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ABSTRACT

This issue presents eight essays all on the theme of how young children can become strong and successful lifelong readers. "Seeking Common Ground" (Lee Sherman) reviews the debate over how best to teach young children to read. "In the Beginning" (Catherine Paglin) suggests that by reading aloud to young children and filling their world with print, parents and preschool providers lay the groundwork for literacy. "For the Love of a Book" (Judy Blankenship) shares a second-grade teacher's passion for reading with her students. "Leading with the Heart" (Joyce Riha Linik) describes a multiage classroom of first-, second-, and third-grade students who exhibit a love of reading, delve into literature, and challenge themselves. "When Life and Words Collide" (Lee Sherman) describes how a teacher brings reading down to earth for her first graders. "Creating Eager Readers" (Melissa Steineger) discusses how informal assessments help students "mine text for meaning." "Book Buddy" (Teri Sherman Matias) describes a volunteer tutor's experiences in giving kids an extra boost in reading. "Peaceful Proposal" (Joanne Yatvin) suggests that teaching at its best includes instruction in all types of skills and an awareness of children's background knowledge and stages of development. (RS)

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NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY
FALL 1998

SUCCEEDING AT READING

LITERACY IN THE EARLY YEARS

ERIC

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 1

FALL 1998

THIS ISSUE

Succeeding at Reading:
Literacy in the Early Years

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COVER PHOTO: SAM GERE AND ZACK SUMMERS READ TOGETHER AT CLACKAMAS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN MILWAUKIE, OREGON. PHOTO BY JUDY BLANKENSHIP.

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Magic Chariot and Decoder Ring

The creaky old schoolhouse where I spent my elementary years had a heart that pumped life into the drafty corridors: the library. It was there, at Seattle's Lake Forest Park School, that I checked out my first chapter book. Scanning the shelves one day when I was in second grade, my eyes fell on the bright-yellow spine of a book called *Kid Sister*. "Hey," I thought as I pulled the book from its slot, "*I* have a kid sister." Besides feeling really brave and smart for choosing a fat book with no pictures, I felt the magic of finding a book that spoke directly to me—the wonder of realizing that an author had written about something important to my own life.

Not long after that I found a huge volume on astronomy. The librarian smiled as I lugged the big book to the checkout counter in my skinny arms. My dad, the Eagle Scout, had taken me outside one night and pointed toward the starry sky, tracing the constellations of lights that formed Orion, the Big Dipper, and Pleiades. I wanted to know more about the heavens.

The humble little school library, I began to see, was a ramp to everything in the world and beyond, everything that could be dreamed and imagined, everything that could be known, everything that could be hoped. Books became balm and refuge. Magic chariot and decoder ring. Periscope and time machine.

The days when my paperback orders from Scholastic arrived were better than Christmas. I remember coming home to a locked house one afternoon and losing myself in the crisp new pages of *Lad: a Dog* as I waited for Mom on the back porch. I remember hiding *Island of the Blue Dolphins* under my covers and reading to the glow of a flashlight long after my parents thought I was asleep. I remember being gently rebuked by a teacher for devouring my most beloved childhood novel, *The Hundred and One Dalmations* by Dodie Smith (1956), instead of paying attention to the lesson at hand. I remember lying on my bedroom floor, propped on my elbows for hours, turning page after page of a frayed old copy of *Little Women*—the same copy my mother had read as a girl.

Making eager readers of children is the first step toward making adults who read with skill and with joy, who read for information and for pleasure, who have access to all the wealth that we as a species store in the written word. Researchers are calling for an end to the "reading wars" that divide educators and communities into bitter camps. No single skill defines a reader, they say. No lone strategy works in isolation. By laying down divisive ideologies, we can work together to ensure that young children become strong and successful lifelong readers.

—*Lee Sherman*

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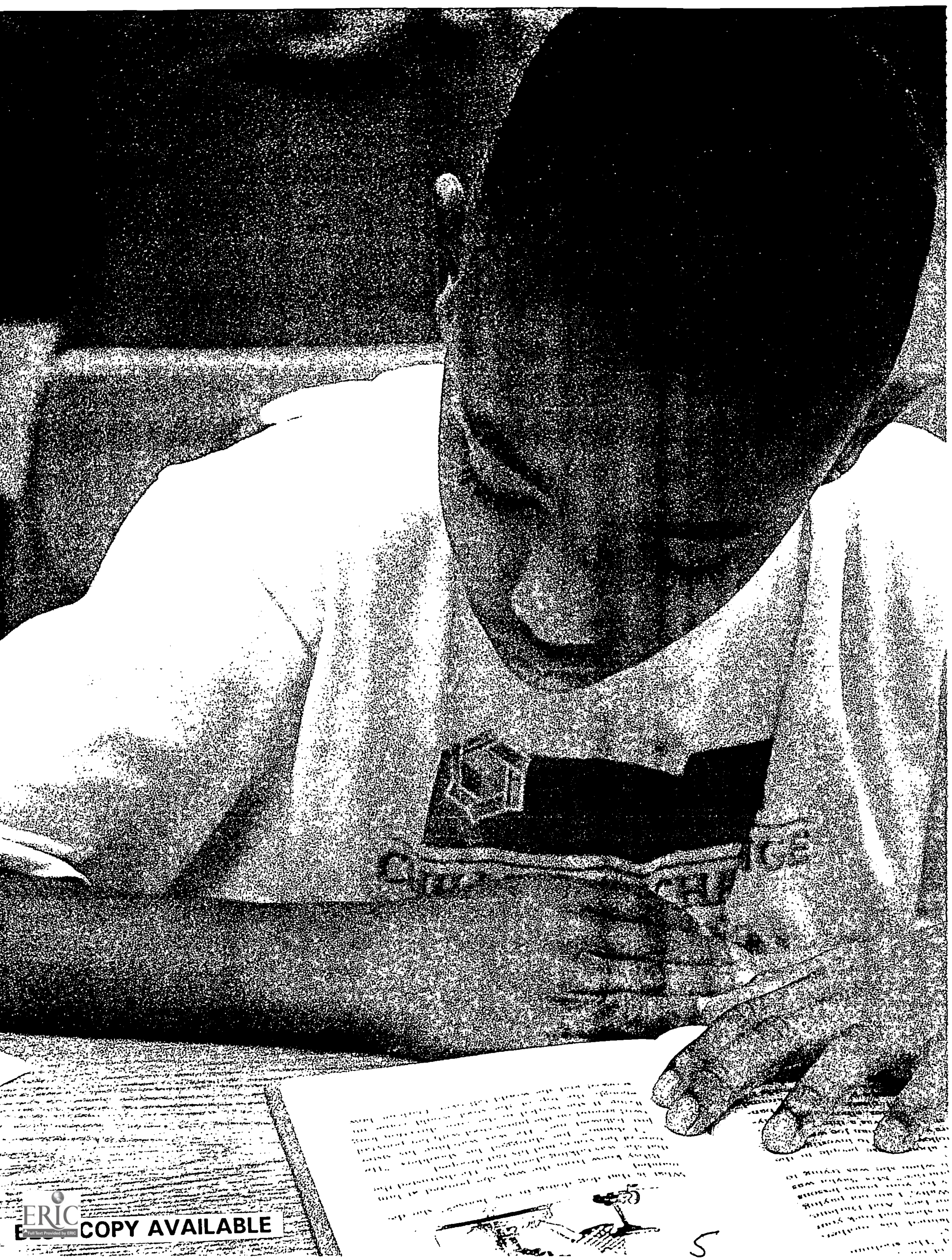


J. Blankenship photo, courtesy of Portland Public Schools Foundation

and teach them skills, too"

By LEE SHERMAN

The teacher holds up a series of flash cards, one after the other, rapid-fire. On each card is a vowel or a combination of vowels. The children know the drill.

"*Ow, oh,*" the second-graders recite loudly in unison. "*A, ay, aw.*"

This scene is replayed daily at a back-to-basics charter school in Phoenix: kids lined up in straight rows giving rote responses to instruction that is unconnected to real reading. It reflects the belief of some parents and politicians that young readers need to memorize the sound-symbol relationships of letters and letter combinations through repetitive drilling and worksheets. The "phonics-first" and "phonics-only" forces are gathering strength as reading scores in many districts slide or stagnate. In some states, such as California, and more recently Washington, lawmakers are getting into the act by mandating phonics instruction.

Few issues stir the emotions of educators more vigorously than the debate over how best to teach young children to read. But there is a healing movement afoot: a plea for armistice. Weary of the rancorous divide between whole-language and phonics factions, growing numbers of educators are seeking common ground. Research strongly supports the idea that phonics and whole language can coexist when blended skillfully by talented teachers.

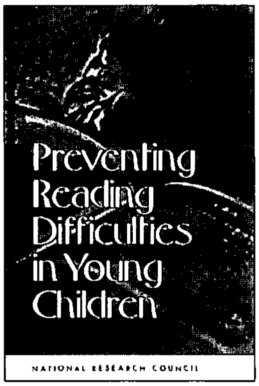
Calling for an end to the "reading wars," an important new report from the National Research Council says that children need both. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* concludes that immersion in language and literature (whole language) and instruction in sound-letter relationships (phonics) are both critical in the early years. A 17-member, multidisciplinary committee, headed by Catherine Snow of Harvard University, spent two years sifting through the findings of several decades of research to make its case.

Comprehension, the council concludes, is the reason for reading. But unlocking the meaning encoded in the mysterious lines, dots, and squiggles that form our written language requires mastery of a number of complex skills. Phonics instruction is critical, the council says, to creating readers who can grasp and grapple with texts of increasing complexity.

"Reading should be defined as getting meaning from print, using knowledge about the written alphabet and about the sound structure of oral language for the purposes of achieving understanding," the council writes. "Early reading instruction should include direct teaching of information about sound-symbol relationships to children who do not know them, and it should maintain a focus on the communicative purposes and personal value of reading."

This finding is not news to many practitioners, who have been quietly blending whole language and sound-symbol skills in their classrooms for years.

- "I don't think you can separate them," says Susan Marchese of Coupeville Elementary School in Washington. "They go together. I mean, how could they not? I get frustrated when I hear about teachers who are just teaching phonics, or they're just doing whole language. I don't know how you could take one away from the other."


Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children
NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

KEY RESOURCES

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) presents the conclusions of an extensive research review by the National Research Council. The council recommends that first- through third-grade curricula include these components:

- Beginning readers need explicit instruction and practice that lead to an appreciation that spoken words are made up of smaller units of sounds; familiarity with spelling-sound correspondences; and common spelling conventions and their use in identifying printed words; "sight" recognition of frequent words; and independent reading, including reading aloud. Fluency should be promoted through practice with a wide variety of well-written and engaging texts at the child's own comfortable reading level.
- Children who have started to read independently, typically second-graders and above, should be encouraged to sound out and confirm the identities of visually unfamiliar words they encounter in the course of reading meaningful texts, recognizing words primarily through attention to their letter-sound relationships. Although context and pictures can be used as a tool to monitor word recognition, children should not be taught to use them to substitute for information provided by the letters in the word.
- Because the ability to obtain meaning from print depends so strongly on the development of word recognition accuracy and reading fluency, both of the latter should be regularly assessed in the classroom, permitting timely and effective instructional response when difficulty or delay is apparent.
- Beginning in the earliest grades, instruction should promote comprehension by actively building linguistic and conceptual knowledge in a rich variety of domains, as well as through direct instruction about comprehension strategies such as summarizing the main idea, predicting events and outcomes of upcoming text, drawing inferences, and monitoring for coherence and misunderstandings. This instruction can take place while adults read to students or when students read themselves.

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- Once children learn some letters, they should be encouraged to write them, use them to begin writing words or parts of words, and use words to begin writing sentences. Instruction should be designed with the understanding that the use of invented spelling is not in conflict with teaching correct spelling. Beginning writing with invented spelling can be helpful for developing understanding of the identity and segmentation of speech sounds and sound-spelling relationships. Conventionally correct spelling should be developed through focused instruction and practice. Primary grade children should be expected to spell previously studied words and spelling patterns correctly in their final writing products. Writing should take place regularly and frequently to encourage children to become more comfortable and familiar with it.
- Throughout the early grades, time, materials, and resources should be provided with two goals: (a) to support daily independent reading of texts selected to be of particular interest for the individual student, and beneath the individual student's frustration level, in order to consolidate the student's capacity for independent reading and (b) to support daily assisted or supported reading and rereading of texts that are slightly more difficult in wording or in linguistic, rhetorical, or conceptual structure in order to promote advances in the student's capabilities.
- Throughout the early grades, schools should promote independent reading outside school by such means as daily at-home reading assignments and expectations, summer reading lists, encouraging parent involvement, and by working with community groups, including public librarians, who share this goal.

The report is available online at http://www.nap.edu. To order a copy, contact the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055, 1-800-624-6242.

A national Reading Summit being convened by the U.S. Department of Education this fall will focus on the council's report. For information on the summit, to be held September 18-19 in Washington, D.C., visit the Education Department Web site, http://www.ed.gov/inits.html#1.

- "Children have to have direct instruction in phonics," says Molly Chun of Applegate Elementary School in Portland. "But I try to embed that in a meaningful context."
- "I was trained to teach reading using the whole-language method, which minimizes phonics," says Wendy Fenner of Oregon's Clackamas Elementary School. "But after getting into a classroom, I could see that some kids just don't have enough tools to learn to read without phonics. So now I combine whole language and phonics, as do most teachers."

If there is so much apparent agreement among researchers and practitioners about how to teach kids to read, why is there so much vitriol in discussions of best practices? Partly, it's politics. The political leanings of phonics proponents—many of whom are conservative, back-to-basics parents and policymakers—often clash with more progressive educational trends and practices. The chasm between the two camps reflects a deep philosophical divide, not only about instructional strategies, but about the role schools play in children's intellectual development. At bottom the question is, Should schools teach children to think, reason, analyze, and evaluate, or should schools stick to the three Rs? Teachers and parents who favor instruction that stresses meaning over mechanics—who want children to look behind the words for enrichment and understanding—cringe at the tactics of some phonics practitioners. Drills such as the one described above suggest a rigidity and regimentation that can stifle curiosity and rob reading of joy.

But phonics doesn't have to mean memorizing rules and spouting rote responses.

"Most of the time the word *phonics* is used to mean 'knowledge about sound-symbol relationships in language,'" Heidi Mills, Timothy O'Keefe, and Diane Stephens say in *Looking Closely: Exploring the Role of Phonics in One Whole-Language Classroom,* published by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1992. "When phonics is defined this way, phonics and whole language are quite compatible."

