclopedia (the weapons section was highly sought after by the boys). Some children were able to borrow up to two books to take home on their own library card, and the teachers replenished or renewed the classroom library. Teachers chose most of their read-aloud books, nap stories, records, and tapes from the public library. A few titles were renewed many times. Among the children's favorites were the Waldo books, and among the teachers' favorite read-alouds were the cumulative stories like *Mr. Gumpy's Outing* (Burningham, 1984), *The House That Jack Built* (Galdone, 1961), and *The Gingerbread Man* (Ireson, 1963).

**Religion-affiliated nursery school.** By contrast, teachers in the private religion-affiliated nursery school displayed about 100 books at any point in time, frequently changed titles as themes changed, and used the resources of a substantial school library (212 titles, including a small library of Disney books and books with religious themes), as well as several public libraries, to stock the children's bookshelves. The director of the nursery school, which has been located at the same Temple for 35 years, has personally collected religious narratives and expository texts for children on religious topics for use by the teachers and children since she became affiliated with the center 14 years ago. Different book areas in different parts of the children's classroom were devoted to special topics and hands-on projects such as guinea



pigs, tadpoles, and Purim megillahs. There were always at least a half dozen expository books related to a science theme, for example, *What's Inside Small Animals?* (Kindersley, 1991), *Animals Born Alive and Well* (Heller, 1979), or *In the Pond* (Christini & Puricelli, 1985), in addition to seasonal and holiday books of many different genres. To illustrate the range of genres available to the children and the depth of the topics, we list just a few examples of books displayed at the time of one autumn observation: *Hiawatha* (Longfellow, 1986), *Sarah Morton's Day: A Day in the Life of a Pilgrim Girl* (Waters, 1989), *The Legend of the Bluebonnet* (dePaolo, 1993), *Thanksgiving Story* (Dalglish, 1954), *A Hanukkah for Dina* (Cohen, 1979), an extensive library of Eric Carle's work, and at least two books by dozens of other children's authors. Children were able to borrow books, buy books through a number of book clubs, and they and their parents contributed books as well.

**University day care.** At the university day care, which is governed by parents in a cooperative arrangement with the director and staff, the preschool library itself housed about 1500 titles. In addition, teachers displayed approximately 35 titles at a time in the 4-year-olds' room. Some of these titles belonged exclusively to the 4-year-olds' room, other titles were borrowed from the preschool library, and about half were borrowed by the teachers and children from the public library. Teachers scheduled morning visits to the public library once a month; each child selected one book, signed out to the day care, for the classroom display. The classroom display changed each month, although children and teachers often revisited favorite books, authors, and themes. Children and parents frequently borrowed books from the preschool and brought books from home to share.

This center still held to its 1960's roots. There were so many ethnic identities represented among the children that no group holidays were celebrated, but instead each child—his or her personal history, language, culture, family, community tradition—was celebrated for one week. Classroom libraries reflected the center's multi-cultural, nonviolent, non-sexist, and environmentally sensitive philosophy as well. Besides traditional children's narratives, predictable books and song books, the libraries here, like those of the religious-affiliated preschool, typically displayed many examples of expository and informational texts. Through the sharing of books, the children participated in issues such as preserving the rainforest, protecting animals, and life and literature from different cultures. Ironically, this preschool, without a single African American child, had the largest library of books with African American settings, characters and themes. There were, for example, several biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr., classic modern stories like *Ben's Trumpet* (Isadora, 1979), folktales like *I Am Eyes: Ni Macho* (Ward, 1978), and recent titles such as *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman,

1991), *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1991), and *Rehema's Journey: A Visit in Tanzania* (Margolies, 1990). In addition, these libraries, like that of the religion-affiliated preschool, had over a dozen Disney books and multiple books by many authors. When the children brought books from home, they were often Disney books, which the children loved, or books written in their first language.

## Resources for Writing

None of the preschools emphasized writing, which we broadly define as any printing, pretend writing, scribbling, or captioning of text. On average, the children we observed spent little time writing—from about 10 minutes each day in the private preschools to less than a minute in one of the income-eligible preschools (see Figure 1).

The alphabet itself received scant attention. Only the university day care actually taught the children to identify and form the English letters of the alphabet in a letter per week format. In the religion-affiliated center, children recited the Hebrew as well as the English alphabet and received individual assistance as they tried to create their own written texts. Two of the preschools for income-eligible children had policies which proscribed teaching the alphabet. One did not allow the display of the alphabet. Teachers in the other publicly funded center taught the alphabet letters in children's first names. In the third publicly funded center, children frequently copied and traced the letters in their first names, but received no guidance on how to identify or form the letters.

**Private preschools.** Children frequently chose to write when writing supplies were readily available during free play in the private preschools. Office supplies—old computer paper, piles of obsolete bureaucratic forms, even recycled drafts of student papers, typewriter, pens, pencils, paper clips, and so on—were set up as an "office center" in the university day care. Children there often used free play time to discuss, create, sign, and decorate greeting cards and other texts, or to continue a writing activity initiated by the teacher during "letter of the week" group work.

In the religion-affiliated nursery school, writing materials were prominently displayed during free play. Every morning there were large sheets of paper scrolled over the tables to invite children to draw, write, and make their marks; bins of markers, pens, pencils, crayons, tape, old coloring book pages, scissors, and stickers were all within a child's reach.



Construction paper covered a large door (the "writing door"), and pencils and pens dangled from string. There were even alphabet cookie cutters for play dough.

**Publicly funded preschools.** Crayons, markers, and paper were distributed only for independent name-copying activities in the child development day care center; in the public school prekindergarten, these materials were used only for group art projects, and in Head Start, broken crayons and dry markers were never replaced. There were generally a few large round pencils in these centers but they were not freely available to the children. Pencils with erasers were a novelty for the children, as was writing itself, and the children often pleaded with the observers to allow them to write. One youngster proudly showed a blue crayon stub that he had been carrying in his bookbag, and another puzzled with the observer over how the eraser part of the pencil worked.

Some of the children had little experience writing or watching others write. These children did not write their own names on artwork or other personal belongings such as spring baskets or valentines. Towards the end of the school year, however, teachers in two of these centers encouraged children to "practice" tracing and copying their first names.

During one late spring observation day in the child development day care center, a child spent a minute or so first tracing dot-to-dot "Ns", and then another minute copying the "N" underneath. Because the letter "N" was the first letter in this child's name, the observer asked the child the name of the letter. The child answered that it was the "up and down" letter. In the absence of any kind of instruction in naming and forming the letter, the child had created his own schemata for remembering what it was and how to print it. After midyear in this center, children occasionally worked in pairs, with the teacher, on pages from a Zaner-Bloser handwriting readiness workbook; the only writing required at this point was drawing connecting lines between pictures and circling pictures.

In the public school prekindergarten there was virtually no assistance or opportunity for inexperienced children to learn how to read or write their names or make writing-like marks on paper, let alone participate in any purposeful writing activity. Only in the private preschools were children encouraged to write for their own reasons and assisted with the process.

## **Socializing Children to Practice Different Literacies: Five Preschool Communities**

As we discussed earlier, the preschools differed in the ethnic and/or religious affiliations of the families they served. In addition, the preschools differed in governance and the degree of participation accorded to parents. Although private preschool staff complained about having to "hold parents at bay" so that their curricular demands for more reading and writing did not overwhelm the teachers, in reality, the voices of the parents (and former parents) were heard individually and collectively because these preschools were governed by parent boards with representation by the sponsoring institutions. On the other hand, the publicly funded preschools had the reverse governance arrangement. The publicly funded preschools, although required to seek parent representation according to bylaws and regulation, in reality were governed by the agencies that provided funding—the federal government, state education and social services departments, and charities. The teachers themselves felt that curricular decisions were made at a distance. At Head Start, the teachers and director said they taught "by the book," meaning the guidelines provided by the county office of the federal program. Prekindergarten teachers and their programs were funded by the state education department, which, in turn, was able to censor instruction in reading and writing and eliminate budget items that looked "too academic." Day care teachers made do with donated books, while the director there spent much of her energy negotiating with the myriad welfare and charitable agencies for money to continue the program.

According to the guidelines described by center administrators, the mission of the university day care was to provide affordable full-day child care as a service to students. The religion-affiliated nursery school provided a half-day educational experience that reflected the religious beliefs of the community. The child development day care center provided free or subsidized full-day child care, a developmental education program, and several meals to children of eligible parents; Head Start provided a school-day (with nap) educational program as well as two meals and health services to children from families that met the federal guidelines for poverty; the prekindergarten provided one meal and a half-day educational program, again, for economically disadvantaged families.