In theory, whole language was never intended to exclude phonics, most researchers agree. But in practice, many educators interpreted the whole-language philosophy to mean that students would learn to read naturally, without direct instruction, if they were simply immersed in a literacy-rich environment.

IDAHO READING INITIATIVE

Improving the reading and literacy skills of Idaho students is the goal of a $24.5 million reading initiative from the J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation. Designed to build preliteracy skills in young children, to improve reading performance, and to detect early reading problems and address them effectively, the initiative's four components will operate through a series of grants awarded over the next three years:

- Read to Children—A grant awarded to the Idaho State Library and Idaho Public Television will be used for a program to improve early literacy development in preschool children.
- Early Reading Programs—To get kindergartners ready to read, a computerized reading program incorporating software, video, and books will be installed in Idaho kindergartens.
- Reading Diagnosis and Assessment—To improve the skills of kindergarten through fourth-grade reading teachers, a course on teaching reading will be offered four times a year. A mentor/trainer course will be offered in each district twice a year to support teachers who have completed the initial course.
- Supplements to Reading Program—A supplemental program that combines library books and computers to motivate students to increase their time spent reading will be available to every Idaho elementary and junior high school.

"The Foundation is taking a proactive, long-term view," says Executive Director Sharron Jarvis. "Our intent is to provide Idaho schools, in a proactive way, with effective approaches to educational challenges and opportunities."

Founded in 1966 by grocery store magnate Joe Albertson and his wife, Kathryn, the private, family foundation fosters educational improvement in Idaho by omoting research, experimentation, and innovation in the education field. The foundation's five focus areas—student learning, teaching excellence, preparation and advancement of educational practitioners, performance of educational systems, and early childhood education—are supported through grantmaking, the J. A. & Kathryn Albertson Center for Educational Excellence, and the Idaho Community Foundation.

For more information, contact the Albertson Foundation, 501 Baybrook Court, P.O. Box 70002, Boise, Idaho 83707-0102, phone: (208) 424-2600, fax: (208) 424-2626.

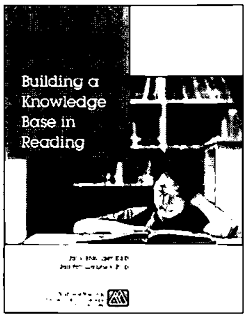
—SAMANTHA MOORES

The council urges teachers to keep their classrooms drenched in print, stuffed with quality children's literature, enlivened with discussions about books, astir with journal writing, book publishing, shared reading, and other "authentic" (real) reading and writing activities. Into this rich whole-language pot, the council advises, teachers should thoughtfully stir explicit instruction in sound-symbol relationships.

"It is time for educators, parents, and everyone else concerned with children's education to make sure that children have all the experiences that research has shown to support reading development," Snow said when the council's report was released in March.

To teach kids phonics is to give them a code—the code that unlocks the vast universe of print. Without that code, children are effectively shut out of libraries, bookstores, Web sites, magazine stands, newspaper kiosks, and the countless other repositories of written information, entertainment, and enlightenment.

Phonics means showing students how spoken sounds link up with written symbols. In English, which is an alphabetic language, those symbols are letters. But before children can learn phonics—before they can beginning mapping letters to sounds—they must first become consciously aware of those



KEY RESOURCES

Building a Knowledge Base in Reading (1997), a research synthesis by Jane Braunger of the Northwest Laboratory and Jan Lewis of Pacific Lutheran University, offers the following "core understandings" about learning to read, along with suggested classroom applications:

1. Reading is a construction of meaning from written text. It is an active, cognitive, and affective process.

2. Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process.

3. Social interaction is essential in learning to read.

4. Reading and writing develop together.

5. Reading involves complex thinking.

6. Environments rich in literacy experiences, resources, and models facilitate reading development.

7. Engagement in the reading task is key in successfully learning to read.

8. Children's understandings of print are not the same as adults' understandings.

9. Children develop phonemic awareness and knowledge of phonics through a variety of literacy opportunities, models, and demonstrations.

10. Children learn successful reading strategies in the context of real reading.
11. Children learn best when teachers employ a variety of strategies to model and demonstrate reading knowledge, strategy, and skills.
12. Children need the opportunity to read, read, read.
13. Monitoring the development of reading processes is vital to student success.

The paper, published jointly by the Northwest Laboratory, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the International Reading Association, is available for $12.95 from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, Oregon 97204, (503) 275-9498 or 1-800-547-6339, ext. 498. A collection of classroom vignettes featuring seven Northwest teachers whose literacy practices reflect these 13 core understandings will be published this fall.

Coauthor Braunger conducts workshops for educators, school boards, and community members on classroom reading instruction that reflects current understandings of language and literacy development. For more information, contact Braunger at (503) 275-9588.

sounds: the *p* in pig, the *t* in turtle, the *a* in apple. They must understand that spoken language is made up of a series of discernable "phonemes"—about 45 distinct sounds in English.

Dr. Rebecca Novick, who specializes in early-childhood education at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, calls this awareness an "ear skill"—one that is vital to beginning readers. Without this basic sound awareness, Novick says, learners probably won't benefit from phonics instruction, which traditionally has taken phonemic awareness for granted.

"To the extent that children lack such phonemic awareness," the National Research Council says, "they are unable usefully to internalize their phonics lessons."

Although most children pick up this critical ear skill easily, it eludes many others, research shows. Without it, students typically have trouble sounding out and blending new words, retaining words from one encounter to the next, and learning to spell, the council reports. "Dozens of... studies have confirmed that there is a close relationship between phonemic awareness and reading ability, not just in the early grades but throughout the school years," the council states. "Research repeatedly demonstrates that, when steps are taken to ensure an adequate awareness of phonemes, the reading and spelling growth of the group as a whole is accelerated and the incidence of reading failure is diminished."

Parents, preschool providers, kindergarten teachers (and primary teachers for kids whose early exposure to literacy is limited) are critical to planting the seeds of phonemic awareness in the minds of young children. When children hear their favorite books over and over, when they hear stories and songs filled with rhymes and alliteration, their ears become attuned to the sounds words make, says Novick. Nursery rhymes—the adventures and antics of Jack and Jill, Little Miss Muffet, Humpty-Dumpty, Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater—are a natural place to start. Children don't need to know what a "tuffet" is in order to hear the rhyme with "Muffet." (These rhymes often resonate in our minds for a lifetime, suggesting the power they can have on the young intellect.)

Tapping into young children's natural sensitivity to rhyme, first-grade teacher Molly Chun makes poetry a fixture in her classroom, where walls and blackboards are draped in verses written on chart paper. Chun chooses playful poems full of word play, like this one titled "The Squirrel":

Whisky, frisky,
Hippity hop,
Up he goes
To the treetop!
Whirly, twirly,
Round and round,
Down he scampers
To the ground.
Furly, curly,
What a tail,
Tall as a feather,
Broad as a sail!
Where's his supper?
In the shell,
Snappity, crackity,
Out it fell.

After Chun leads the children through a choral reading of the poem, she says, "Tell us two words that rhyme"—an exercise in phonemic awareness. She talks about the definition of the word *broad* and asks the children what the squirrel ate for dinner (suggested but not stated in the poem)—an exercise in gleaning meaning from text. Then she asks individual children to come up to the poem and circle blends (such as *br*) and "h brothers" (such as *sh*)—an exercise in sound-symbol relationships, or phonics. For Chun's students, phonics instruction grows organically from meaningful activities involving real reading. (See Page 32 for a closer look inside Chun's classroom.)

"A lot of teaching about consonants and vowels and the sounds they make must take place if children are to learn how to decode words," notes Michael Pressley of the University of Notre Dame in his 1998 book *Reading Instruction That Works*. "Decoding instruction," he adds, "prepares students to tackle words they have never seen before, even when they are well prepared for beginning reading."

But how much phonics is the right amount? How should it be taught? When do children benefit most from phonics instruction? Phonics fans often butt heads with whole-language supporters over these issues. The best approach, according to the National Research Council and other researchers, is to give phonics lessons in tandem with real reading and writing experience. Reading and phonics piggyback on each other: Reading reinforces the lessons of phonics, while phonics speeds the learning of reading. When a child reads an engaging story (usually a trade book or library book) of her own choosing, she is motivated to decode new and unfamiliar words because she cares about the meaning they contain. When a child experiences excitement and pleasure from the words on a printed page, she becomes an eager and critical reader—the ultimate goal of reading instruction.

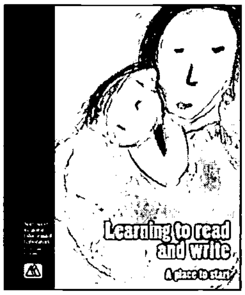
"To say that children learn to read by reading is not to deny the need to provide explicit instruction and many demonstrations in the classroom," Drs. Jane Braunger and Jan Lewis say in their 1998 paper, *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*. "The point to be made is that the amount of extended text reading that children do is directly related to their reading achievement. Without real engagement in meaningful texts, children will not become readers. This is why a focus on early instruction in isolated skills is so potentially damaging for young readers, especially those who struggle to learn to read."

Phonics shouldn't stand alone as a teaching strategy, agrees Dorothy Strickland of Rutgers. To be effective, it must be linked to a much broader set of strategies anchored in the full array of literacy activities. For instance, students should be encouraged to draw on prior knowledge, story context, and grammatical cues, in addition to sound-symbol cues, to figure out unknown words.

In *Teaching Phonics Today: A Primer for Educators*, published by the International Reading Association in 1998, Strickland suggests the following guidelines for learning and teaching phonics:

- Teaching phonics is not synonymous with teaching reading
- Reading and spelling require much more than phonics
- Phonics is a means to an end, not the end in itself
- Phonics is one of several enablers or cueing systems that help us read
- Phonics is one of several strategies for spelling
- Memorizing phonics rules does not ensure application of those rules
- Learners need to see the relevance of phonics for themselves in their own reading and writing
- Teaching students to use phonics is different from teaching them about phonics
- The best context for learning and applying phonics is actual reading and writing

In its 1985 research review *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, the National Academy of Education offered an even leaner set of maxims: "Do it early. Keep it simple."



KEY RESOURCES

Learning to Read and Write: A Place to Start (1998) by Rebecca Novick of the Northwest Laboratory includes these suggested strategies developed by Constance Weaver for building phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge within a whole-language framework (see Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, & Vento-Zogby, *Creating Support for Effective Literacy Education*, published by Heinemann in 1996). Among them are:

- Read and reread favorite nursery rhymes to reinforce the sound patterns of the language, and enjoy tongue twisters and other forms of language play together.
- Read aloud to children from "big books" or charts large enough for all children in the group or class to see the print easily. Run a pointer or your hand or finger under the words, to help children make the association between spoken words and written words.
- Part of the time, choose "big books" and/or make charts of stories, poems, and rhymes that make interesting use of alliteration, rhyme, and onomatopoeia.
- When sharing "big books" or charts, focus children's attention on the beginnings and ends of words. It is helpful to focus on elements that alliterate and rhyme, before focusing on individual sounds.
- The most effective and efficient phonics instruction focuses children's attention on noticing onsets and rimes. During the discussion of onsets and rimes, you and the children can make charts of words with the same sound pattern (to help children use analogies to read new words). Read alphabet books with children, and make alphabet books together.
- Read with children other books that emphasize sound —books such as *Noisy Poems*, edited by Jill Bennett; *Deep Down Underground*, by Oliver Dunrea; and Dr. Seuss books. Comment on sounds.
- When reading together, help children use prior knowledge and context plus initial consonants to predict what a word will be; then look at the rest of the word to confirm or correct.
- Talk about letters and sounds as you write messages to children and as you help them compose something together, or individually. This is a very important way of helping children begin to hear individual sounds in words as well as to learn to spell some of the words they write.
- Help children notice print in their environment—signs, labels, and other print.
- When children demonstrate in their attempts at writing that they realize letters represent sounds, help them individually to write the sounds they hear in words.
- Provide tape recordings of many selections for children to listen to, as they follow along with the written text. It helps to provide small copies of the text, not just a "big book" or chart.

The publication, which includes site profiles and training handouts, will be available this fall from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, Oregon 97204, (503) 275-9498 or 1-800-547-6339, ext. 498.

"Except in the cases of diagnosed individual need," the academy said, "phonics instruction should have been completed by the end of second grade."

ut what about those students who struggle in vain to break the code? Researchers have found that decoding words is extremely difficult for as many as 25 percent of children. Unlike learning to speak—an innate ability that develops naturally through interaction with a caregiver—learning to read is a somewhat "unnatural act," Novick notes. As a creation of humans (rather than a creation of nature), the conventions, logic, and structure of written communication must be given anew to each generation. With adequate instruction, most children pick up decoding skills. Kids who don't are left out of the literacy loop. The consequences are huge in a society that increasingly revolves around information.

"No matter how they are taught... some children will still need more intensive individual help," writes Constance Weaver in *Reconsidering a Balanced Approach to Reading*, published in 1998 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Intensive individual help for struggling readers is the recommendation of a number of researchers, including the National Research Council. But they caution against giving these children tedious remedial work—worksheets, drills, instruction that is isolated from the rich, colorful world of real stories and interesting information. Slower learners as well as rapid ones need to participate fully in meaningful literacy activities.

"Because success in reading builds on the same skills for all children," says Snow, "we do not believe that those who run into difficulty need instruction that is qualitatively different from other children. Instead, they may need more focused, more intense, and more individual application of the same instructional principles."

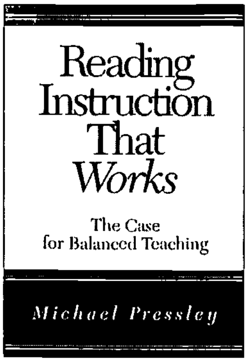
Children have the best chance to overcome reading difficulties if intervention starts in first grade, "before a history of failure has set in," Novick reports. Kids should get help while their natural curiosity and willingness to learn are still intact. One-to-one tutoring gets the best results, according to Novick, who cites a 1996 study showing that four types of activities are particularly important to the success of tutoring:

- Reading text that gradually and repetitively introduces both high-frequency vocabulary and words with common spelling patterns
- Receiving direct instruction about the letter-sound relationships with words
- Being helped to identify and spell words through numerous interactions in which the teacher helps the child bridge old knowledge and new
- Hearing the tutor's words as that tutor models how to identify or spell unknown words

It's important, though, that extra help not eat into the child's other literacy opportunities, especially time for individual reading and writing, Weaver cautions. She recommends a number of creative ways to build in extra time and help for struggling readers. For example, schools can provide:

- Support from reading buddies, including classmates, older children, aides, and senior citizens
- Instructional aids such as books on tape and high-quality, multimedia computer programs that engage readers interactively
- In-classroom support from other professionals, such as speech and language teachers and reading specialists
- Support before or after school or on Saturdays from such specialists (who could be given staggered schedules)
- Library support before and after school
- Supplementary literacy programs and events, such as schoolwide 'read-ins'

Word "chunks" as a focus of phonics instruction hold great promise for all kids, but especially for children for whom decoding is a troublesome concept. Molly Chun's first-grade classroom is hung with sheets and sheets of chart paper printed with lists of rhyming words that share groupings of letters: *fan, man, ran, van; cat, fat, mat, hat; did, hid, rid, kid.* Researchers have discovered that the brain stores patterns of letters—particularly patterns that often occur together, such as *an, at,* and *id* in the example above—rather than individual letters or whole words. Research suggests that readers read in chunks, too. A fruitful phonics lesson is to draw children's attention to "onsets" and "rimes" in syllables—that is, the consonant that begins a syllable (the onset) and the vowel-consonant grouping that follows (the rime). In the example above, *an, at,* and *id* are the rimes, and the beginning consonants (*f* in *fan*; *k* in *kid*) are the onsets. Once a child learns a word with a common rime, he is likely to recognize that familiar chunk when he encounters a new word containing the same letter grouping. Thus, he is able to read unfamiliar words more easily by drawing analogies from known to unknown words.



Reading Instruction That Works
The Case for Balanced Teaching
Michael Pressley

KEY RESOURCES

In *Reading Instruction That Works* (1998), Michael Pressley of the University of Notre Dame writes: "The radical middle...is only radical in contrast to the extreme whole-language and phonics positions that have defined the recent debates about beginning reading instruction....The most sensible beginning-reading curriculum should be a balance of skills development and authentic reading and writing."

The book can be ordered from Guilford Publications, 72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012; http://www.guilford.com

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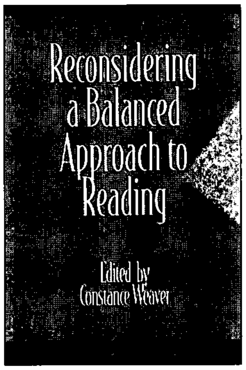
While most reading experts agree that both phonics and whole language belong in primary classrooms, the best way to blend them is less clear-cut. Teachers may find themselves teetering on an instructional tightrope when they begin to mesh the two perspectives.

"There is a balance, and a very delicate one, between not doing enough to help children learn to draw upon phonics knowledge to recognize familiar and unfamiliar print words, and emphasizing phonics too much," Weaver notes.

Many researchers share a deep concern that without a unified theory to guide instruction, teachers will throw in a little phonics here, a touch of whole language there—an approach that has been disparaged as the "instructional Cuisinart" or "tossed salad" style of literacy instruction. While researchers may disagree on the precise balance of phonics and whole language, there is consensus on one key point: Reading programs should be grounded in research. And most researchers, whatever their perspective, agree that meaning is the essence of reading, even for the littlest kids.

Writes Weaver: "I argue for instruction based on a coherent integration of the best of differing bodies and types of research and a theory of reading that puts meaning at the heart of reading from the very beginning, rather than as some distant goal."

Novick sums up the delicate balance teachers must find as they lead their young students to mastery of written language. "The ability to match print to sound is a crucial part of becoming an independent and fluent reader," she says. "Children also need to develop and maintain a positive disposition toward literacy and the ability to think critically and imaginatively. The challenge for teachers is to help children build a solid literacy foundation in the primary grades, one that provides not only basic skills, but also multiple opportunities to 'get lost in a story' —to reflect, reason, create 'possible worlds' through stories and dramatic play, and to share experiences, ideas, and opinions."


Reconsidering a Balanced Approach to Reading
Edited by Constance Weaver

KEY RESOURCES

In the collection of articles titled *Reconsidering a Balanced Approach to Reading*, Constance Weaver of Western Michigan University says that effective phonics instruction:

- Is derived from and embedded within a rich literacy context that also integrates reading, writing, and literature with the use of oral language across the curriculum
- Requires children to think, not passively complete worksheets or engage in drill
- Focuses on patterns, not rules
- Focuses on rimes and onsets before single phonemes
- Combines attention to phonemic awareness with attention to letter/sound correspondences
- Is interactive and collaborative, involving discussion

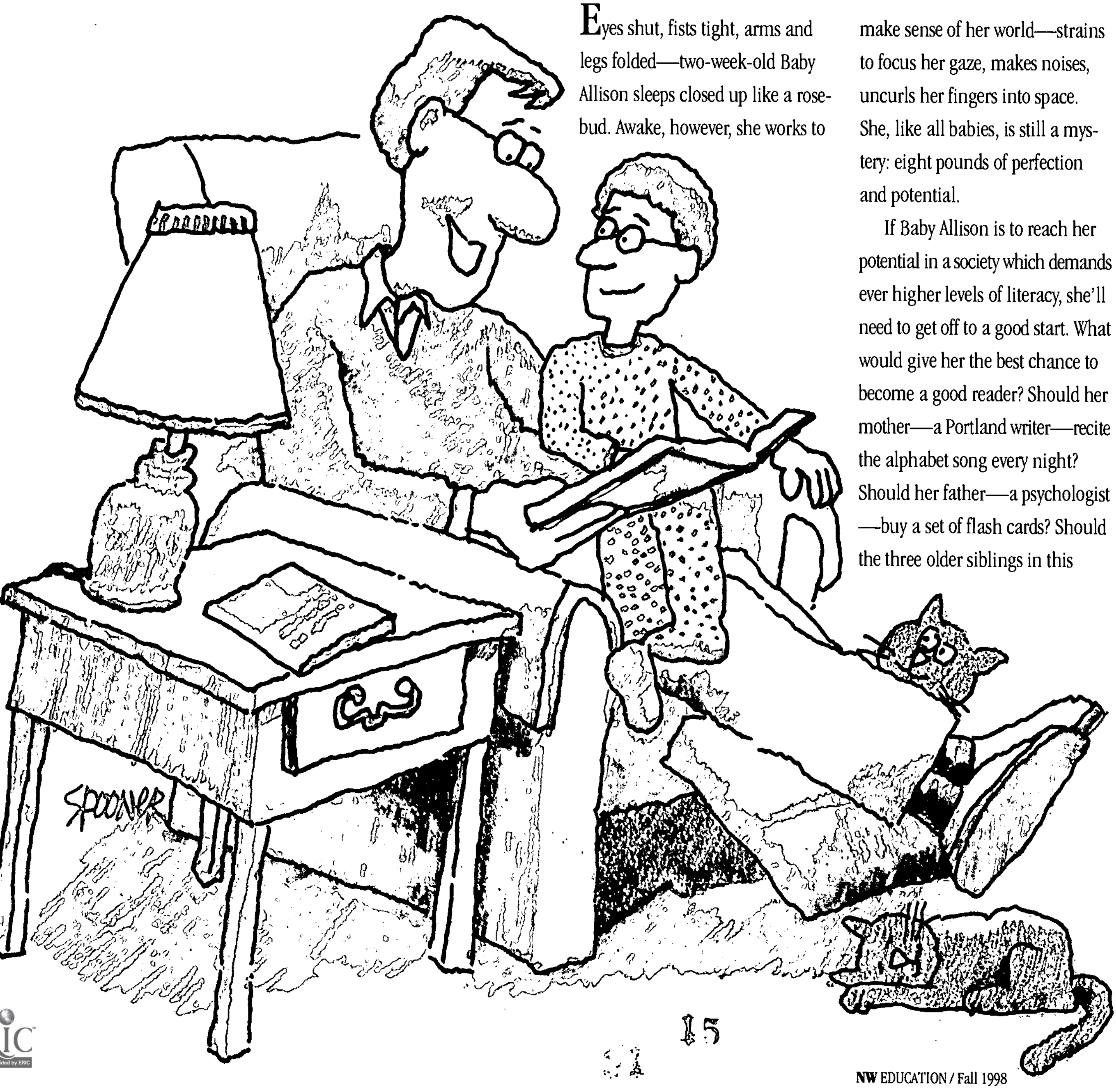
The book can be ordered from the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 West Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801, 1-800-369-6283, http://www/ncte.org

By reading aloud to young children and filling their world with print, parents and preschool providers lay the groundwork for literacy

By CATHERINE PAGLIN

In the Beginning

Illustration: JOE SPOONER



Eyes shut, fists tight, arms and legs folded—two-week-old Baby Allison sleeps closed up like a rosebud. Awake, however, she works to make sense of her world—strains to focus her gaze, makes noises, uncurls her fingers into space. She, like all babies, is still a mystery: eight pounds of perfection and potential.

If Baby Allison is to reach her potential in a society which demands ever higher levels of literacy, she'll need to get off to a good start. What would give her the best chance to become a good reader? Should her mother—a Portland writer—recite the alphabet song every night? Should her father—a psychologist—buy a set of flash cards? Should the three older siblings in this blended family correct her pronunciation when she begins to talk baby talk? Or should they all wait and do nothing until she reaches first grade?

The answer is none of the above. Give-and-take with loving parents, along with activities that stimulate her mental and physical development—not gimmicks, special training, or off-the-shelf products—will best help Allison get ready to read. If her family responds when she cries; if they talk and sing to her as they hold, change, feed, rock, and dress her; if they read to her; if they play games with her; if they provide age-appropriate toys and materials; if they answer and encourage her speech when she begins to talk, she'll not only feel loved and valued, but absorb valuable knowledge about language, books, print, reading, and writing.

Learning to read is usually associated with first grade; that's when most children "crack the code" that allows them to decipher new words. But steps toward that milestone of literacy begin at the beginning.

"They're not going to learn to read until they get that background," says Debra Lande, who has taught preschool, kindergarten, and first grade, and is a member of the Portland Public Schools reading advisory committee. "There has to be that foundation that is supplied from birth. It's being read to even in infancy, it's the rhymes, it's the songs, it's the spoken word, the language-rich environment."

The early-literacy field has not been as overshadowed by the whole-language versus phonics debate as discussions of reading in the primary grades. It has, however, been caught between two extremes of interpretation regarding what is developmentally appropriate, says Sue Bredekamp, Director of Professional Development for the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

At one extreme, recognition of early literacy sometimes leads to inappropriate responses. Lande deplores what happens when, for instance, parents try to "shove a first-grade curriculum into a four-year-old."

"The children don't have that love, that excitement you have when you get something," she says, "because it's been told; it's been delivered, not experienced."

Equally misguided is "the maturationist notion that you don't do anything . . . (that) visual and physical development will just reach 'reading readiness,'" says Bredekamp. "Now we know that two- and three-year-olds can recognize letters, can be helped to see their name, can understand that print is where stories come from. Obviously, there are some really important things parents and teachers do."

Probably the most important thing they can do is read aloud daily. "The single variable that's been found in repeated studies as having an impact on children's school success—not just learning to read—is the number of stories they have had read to them before they come to school," says Dr. Jane Braunger, Senior Associate at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and coauthor of *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*.

Reading one-on-one or in small groups allows small children to sit on a lap or nearby, to see small pictures and print up close, to ask questions like "Why is she sad?" and to respond to adult questions like "What's the rabbit doing?" or "What do you think happens next?"

Children can be read to by parents, older siblings, and other caregivers at home—and by child-care workers, teachers, librarians, parent helpers, or older "reading buddies" in day care, preschool, and kindergarten.

At the Portland home of five-year-old Penda and three-year-old Amina, the reading routine is firmly entrenched. The coffee table in the living room is covered with picture books, and many more line the bookshelf. Midafternoon is one of their story times. Amina chooses a cloth book of the song *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*. As they sing, her mother, artist Ronna Neuenschwander, points to the brightly colored print that highlights the names of the animals and the noises they make.

Penda, who has almost completed kindergarten, rushes impatiently through the song, anxious to show off her abilities.

"I want to read," she says, launching into a "Bob Book" about a dog.

"I can't see, I can't see," her sister protests.

"Oh, I forgot to show the picture," says Penda, holding the book up to her audience as she has seen her teacher do.

In their bedroom Penda and Amina have a box of books specifically for bedtime. If their mother puts them to bed, she reads one of

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these. If it's their father, artist Baba Wague Diakite—a native of Mali in West Africa—he usually tells them a traditional tale. In fact, he has written down and illustrated one West African tale, *The Hunterman and the Crocodile*, which was published by Scholastic in 1997 and received the Coretta Scott King award.

"They can't go to sleep without a story. It's a nice way to get them calmed and listening," says Neuenschwander. "After the story, Penda will take a book to bed to read. Even Amina will take one to look through."

In the Small Small Pond

A PIG! A PIG!

The 18 two-year-olds at University Ravenna Pre-Threes Cooperative Preschool, a laboratory preschool of North Seattle Community College, get reading on demand, thanks to an army of parent helpers. "We always have a parent stationed in the library, reading to anyone who wants to come in," says teacher Marta Franzen. "Usually the children are the ones to pull the book off the shelf." Often they indicate their choice of topic by saying, for example, "trains" or "baby," she reports.

Franzen has the books organized by subject category so it's easy for any of her parent helpers (called "assistant teachers") to respond to requests. An informal check-out system allows children to take books home. A rack in the carpeted reading area displays "big books" and seasonal books. At the beginning of the year, for instance, this is where Franzen puts books about school and making new friends.

Similarly, at Helen Gordon Child Development Center, Portland State University's laboratory preschool and extended-day program, a low teacher-to-child ratio makes story reading available almost any time. On a typical day, a handful of three- to five-year-olds clusters around a teacher sitting on the floor with a book.

"Yay! Pig one!" shouts one of the children.

"This is called *The Pigsty*," says the teacher. Before she begins, she points out how the illustrator used a pair of socks to form the letter M in the word Monday. Then she reads from the book by Mark Teague:

Monday afternoon Wendell Fultz's mother told him to clean his room. "It's turning into a pigsty," she said. Wendell went upstairs.

The teacher pauses, draws in her breath, and turns the page. "A pig, a pig!" the children squeal with delight.

Much to his surprise a large pig was sitting on his bed, she continues. *"Pardon me," said*

Wendell. He shoved some toys into his closet. But the pig didn't seem to mind the mess and Wendell found that he didn't mind the pig either. He decided to take a break.

"What's a break?" a little boy asks.

"A break means, I'm not cleaning anymore. I'm sitting down, doing nothing," says the teacher.

From being read to repeatedly, these children have learned that reading is enjoyable, that pictures provide clues to the story, that books and print go from left to right, that print represents words and meaning, that stories have a beginning and an end. By listening, watching, and asking questions, they add to their vocabulary and increase their comprehension. They are beginning to make associations between letters and letter sounds. And by learning to love stories, they are becoming motivated to read on their own.