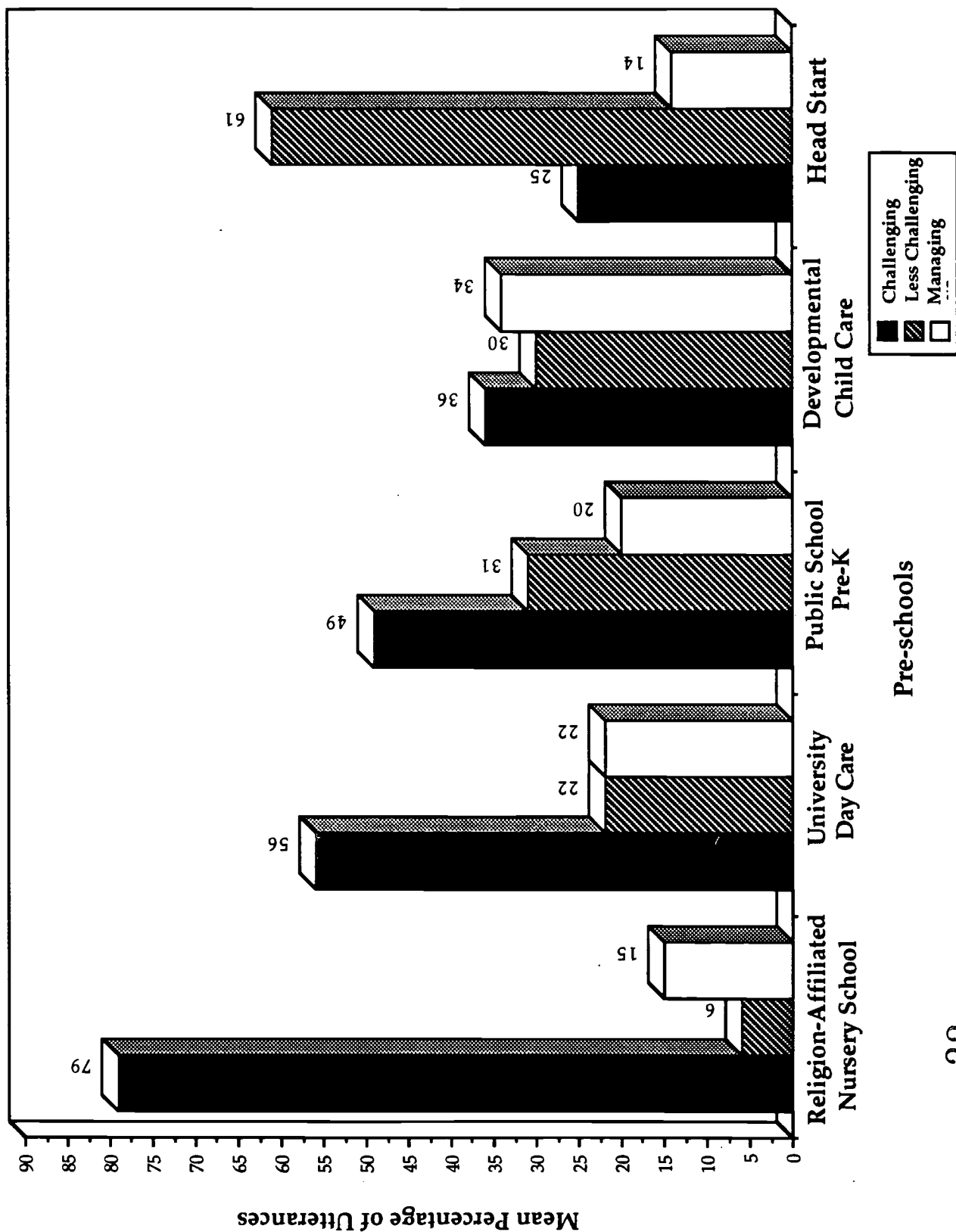
Although not an explicit goal of any program, all teachers initiated children into the literate practices and rituals of their respective classroom communities. Different communities use and value literacy differently and children are socialized into the literacy practices of the preschool communities to which they belong. Through interactions with their intimates, they learn and share with their community its beliefs about the uses and value of reading and writing, including larger political and social uses as well as personal

aesthetic or everyday kinds of functions<sup>6</sup> (McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996). Relatedly, as Au (1993) observed, "If students are to feel welcome in the classroom community, that community must in part reflect the values in students' homes as well as the values of the school and mainstream society" (p.83). In some preschool communities more than others, teachers provided children with the support they needed to personalize literate practice and make connections across texts and between texts and their own lives.

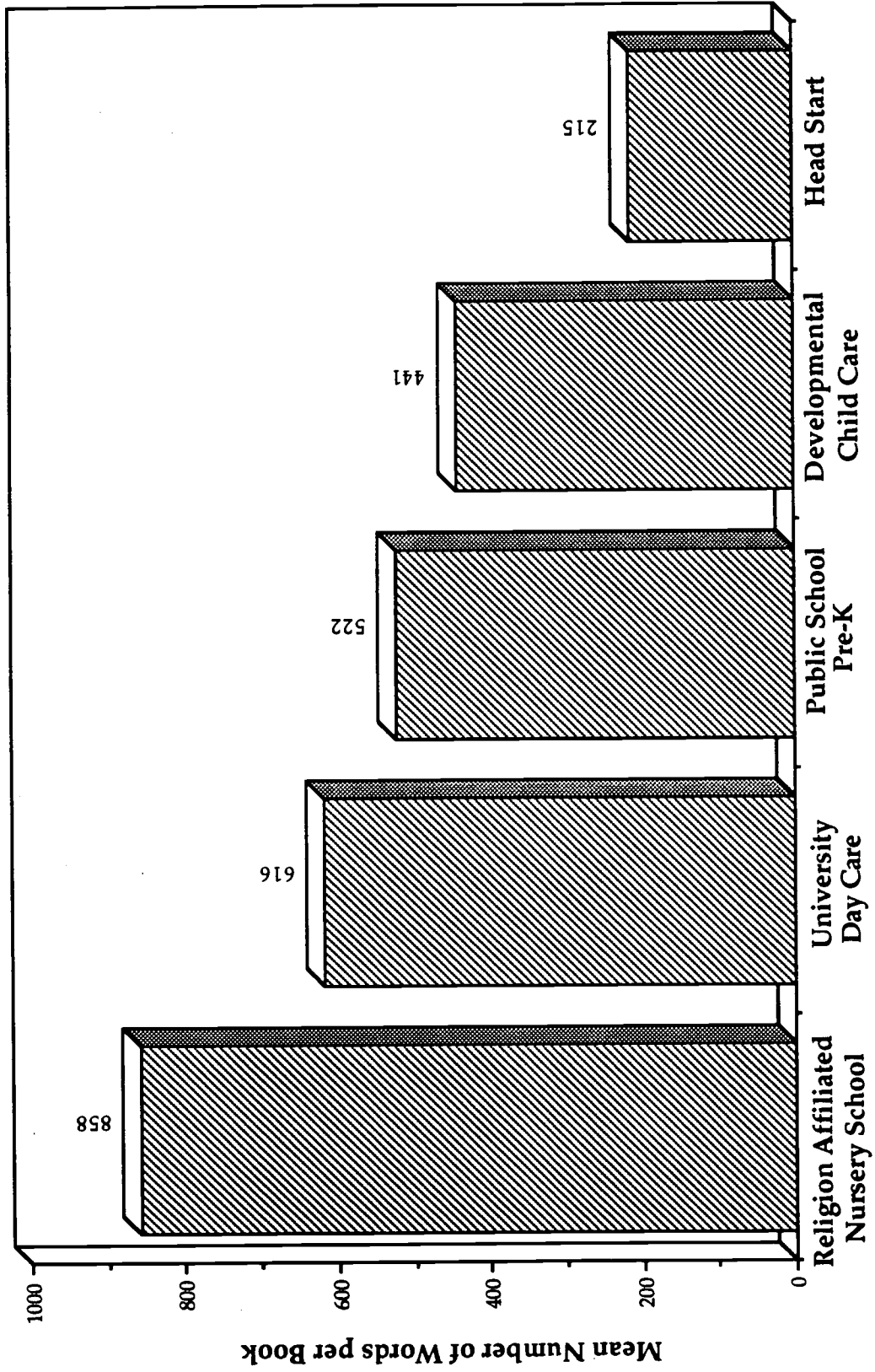
Descriptions of the literacy practices and literacy beliefs in each preschool follow, with particular attention given to patterns of teacher-child verbal interaction surrounding book reading events. Teachers' book-reading styles, in particular the ways teachers involve children in analytic talk about texts, hold long-term significance for children's literacy development. In one recent study (Dickinson & Smith, 1994), such teacher-student dialogue in the preschool was identified as a potential "precursor" (p.13) to developing literacy. Preschool teachers' "cognitively challenging talk" (p.7), for example, emerged as a powerful correlate of children's vocabulary knowledge one year later. Our study found that it was only in the two private preschools that teachers regularly engaged children in cognitively challenging analytical talk during book readings (See Figure 3).

In our analysis of book readings in each of the five preschools, we describe these events qualitatively in terms of broad patterns of teacher-child interaction, drawing upon the frameworks developed by Martinez and Teale (1993) and Dickinson and Smith (1994), and we illustrate those patterns with specific examples of teacher behaviors during book reading. We attend to three general characteristics of book talk: (1) the quantity of talk, and whether it occurred before, during, or after the book reading; (2) the teacher's use of informing and/or questioning strategies as they initiate talk and/or respond to children's talk; and (3) the content of the talk. For this last characteristic, we adapt the three categories of talk suggested by Dickinson and Smith (1994). "Cognitively challenging" talk requires analytical work on the part of the teachers and children to get a sense of character and event development, to predict and confirm, to respond and evaluate, to make personal connections to experience, and to talk about the form and meaning of the language of text. "Less cognitively challenging" talk refers to textually explicit talk, or labeling, and the "chiming", or choral reading of, text. The last category of talk serves to organize and monitor children's behavior and is called "management" talk; it includes teacher talk about behavior and requests for children to attend to the book reading. In addition, we tabulated the length of the books teachers read aloud to the children (See Figure 4) as a proxy for overall text difficulty.

# Teachers' Talk About Books



Difficulty of Books Read by Teachers



**Religion-affiliated nursery school.** In order to help prospective parents understand the philosophy and curriculum of the nursery school, the director produced a brief summary of what the nursery school offered. According to this summary, the nursery school provided an environment "designed to stimulate and challenge young children—intellectually, socially, physically, aesthetically." "Prereading and premath skills" were developed through music and movement, classic stories, cooking and building activities, original storytelling, writing, individual comments, calendar work in English and Hebrew, thematic extensions, concept building, "and much more" (Open House Newsletter, 2/1).

Indeed, our observations at the center confirm the apparently seamless connections between the literate rituals of the home, the school, and the religious community. Children listen to Torah stories, holiday narratives and explanations; they enact Bible stories and write and draw their own representations of what these stories mean to them as Jewish children. For example, during Passover, all of the approximately 60 children helped each other make full size body drawings of themselves as Israeli children, with pets and favorite toys. Through the drawings and their shared understandings of the Passover story, the children "stepped into" their Biblical roles to escape the wicked Pharaoh, and these drawings lined both sides of the hallway behind a body drawing of (a proxy for) Moses leading the children out of Egypt to the Promised Land. The director of the center said that children's books dealing with religious topics are chosen for two purposes: to instruct the children in the content of their religion and to show them that other families share these rituals and beliefs.