The Helen Gordon and University Ravenna preschools are well-stocked with books and adults to read them. It's a different story at many child-care centers in poor areas. In a recent study, researchers visited 350 child-care centers serving 18,000 children in such areas as greater Philadelphia to find out how many books they had, relates Susan Neuman, Associate Professor of language arts at Temple University and head of the Early Childhood Committee of the International Reading Association.

"There wasn't much to count," she says sadly.

Compounding the problem were child-care workers who, though loving and concerned for the children's welfare, did not believe listening to stories to be a cognitively challenging activity deserving time in the daily schedule.

The importance of access to books was vividly illustrated when the Free Library of Philadelphia and six other county library systems, sponsored by a grant from the William Penn Foundation of Philadelphia, flooded the centers with books and trained child-care workers how to read in an interactive way. Six months later, 400 children in the intervention group showed dramatic differences from 100 children in a control group. Those in the intervention group scored higher in letter knowledge, concepts of print, concepts of narrative, concepts of writing, verbal knowledge, and ability to recognize environmental print. Not only did these differences hold when the children were tested again in kindergarten, but the children in the intervention group also scored higher on phonemic awareness—the critical understanding that

TIPS FOR WHOLE-GROUP READING TO PRESCHOOLERS

1. Select books with your audience in mind. Rhyming and predictable books are especially good for young preschoolers. "The books I've had the most success with are ones where they can all make a sound," says Marta Franzen who teaches two-year-olds at University Ravenna Pre-Threes Cooperative Preschool in Seattle. (Her students like *The Noisy Counting Book* by Susan Schade and Jon Buller.) "If they can anticipate being able to participate, it really rivets them."
2. Give an artful performance of your text. "I really have to play it by ear and ad-lib and shorten the story sometimes," says Franzen. If I start to lose them, I modulate my voice. I try to vary my voice—the pitch and volume and the speed. Sometimes I have them guess—(dramatic gasp)—*what* is going to happen on the next page."
3. Accommodate interruptions. "If they start to interrupt and say, 'I have a cat,' I might say, 'It looks like a lot of people have cats; if you have a cat, put your hand up,'" says Franzen. "It's important to have a pause sometimes."
4. Gauge the mood of the group before making the decision to read.
5. Use "big books" or books with bright, easy-to-see illustrations.
6. Don't force children, particularly younger ones, to sit with the group.

words are made up of separate sounds.

PEN AND LINK

Learning to write is the other half of early literacy, linked inextricably with learning to read.

"Many children come to reading through writing," says Braunger. "Many children are eager to write, and their reading of their own 'texts' is one of their first reading experiences. For many children, it is through their writing that their phonics knowledge develops. When a child uses invented or temporary spelling, we can see that they have phonemic awareness. They couldn't attempt to represent a sound with a letter unless they had the concept that letters represent sounds."

At Helen Gordon the opportunity to write occurs every morning, even before the child steps into the classroom. While the parent records the child's arrival time and initials the sign-in sheet in a loose-leaf binder, the child may open a companion binder, find the page with his or her name printed at the top, and make her mark, whether with a picture, writing-like scribble, or actual letters.

The desire to imitate adults is a powerful motivator for writing. Children are also motivated to write when they have a real-world task to accomplish, as Neuenschwander found the last time she and her family visited Africa.

"Penda had just turned four, and she wanted to start writing letters to people," she remembers. Penda knew the alphabet and asked her mother which letters spelled the words she wanted to say. "She got into doing really extensive letters, and part of it was because she really wanted to keep in touch with people and needed to, being in Africa. Ever since then, she's loved, loved, loved writing letters and stories," says Neuenschwander.

From the repeated letter-writing experience, Penda learned to read and spell certain commonly occurring words by heart, such as "dear," "love," and "the." At five, she is beginning to use invented spelling and sound out unknown words on her own.

"I think that's one of the things kids miss if you just sit down at a table and say, 'We're all making Bs,'" says Ellie Nolan, Director at Helen Gordon. "They're not seeing that a B is part of this word, and that this word you can use to tell somebody something. This S you can use to make a sign that says, 'Stop, don't touch my building that I just made.' This S can be for Stephanie whose toothbrush this is or whose cubby this is."

"If you can find anything that's intrinsic and self-motivating, you've got it made," says John Meskimen, now finishing his first year as a Portland Public Schools kindergarten teacher.

"When it's also student-generated, it becomes more like play than work," he adds. He recalls an incident from his student teaching in which the simple act of one child giving another her phone number led to an entire group of students making their own phone directories. After the students had gathered multiple pieces of paper with numbers on them, they realized they needed to attach names to the numbers. "It was completely spontaneous," marvels Meskimen. "It really was amazing. It spread like wildfire."

Before children begin attempting to write and spell, they can experience the power of writing through dictation, a technique that remains useful on into kindergarten and, for some students, first grade. For instance, when her two-year-olds finish a painting at the easel, Franzen will ask them, "Are there any words you'd like me to put on the paper?"

"I say each word aloud as I'm writing it, and then I read it back to them," she says.

At Helen Gordon, children are encouraged to write or dictate letters and stories. The children's writing reflects their wants, needs,

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It Looked Like Spilt Milk

Read-Aloud Books: Birth through Kindergarten

Board Books

Clap Hands, Helen Oxenbury, Simon & Schuster, 1987.
Have You Seen My Duckling, Nancy Tafuri, Greenwillow Books, 1984.
Max's Breakfast, Rosemary Wells, Dial Books, 1985.
Old MacDonald Board Book, Rosemary Wells, Scholastic, 1998.
Where's Spot? Eric Hill, Putnam, 1980.

Rhyming and Pattern Books

Baby Rock, Baby Roll, Stella Blackstone, Holiday House, 1997.
Eentsy, Weentsy Spider, Joanna Cole, Morrow, 1991.
The Fat Cat, Jack Kent, Parents Magazine Press, 1971.
Green Eggs and Ham, Dr. Seuss, Beginner Books (Random House), 1960.
Jan Ormerod's To Baby With Love, Jan Ormerod, Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard, 1994.
My Little Sister Ate One Hare, Bill Grossman, Crown, 1996.
Over in the Meadow, Louise Voce, Candlewick Press, 1994.
There Was an Old Lady that Swallowed a Fly, Simms Taback, Viking Press, 1997.
The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Eric Carle, Collins, 1979

Intermediate Picture Books

Crow Boy, Taro Yashima, Viking Press, 1955.
Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse, Kevin Henkes, Greenwillow Books, 1996.
Ma Dear's Aprons, Patricia McKissack, Atheneum, 1997.
Mama, Do You Love Me, Barbara Jossee, Chronicle Books, 1991.
Mushroom in the Rain, Mirra Ginsburg, Macmillan, 1974.
Officer Buckle and Gloria, Peggy Rathman, Putnam, 1995.
The Tale of Peter Rabbit, Beatrix Potter, Frederick Warne, 1902.
Tikki, Tikki Tembo, Arlene Mosel, Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1968.
The Vingananee and the Tree Toad, Verna Aardema, Frederick Warne, 1983.
Whistle for Willy, Ezra Jack Keats, Viking Press, 1955.

Chapter Books

Charlotte's Web, E.B. White, Harper & Row, 1952.
Mr. Putter and Tabby, Cynthia Rylant, Harcourt Brace, 1994.
The Mouse and His Child, Russell Hoban, Harper & Row, 1987.
My Father's Dragon, Ruth Gannett, Random House, 1948.
Winnie the Pooh, A.A. Milne, Dutton, 1926.

Sources: Susannah Price, Youth Services Supervisor, Boise Public Library; Chrystal Carr Jeter, Youth Services Coordinator, Anchorage Municipal Library; Cecilia McGowan, Youth Services Coordinator, Spokane Public Library.

fantasies, and fears. "Once upon a time there was a little girl named Emily," reads Thea's dictation, "and it was a sad time for her because she fell down at school and her mother and father were not at home and they never came to pick her up."

RICHES OF PRINT

Both reading and writing are supported by a print-rich environment in the classroom. At Helen Gordon, teachers give each child a symbol, such as a sun. The symbol and the child's name are on the child's cubby, art file, and toothbrush. Toys and materials bear word and picture labels. Common objects and areas in the classroom are also identified with print. Reflecting the culturally diverse make-up of the student body, Russian script, Chinese characters, and words in other languages are used in addition to English. Children's writing, drawing, and dictation covers the walls.

Dramatic play centers, used in preschools and kindergartens, offer endless possibilities for print enrichment. If children are playing in the "fire station," they can use a pad and pencil to take down an address when they answer a 911 call. At the "doctor's office" they can use an appointment book and a medical chart, or read magazines in the waiting room. If they are playing at the "grocery store," they can look at labels, make a shopping list, and write checks. At the "restaurant" they can read menus, write down orders, and pay with money.

At home, a print-rich environment might include children's own books, library books, letter blocks, magnet letters, bathtub letters, letter stamps and stamp pad, paper, writing and drawing implements, chalk and chalkboard. A parent can also alert a child to letters and words on everyday objects around the house and in the neighborhood, such as cereal boxes, cans, newspapers, clothes, signs, and posters.

"Every time we go places now, we're always calling out words," says Neuenschwander. "It was really exciting for Penda to realize there were people writing big messages to you everywhere. There are these big messages popping out—OPEN, CLOSED, STOP! It's not only in your house in a book, but it's everywhere out there." ☐

In **Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children,** two respected organizations, the International Reading Association **(IRA)** and the National Association for the Education of Young Children **(NAEYC)**, combine their respective expertise in the areas of reading and child development. This recently released joint position statement makes recommendations for practices and policies that support the goal of helping all children to read competently by third grade.

Several issues prompted the joint statement:

- The urgent need for high levels of literacy
- The increasing diversity of school children and the challenge of teaching them
- Misunderstandings about early literacy development and what constitutes appropriate teaching practice
- Inadequate preparation of child-care and preschool personnel; lack of specialized early-childhood training for primary-grade teachers

Following a review of reading and child development research, the statement spells out some recommended teaching practices. For the infant and toddler years, for instance, the document recommends "frequently playing with, talking to, singing to, and doing fingerplays with very young children," and "sharing cardboard books with babies and frequently reading to toddlers on the adult's lap or with one or two other children."

For preschool, one of the recommended practices is "adults' daily reading of high-quality books to individuals or small groups, including books that positively reflect children's identity and culture."

"We want every child-care center in the United States to begin to recognize the importance of oral and written language activity throughout the day," says IRA coauthor Susan Neuman.

Learning to Read and Write urges teachers to view reading and writing skills in a developmental continuum within which children will show normal variation related to differences in individual development and culture.

"Teachers need to find where kids are on the continuum and support their continued learning," says coauthor Sue Bredekamp of the NAEYC. For children showing extraordinary variation, intervention is necessary.

The joint statement sets out a sample continuum of early reading and writing development consisting of "challenging but achievable goals" and the types of teacher and parent support that will help children reach the goals. A goal for preschool, for example, is "Identify some letters and make some letter/sound matches." A goal for kindergarten is "Show familiarity with rhyming and beginning sounds." A goal for first grade is "Orally read with reasonable fluency."

The IRA and NAEYC call for funding of policies and resources that would support the teaching and learning of reading:

- A system of preparation and development for those in the early childhood field.
- Smaller class size to facilitate individualized instruction: adult-child ratios of no more than one adult for every eight to 10 four- and five-year-olds with a maximum group size of 20; class sizes of 15 to 18 in the early grades.
- Adequate numbers of books (as well as software and multimedia resources) for classrooms and school libraries. Five books per child is the minimum necessary to provide the most basic print-rich environment.
- Individualized instruction, not grade retention or social promotion, for those who are not progressing in literacy development.
- Multiple, age-appropriate assessment strategies: no standardized tests before grade three or four.
- Access to health care: Some reading difficulties are caused by untreated vision and hearing problems.
- Access to high-quality preschool and child-care programs for all.

The complete statement can be found in the July 1998 issue of NAEYC's journal, *Young Children*.

FOR THE LOVE OF A BOOK

WENDY FENNER SHARES HER PASSION FOR READING WITH HER STUDENTS

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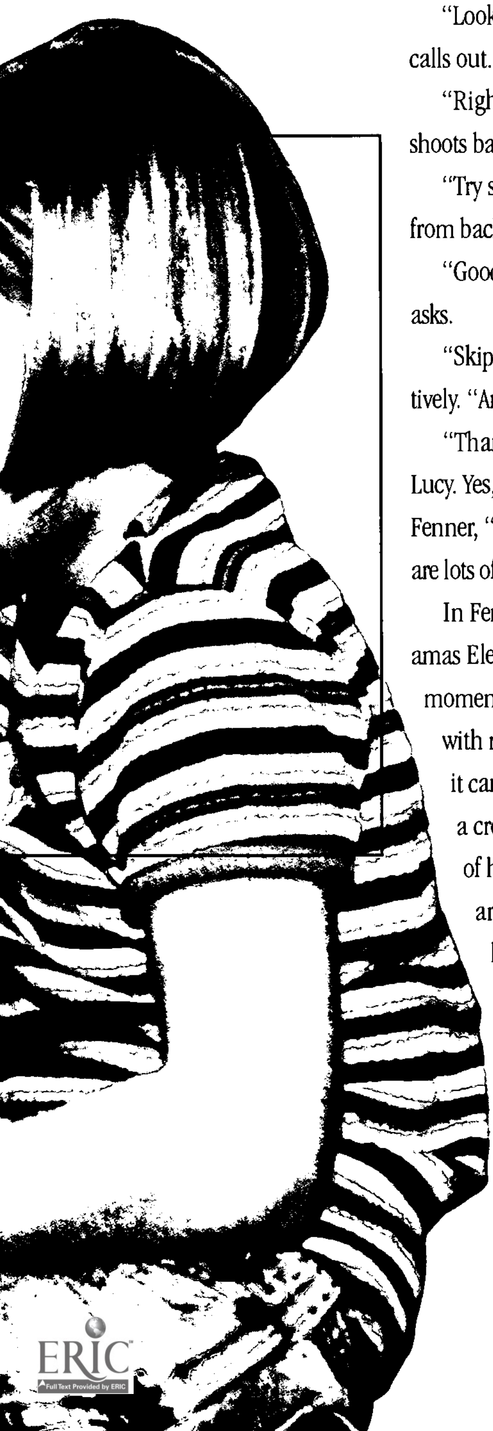

MILWAUKIE, Oregon— "What do you do when you're stuck on a word?" Wendy Fenner asks her second-grade students as they drift off to private classroom spaces like "cozy corner" and "author's chair" to read their library books.

"Look at the picture," Christie calls out.

"Right. What else?" Fenner shoots back.

"Try sounding it out!" Josh yells from back of the room.

"Good! What else?" the teacher asks.

"Skip it?" suggests Lucy tentatively. "And come back later?"

"Thanks for raising your hand, Lucy. Yes, everyone's right," says Fenner, "you are *all* right. There are lots of ways to figure out a word."

In Fenner's classroom at Clackamas Elementary School, every moment of the day seems infused with reading and the excitement it can generate at the hands of a creative teacher. In fact, most of her kids hardly notice they are learning to read, they're having so much fun.

However, some of Fenner's 26 students are struggling, barely able to get through a first-grade primer, while others are reading at the fifth-grade level. "I taught a combined first-second grade last year," Fenner says, "and I tried to organize my kids into reading groups, and be sure no one felt they were in the lowest group. But realistically, I could only spend about 20 minutes with each child every other day. And it just wasn't enough. I was staying awake at night trying to figure out how to find time to read with all my kids."

This year Fenner is sleeping better. In the fall of 1997 the teachers at Clackamas Elementary created a system of reading blocks that includes every student from second through sixth grade. "We assessed all students in the first couple of months of school and tried to figure out where each one placed on a reading continuum," Fenner explains. "We ended up with 14 reading groups this year, organized according to grade level and reading ability."

Every morning, students gather in their "blocks" for one hour of intensive reading instruction. Those with the most difficulty learning to read meet in groups as small as six, while good readers work in groups four times that size.

"Now I still don't always read daily with each of my second-graders," says Fenner, "but it's a huge relief to know they are going to other classrooms for special reading attention, just as it must be a relief to other teachers to send their lowest readers to me every day."

It is 9:30 on a warm spring morning, and in a routine comfortably familiar to the children in Fenner's classroom, some quietly leave the room when she announces it's reading-group time. Other children stay, and more drift in from other classrooms. After a few minutes, 15 second- and third-graders, those who are a full year or two behind in learning to read, settle down on the floor. Fenner sits on a pint-sized chair in their midst with a book in her lap and an easel at her side.

PLANTING A PEACH TREE

When the room is quiet, she holds up *Coyote Plants a Peach Tree* by Mary Brown. "Now, how do you think a coyote could plant a peach tree?" Fenner begins.

"He'd dig a hole," Malika says.

"Right," Fenner says, "and how else?"

"Maybe the coyote eats the peach, and it comes out the other end as a seed and grows," David puts it delicately without saying any bad words.

"Good!" Fenner turns to the easel and quickly sketches a crude tree. "Now what are these called? *Brrrrrr*. . .," she prompts. "Branches, that's right. And these? Flowers, yes, but what's another word for flowers? Blossoms! Good, Josie!" She writes the answer on the easel, spelling it aloud.

"Now, when a bee comes buzzing around, what does it want?"

"Nectar," Josh replies.

"Yes! Nectar! And how do you spell that?"

Fenner opens *Coyote Plants a Peach Tree*. "I've covered the words because I want you to think about the story," she says.

Keeping the pace lively, she guides her students through the book, asking questions, writing new words on the easel, and directing attention to the pictures. By the time she's finished, the children have anticipated the story line, learned some new words, absorbed a small lesson in botany, and practiced spelling.

"It's more natural if the children themselves generate the vocabulary before they read the book," Fenner explains, "though in reality I am guiding them to say those things. When we talk about what they see on the page and I ask, 'What's this called? What's another word for it?' I'm looking for someone to say the exact word that's in the text. When Josie says 'blossoms,' I repeat it, write it, and spell it, so when students get to that word on their own, they'll remember it."

"Kids like it when I cover the words because it takes the pressure off," Fenner continues. "They can enjoy the pictures and talk about what they think is happening in the story without being distracted by trying to figure out the words. By the time we finish, they can't wait to get their hands on that book to see if their predictions match the text."

And today Fenner just happens to have enough copies of *Coyote Plants a Peach Tree* for teams of two to read the story aloud to one another. Children settle around the room in pairs and the pleasant drone of voices fills the air as Fenner strolls around looking over shoulders, making sure every child is either reading or listening. "How does good reading sound?" she asks.

"Like talking," Malika says, without looking up from her book.

"That's right," Fenner says, "and I hear a lot of good expression in your voices."

Self-esteem is a key issue with slow readers, Fenner believes, and she tries to make certain that every child feels a sense of accomplishment by the end of the hour, however small. Jack, a third-grader, has hung back on the edges of the group during the lesson, appearing to pay no attention. But when Fenner asks if anyone knows anything else about coyotes, Jack puts up his hand. He walks to the front of the room and says, "Coyotes don't hurt people, so we shouldn't hurt them."

"It's a real problem if a child is completely disengaged from reading," Fenner says, "but I do whatever I can to connect a low reader to the material. Jack, for example, doesn't particularly like to read. He's new, and he's struggling. So I was happy that he could share what he knew about coyotes and get some recognition."

Fenner usually spends 20 minutes a day on phonics with her reading group. These kids are so far behind in reading, she says, that they're just not catching up without the additional help of phonics. "I was trained to teach reading using the whole-language method, which minimizes phonics, but after getting into a classroom I could see that some kids just don't have enough tools to learn to read without phonics. So now I combine whole language and phonics, as do most teachers."

It's time for recess. The children line up at the front of the room, facing Fenner who stands in the doorway. They know the routine. The ticket to the playground is an answer to a question about *Coyote Plants a Peach Tree*. As each student steps forward, Fenner leans down and asks a rapid-fire question about the story, her hand poised above the child's shoulder. As she gets an answer, she lightly touches the child. Released, and pleased with themselves, the children run down the hall to 15 minutes of freedom.

"When these kids came to me, the only reading tool they had was to try to sound out words," Fenner says, "and they weren't very good at that." Sounding out words can be very difficult, she points out, because there are so many exceptions in our language. "Or maybe they get close but it doesn't match a word they know, so they give up."

Photos by Judy Blankenship

"Low readers really need the skills to feel good about themselves," Fenner says, "and I try to give them a cueing system beyond sounding out words so they can learn how to read on their own: Study the picture, look at other words in the text, think about what makes sense in a sentence."

ALPHABET SOUP

After recess, Fenner's full second-grade class of 26 students gathers on the floor in front of her. It's reading time for fun, and today she has chosen *Martha Speaks* by Susan Meddaugh, a story about a dog who eats alphabet soup and begins to talk. And talk. And talk. The kids love it. As Fenner reads, she asks questions, comments on the story, and holds up the book for everyone to see the funny illustrations. When Martha the dog reminds herself to "never mistake a leg for a tree," the kids go wild. "Tell your neighbor why that's so funny," Fenner suggests.

"Pee, pee, pee," the students whisper to one another with delight.

It's a continual challenge to acquire high-interest books for the classroom, Fenner says. "I want real books with real vocabulary as opposed to these canned 50-word books," she says. "I'm bored to tears reading those, and I can't imagine asking a child to be interested." The district gives her a set of standard reading books that are quite good, she notes. But to supplement those, Fenner brings in books that are designed for beginning readers regardless of their grade level. These books, Fenner says, don't carry a stigma for older kids.

The children in her low reading group know if they are given a first-grade book. "They don't want to use it when they are in second or third grade," Fenner says. "It totally shoots their self-esteem. A child like Jack, with a book like that, wouldn't have a chance."

Fenner's second-graders got their library cards on a field trip to the public library earlier this year. "The card has been a catalyst for change in some families," she says. "The kids were very excited to check out books on their own, and the whole idea was that a parent or older brother or sister has to take the child back to return the books and get more. But other families haven't shown any interest."

Still, Fenner continually reinforces the idea of using the library by bringing in a weekly hodge-podge of library books on particular subjects she knows will interest her kids. After reading *Martha Speaks*, she presents her library choices for this week. "Tim, I was thinking of you when I picked up this book on horses," she says casually as she tosses it on the pile beside her. "And Christie, here's one on whales that you might like." The kids clamber for these books as they scatter to read on their own for 10 minutes.

But certainly the most sought-after book this day is *The Spice Girls' Journey*, written at home by second-grader Lucy for the family book-writing contest—part of a schoolwide "reading round-up" week. With a floppy head attached to the top of its construction-paper body, and long dangling arms and legs, the book itself is a Spice Girl. One child barely puts it down before another eager reader snatches it up.

"On a very hot day," the story begins, "the Spice Girls took a long journey from England to Clackamas, Oregon, USA. They were going to stay there three mounts" [author's spelling].

"Some kids got a lot of support from their families in making these books," Fenner says, "and others didn't. But I get excited about whatever comes in because it's a book. I want these kids to love books, to have books in their hands constantly. That's what it's all about for me." ☐

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> I very much prefer the feel of a real book as opposed to a thick textbook. I think it's important for kids to get their hands on the kinds of books they get at the library, and I'd like to have enough books so I could send high-interest, high-readability books home with my kids every day.
>
> —Wendy Fenner

Susan Marchese's students
learn to love reading,
delve for meaning,
and challenge themselves

LEADING WITH THE HEART

By JOYCE RIHA LINI

N BILLINGTON
END OF SQUANTO
SPORT

ERIC
Full Text Provided by ERIC

WHIDBEY ISLAND, Washington—They don't know it, but residents of a Puget Sound port owe a debt of gratitude to a woman who taught third grade in Rocky Point, New York, some 20 years ago. Lynn Petersen was wielding the chalk at Joseph A. Edgar Elementary School when Susan Marchese was a child. It was in Petersen's class that Marchese was inspired to follow in her teacher's footsteps, a path that led her to Whidbey Island and a blackboard of her own.

Just up the road from the mussel rafts of Penn Cove and the turn-of-the-century storefronts of Coupeville's town center, is Coupeville Elementary School, where Marchese teaches a multiage class of first-, second-, and third-graders. Her students are learning far more than the mechanics of literacy. Inspired by their teacher's enthusiasm for the written word and guided by her creative instructional approach, these students are learning to love books and to delve deeply into the literature they read.

In a 1996 research study conducted by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Assessment and Evaluation Program, Marchese's students far surpassed their peers in reading comprehension. In the study, teachers were asked to read a fable to their class and then ask students to respond to a simple prompt, designed to gauge their level of evaluative thinking. After reading "The Camel Dances" in a collection by Arnold Lobel, students at other schools had trouble interpreting the tale, which is about a camel who follows her dream to dance. But the essays that Marchese's students wrote about the fable included analysis of the deeper meaning of the fable. It was clear to researchers that Marchese's approach to teaching reading comprehension was working.

Marchese focuses on finding "ways to make students want to learn and love it," she says. "They have to love what they're doing."

AN ABUNDANCE OF BOOKS

Books are the heart of the classroom. Because reading is the key to all learning, students need access to books—an abundance of books, "a lot of really great literature," Marchese says.

There are shelves of books, boxes of books, racks of books. There are Caldecott award-winners and Newberry picks, books that have been recommended by other educators and books that have not. In fact, the walls are so covered with resource information that the classroom itself reads like a book.

"Many of the books are organized by subject, and not necessarily by level," she says, showing a visitor around her classroom. "I also have some organized by level. White, for example, indicates a beginner's box; then I have red, blue, and green. And, of course, there are the chapter books. And books organized by author."

Shelves and bins are clearly marked to help students find what they want. Authors like Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle, and Laura Ingalls Wilder are all identified, as are series like *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Subject headings include such topics as cowboys, holidays, and biographies.

"It looks chaotic, I think, if you're an outsider coming in," says parent volunteer Nicki Hall. "But through the year, I see that it really works for the kids. Whatever a student wants, they can find."

The arrangement makes it easy for students to pursue their interests, something that Marchese believes is crucial. It's a sort of lead-with-the-heart-and-the-brain-will-follow philosophy.

"If they're interested in a certain subject, they can find books that will pique their interest," she says. "If they like a certain author, they know where to find more."

When students are asked what kind of books they enjoy, their responses are generally predictable.

"Books about dogs," says one student.

"Detective stories," says another.

Ben, however, has a surprising answer, considering he's only eight. "My favorite is realistic fiction." To clarify his answer, he explains, "That's something that could really happen, but didn't. It's not a true story."

Ben has learned about realistic fiction, as well as other genres of literature, from Marchese. One of her wall displays includes definitions not only for realistic fiction, but also for historical fiction, science fiction, folklore, fantasy, poetry, biography, and informational books.

"The standards I set are high," she says, "but the kids need to be challenged."

This may be one of Marchese's biggest strengths as a teacher. She sees no limit to what students can learn. Whatever their level, she makes sure they climb higher.

Challenging students at a wide range of levels is critical in a multiage classroom.

"I think that's always a concern with multiage," says Marchese. "People see that first-graders are challenged because of the third-grade exposure. But they worry about the third-graders. In fact, most of what I do is at a third-grade level, and I'm constantly looking for ways to challenge the more advanced students."

But that doesn't mean she neglects the more basic needs of first- and second-year students.

"This year," she says, "I had a number of beginners who needed extra help. So I focused a lot on skills work—like phonics, for example. I really hit phonics hard this year, and the second- and third-year students benefitted from the reinforcement as well."

On the issue of phonics versus whole language, Marchese is adamant that you can't teach one without the other. "I don't think you can separate them. They go together. I mean, how could they not?" she asks. "I get frustrated when I hear about teachers who are just teaching phonics, or they're just doing whole language. I don't know how you could take one away from the other." Marchese alternates between whole-language and enrichment projects (such as literature groups), and skills practice (such as phonics or spelling).

For assessment, Marchese logs a fair amount of one-on-one time with children, using a variation of a running-record model (see Page 40 for more on running records), where she examines how students decode what they read and why. She gives book tests, as well, to make sure students are performing at the level the district requires.

"If someone does get stuck, I try to guide them," Marchese says. She arranges for paired reading, in which one student can prompt the other. She also provides one-on-one time with a parent volunteer. "And," she adds, "it's important to choose just-right books."

How does one determine if a book is "just right?"

"Well, there's the five-finger rule," Marchese explains. "If they miss more than five words on a page, it's probably too difficult. If they can read the whole thing quickly, without any difficulty, it's probably not challenging enough. During independent reading time, I can help them sort it out."

She also has printed handouts for parents who assist in the classroom or work with their child at home. These include hints for helping a child sound out or decipher words, as well as an idea of the kind of questions to ask to gauge comprehension.

Indeed, comprehension questions are an extremely important component of Marchese's approach to teaching literacy. At storytime, for example, Marchese will stop before opening a book and ask students what the title suggests. Throughout the story, she'll pause to ask questions to make sure students are processing what they're hearing. When students take the "author's chair" to share a story they've written, it's always more than a recitation. The class listens carefully, because discussion follows. At poetry time, which takes place once a week, students not only practice their presentation capabilities, but spend time comparing new poems to others they've read.