Book readings were marked by cognitively challenging discussion that probed for children's understandings of vocabulary and the concepts represented by these words. The teacher, through lengthy discussion before and after the reading of the story, helped children place narratives within the context of their own lives. During story readings, the teacher responded to children's questions and tried to support their understandings by summarizing or clarifying chunks of the text. To illustrate the teacher's bookreading style and show examples of the sustained talk that prevailed throughout these interactions, we present excerpts of her discussion before her reading of a Hebrew narrative, during the reading, and after the reading. On this occasion (1/10), the teacher introduced *The Secret of the Sabbath Fish* (Aronin, 1979), with a discussion of *Tzedukah*, the Hebrew word for the practice of charity:

Teacher: What is *Tzedukah*?

Student: I don't know.



Teacher: That's all right because someone will tell you.  
Student: A Tzedukah box.  
Teacher: Yes we have a Tzedukah box. What do we do with a Tzedukah box?  
Student: You put monies and dollars in.  
Teacher: Yes, You put monies and dollars in. And then what happens to the monies and dollars?  
Student: They get sende away . . . to other people that don't have them.  
Teacher: We take the Tzedukah from school and we give it to people who are very poor and don't have the money to buy things. Most of our money we give to places like the Ronald McDonald House and Camp Good Times and Happy Days .  
. Well here's a story about another kind of Tzedukah, someone whogives something that's not money. And it's called *The Secret of the Sabbath Fish*.

The teacher continued to define concepts that she believed were central to understanding the story before she began to read it aloud. Although she was very much informing the children at this point, not responding to them, she managed to convey information about pogrom by telling them a narrative that personalizes the idea of a pogrom and draws the children into the experience as participants in this shared history:

Teacher: The book talks about two things. One thing that we've never talked about in school before. The word that you're going to hear is the word *pogrom*. And a pogrom is something that used to happen a long, long, long, long time ago when my grandma and *my* grandpa lived in a country that was very far away. A pogrom is a kind of a fight. It was a kind of fight where there were bad bullies, and the bad bullies would try and hurt people that they didn't like. And sometimes they didn't like you because your skin was a different color. In this story they didn't like people who were Jewish and who prayed to God the way we pray to God . . .

In addition, the teacher asked children to predict using textually explicit information, as in this example:

Teacher: What's on the first page?  
Student: Shabbas candles.  
Teacher: Do you think it's a Shabbat story?

And the teacher encouraged inferential responses to the text as in this example in which she talked about the main character in the story:

Teacher: And do you know who the most important person in this book is?

Because several immigrant children were learning English as a second language and so many of the other children were also learning Hebrew, the teacher typically tried to clarify word meanings across languages, building on what was familiar and known:

Teacher : Tante means Aunt. And her name is Tante Mashe. And do you know where Tante Mashe lives? Tante Mashe lives in a city called Barisev. And Barisev is in a country called Russia. And her name is Tante Mashe, just like our Mashe who came from Russia, but (to student) I don't think you're a Tante yet.

The teacher occasionally substituted a more familiar phrase or word for one used in the book, and often alerted children to this change: "The word Sabbath is the same as the word Shabbat. I will probably read it as the word Shabbat."

Throughout the actual reading of the text, the teacher responded to students' questions, elaborated parts that she felt might be confusing, paraphrased text language here and there, and summarized important elements in a style very similar to the co-construction of story meaning described in earlier research (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Martinez & Teale, 1993; Dickinson & Smith, 1994). Although the teacher talked with the children in cognitively challenging ways in all our observed storybook interactions, we present here another extended excerpt of teacher and child discourse from *The Sabbath Fish* to illustrate the strategies the teacher used during the read-aloud to support children's understanding:

Teacher [summarizes]: The story tells of a generous Hebrew woman who did not have a lot of money to give to the poor. Instead of giving the money away, she buys a very nice fish from a fishmonger who tells her, [Teacher reads text]: "*Don't fry it, Matushka. And don't bake it. But as you prepare it, think about what has been happening to the Jewish people. The fish will taste better that way*" (p. 11). [Teacher paraphrases and adds an explanation]: Tante Mashe took out a big wooden bowl and thought about the pogrom. *The large wooden bowl seemed to her like a small world. "I see," she whispered.*



*"The Jewish people have been stripped through the ages, in every country, and in every part of the bowl we call the world." People keep picking on us and fighting with us. She reached for the scaling knife. "Our people have been crushed." And she reached for the chopper. The wooden bowl shook under repeated blows.*

Student: Judy, was Tante Mashe bad?

Teacher: No. She's a very good person and she's trying to help all her friends be happy even though sometimes bad things happen to them.

At the close of the story reading, the teacher drew children into a discussion of charity, particularly the practice of charity within the larger Temple community, and tied it to cultural knowledge embedded in the story of Tante Mashe and the Sabbath Fish. She initiated the discussion by inviting the children to think of "something else that you could give people to help them."

Although stories with religious themes were read during circle time on Fridays, usually the teacher selected more traditional fiction for read-alouds, typically contemporary folktales or narratives. The teacher rarely selected repetitive or predictable books for group reading. Like readings of religious narratives, other storybook readings were marked by a great deal of talk before, during, and after the readings. Likewise, these read-alouds were also rich in analytical dialogue wherein children were challenged to think beyond textually explicit information. After reading imaginative stories, she might ask, "What would you have done if you were this person?" or "How would you have felt if you were that person?" She said that she finds it "very sad that children can't pretend about anything that doesn't tie into what they're watching on TV or seeing at the movies." Indeed, a cover letter sent to parents from the teachers at the beginning of the year says just that:

We believe that literary language is more provocative, complex and structured than language used in conversation and TV and is a wonderful way to enrich your child's language and nourish his/her imagination (9/2).

This teacher is the only one we observed who read story dialogue in dialect in order to better portray the story characters to the children. Before reading *Airmail to the Moon* (Birdseye, 1988), the teacher pointed out the character's different way of speaking (4/15):

In *Airmail to the Moon* the little girl that tells us the story lives in the same country we live in but she lives in a place that's far away from [our city]. They talk a bit differently there and their voices sound a bit different and sometimes they say things differently than we do like instead of calling her dad—"Daddy,"—she calls him "Dadaw" . . . You guys ready? Ora Mae's ready to talk to you!

Similar to teachers' beliefs about instruction at other centers, the teacher here was very specific about not using ditto sheets and not teaching in a formal way. But she said that she did try to make children aware of letters and the sounds of the letters; she tried to make sure that the children can print their names and that they know how to "spell their names and write it in some fashion." Dictated writing, making books and other kinds of assisted writing were part of the children's curriculum experiences. Nonetheless, the teacher was insistent that "nothing's a lesson"; talking about letter-sound correspondence was "rarely planned" but happened rather spontaneously as "we look at the letters that we're writing; we look at the sound they make."

Our observations corroborate the teacher's perception that writing instruction was often spontaneous and always contextualized—she often invited the children to join her in creating a text. On one occasion (3/3), for example, the teacher asked the children to help her write a thank-you note to another teacher who had made the class a weather chart. She sprawled on the floor with a large sheet of poster paper and markers. The children gathered around her.

Teacher: What should we write?

Students: Thank you . . . Thank you for the poster . . . We really like it.

As she begins to write, the teacher stretches out the sounds of the letters in the words and asks the children what each letter is. For some letters, she gave the children other clues, based on what they already knew about print. She said, for example, that *like* starts with the same letter as *love*.

Student [seeing the letter *R* in the note]: That's a Ninja turtle number!

Teacher: Is there anyone here whose name begins with *R*? Rachel! Go look at Rachel's box and see what it starts with. Right! *Rachel* and *Raphael* start with *R*. And the *a* is the same and the *e* and the *l* are in *Raphael*. If you get a paper I'll write Raphael so that you can see what letters are the same.

She pointed and had the children compare the first, second, and third letters and asked if they looked the same and if they sounded the same.

Inviting children to write and share their writings within the larger community of parents, teachers, and members of the Temple has apparently been a tradition at the nursery school for a long time. For the past 35 years, the nursery school has had its own newsletter, the *Gan Gazette*, which according to the director is a "journal of original children's writings and illustrations and drawings compiled by each class and offered to parents at the end of the year" (open house, 2/1).

**University day care.** In an orientation for new staff, the director established a philosophy that reflected concerns of a much larger, even global community. The center wished to promote nonviolent, nonracist, non-sexist values as well as respect for the environment and tolerance for differences in beliefs and backgrounds. The director claimed two commitments—"being child-centered and the second is our commitment to cultural diversity" (3/8). For conflicts that might arise, the director urged the staff to have children "use their words" to express emotions rather than lashing out physically. Using words clearly meant writing words as well as telling words, and as an example, the director showed a note of apology written by a child to the "park department" at the university: PLANT-DAPRTMANT.IMSORE-IWONTBRAKANEMORWENDOs.

Children also observed parents and teachers "using words in writing." Each day the teachers would write a letter to parents telling them what the children did that day and these letters were posted for the parents to read as they picked up the children. Similarly, parents could post notes to teachers each morning and there was a pad of paper and pencil for that purpose attached to the bulletin board. In promotional materials about the center, it described itself as "cooperative in spirit and practice" and said that "it works to teach values by living them" (5/15). Our observations suggest that the day care used substantive issues such as the environment and ethnic differences to socialize children into the practices of a multi-cultural, literate community.

Unlike any of the other preschool centers, this one taught the letters of the alphabet explicitly. Each letter was the focus of attention for a week, and reading and writing activities were selected to emphasize particular letters. Like the religious center, teachers provided individual assistance—stretching out sounds and helping to form letters—to children who were attempting to create their own texts. Many children were Asian and many had relatives, particularly grandparents, but sometimes even a mother or father, who were left behind in China or Korea. Children often spoke of missing these relatives and the

teachers encouraged the children to write down their feelings in a letter. One of the books read to the children was *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (Baker, 1987), a book with striking illustrations showing a father and son walking through a heavily forested area doing things together and talking about the forest. The book itself was a gift to one of the children from his aunt, who wanted him to remember the "land of his birth," according to an inscription on the inside cover. For another child, the book evoked powerful memories of where her grandmother lived and she cried because she missed her. The teacher dried the child's tears and helped her write a letter to her grandmother, which her parents mailed to China.

In a discussion of how she selects books for the program, the head teacher said that "first off, the center is multi-cultural, nonviolent, non-sexist and all of that. Any books read would have to be within those parameters." Besides that, books should be appropriate for a four-year-old—not too long, not too many words that need to be explained, although "they do have a pretty lengthy attention span when it comes to a book or a subject that they really like." During some months there are special themes, such as Earth Matters, when they plan to spend the whole month finding out about the earth, "maybe doing the air, the water, the land around us. We [also] have a schedule of weeks when each child gets their own week, and that week is their special week, and they can bring in books, and do and tell us anything about themselves." One Korean child, Nah-yoon, brought in a photo of herself as a baby, sitting in her highchair, holding a pencil. She dictated the words she wanted the teacher to write about her photo: "It's my first birthday. 1-year-old. In my house. I'm playing with a pencil." Her father explained that it was an old Korean custom that on the child's first birthday the parents would lay out several things for a child to choose from—pencil, money, and so on. Since Nah-yoon chose the pencil, Korean lore would predict that she will be a scholar. He asked the teacher to add that explanation to Nah-yoon's dictated words (5/15). During the weeks when the children themselves become the "theme," the teacher tries to select books that relate somehow to the child, either by being "favorites" or by foregrounding some aspect of the child's life or culture.

When asked to describe her book read-alouds beyond the relation of books to themes, the teacher said that she explains the story "if they need it:"

I do try to answer their questions when they ask them. *The Mysterious Giant of Barletta* (dePaola, 1988). I remember when I was reading that I had to stop every few pages and explain things. I don't really find that they ask a lot of questions. I don't know, maybe I'm patting myself on the back, but I think we have such an intelligent class, and for the books

we have, you know, they really understand [them]. If something's not understood I'm sure that we take the time to explain it.

Our classroom observations confirmed that the teacher did consistently respond to children's questions and comments during book readings, respecting their role as participants in the ongoing dialogue about texts. Indeed, the teacher's utterances were more often responses to children than they were initiations of verbal exchanges. And when she did initiate a topic during story reading, it was usually to inform, rarely to question. School-type evaluative questioning by the teacher was markedly absent.

In this preschool classroom, the amount and, to some extent, the content of teacher-child talk during storyreading varied depending on the conceptual difficulty of the book being read. There was less talk and less cognitively challenging talk during the readings of, for example, *The Napping House* (Wood, 1984), *Over in the Meadow* (Galdone, 1989) and *Is Your Mama a Llama* (Guarino, 1991) than there was when the teacher read, *A House for Hermit Crab* (Carle, 1991) and *The Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1990), or when she read excerpts from *Rainforest Secrets* (Dorros, 1990) and *People* (Spier, 1988). While chiming was the predominant interaction when simple predictable books were read, such books were not read frequently. Some instances of management talk were present during most book-readings, but there was no attempt to silence children's questions and comments about the book being read.

The teacher tended to both initiate and sustain more cognitively challenging talk when the book being read was informational and part of a thematic unit, for example *Rainforest Secrets* and *The Great Kapok Tree* for the jungle theme (also during letter J week). This interaction is part of a long discussion that followed the reading of several pages of *Rainforest Secrets*:

Student: If you chop down trees, the birds will fly away and find another tree, and we can't grow a tree up by ourselves for the birds so they can live.

Teacher: Well, you know what, maybe an idea would be for us as a class when the winter is all over and it's time for things to start growing again, maybe it would be a good idea for us to plant our own tree for the birds and bees and things to live in.

Student: [Without trees] . . . they will die.

Teacher: That's right, and the trees provide the stuff to eat and drink for the birds.

Student: If birds don't have any place to live, what will they do?

- Teacher: That's the scary thing. We don't know what will happen if we knock down all the trees. So it's not a good idea to [do so].
- Student: Then, then we don't have any trees, then , then, then, we don't have [wood to make] napkins out of.
- Teacher: Right. Paper products, like napkins and toilet paper and paper towels and the paper that goes in books is made out of trees. And if we don't have trees, that would be horrible. We might not have books. . . We might not have paper to draw on. So we have to remember that trees are an important thing for us to have. Last question before we get books [for nap]?
- Student : But you know what? If we cut down all the trees, I have lots of paper at home. So if we cut down all the trees, I can bring my paper.
- Teacher: What happens when we run out of your paper? What happens when we run out of all the paper in [the preschool] and all the paper in the whole world and there's no trees to make more paper with? Then what do we do?
- Student: I don't know.
- Teacher: I don't know either.

Children's ideas were taken seriously, and the teacher regularly engaged children as competent conversational partners in discussions of serious topics. At one point, the teacher arranged for the children to be part of a campaign to save the rainforest. She brought children to the local mall where they received a certificate from the Nature Company verifying that they (or their sponsors) had bought an acre of rainforest in Belize. The teacher read the certificate to them and explained that their money was going to help protect the Rio Bravo conservation area in Belize by teaching the people who live near the forest not to cut down the trees. She subscribed to their newsletter and explained its purpose by saying, "We're going to be getting these every once in a while telling us about the progress on our acre .. so that you and your parents can read together about how we are saving the rainforest in Belize.

Teachers and children in this preschool valued books as sources of interesting and useful information. When the teacher did not know the answer to children's questions, she talked of consulting books. She and the children together would "find out," as in the following talk that occurred during the reading of Walt Disney's *Bambi* when a child asked why opossums hang upside down. The teacher said she didn't know but perhaps they could find out together. One child volunteered to bring in a book:

Teacher: That would be a good book to bring in and maybe we could find out. Or, if not, there's a book called an encyclopedia, and we could find out about opossums, and maybe that would tell us why they do.

Student: I know...Because they sleep at night and they never get down.

Student: They're like bats.

Teacher: I don't know if they're like bats. We'll have to read to find out about that.

Student: Maybe we could read in my book?

Teacher: Maybe next time you come you could bring that book and we could look it up.

Many of the books selected by the teachers for read-alouds helped elaborate the center's beliefs about the value of tolerance, cooperation, and diversity. The topics of such books are weighty, and children were challenged both by the ideas presented in this literature and by the analytical talk that invited them to express their thoughts but also nudged them to think more deeply about their beliefs. Certainly, a poignant example of such literature is *People* by Peter Spier (1988), a book that was read several times to the children. On this occasion (11/15), the teacher summarized the previous day's discussion of it and then took up the text where she had stopped reading on the day before:

Teacher: We talked about the fact that even though some of us may be a little bit more powerful than others, that we all have our own power, right? We're all powerful within ourselves. And, we're all the same because all of us are going to die, no matter who we are. Even if you're the king or the queen or the president...

Student: [Or] a leader.

Student: Even Dr. Suess died.

Student: You're right. He already died. He died a long time ago.

The teacher acknowledged the comments and continued to read the text:

*Some people, but very few, are mighty and powerful, although most of us are not mighty at all. We have invented a strange set of ranks, grades, and classes.... Yet we all live on the same planet, breathe the same air, and warm ourselves in the same sun. And in the end we all must die. A few of us are remembered long, long after we're gone. And even that, in countless different ways!*



The teacher then used Dr. Suess, the example provided by the children earlier, as someone famous who died, and she commented on the text just read: "Like Dr. Suess. We'll never forget Dr. Suess. Why won't we ever forget Dr. Suess?" One student responded, "Because of the movie and the book," and other students commented on the "hundreds of books" he wrote that they still have at home. The teacher moved the discussion along and continued to read:

*It is very strange: Some people even hate others because they are unlike themselves.  
Because they are different. They forget that they too would seem different if they could  
only see themselves through other people's eyes*

The teacher summarized another bit of the previous day's discussion, connecting it to the present text, and again invited the students to respond, "So remember how we talked about all of us in this room-how we all look different but we can still get along and play together?"

One child notes that "But ... some people don't know that other peoples are different, they hate other peoples."

And another admits "But you know what, when I see someone who has a long nose, I think they look funny."

The teacher tapped into the child's observation, asking her to clarify her position :

Teacher: But would you not be a friend with somebody with a long nose just because they had a long nose?

Student: They would be my friend but they would just look funny.

Teachers in this program clearly used children's books to help create a forum from which they elaborated a vision of a better world. Through dialogue around the issues raised by book readings, the children participated in the construction of this vision and clarified its meaning to themselves and each other. They shared interpretations, moving from the text world to their own experiences, and in doing so created deeper understandings of the values expressed by the literature and by the community that selected the literature. Teachers treated the children as "already literate" participants in the community — pushing them toward greater tolerance of the possible meanings of texts and other points of view, always urging them to "use words" to express their knowledge and understandings.



**Head Start.** All those who work at the Head Start center live in the same African American neighborhoods as the children. Many have been employed in some capacity for upwards of 20 years, such as the director, who started as a bus driver, became a cook, then teacher, now director. At the center, the teachers, parents, foster grandparents, cooks, and even bus drivers share community news as they drop off children, arrive for work and prepare for the beginning of the school day. The two teachers always brought in a morning newspaper, which they shared with other adult participants as they mingled together in the classroom, drinking coffee, reading and editorializing on the news. On one occasion, the topic was the newspaper coverage of the fire that consumed a building across the street from the center, in full view of all the children on the way to the library. An old woman was found dead in the house and was brought out in a body bag, and a fireman injured himself while fighting the blaze.