LITERATURE CIRCLES

Eventually, students learn to ask the questions themselves. In literature circles, one of the children's favorite activities, Marchese lets students choose one of a handful of books. Small study groups are then formed based on same-book selection, and these groups read the book together, a little at a time, stopping along the way to discuss what's happening.

A group that calls itself "Hot Diggity Dog" is reading *Nate the Great and the Missing Key*, a story in which readers are given clues to help solve the mystery. One student has been given the job of holding the "question" card, a visual reminder to ask salient questions and keep on track. "So where's the key?" he asks, as the group flips pages back to a clue-laden passage. Citing this excerpt, they surmise that the key is on Fang's collar and not with the parents, as they previously thought.

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When they've finished their book, each group "celebrates" by coming up with a creative project related to the story they've read. This may be a puppet show or a play, a mobile or a painting, or any one of a whole list of ideas posted on the wall. The members of Hot Diggity Dog are pondering their options, when one member suggests making a board game called "Find the Key." Teammates leap on the idea.

"Yeah, we can have pieces that you turn over to see if the key's there," says one.

"What about a space with a banana peel that says, 'Go back five spaces?'" asks another.

In group and solo reading projects, students summarize story lines in individual response logs, a task that helps them process the information.

"Reading and writing go together," Marchese states. "That's a really important link."

Because the thought process is paramount, the first focus of writing projects is to get thoughts down on paper, without stopping to edit.

"Techniques of grammar and spelling are taught after children experience the thrill of expressing themselves in writing," writes Marchese in a parent handout. Unfettered by an internal editor, students write freely in their journals every

* Publish
* Finish read
book.
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day, recording significant events, summarizing book passages, jotting down ideas for stories.

On other assignments, however, students learn to apply spit and polish. The six-trait writing assessment process, a model developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, has been an enormous help, according to Marchese. "It's been really great in terms of writing *and* reading."

Students apply the six traits—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions—in "publishing" books of their own. Starting with an idea, they write a story draft, revise it, edit it, and finally "publish" it—adding illustrations, a cover, a publishing date, and a brief author bio.

Here's how a book by third-grader Elyse begins: *"Down," I yell as the 10-month-old puppy jumps on the guest. "Down, Beau!" He runs over to me, tongue hanging out, a smile on his face. That's my puppy, Beau. A jumpy, happy, black-and-white 10-month-old puppy.*

The work demonstrates that Elyse is far past simple Dick-and-Jane sentence structure and has even begun to grasp concepts like establishing voice and employing interesting details, in addition to using more complex mechanics. Later in the story, she even ventures into metaphors when she compares the shape of a dog toy to a snowman. She is extremely proud of her book and is already thinking of the next one.

Like others in the class, Elyse clearly loves what she's doing. In fact, it's not unusual to see Marchese's students sitting inside at recess. First-grader Katie elects to stay in to finish a piece on orcas. Third-grader Ben is hard at work on a book celebration project. When the schedule occasionally gets off track, and Marchese cuts down on silent, sustained reading time, students are disappointed.

TEACHING OPS

Marchese never misses an opportunity to teach. Instead of having students draw crayon hearts or flowers for Mother's Day cards, Marchese invents a more meaningful project.

"What's the first place you remember?" she asks her students. "The first place you lived?"

A dozen hands shoot up.

"I lived in Alaska, " says one child.

"I've always lived here," says another.

"What do you remember about the place you lived?" Marchese asks. "Describe it."

When they answer, she prompts them with further questions: "What color was the fence? Were there any flowers in the garden?"

Once they have a picture in mind, she has them transfer the image to paper.

When storytime arrives later in the day, Marchese introduces a book called *What You Know First*. For the next 20 minutes, chins rest on elbows and knees, pigtails hang motionless, eyes are glued to the book in Marchese's hands. After the enchantment of the story has ended, Marchese pulls them back into the classroom with a simple question: What do you think the story is about?

The more advanced third-graders wave their hands frantically, but Marchese waits for some of the first- and second-graders to speak. Little by little, they sort through the events of the story, and Marchese weaves the older students into the discussion, letting them prompt the younger. It turns out the story is about a farm on which a young girl lived, the first place she remembers. The children's eyes light up when they grasp the connection to the pictures they've just drawn.

Excited, they continue to discuss the story, Marchese prompting them further with questions about sensory details. A student remembers a reference to a cow's soft ear. Another remembers the scent of hay. Next, the students put pencil to paper to write *their* stories, taking care to include details like those in the story they've just heard.

This learning experience is something mothers will undoubtedly appreciate more than a generic holiday message.

A number of these mothers—and some fathers—visit the classroom to help out.

"I'm Susan's biggest advocate," says parent volunteer Amy Hauser. "I mean, there are a lot of teachers who have just one grade level, and they don't really have a handle on where their students are, assessmentwise. Susan really knows where each kid is at, and how to challenge each one at their level.

"And she does it creatively," Hauser continues. "Last year, she did this thing with imagery. It was wonderful. She would read a section from a story that included references to imagery, and then the children would draw a picture of what they envisioned. In their pictures, they would include key words that helped them visualize. I remember one day, she even read a passage from *Snow Falling On Cedars* (a bestseller by Northwest author by David Guterson)."

"If I'm reading something that strikes me," Marchese says, "I'll bring it in and tell the kids, 'I really like this part in this book I'm reading,' and I'll share a little bit with them."

Children, it's true, learn from

example. And Marchese sets a good one. Students get excited about reading and writing and learning in this classroom, in part because their teacher gets excited about reading and writing and learning.

Perhaps Dan Sakaue, Principal of Coupeville Elementary, says it best: "She's the kind of teacher you want your kids to have."

There is no doubt that Marchese has made an impact that will extend far beyond Coupeville and even Whidbey Island. In fact, second-grader Katie has already announced her plan to follow in Marchese's footsteps.

"When I grow up," she says, "I want to be a teacher like Ms. Marchese."

And so the path continues. ☐

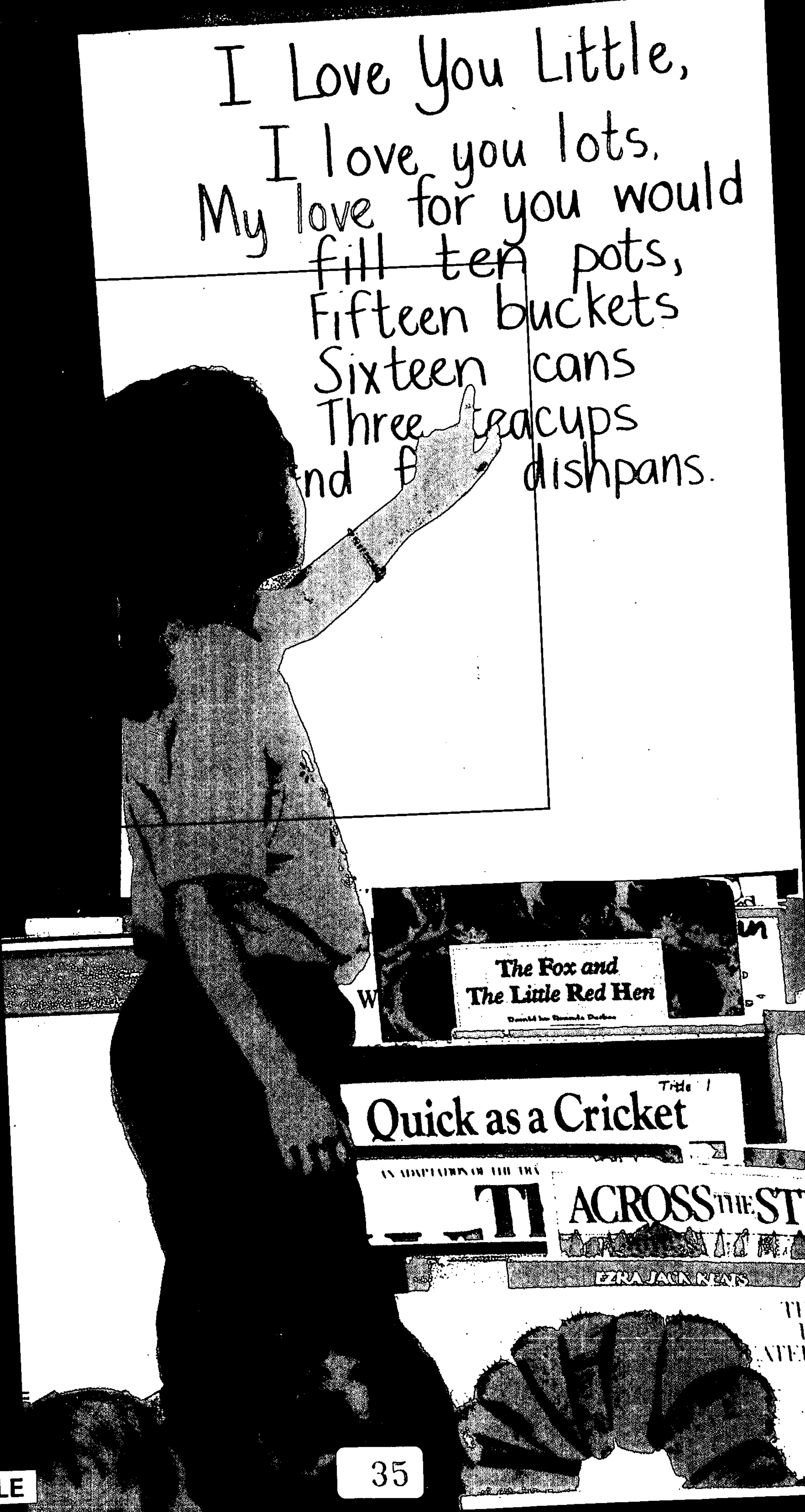
> "Students have to love what they're doing."
> —Susan Marchese

Photos by Joyce Riha Linik

WHEN LIFE AND WORDS COLLIDE

MOLLY CHUN BRINGS READING DOWN TO EARTH FOR HER FIRST-GRADERS

By LEE SHERMAN


I Love You Little,
I love you lots.
My love for you would
fill ten pots,
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nd f dishpans.
The Fox and The Little Red Hen
Quick as a Cricket
ACROSS THE ST
EZRA JACK KEATS

PORTLAND, Oregon— "One of our tadpoles got his front legs!" Nicholas tells a visitor, pointing to a big glass jar alive with squiggling baby frogs. The first-grader's eyes, wide with wonder, betray the pride and excitement he feels as he shares his news.

For several months, Nicholas and his classmates at Applegate Elementary School have witnessed the drama of emerging life. They've seen clusters of slimy eggs yield big-eyed amphibians, and cottony cocoons produce orange-and-black-winged butterflies. But far from being confined to glass jars, these real-life science lessons have spilled out and spread to every corner of Room 7. Veteran teacher Molly Chun has blended frogs and bugs, snakes and turtles, spiders and crabs into the students' reading and writing activities. Drawing on a rich collection of children's literature and a mixed bag of creative teaching strategies, she weaves discrete bits and pieces of learning into a coherent web of meaning for her 20 students.

Using the big book *Tadpole Diary* by David Drew as a model, the students individually record their week-by-week observations of their classroom frogs' development. (Another big book, *Caterpillar Diary* by the same author, provides a model for recording butterfly observations.) The students then pool their knowledge and identify the gaps in their understanding. As the kids call out bits of information, Chun records them boldly with a black marker on white chart paper for all to see.

"What do you know about tadpoles?" Chun asks the children, who sit cross-legged on a frayed square of carpet in one corner of the room.

"They're tiny!" one child volunteers.

"They're slippery," offers another.

"They swim with their tails," a third calls out.

Chun lists the children's statements, one after the other. Then she creates a second column on the chart paper, labeled, "What do you want to know about tadpoles?" Again, she writes down the children's words.

"When do they learn to hop?" a student wonders.

"When do they eat flies and bugs?

"Do they have nests?"

In another seamless blending of science and literacy, where life and print merge, the students create a collaborative poem based on their scientific observations. "Caterpillars" by Room 7 goes like this:

Caterpillars
wiggling,
eating,
hanging,
shivering,
crawling,
inching,
creeping,
growing,
sleeping,
changing into cocoons.

Embodying children's speech in print—showing them that the words they speak have written equivalents—can help young children make the critical link between sounds and letters necessary for reading, research has found.

The small scientists, peering through jeweler's lenses to enlarge their vision, examine not only the classroom frogs, but also the flora and fauna of the city park that adjoins their urban campus. After an hour of outdoor exploration one warm April afternoon, Chun's students share their observations, likening each seen object to something else they've encountered in their six or seven years on earth. Their analogies—where they verbally connect new information with old—paint vivid pictures of the transforming power of the magnifying lenses on their world. But even more importantly, they show the power of words to communicate and illuminate experience. To the question, "What did you see, and what else did it remind you of?" came responses like these:

"I saw a little gray spider that looked like a monster."

"I saw tiny yellow spiders that looked like Charlotte's spiders."

"I saw pitch that looked like gold."

"I saw a hole in a tree that looked like a cave."

"I saw the seed of a wishing flower that looked like a nut."

Says Chun: "I really believe in the constructivist theory—that children learn by making meaning out of their world."

She characterizes her approach to literacy instruction as whole language. But in her two decades of classroom experience, Chun has found that explicit phonics is a necessary component of early-literacy instruction.

"Children have to have direct instruction in phonics," says Chun. "But I try to embed that in a meaningful context. If I give the kids a worksheet, which they get every once in a while, they'll do it, but they don't latch onto it. It's not meaningful. It's very frustrating for them a lot of the time."

Direct instruction in phonics is particularly critical in inner-city schools such as Applegate, Chun notes. Although her students come to school with "wonderful, rich home language," she says, they often lack experience with "school language"—the language and conventions of print. The books, magazines, newspapers, bedtime stories, and other opportunities that prepare kids to read are missing in many low-income homes.

BURSTING WITH WORDS

Any deficit in kids' exposure to "school language" is quickly erased when they come to Chun's class. Room 7 bursts with written words; the walls drip with print.

Hundreds of books, big and small, are crammed into every plastic tub and wooden shelf. Hanging on clotheslines and every available vertical surface are sheets of chart paper covered with hand-printed words. The paper holds the written records of students' observations on tadpoles and other natural phenomena. It displays light-hearted poems the children recite and study together, circling blends (*bl, br, pr*) and digraphs (*ai, ea, ou*), including the "h brothers" (*th, ph*), with colored markers. There are one-sentence summaries of chapters Chun has read aloud from books such as *My Father's Dragon* by Ruth Gannett. There are lists and lists of rhyming words (*cat, hat, fat, mat; big, fig, dig, jig*).