Observer: Does the center get the paper?

Teacher Assistant: No, we buy it. The kids have been trying to read the paper now.

Teacher: When they get up and sit at the table, they'll be reading the paper.

Teacher Assistant: I brought in the paper this morning. They were excited about this [the fire]. What they saw yesterday. The fire across the street. [All present became involved with the newspaper story of the fire and the accompanying photographs].

Teacher Assistant: This is the lady that was hurt. That was her aunt that got burnt...that got killed in the place.

Teacher: Oh, is that the lady that was talkin to us this morning?

Teacher Assistant: uhuh. That's Mary's good friend. That's that girl. This is her husband, Walter Richard. Don't you remember that? His sister is Kashand's godmother.

The adults always commented on any aspect of the news that touched their community, especially people they knew who were in the paper. Usually, the adults clipped coupons and discussed items for sale. As the children arrived with their parents or bus drivers, the adults would frequently join in these newspaper conversations. The teachers seemed to want to engage the children in similar kinds of literate activities because one of the teachers told us that "around Christmas time we always do 'What do you want for Christmas?' and 'What do you want to give somebody for Christmas?' and we take all those flyers out of the paper and then cut it out and paste it on paper." There were no other cultural or religious activities during the holidays because this year they were not seen as needed. The teacher explained

that all of the children spoke English (one child also spoke Spanish in his home), and although there had been Muslim children in the center in the past, there were none now.

Besides reading the morning newspaper in full view of the children, the teachers at Head Start took them to the public library to check out books for home and for the classroom. The teachers saw this as an opportunity for them to replenish the classroom library, which consisted of donated books in poor condition, and to kindle a similar kind of interest in books on the part of children without much experience in libraries. Children with up-to-date library cards picked out up to two books to take home. The teachers always selected books for themselves as well, commenting that they each read a book or so a week during the school year and more than that during the summer. The newspaper provided good leads on interesting adult books to read, as this conversation suggests "I read the paper on Sunday and I see what's on the bestseller lists. And then I go to see if they have it at the library. I try to keep up with those stories."

Children's books for the center were selected in a very different way. According to the director, center books should be graduated in difficulty, just as other materials were (she gave the example of puzzles), with more difficult books having more words on the page. Easiest books should be read first. The teachers selected books for story reading that were short, with predictable syntax and cumulative story frames. The same books were read repeatedly; children were encouraged to memorize the text and read along or chime with the teacher, enthusiastically supplying the missing words whenever she paused. Story read-alouds here were characterized by high engagement on the part of the children and active participation in the actual reading of the text but virtually no cognitively challenging dialogue between the children and teacher about the text. We did not observe any extended story introductions or discussions at the end. Typically, stories were introduced with only the title of the book, but early in the year we observed a very informal introduction of *Mr. Gumpy's Outing* (Birmingham, 1970). In this case the teacher asked the children to identify textually explicit information in the illustrations on the first page before she began to read:

Teacher: Remember this guy's name?

Student: Colombo?

Student: Peter Rabbit?

Teacher [reads text]: *Mr. Gumpy had* -- What did he own? [points to illustration]

Students: A house.

Teacher: What was his house by?

Student: Water.

Teacher: What kind of water?

Teacher: Was it a lake?

Teacher: Was it an ocean?

Teacher: Was it a river? [reads] *He had a house by the river....* (10/11)

There was very little story talk at all, possibly because the texts were so familiar. The teacher frequently (but not always) asked children to define vocabulary that she thought they would not understand as in the following verbal exchange:

Teacher [reads]: *This is a priest all shaven and shorn.* Shaven and shorn means what?

Student: Bald?

Teacher: He don't have any hair on his head. (1/16).

The goal of the readings seemed to be to memorize the text, with the pictures providing cues for adding to the cumulative story. It was an oral production, and indeed, in the example (1/16) of *The House that Jack Built* (Galdone, 1961) that follows, one child asks, "Can I say this book?"

Teacher [asks, pointing to the illustration]: Who's this ?

Students [answer in unison:] Maiden!

Teacher: Right, maiden.

Student: Can I say this book? [softly says] *This is the maiden*

Teacher: Say it again. Say it louder.

Student: *all forlorn*

Teacher: Right, *that*

Student: *that milked the cow*

Teacher: *with the, with the*

Student: *crumpled horn*

Teacher: Right ... *crumpled horn* [Teacher and students continue to read in this pattern]: ... *that lay in the house that Jack built..* Give yourself a hand. That was great [applause].

Thus, story read-alouds were collaborative oral productions of familiar and highly predictable texts that lent themselves to this kind of interaction. The only time teachers read a different kind of text was occasionally at nap time when the goal of the oral reading was, as one teacher said, "to put them to sleep." One of the library books that the teachers signed out

of the public library specifically for nap was a collection of Beatrix Potter stories. Actually, stories were not always read to the children; sometimes the children listened to recorded stories and songs, and other times, the teachers allowed the children to watch videos from their cots.

According to Head Start teachers, the daily schedule itself was established by the center director. Teachers "basically follow the book." The curriculum was developed by the county and was based on the idea that all instruction should be totally individualized. When asked if they measure development during the year in order to individualize, the teachers said that they don't measure it, "we just see it... You look at a child and say, OK, this child needs help in this area and that's what you work on. After we get the basics done — [such as] you can stand in line, you can leave each other alone, you can eat with a spoon. That's the basics" (4/8).

As for program goals, the teachers said that most of all they want the children to be able to "communicate with their classmates, follow directions, listen, talk instead of cry, be on their own more." In the area of literacy development, what the teacher does depends on the kind of group it is. "We get some groups in here that you can tell they don't even know what a book is. This group [during the observation year] is pretty literate. A lot of these kids have been exposed to a lot of books." When asked about individual children's interest in reading, writing, and listening to books, the teachers said that with this age group, it "all has to do with their attention span. If they had the attention span to sit there, they'd do it." The ones that liked to sit and listen to stories were the ones, in their view, who had the longer attention spans.

By the time the children went to kindergarten, the teachers felt that the children should "at least try to print their names." Although an alphabet poster was displayed in the Head Start classroom, the teachers emphasized that it was "for exposure." We don't force it upon them. They'll go over here and they'll recognize a letter that is in their name, they'll point to it and say, "I know what this letter is!"

The director concurred with the teachers' interpretation of the curriculum. Instruction is individualized in so far as each child becomes the focus of instruction on rotating days; whatever is deemed appropriate for that one child will also be experienced by the others, at least for that day. This strategy serves two purposes — it supports the strengths that individual children might bring to the classroom and it exposes children who may not have any knowledge of books or writing:

If the child comes in writing his name, [and] we do have children writing their names, and they are starting to pick up books, we encourage it.... If a child is starting to pick up books and read words, then the teacher will make sure that those books are available and give that child that help when it is time to focus on him (8/6).

The disadvantage of such strategies is that there may not be children who are already knowledgeable enough to ask for assistance writing or reading books. If literacy curricula are tied to individual development, as here, there may not be opportunities for children with the least print experiences at home to participate in school experiences that allow them to explore the functions and forms of print.

We observed children playing with literacy artifacts only once (4/28), and that was in the "home" center when three children were seated around a table with a stapler, hole puncher, a blank attendance sheet and some extra Xeroxes of reminders to parents that "tomorrow is library" and to "return books." The children "borrowed" a pencil from the top drawer of the teachers' desk and then asked the observer for another one. The following interaction makes clear that they have noticed what the teachers in their classroom use writing for:

1st Student: I have to write all the kids down. All the kids are absent. [to another child]  
Use it first (the stapler) then when I done writing you better give it back to me.  
I writing all my words.

2nd Student: You wanna use this? First can I do the attention?

3rd Student: Nope [Students squabble over the papers and stapler]....

1st Student: Next time I'm not going to do words. Next time I'm only going to send out these notes for the library. "Go to the library. Library tomorrow." Trying to get these notes to all the kids in our class. Now get me that list. We need that list. Now give me that list. We need that list for our kids. We need it for our kids... It don't say nothing. [stapling] All the kids got to write on this. All the kids got to write on this so they see there's no fighting in school, no playing guns, no hitting, no kicking

Other Students [overlapping]: — no playing guns, no hitting, no kissing?

1st Student: No kissing either.

The children's interactions were an almost perfect reflection of the ways we had observed writing being used in that classroom. Attendance was taken every morning, library reminders were sent home every Monday afternoon, and the teachers reviewed the rules of the

classroom behavior that they had posted on the wall. Otherwise, the only writing that we observed on the part of the teachers was assisting a child in tracing the letters of his name in a dot-to-dot format. Children rarely wrote anything, although some children spontaneously tried to write their names on art work, often prompting their peers to also try to do the same thing. If children asked for help writing their names (which few did), teachers happily complied.

The program philosophy was such that "exposure" to writing was thought to be appropriate at the four-year-old level of development, and thus, exposure was the only explicit goal. Even book selection appeared to be limited by ideas of what would be appropriate for individual development — the concept of starting with easy books and gradually increasing the difficulty of the books by adding more words and more pages — not by ideas about the content or the topics of the books. The belief that the language of books, including the complexity of the sentences and words, could enhance development was not expressed by the teachers or director. Nonetheless, by socializing children to use the public library, to read the newspaper to find out what happened in the community or which stores have special offers, to write to remember, and to establish norms of behavior in writing for all to refer to, the teachers here showed the children what literate people in the larger community do.

**Child development day care.** At another center for economically disadvantaged children, a day care founded in the early 1900s for the children of the working poor, there was a more clearly defined curriculum. The director distributed a list of the topics or "themes" to be covered by the teachers each week. For example, during February, the teachers were to develop themes around Valentines' Day, Friendship, President's day, money, and health habits. Nonetheless, teachers did not usually develop themes with children's literature. Typically, teachers spent group time asking children what holiday was coming up and giving them a brief bit of information on it. The director also determined that in January of each school year, the teachers would begin using readiness workbooks to develop skills in the areas of visual discrimination, color matching, and hand-eye coordination. The director believed that such curriculum was not academic, as the teaching of individual letters would have been, but rather, "enrichment ... so they are ready when they do go to kindergarten."