And there is the "pocket chart" —a piece of blue canvas covered with horizontal rows of plastic pockets. Each pocket holds a manila card. Printed on each card is a common word, most with just one syllable (*at, be, by, go, see, me, am, good, saw, down*). Chun describes this low-tech apparatus as "incredibly important" to her literacy instruction. By letting kids handle and manipulate words, the pocket chart gives her teaching the visual and tactile qualities young children need for learning.

"The pocket chart was God's gift to elementary teachers," Chun says. "I use it constantly."

One morning in May, the first-graders read a poem called "Bubble Gum." Children take turns "finger pointing" as they read the words aloud for the rest of the class:

I'm in trouble,
made a bubble,
peeled it off my nose.
Felt a rock
inside my sock,
got gum between my toes.

Made another,
told my brother
we could blow a pair.

Give three cheers,
now our ears
are sticking to our hair.

After the students search the poem for words with the long *e* sound *(peeled, between, three)*, Chun says: "Now, look at the pocket chart. The poem is in the pocket chart. What's wrong with that poem?"

"It's scrambled!" Levander calls out.

"Does it make sense?" the teacher asks. "Does it sound right?"

"No!" the children chime.

One by one, students go to the pocket chart and rearrange the scrambled lines. Jessica struggles when it's her turn, trying the words this way and that, while her seated classmates squirm impatiently, calling "Nope!" "Nope!" to her various attempts. With help from Carmella, she finally finds the proper order.

Next, Chun sits in a threadbare wing chair, her students clustered at her feet. Holding up a picture book for them to see, she says: "This is the *Icky Bug Alphabet Book* by

Photos by Douglas Walker

Jerry Pallotta. What do you think this book is about?"

"The first bug is probably going to start with an A and the next bug starts with a B and on like that," Larry volunteers.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Larry. Did you read this book already?" Chun responds in mock amazement.

She reads to them about ants, bees, crickets, and dragonflies.

"E is for earwig."

"Ooooh," the students groan in disgust.

"F is for...you know this bug, too. What's the bug that lights up?"

"Firefly!" they call out in unison.

"L is for ladybug. You guys know this one. Gardeners love ladybugs, because...what's that little green bug they eat?

"Aphins?" someone offers.

"Aphids," she gently corrects.

The bugs inspire lots of comments from the kids, whose recent shared-reading lessons have featured such insect-centered stories as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Very Quiet Cricket*, and *The Grouchy Ladybug*, all by Eric Carle. James knows that ants are strong. Jessica thinks the moth's wings are pretty. Larry once caught a grasshopper. Nicholas once saw a scorpion sting a fly. "The fly died in two seconds," he volunteers. Chun admits she wouldn't mind being a queen bee, lounging in the hive while all the other bees buzz to her command.

The children return to their seats, each with a big sheet of paper divided into six boxes. Their assignment is to draw the six bugs they liked best in the alphabet book. When they finish drawing, Chun tells them, they may write about the bugs on the back of their paper. Meanwhile, the teacher meets with small groups (she calls them "guided groups") for reading practice. All but four of Chun's first-graders are reading at or above grade level. Two of her groups, in fact, are reading at second-grade level or higher; with these, she meets twice a week. The other groups—those that are having more trouble—meet daily.

Using leveled books such as *Tales of Amanda Pig* (a Puffin "Easy-to-Read" book), *Morris Goes to School* (an "I Can Read" book from Harper Trophy), and *Hungry, Hungry Sharks* (a "Step Into Reading" book from Random House), Chun first reads the story aloud to the group. Then the children read it in chorus. Only after they have heard the story and talked about it does Chun call on them to read aloud by themselves. If a child struggles, Chun pairs her with a stronger reader, and the two read in tandem.

As each child reads, Chun keeps an informal "running record" (see

Page 40 for a description of a running record), where she notes which words or concepts are stumbling blocks. One of her groups, for example, was tripping over the distinction between *the*, *then*, and *they*. "Look at the end of the word," Chun reminds Terra when the little girl mistakes *they* for *the*.

"Kids need book language modeled," Chun says. "We spend a lot of time reading aloud. Sharing the book together a few times first helps them with the pattern and the language of the story."

Each day, each student takes a copy of his guided-group book home in a zip-lock bag. Their assignment: Read for 20 minutes at home, independently or with a parent.

"They really just need a lot of practice," Chun says. "For a few children, reading comes naturally. But for most, it takes a lot of practice, a lot of experience. Parents need to understand that."

JUMP ROPE RHYMES

Teaching children to read, says Chun, requires "filling their world with print." For fledgling readers, that print needs to be "patterned, predictable, and repetitive," she says.

Jump rope rhymes—those silly, sing-song poems children have jumped to for generations—offer a perfect on-ramp for first-graders' journey into literacy, Chun has discovered. She begins each year by teaching the rhymes orally—old favorites like this:

Little Arrabella Miller
found a furry caterpillar.
First it crawled upon her mother,
then upon her baby brother.
They said, "Arrabella Miller
take away that caterpillar.

And like this:

Bee, bee, bumble bee,
Stung a boy upon his knee,
Stung a pig upon his snout
And I declare that you are out!

After learning the words, clapping the rhythm, and chanting the rhymes while jumping rope on the playground, the students finger-point the rhymes in the pocket chart. Finally, Chun gives each child a rhyme printed on 8 ½" x 11" paper, where they finger-point the words and draw pictures to illustrate them.

Because jump rope rhymes are rooted in play and physical activity, they are a natural "jump-off point" for young readers, Chun says. In workshops she gives for other teachers, Chun suggests using the rhymes to build such skills as recognizing letters; identifying beginning, middle, and ending consonant sounds; identifying blends and digraphs; locating word endings such as *ed* and *ing*; locating rhyming words; and understanding short and long vowel sounds.

In those early weeks of autumn, Chun hits hard on the basic concepts of print: directionality (left to right, top to bottom), sentence conventions (initial capital letter and punctuation), letter recognition, and the alphabetic principal (letter-sound relationships).

"It takes a lot of pointing out print and bringing it to their attention," she says.

After illustrating the classroom collection of jump rope rhymes, Chun's students write and illustrate their own original stories—stories about building a doghouse or becoming a musician or playing with neighborhood friends. The stories are keyboarded on the computer by the classroom aide and "published" in book form.

Stephanie's story is called *All About Bats*. It goes like this: "I wonder how bats hang upside down without slipping. Most bats don't bother people. Bats eat fruit and not people."

Christopher titled his book *Counting*. He writes: "I counted 29 red gnats. I counted 17 green vats. I counted 18 blue rats. I counted 10 purple cats. I counted 8 orange hats. I counted 6 yellow mats. I counted 5 black bats."

Levander, who calls his book *I Want to Be*, writes: "I want to be a singer when I grow up. If I get fired, then I want to be a teacher. I will teach fifth grade and do what is right. The end."

When Chun started teaching first grade, she spent a lot of time thinking up prompts for writing. But, she says, "I have found that no prompt works better than a child's own stories that are in their head." Now, she tells them to "write about your life, write about what you're good at, write about what you know." She quotes early-literacy expert Lucy Calkins, who says, "We fall in love with our students when we know their stories."

"Their stories are fabulous," Chun says. "That's what first-grade teaching is all about—listening to their stories." ☐

> “I really believe in the constructivist theory—that children learn by making meaning out of their world.”
> —Molly Chun

Caterpillar Diary
Tadpole Diary
The Grouchy Ladybug
Eric Carle
20
in the tree that
a cave.
baby bee that
a dragonfly.

CREATING EAGER READERS

Informal assessments help students mine text for **meaning**

By MELISSA STEINEGER

"From an instructional standpoint, a test is any situation that affords educators the opportunity to make a decision that might improve instruction."

—Jerome Harste, 1989

The third-graders at Stevenson Elementary School in Washington dutifully read *Baby Wolf*, a text with all the style and substance of the old Dick-and-Jane primers: See baby wolf. See baby wolf sleep. Yawn, baby wolf, yawn.

It was the young readers who were yawning when Dr. Lesley Thompson jolted them with a story about a sled dog named Cookie and her litter of pups. Thompson, a reading-assessment expert at the Northwest Laboratory, had given the youngsters a chapter titled "Nativity" from Gary Paulsen's book *Puppies, Dogs, and Blue Northers: Reflections on Being Raised by a Pack of Sled Dogs*. The text, written at about a sixth-grade level—three grade levels above their other materials—dramatically describes how Cookie dealt with the death of one of her puppies.

As they responded to Thompson's prompts and queries, the students showed their ability to synthesize what they had read—that is, to see how parts of the story work together to build meaning, noting similarities and differences between the two stories, and finding meaning beyond the texts' literal boundaries. To probing questions such as "How do you know that Cookie was a good mother?" the third-graders eagerly shared their feelings, all the while exploring ideas from the text. Even later, when the official inquiry into the text was over, the students returned to the story during free periods, reread it on their own, and talked about it with their classmates. In explaining the difference between the stories—why Paulsen's narrative captured the young readers so completely—one student replied: "'Nativity' is real to me. *Baby Wolf* is just a story."

These students, who were part of a 1997 pilot project on reading assessment, had become what Thompson calls "engaged readers." Engagement with text—something that research indicates is critical to becoming a good reader—can be fostered in the primary grades by using informal reading assessments, Thompson and other researchers say.

Simply put, informal reading assessments involve understanding an individual reader—his or her strengths, weaknesses, interests, attitudes toward reading—and then using that understanding to help engage the student in reading. The goal is to create readers who challenge themselves to read frequently and who tackle books above their grade level. Eager readers, like the third-graders Thompson worked with, are the end result of effective classroom assessments.

The strength of informal assessments in the overall assessment mix is their ability to give specific clues to a young reader's personal set of strategies for decoding words and gleaning meaning from text, says NWREL researcher and reading specialist Dr. Jane Braunger. These clues give the teacher the insight he or she needs to plan instruction that will move that student further along the reading continuum.

"You want a window to the child's mind," says Braunger. Opening that window, she says, is what informal assessments are all about.

Braunger, coauthor with Dr. Jan Lewis of the 1997 book *Building a Knowledge Base in Reading*, jointly published by NWREL, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the International Reading Association, identifies the key benefits of informal assessments:

- They provide indepth understanding of an individual's development as a reader. This allows a teacher to design instruction to meet the needs and interests of all the individuals in a class, create flexible reading groups that change as skills change, choose reading materials appropriate for the needs of the individuals, and move the individual along his own continuum of reading development.
- They help a teacher see a youngster's background knowledge, motivation to read, and other hard-to-measure elements that have a profound effect on how well a youngster reads.
- They help a teacher link teaching and testing by allowing her to build on students' base of knowledge and skills in designing instruction.

Noted researcher Dr. P. David Pearson of Michigan State University advocates using informal testing, especially in the younger grades. Pearson, author of numerous books on reading, says teachers would use their time better by informally assessing individuals rather than by giving standardized tests to whole classes, particularly in the primary grades where students may not understand directions or may be unable to concentrate for the duration of the test. Teachers will gain the clearest picture of a youngster's reading development, he stresses, by using a variety of assessments rather than relying on any single type of evaluation. (For more of Pearson's views on informal assessments, visit his Web site at http://ed-web3.educ.msu.edu/cspds/home.htm. Select Works in Progress and then Past Archives to find his essay, "Standards and Assessments: Tools for the Reform of Early Reading Instruction.")

Following are descriptions of three tools—running record, miscue analysis, and cloze procedure—and one task—oral retelling

—that teachers most often use to informally assess students' reading strategies and comprehension assessment. Assessment tools, says Thompson, are, like hammers and wrenches, instruments that are applied in the same way over and over. A task, in contrast, is variable and adaptable to specific needs or settings. Thompson recommends that teachers receive training in the use of these techniques in order to fully realize the benefits they can bring.

*Running record a cumulative account of selected behavior, as of that of a student noted by a teacher over time.**

The running record of text is a system developed by New Zealand educator Marie Clay and detailed in the 1993 edition of her book, *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. A running record is the teacher's record of everything the child says when reading a text aloud.

Reading samples are 100 to 200 words, or enough to take the child three to 10 minutes to read. Samples should come from readily available reading materials used within the regular classroom and should be at three levels of difficulty: easy, instructional, and hard.

Easy texts are those children have previously read successfully. Instructional texts have some familiarity for the child, but the reader must problem-solve to read at 90 percent to 94 percent accuracy. A harder text may have been previously introduced or never seen before, and the child will read it at 80 to 89 percent accuracy. These levels of difficulty provide insights into how a young reader orchestrates effective reading (easy text), how a youngster problem-solves reading material (instructional text), and how effective processing breaks down (harder text).

There are several options for recording the information: using a blank sheet of paper, creating a form, or making a duplicate of the text with space between lines. Although running records don't need to be tape recorded, recording may help teachers who are learning the technique to review how well they've captured errors.

Clay offers a shorthand method of capturing the child's reading. It goes like this:

- For every correctly read word, the teacher makes a checkmark.
- If the reader misreads a word, the teacher writes the wrong word over the correct word, like this:

(Child) Spit
(Text) Spot

This is counted as one error.

- If the youngster tries several times to read a word, each attempt is recorded:

(Child) Spit / Splat / Spat
(Text) Spot

This is counted as one error.

- If the teacher must tell the child the word, the teacher records a "T" for told:

(Child) Home ____
(Text) House/ T

This counts as one error.

- If the youngster makes several attempts, eventually getting the word correct, the teacher writes SC for "self-corrected." SC is not an error.
- If a child reads a word that is not in the text, the teacher writes the word and beneath it draws a dash. If the child skips a word, the teacher writes the word and above it draws a dash. Either instance counts as one error.
- If a youngster appeals for help, the teacher writes an "A" for appeal. If the teacher must tell the child the word, the teacher adds a "T" for told. Either situation alone or combined counts as one error.
- If a child gets into a state of confusion, the teacher may intervene by saying, "Try that again," perhaps indicating where the child should start anew. Such an instance is marked as TTA (try that again). If the confusion lasts over several words or a phrase, the teacher brackets the entire portion and counts it as one error.
- Repetition is marked as an R, but is not counted as an error. If the child repeats a phrase, the teacher writes an R and draws an arrow back to where the youngster begins anew. If the child reads the phrase correctly, the entire sequence is marked as SC and is not an error. Sometimes a child will reread text and correct some but not all errors. Any repetitions are not counted as errors, but new or continued misreadings are.
- No error is counted for trials that are eventually successful—for instance, the child who says want/ won't/went for went.
- Other non-errors include reading multiple errors and then going back and self-correcting, broken words (a way for away), and mispronunciation. If there are alternate ways to score, score so that the fewest errors are recorded.