According to the director, trying to strike a balance in prekindergarten was difficult. In her view, many of the children were developmentally delayed and language or speech impaired, many came from chaotic home backgrounds, and many needed special education services. Her experience suggested that "when they didn't do skills, the test scores went



down," and the year that we spent observing in this center was apparently a year with low test scores. On the other hand, children were not allowed to take any books from the center home with them, nor were they scheduled for the public library, because the director and center staff felt that they would lose books or mishandle them. The director felt that the children were "happiest" when they were given a lot of time for free play, yet she believed the children's behavior was frequently difficult to control.

In the classroom, story reading time was often a transition between activities such as lunch and nap, when the children had to sit quietly on the piece of tape with his or her name and listen. Enthusiastic responses were treated as misbehavior and sternly rebuked. In contrast to the quiet demeanor required of the children, the teachers often did not appear to value storybook reading as much as the children, nor to respect the children's interest in listening to the stories. Teacher assistants, in particular, would conduct loud conversations with other adults, noisily clear off dishes, throw nap cots on the floor, take groups of children to the bathroom, and loudly reprimand children for turning around, talking, and so on. Books were usually not selected for story reading beforehand, and teachers often grabbed whatever was handy to read to the children. Sometimes the teachers would read a book that a child brought from home, while at other times teachers would allow a child to select the book to be read. There did not seem to be a plan for incorporating books into the curriculum. When asked why it is important to read to children, the teacher answered:

I think that they learn...at least from me I know that they learn the alphabet and they learn how to spell some words and things about... books (3/11).

Story time in this classroom was characterized by little story talk. The teacher's style across book-readings was marked by her consistent failure to orchestrate sustained discussion with children. There was no prereading or postreading discussion. The limited teacher talk during book-reading consisted of brief utterances, usually between 2 -12 words in length. For example, when she read Rey's *Curious George Goes to a Costume Party* (11/8), she made 8 comments averaging 4 words each, and in Marshall's *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (5/12), a total of 6 comments averaging 12 words.

The more cognitively challenging utterances were most often brief definitions of possible unknown words, or brief clarifications of the story plot or book illustrations. The teacher primarily used an informing (rather than a questioning) instructional strategy, and frequently provided pictorially or textually explicit information, as for example, when reading Marshall's *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*:

*Then Goldilocks sat in the little chair, and that was just right -- neither too hard nor too soft. In fact she liked it so much that she rocked and rocked -- until the chair fell completely to pieces! She broke his chair.*

The explicit bits of story information she chose to highlight were not necessarily important story elements, and no attempt was made to note important story elements consistently. A greater number of pictorially explicit bits of information were provided, however, when she read a storybook with limited text, where much of the meaning was carried by the illustrations, for example, Joyce's *George Shrinks* (1987) and Bridwell's *Clifford's Puppy Days*):

Teacher: Look it. He's smaller than his bed ...The toothbrush is bigger than him...He's gonna try to wash the dishes (11/25).

And in books with repeated or familiar text, the teacher paused mid-sentence to let the children chime the upcoming words. When children *en masse* filled in the upcoming words more or less accurately in Schmidt's *The Gingerbread Man* (1985), the teacher commented, "You guys are such good readers." What was valued was memory of text.

She also sometimes asked children to predict what they thought would happen next, as she did while reading *Corduroy* (Freeman, 1968):

Teacher: So what's she going to do?

Several Students: Bring him home.

Other student: She can't bring him home 'cause he's real.

Teacher: Well, she can get him now 'cause she has money. She went and got all the money from her piggy bank.

Student: She got to pay for him.

Teacher: That's right (10/16).

The above excerpt was one of the most extended interactions observed. It is noteworthy that the teacher did not directly respond to the first child's comment, leaving that child confused about *Corduroy's* being "real," and her response to the second child ended any further discussion. Children were not invited or encouraged to share their own ideas and experiences as they related to the stories being read. As the teacher said during her reading of Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, "When I ask you something then you can talk to me about it, but



right now it's time to listen" (10/16). Children's answers to questions were brief; often many children answered at once, and the teacher did not typically encourage further reflection. Children were usually reprimanded by either the teacher or the teacher assistant for interrupting a storyreading, even when they were asking for clarification. And when unsolicited comments were tolerated, such comments or questions were either unacknowledged or, at best, answered with "okay" or "we'll see" -- words that effectively ended discussion.

Even when the teacher answered a child's question, she did not allow the children to talk to clarify the meaning of texts, and children's understandings of particular stories remained problematic. For example, during the reading of *Grandfather Twilight* (Berger, 1984), a child asked, "Is that the pearl, Miss Ann?" The teacher responded, "It must be. Remember, they said that the pearl gets bigger," whereas the pearl was actually a metaphor for the moon. Rather than discuss the text, the teacher told them, "We'll have to read and find out." However, at the end of the story, the teacher turned to the children and said, "Look kids. The pearl got big and it's in the sky and it looks like a beautiful moon. Weren't the pictures beautiful? Now, let's clean up." There was no discussion and, probably, little understanding.

Similarly, after the teacher finished reading *Pet Show* (Keats, 1972), she said, "Wasn't he nice to that old lady? I like this book. I like all of the books by this man." She looked at the observer and said, "I think that I liked *Peter's Chair* (Keats, 1967) the best but this book is good too." Picking up on the cue, one student responded, "I liked *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962) the best" and another said, "No, this one was better." Soon a number of children called out their opinions about which book was the best. The teacher could have acknowledged the connections across texts that the children were making, as well as their preferences for one story over another. However, she cut off all discussion and said, "Everybody be quiet now." She treated participation in the literate discourse about Keats' books as outside the bounds of appropriate behavior for children in the classroom.

When asked about the preschool curriculum and the role of literacy, the teacher provided a resource book from which she had taken several quotes to label and describe the different centers in her classroom, including the "library." Although the resource manual recommended a well-stocked classroom library, including multicultural literature and classic children's books, with borrowing privileges for parents and children, the bookshelves were basically bare and no borrowing was allowed.

Although the majority of the children and staff were African American, there was no emphasis on African American culture in the curriculum, and few books were read to the children that had any bearing on their experiences as African Americans or as urban

schoolchildren. The director, who is white, made a resource book available to teachers on the feast of Kwanza, so that they might incorporate it or a discussion of it into their curriculum. However, during the year we observed, none of the teachers did so, because they themselves were not familiar with the feast and did not celebrate it. The director added that she thought that a college professor out in California "cooked up" the Kwanza feast and that it was not an authentic holiday in the community served by the preschool.

In this school, children rarely wrote anything. However, towards the end of the school year, they were asked to practice printing their names each morning. Each child had a printed model of his or her name on an oaktag strip. The children sat quietly at a table with a bin of markers, crayons and paper, and wrote their names at least one time. They were then free to participate in other activities or mill about. There was no adult monitoring the writing table to assist the children. The teacher and teacher assistants seemed to think that the children would "get it" when they were ready. Although earlier in the year there was no talk about letters or letter identification, by late spring the teacher and teacher assistants were calling children's attention to some letters (mostly consonants) during small group time. The teacher would hold up a letter, ask what it was, and announce that the teacher assistant would be taking the children two at a time to practice making the letter of the day (tracing in a dot-to-dot format, then copying underneath). There were virtually no conversations during these interactions between the teacher assistant and the children about the letter. After one child finished a small pile of Ps, the observer asked what the name of the letter was. The child said he did not know; the observer asked whether the letter was in his name (it was). The child said no.

About midyear, readiness workbooks were distributed to the children, who met in pairs at the writing table with the teacher to do two pages each day. Unlike the name-copying activities, the teacher personally guided the children in a very straightforward way through the workbook pages, which required primarily matching and drawing lines from one side of the page to another. Not all children were judged ready to have a workbook, and since the workbooks were highly prized, those not selected would wildly wave their hands when the teacher asked, "Who has not yet done workbook today?" No explanation was ever given to the children who did not have a workbook, although at least one child asked for one. Another child took completed workbook pages out of a student's cubby, and after studying them intensely, returned them to his own cubby instead. (In other words, he stole them to bring home).

Teachers here viewed literacy as a set of skills to be learned. They valued children's completion of the workbook pages far beyond children's attempts to print their names or understand stories. Even when teachers noticed that children were making connections across

texts, or between their lives and textworlds, they did not publicly acknowledge or legitimate those connections. It is as if the teachers were saying to the children — conform, copy, and listen, even without understanding.

**Public school prekindergarten.** While the other two publicly funded programs have served generations of low-income families living in their communities, the state-funded prekindergarten program for disadvantaged children was only in its third year of operation. Located in a public school, this program was half-day. The two teachers were both certified as elementary school teachers, although the African American teacher had let her credential expire and, consequently, was employed as a teacher assistant, not as a teacher. Because the program was externally funded for the most part, and new, the teachers and director felt that they needed to adhere closely to the state curriculum guidelines. The official program narrative suggests that economically disadvantaged children may already have negative associations with school. Helping the children feel at ease was the first priority, not academic work.

Emphasis will be on establishing a climate of comfort. The home life variables such as poor nutrition, lack of rest, or a non-English speaking household will be considered when determining the appropriate instructional activities for the children. The program will stress nonacademic themes such as building self-esteem, problem-solving and effective listening (p.7)... Emphasis in early childhood education should be on skills that are nonacademic, and that stress preparation for the educational process (p.9).

Literacy development is not identified per se, but story reading is relegated to a 15 minute block of time at the very end of the day, a period called "quiet time/prepare for dismissal:"

During this time the teacher will read a story to the class. Students will have a chance to finish art projects if they are still working.(p.52)

Nonetheless, the guidelines suggest that the daily schedule remain flexible so that children who prefer to explore books frequently are able to do so and children who need special encouragement to use the book corner also be given this encouragement.

The most important part of the curriculum, according to the prekindergarten teacher, was the centers, which were designated areas around the room where children spent most of their time, playing and talking to each other. The teachers rarely entered the centers while the

children were there. The reading corner was available during center time, but early on it was set up right by the classroom door so that there was no place for children to sit down, and later on it was moved to the waffle block and music area. Neither spot was conducive to listening to tapes (nor were the tape recorder and little paperback books always available) or looking at books from the classroom library. The classroom library consisted of hardbound books because they were better able to withstand constant use, and the listening library consisted of several tapes and multiple copies of paperback books. These, however, were often put away and not available to the children. The program was not allowed to have torn books on display so the teacher set out only hardbound books for the children to handle on the bookshelves. The teacher assistant explained the policy:

Because they were handling the hard covered books a whole lot, you know, just about every transition time was a reading time. When they left breakfast, it was a time to look at books, when they left snack time, it was a time to look at books. After clean up, it was a time to look at books. If there was nothing else specifically planned, [they looked at books] and so, when you have a lot of soft covered books, children tend to not always use books in a manner that's appropriate. So the hard covered take a little bit more of the wear and tear that the books get. (6/21)

Unfortunately, the paper back books were the ones most familiar to the children because they were smaller versions of the big books read by the teacher. The hardbound books had their paper jackets removed and were not as attractive as the paperbacks, nor had the children heard very many of these stories read aloud to them.

The teacher herself had very little role in the selection of books for the classroom. She said that she tried to send in her own order but that the books are "chosen for her" by the central office. The books are ordered "in bulk" then brought out to the classrooms, with all the prekindergarten classrooms receiving the same things. One request that was honored, however, was multiple small copies (four) of some of the big books she had in the room. Describing how she selected books for read-alouds, or for her curriculum, the teacher said she "just varied them so that they wouldn't get too much. They do like most of the books that are on the tapes, but it was basically for variety and their enjoyment, so they wouldn't get sick of the same books." She believed that the children liked all books:

It depends on how you read a book. They enjoy really any book that you present to them, as long as you get them involved in it. ... Well I noticed towards the end of the year they

care for the books more, and they seem to want to get more involved in, even if they don't know every exact word, they want to read it the way that we present it to them...They want to read too. (5/9)

The teacher said she "liked to read stories like *Caps for Sale* more than once, so that they can get to know the story, get familiar with the words." As in the Head Start classroom, the majority of the big books that the teacher read aloud were books with predictable text, supportive illustrations, and repetitive refrains such as *Caps for Sale*, *Rosie's Walk*, *More Spaghetti*, *I Say*, *The Little Red Hen*, and so on. The most complex book that we observed the teacher reading was *Scuffy the Tugboat* (Crampton, 1955), a Golden Book brought in by one of the students from home, which had many more words on a page and many more pages of text than most of the books read aloud. Like the Head Start teachers, the prekindergarten teacher believed that not all children have the attention span to listen to longer stories. In this case the teacher felt that her afternoon class could "sit for close to an hour," but not her morning class (which was the class being observed), so she would substitute other activities:

Even this morning when we normally do story I could just see the energy. That 's why I brought them outside for awhile. I figured let's run around. When they go home maybe they'll take a little nap for their parents.

Like the Head Start read-alouds, there was an emphasis on chiming -- guessing or remembering the words that completed a line of text (usually predictable from the pictures or the refrain ) in an oral cloze type of format. The amount of talk was spare; interactions were not cognitively challenging. There was little interpretation during storybook reading and rarely any discussion before or after reading. The teacher seldom responded to a child's comment. Questions typically required the children to answer yes or no, label and identify textually explicit information, or provide other one-word responses. Only once did we observe the teacher interrupting the storyreading to clarify the meaning of a word with extended discussion.

As in the typical interaction excerpted below, we never observed the teacher introducing stories with more than the title and the name of the author and, sometimes, the name of the illustrator:

Teacher: Okay, listen, everybody on a colored square. *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff (1985). That's the author's name. *If you give a mouse a cookie, he's going to ask for a glass of*

Students: Milk.

Teacher: *Milk. When you give him the milk, he'll probably ask you for a ...*(10/25).

The teacher frequently asked the children questions about the illustrations as she read the story, usually requiring them to label or identify something explicit in the pictures. This sort of interaction kept the children engaged, and they loudly *en masse* responded to the teacher's queries, as in the previously cited excerpt and the one following (11/12) from *The Day the Teacher Went Bananas* (Howe, 1984):

Teacher: *When it was time for arithmetic, he showed us how to count on our toes.* Look it, they have their shoes and socks off. We don't take our shoes and socks off in school do we?

Students: No (loudly).

Teacher: *Then we had art class. Our teacher taught us how to work with clay.* What are they doing with the clay here?

Student: Play.

Teacher: What are they putting it on?

Student: On the floor.

Teacher: We don't put it on the floor do we?

Students: No (loudly).

Teacher [continues]:...*Why this is awful Mr. Quackerbottom cried, you all belong in a zoo. And the next day, that's exactly where we went to have lunch with our favorite teacher.* Please get up quietly and go to the table, put your napkins on your lap.

There was no discussion of the point of this story, and indeed, the children probably went away thinking that the gorilla was a bad teacher for the children in the story. Even when the children were clearly confused about what was going on in the story, as they seemed to be at the end of *Miss Nelson Is Missing* (Allard, 1985), the teacher focused on one-word right-answer questions rather than inviting a discussion about the characters:

Student: Where's Miss Nelson at?

Other student: She's right there with the yellow hair.

Teacher: The blonde hair. Can you say blonde?... [reads text] *Detective McSmogg is working on a new case. He is now looking for Miss Viola Swamp. Who was Miss Viola Swamp?*

Student: The witch.

Teacher: But who was she?

Other Student: The wicked witch.

Teacher: What was that dress hanging in Miss Nelson's closet?

Student: A black dress

Teacher: Who wore that?

Student: The witch.

Teacher: Who?

Student: Miss Nelson.

Teacher: Did Miss Viola Swamp wear that?

Students: Yes (loudly).

Teacher: So do you think they were the same person?

Students: [Some say Yes loudly; some say no]

Teacher: Why not?

Student: Because they didn't have the same face and they didn't have the same hair.

Teacher: Did you ever hear of people wearing wigs? This is Miss Nelson, all right? [points to illustration] Miss Viola Swamp was Miss Nelson dressed up.

Student: How we dress up for Halloween.

Teacher: Thank you Ariel, for figuring that out. Tasha, thanks for listening so nicely today. Where would you like to go for centers? (1/16)

The teacher ended this discussion by informing the children rather than helping the children build their own inferences based on text clues and knowledge of the world. Although the teacher did notice stretches of text that might be difficult, she seemed to ask questions in a way that evaluated children's understanding rather than helped to clarify understanding, as in this excerpt from a reading of *Scuffy the Tugboat* (Crampton, 1955):

Teacher [reads]: "*Not I, " tooted Scuffy. "Not I. This is the life for me" (p.5). Does Scuffy like it?*

Students: No

Teacher: Yeah he did. Are you listening?

Other student: It's like "Not I," said the hen, "Not I," said the cat.



Although a child recognized the more formal story language from the folktale about the little red hen, and also recognized the meaning of the phrase, the teacher ignored the comment and continued to read. The teacher rarely responded to children's comments. As in the child development center, children were discouraged from interrupting the story at all, and were directed to respond (usually all together as a group) only when questioned directly. The preferred type of question seemed to be the kind that required no discussion, only a one or two word response for example: "Are these letters or numbers? [ and a few pages later] ... Is that a small truck or a big truck?"

Other school-type questions seemed to be the teacher's way of clarifying word meanings, but the queries were posed so that they did not encourage interaction: "Is a river bigger than a brook?"

Often the teacher finished storyreading by simply saying, "The end, " as in her reading of *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Viorst, 1972), a story that simply begs for some response from children:

*It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My mom says some days are like that, even in Australia. The end. Please go to the table (3/20).*

Similarly, at the end of *The Post Office Book: Mail and How It Moves*(Gibbons, 1982), the only expository text we heard read to the children at this center, the teacher put off children's comments until "after the story" but limited discussion here with the same kind of closure:

*Letter carriers pick up the rest of the mail and deliver it to you. See, they're delivering it all the way to you. You can check your mailbox [pointing to the illustration] and that's the end.*

The majority of the story readings throughout the year were characterized by interactions like these but there was at least one daily opportunity for the children to look at books on their own, although they were not allowed to take any books home. At the beginning of the year, the teacher said that she focused mostly on how to handle books so that the children did not destroy them:

*It takes a good, I'd say a good month. I tell them that our books are important, and if they're not careful turning the pages, we won't have them for long. We showed them how to open a book, turn the pages. (6/15)*

In so far as the program is not an "academic" one, the teachers here, like the teachers in the other publicly funded preschools, believed that they are not supposed to teach children the letters of the alphabet or any printing, color names, or other similar kinds of things. Once, during the first year of operation, the state supervisors visited the classroom and asked the teachers to take down the letters of the alphabet that were on display. The teacher explained the nonstructured nature of the program in this way:

[The children] do [drawing] with markers on the big paper. But it's not a structured program. I mean if they do that [drawing], then we can go with that. But we can't actually teach them writing cause it's a non-structured program. They come over and get markers and write, they've done a lot of tracing and things like that [body tracing]. Nothing can really be [forced]. ...If the child chooses not to do it, you can't force them. Even if they don't want to do it ever. (6/15)

In spite of the official philosophy, the African American teacher assistant, in particular, felt that more should be going on in the prekindergarten program. She took it upon herself to evaluate the children's ability to write their names, in the fall and again in the spring, but felt powerless to teach them (6/21):

You know, I recognize the need for having a lot of active time, and a lot of free play, but I think those are also times when a lot of vital learning can take place. They're really finding how important the preschool programs are, that's the big push now, to bring the preschool programs back into the schools, because they're finding how important they were in the child's development. But I also think that, if you're gonna take taxpayer's money and put them into a program for children, that you really need to be working at developing some skills. I think if you don't have a scope and sequence for your program, and you don't really have a format for what it is you want— the skills that you want children to acquire during the year, then you really have no basis for teaching children .

This teacher assistant also had strong feelings about the content of stories read aloud to children, and the content of the curricula in general, because of her own strong ties to a fundamentalist Christian community. For instance, she did not believe that celebrating Halloween was appropriate for children and suggested that the observer listen to the Christian radio station on Halloween day for a different perspective.

Her comments are interesting in that there was only one other challenge to the content of the literature presented to African American children and that was expressed by the father of one of the 4-year-olds who attended this program. This parent said that he does not like to hear his son say, "I can't do that," so he has tried to bring African American history to his son to help him see that "whatever you picture in your mind — we can do it." Through *Ebony* magazine, the father ordered Sun Man and Sampson books and superhero figures, Martin Luther King books and other literature on African American people, because he believed it the "responsibility of parents to educate kids about African American books. They're not going to get it all in public school." (6/22)

Besides feeling a conflict between her religious beliefs and the content of the curricula, the African American teacher assistant criticized the classroom program for not providing opportunities for children to learn new things. By this time in the school year, she thought that the children should know the alphabet, that they should have many opportunities for writing, dictating and taping stories, and for developing fine motor skills. She has noticed that by the "last three months of school, the centers don't really hold their interest. And so what you tend to get is just a lot of what I call destructive rather than constructive play. Because if children are bored, they're gonna wander around aimlessly:"

I do notice a lot of times if children see you writing, all of a sudden they will want to write. [But] I think that you can't always wait for kids. You know, personally, I think that you sometimes have to direct. I think there needs to be some children's choices of things, but I think also as a teacher, you need to be able to sit down and say, this kid needs this, maybe not so much has an interest in it, but it's a need.

The prekindergarten teacher also expressed a desire to be able to teach the children more:

I really think it should be a time where you can teach things like the colors and we're not allowed really to teach that. How to write their names. A lot of the kids are beginning to print their names now and we encourage that. You know, the basic thing here is fine motor, socialization, even like things like sharing... I think that it would be better for them, if they're ready, towards the end of the year if we start teaching them letter forms and how to write their name.... (6/15)

Unlike the other preschool programs, the public school prekindergarten seemed to be the most isolated from the community that it served and the teachers the least involved in

constructing the literacy curriculum. Although the program is well equipped, particularly compared to the other publicly funded preschools, there was no value assigned to literate behavior and few opportunities to engage in literate discourse. Whether because of inflexible bureaucratic structures inherent in the management of externally funded programs, or in the translation of developmentally appropriate guidelines<sup>7</sup> from federal and state sources to the local level, or just the predispositions of the teachers involved to let someone else do the planning, there seemed to be little authority vested in the classroom to construct the literacy curriculum.

## SUMMARY

This study explored how literacy curricula were constructed and enacted in five different preschool settings. Although the results of the present study cannot be generalized beyond these five preschools, the findings may help frame future inquiries into the purposes and outcomes of early childhood programs. Educationally significant variations between private not-for-profit and publicly funded programs emerged from the data gathered, clearly demonstrating inequities in children's access to books and to knowledge about print. Not only were far fewer books available to poor children in publicly funded preschools, but the kinds of books available were very different. In the publicly funded preschools, the restricted range of books, in terms of genres and linguistic complexity, content and topics, strongly suggests a limited view of poor children as learners, and, particularly, as participants in a literate culture.

Children's access to print knowledge, such as the prominent display of the alphabet, instruction in letter identification, and assistance in writing and printing, was more limited (and in some cases, nonexistent) in the preschools for children of poor families. In publicly funded preschools, information about print was said to be conveyed only to children who demonstrated they were "ready" to be taught. Because the majority of African American children in this study attended publicly funded preschools, the "withholding" of print knowledge is poignant testimony to the fact that many contemporary African American children, like the young Frederick Douglass who traded bread for instruction in the alphabet, still have no claim to be taught to read.

Except for the Head Start classroom where teachers themselves used literacy to personally keep informed, teachers in the other publicly funded programs at least overtly rejected a "skills" notion of literacy development but did not replace it with anything else. Given the secular content of instruction in most public schools, it is not surprising that the

selection of literature for the children in publicly funded centers reflected linguistic content (easy-to-read) and social development (how-to-behave) rather than, say, African American ethnocentricity or values. Unfortunately, children who participated in these publicly funded programs came away with little idea of what it means to be a literate African American person or what kind of power or responsibility literacy might confer. This kind of cultural knowledge about the place of literacy in one's life is precisely what motivates children to read and sustains their engagement with texts. By any standard, the day-by-day interactions with print and literature in these publicly funded settings were impoverished compared to those of the middle-class preschools where no restrictions on literacy instruction or cultural content seemed to apply.

Further, publicly funded preschools in this study were more likely to have curricula guidelines for "developmentally appropriate practice" written by professionals external to the community -- county-wide administrators, state education agency supervisors, or the professional associations of day care and preschool workers. Parents in our study, although puzzled by the lack of attention to "learning the alphabet," clearly appeared to trust as expert the judgment of teachers, a tendency of low income and working class parents that has been reported in other communities (Lareau, 1989). Policies that limit family eligibility for publicly funded preschools, and in some cases, present employment policies of hiring less well-educated preschool teachers at barely minimum wage, would seem to sustain the isolation of residential segregation and contribute to a narrow view of children's literacy development among parents, teachers, and the children themselves (McGill-Franzen, 1993). By contrast, we believe that the private preschools, governed by parent boards, more accurately represented the values of the parent community. The curricula documents prepared by the private preschools for prospective families placed high value on literacy and explicitly encouraged its development.

Case study comparisons across the five preschool settings illustrated how children are socialized to practice different literacies. Early experiences with books can shape children's cognitive and social development in profound ways. Besides the advantages in language proficiency that accrue to children from sustained conversations around books (Chomsky, 1972; Dickinson & Smith, 1994), children also learn to "own" literacy and relate to literate behavior in ways that affirm their worth as individuals and their identity within a cultural community (Ferdman, 1990). Not only did children in publicly funded preschools have access to fewer books and spend less time engaged in literacy activities, but they were offered less challenging and culturally relevant pedagogy. By contrast, low-income children in the private-not-for-profit preschools experienced literacy as both a "culturally cohesive force"

and "moral force" (Purves, 1993, p.356) that conveyed belonging and purpose even to 4-year-olds within their respective classroom communities.

As Toni Morrison (1989), the first African American recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, explained: "Cultures, whether silenced or monologicistic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in the language and images available to them" (cited in King & Mitchell, 1992, p. 61). Certainly, if publicly-funded preschools are to help children achieve their promise, more fully developed and culturally relevant pedagogical and curricular frameworks for understanding literacy development need to be in place.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The present study was conducted under the auspices of the OERI sponsored National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning. The data reported here are from a longitudinal study of the influence of classroom experiences with literature on the development of literacy and literary understandings in children from 4-7 years old. The views expressed are those of the authors.

<sup>2</sup>The children's development is reported elsewhere. See, for example, McGill-Franzen & Lanford, 1994; McGill-Franzen, Lanford, Gioia & Blustein, 1996; and "Four children, four stories of literacy in school," an International Reading Association monograph in preparation.

<sup>3</sup>The children were observed at regularly scheduled intervals in the five different preschool settings throughout the school year. When children participated in literacy activities, the researchers asked them about their work (and recorded these interactions), noted concepts about print, book handling, and other markers of literacy, and collected copies of their work. Teachers and teacher assistants were interviewed at the time of each observation (debriefing interviews to probe for beliefs and purposes) and formally at the beginning and end of the school year to discuss curricula goals and focal children's development. Parents were likewise interviewed at the beginning and end of the year, most often in their homes, to help the researchers understand the kinds of reading and writing children experienced in the home, their educational expectations for the children, and their satisfaction with the school program.

<sup>4</sup>The longitudinal study extended over four years of school.

<sup>5</sup>In one case, the classroom library was composed almost entirely of children's books that belonged to the teacher. Because these book titles were not available to the children, as other classroom libraries were, this book collection is referred to as "school's library" in the figure, and is distinguished from the classroom library.

<sup>6</sup>As in McGinley & Kamberlelis (1996), functions of literacy in the present study are not mutually exclusive coding categories, but rather interpretive frames to make sense of the overlapping purposes and uses of literacy, either observed in the classroom or stated in interviews. We pay particular attention to the literature selection by teachers, to the talk around the book readings, and to teachers' expressed intentions and goals. We broadly group functions into personal and social, with personal functions encompassing everyday, school, and imaginative uses of literacy and social functions defining uses with a more political or broader focus outside classroom and home. Books chosen to label colors, identify the alphabet, or increase attention span would fall under a personal, school-related function. Using literacy to select toys to buy, write letters, practice religion, or make children drowsy for a nap might be thought of as personal, everyday uses. Putting oneself in a book character's shoes, laughing at incongruity, connecting to the past and anticipating the future are still considered personal functions but these constitute more imaginary kinds of uses that take place in the individual's head. Social functions reach beyond the everyday, school or imaginary uses of literacy to enacting values such as protecting the earth, preventing intolerance, or appreciating community.

<sup>7</sup>Preschool teachers and administrators referred to a particular set of guidelines, those published by the NAEYC in 1987. These guidelines proscribe teaching alphabet letters in "isolation" and singing the alphabet song as developmentally inappropriate for preschoolers. Many state departments of education have also prohibited the display of alphabet letters in preschool programs funded by state or federal agencies and under their auspice (See McGill-Franzen, 1993, for an analysis of these policies and the beliefs underlying them).



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