To determine the student's error rate, compare the number of errors with the number of words in the text. A student making 15 errors in a 150-word reading selection has an error rate of one to 10 (one error to 10 words).

To calculate the percentage of accuracy, divide the number of errors by the total number of words in the text. Then subtract that number (the error rate) from 1. In the example above, the student has a 10 percent error rate, hence an accuracy rate of 90 percent. Children who are reading text at the appropriate level should score at 90 percent or higher.

"If there is more than 10 percent of error in the record rate this is a 'hard' text for this child," Clay writes. "When children read a book with less than 90 percent accuracy, it is difficult for them to judge for

The traits of an ***effective reader***

What are the characteristics of a good reader—that is, one who reads critically, deeply, and with comprehension?

Having identified six traits shared by good readers, Dr. Lesley Thompson of the Northwest Laboratory, has developed an assessment strategy for the traits. Every reader falls somewhere on a continuum of progress for each trait, Thompson says. Students may have greater or lesser skill, but they can always be helped when a teacher informally assesses the skill level the student has reached and shapes instruction to further the youngster's development.

The traits, along with examples of advanced accomplishment, follow:

1. **Decoding conventions** of writing, organization, and genre. Advanced students are able to recognize correct grammatical constructions, understand the function of punctuation, and have an awareness of spelling conventions. They can identify the title, author, and components of the text, such as the table of contents and chapter headings. And they can identify the genre.
2. **Establishing comprehension.** Students can state or write a thesis statement; name major and minor examples of the thesis; identify the turning moments with facts and examples; and can connect the turning points to the main thesis.
3. **Realizing context.** Students can use examples from the text to discuss the author's intentions and inferred meanings, both implicit and explicit.
4. **Developing interpretation.** Students can identify problems in texts and resolve them using clues and evidence.
5. **Integrating for synthesis.** Students can connect text with other texts, subjects, and experiences.
6. **Critiquing for evaluation.** Students can, with insight and evidence, critique ideas and perspectives found in the reading.

Resource Notes: The Northwest Laboratory offers three-day workshops on using the six traits to nurture strategic reading and critical thinking in students. For information on upcoming Creating Readers institutes, including an October institute in Cannon Beach, Oregon, and a March institute in Arizona, call the Assessment and Evaluation Program, (503) 275-9535 or 1-800-547-6339, ext. 535.

Also available is a newly published video, which presents the six traits of an effective reader and shows how they can be applied in the classroom. For details and ordering information on *The Journey of a Reader*, call (503) 275-9535.

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themselves whether their attempts at a word are good ones or poor ones. They need easier material which they can attempt at a rate of not more than one error in 10 words at the time they begin the new book. For the average child there is movement from 90 percent accuracy when he is first promoted to a book to 95 percent or more as he completes his learning on that book."

A long analysis is not necessary. But a teacher should at least ask what led the child to make the error and use that information as an aid in instruction. More difficult texts will produce higher error rates; with more practice, teachers improve their ability to detect errors—also raising the error rate.

While learning to take a running record may seem complicated, Clay says most teachers need two hours or less to learn the basics. She suggests selecting three average readers as case studies. Try out the procedures on these children, score and analyze the results, and summarize the observations. Some teachers fit running records into their schedules by taking a running record of one child each day—which means each child has a running record every three to four weeks.

Miscue analysis

a formal examination of the use of miscues as the basis for determining the strengths and weaknesses in the background experiences and language skills of students as they read.

A reading miscue inventory and analysis combines aspects of the running record with oral retelling. The inventory is a listing of words a child may substitute when faced with a word that is difficult to pronounce or decode. By analyzing a child's substitutions as the child reads aloud, the teacher can look for specific areas where a reader is having trouble decoding words, phrases, or ideas and later provide the appropriate instruction.

A "miscue" is defined in *The Literacy Dictionary* of the International Reading Association as "a deviation from text during oral reading or a shift in comprehension of a passage." The dictionary adds the important note that "miscues are not random errors, but are attempts by the reader to make sense of the text." For this reason, they "provide a rich source of information for analyzing language and reading development."

The general approach is for the teacher to choose a text of interest to the reader, but one the reader has not read. The piece should form a cohesive whole, whether it is a story, poem, or other text of about 500 words, or enough text to allow for 15 to 30 minutes of reading. Several pieces may be chosen to reach that duration. The piece should be predictable—that is, the reader should be able to provide some meaning without a previous reading—yet be of sufficient difficulty that the reader will make miscues. (If the reader does not miscue, the student has mastered the reading-skill level of the chosen text.)

The teacher marks identical copy that is triple-spaced, but has the same number of words per line and page so that format miscues can be identified. After the child reads the text and the teacher marks the miscues, the reader retells the story orally, without prompting, if possible. When the retelling is finished, the teacher delves more deeply into the story with open-ended questions such as these: "Tell more about (a character named by the student);" "After (an incident mentioned by the student) happened, what came next?" and "Why do you think (a character named by the student) did that?"

Analyzing the miscue inventory and the retelling can provide insight into a child's ability to use context to establish meaning, drive to seek meaning, ability to self-correct, growth in developing fluency, and ability to read with fluency and [illegible]on.

Cloze procedure *any of several ways of measuring a person's ability to restore omitted portions of a text by reading its remaining context.*

The cloze process can help a teacher assess a student's reading comprehension and mastery of language. Students use clues from the context of the passage to fill in words that have been deliberately omitted. A traditional cloze exercise omits words systematically, say every fifth or 10th word, regardless of the word. But words also can be deleted more selectively, by category. Teachers may wish, for example, to omit verbs, prepositions, or special vocabulary. Research suggests that selective word deletion is more useful in providing clues to teachers than systematic deletions.

LinguaLinks (http://www.sil.org/lingualinks), an electronic resource for language learners and teachers, recommends leaving intact the first two or three sentences of the passage to provide enough context clues for the reader. Here is what a cloze exercise with selected verbs omitted might look like with a passage from "Nativity."

Cookie slept hard, was absolutely sound asleep, and I thought I would take the body now, take it to the house and dispose of it so she could not find it. But when I reached across the hut to get it, her eyes opened and her lips moved to clear teeth, and again she looked directly into my eyes. "I will _____ *your sled," she said, "and love you and* _____ *the team and* _____ *your life and be loyal to all that you are and* _____ *you in all things until I cannot, but if you* _____ *my pup you die." I left the pup and it was not for three days, almost four, when the still-frozen pup was clearly not going to come back to life, that she finally surrendered to her grief and let me take it away.*

LinguaLinks offers these guidelines for preparing texts for a cloze procedure:

- Choose texts that provide a lot of clues and supporting information to aid word identification
- Use cloze tests along with other kinds of tests for reading comprehension
- Test the text with a fluent reader before using it
- Use texts at an appropriate reading level for each learner

In reviewing students' completed cloze exercises, Thompson says, teachers should look for complexity and sophistication in the student's word selection, the student's ability to come as close as possible to the original text, the ability to demonstrate literal comprehension of the original passage, and a willingness and desire to create meaning.

> *Retelling requires the student to construct a personal text and make inferences both from the original text and prior knowledge.*

Oral retelling measures how well a child understands a text and can help youngsters improve their reading comprehension. This assessment also helps engage children in reading by allowing them to capture the flavor of a piece they've read by using their own language.

"An analysis of the retelling can help teachers identify problems that do not surface when students are simply asked to answer questions," the Oregon Department of Education notes.

Oral retellings are straightforward. Aware that he or she will be retelling the story, the youngster reads a designated text. To help the student along, the teacher may preface the reading with some instruction that will help the child construct a good retelling. She might, for instance, instruct the reader to give a general introduction to the story, describe the main characters, and explain any obstacle the characters must overcome.

Typically, the teacher asks the child to tell the story as if he were telling it to another child who has not read the story. Older readers may retell the story in writing. For any age, teachers may choose to prompt the retelling with questions about the plot, characters, and significant ideas.

To evaluate, the teacher looks for the child's knowledge of the gist of the story and the main ideas; accurate reporting of the events; sequence accuracy; the number and accuracy of direct quotes from the text; the ability to relate information to personal knowledge; the presence of the beginning, middle, and end of the story in the child's retelling; precision of vocabulary; the presence of characters and setting; and the use of detail. This may be recorded on an appropriate scale—say, "low," "moderate," and "high."

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Teachers also can probe for understanding by asking the reader to make inferences rather than simply recalling the text. They can invite a personal response to the text which helps young readers extend their ability to connect the text with other texts and experiences.

The teacher can model how to explore a text by making notes of the main ideas of the text, then sharing these with readers. He can invite the readers to identify what the text made them think about, and encourage them to ask questions about things they didn't understand.

Oral retellings also can engage an entire class. Braunger once asked a first-grade class to retell a story, allowing students to relate their favorite passages or events while she wrote down the responses. In an article titled "Retelling: Reading Assessment That's Also Good Instruction" from the *Handbook for Student Performance and Assessment*, a 1996 publication from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Braunger describes how the students were eagerly raising their hands or calling out their favorite parts. When the retelling was over, the entire story had been captured from the classroom full of engaged readers, she says. The experience also provided a model for the students when they later gave individual retellings exts.

Research has found that both low- and high-skilled readers have increased comprehension of setting, theme, plot, and resolution after participating in only four retelling sessions. ☐

**NOTE: Definitions of assessment terminology are from The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing, edited by Theodore Harris and Richard Hodges and published in 1995 by the International Reading Association; and from Reading Assessment: Grades K-4, Third Grade Benchmark, published by the Oregon Department of Education.*

More resources

Here are some useful publications for learning more about informal reading assessments:

An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement

by Marie Clay (Heinemann,1993). This is a description of the New Zealand educator's systematic approach to observing children's reading and writing in the first years of school. It includes a detailed description of how to take running records and other observation techniques.

Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children

by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (Heinemann, 1996). Written for K-3 teachers, resource specialists, administrators, and staff developers, this book advocates a balanced approach to literacy development and explains how to implement guided reading, reading aloud, shared reading, and interactive writing.

Reading Miscue Inventory Alternative Procedures

by Yetta Goodman, Dorothy Watson, and Carolyn Burke (Richard C. Owen Publishers, 1987). This publication gives a detailed description of reading miscue inventory and analysis by the originators of the technique.

Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction

by Judith Langer (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1995). Langer's book is rich with classroom narratives and actual samples of student work, which she uses to demonstrate ways to help students become critical thinkers of literature.

New Policy Guidelines for Reading: Connecting Research and Practice

by Jerome Harste (National Council of Teachers of English and ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, 1989). Intended to help educators develop improved policy in reading instruction and research, this book offers a useful discussion of the role of evaluation in reading curriculum (see Pages 34-40).

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BOOK BUDDY

A volunteer gives kids an extra boost in reading

By Teri Sherman Matias

My heart started to pound as I pulled into the parking lot at Kelly Elementary School in southeast Portland on my first day as a reading volunteer. I was asking myself, "What am I doing here? I don't know how to teach children to read. My degree is in graphic design, not education. I don't even have nieces or nephews, let alone kids of my own, who might have given me *some* experience in relating to young children."

But I had made a commitment to the volunteer coordinator, and she was expecting me. I reminded myself what had brought me to Kelly Elementary School that day. A series of news stories about the extreme difficulties facing some of Oregon's children, and the lack of resources available to help them, had left me asking, "Is there something I can do?" *The Oregonian* had published a list of volunteer opportunities, and that's where I found out about SMART, a book and reading program for children in kindergarten through second grade.

SMART (Start Making a Reader Today) is sponsored by the Oregon Children's Foundation, a nonprofit organization formed in 1991 by former governor Neil Goldschmidt and the law firm of Ater Wynne Hewitt Dodson & Skerritt. The foundation's main focus is to increase early literacy in the belief that early reading success leads to success later in school and in life. The program, which serves students in 13 Oregon counties, focuses on schools that have 40 percent or higher participation in free and reduced-price lunch.

As I walked into the SMART reading room at Kelly that first day, my nervousness was calmed by the bright, cozy atmosphere created by comfy sofas, tables covered with books, stuffed animals, and other cheery decorations. After two years as a volunteer, I still feel a sense of well-being as I walk into that room. I imagine the kids must feel that way, too.

I was relieved to find that the activities necessary to accomplish positive results didn't require extensive training. In fact, I soon realized that a skill I had taken for granted—being able to read—was all I needed in order to contribute something to a child's life.

The goal of the SMART program is simple: to create a relaxed and safe environment in which children can practice their reading skills, one-on-one, with caring adults. I spend one hour each week at Kelly—half an hour with each of two students. I read with the same two students for the whole year.

I start each session by stopping by the child's classroom and walking him or her back to the reading room. Kids in the SMART program (chosen by their teachers because they especially can benefit from extra reading practice and attention) are the envy of the class. Far from carrying a stigma, SMART is viewed as something fun, like being in a club. If the regular SMART student is absent, all the other kids eagerly vie to take her place that day.

The child chooses what she would like to read from the many new, donated books. I might read to her, or she might read to me, depending on the difficulty of the book and what she feels comfortable doing that day.

We often talk about the book and subjects that come up as we read. One day Katerina and I read *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans, a story that takes place in Paris. We got out the globe and found France. Then she wanted to find Russia, the cournty where she was born.

Once each month the kids get to choose a book to take home and keep. This is a way to bring books into homes where resources may be limited. Brothers and sisters can then enjoy them, too.

Each student has different abilities and challenges, which the teacher shares with the volunteer ahead of time. Lindsey, whose home life is unstable, needed to work on her basic alphabet skills. Carlos comes from a home where English is a second language. Nick, who is from a big family, was struggling with basic skills and needed a little extra personal attention.

I have been impressed by the teachers I see. But each child in the full classroom needs so much from the teacher, and teachers—no matter how talented or dedicated—can only spread themselves so thin. It's no wonder that some of the children, especially the quiet and shy ones, don't get all the attention they need to flourish.

Some days I feel encouraged by clear progress and growing bonds of affection with individual students. Other days, they seem bored and distracted. There have been times when I questioned my abilities. But as the weeks and then months go by, feelings of familiarity and trust grow. The students know I'll be back the next week, and that I really care about them. Giving children the sense that they're important, I've realized, is a big benefit of the tutoring program.

By the end of that first school year, Lindsey ran up and threw her arms around me whenever I came to her class to pick her up. And

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Carlos paid me a high compliment when he said, "You're a *great* SMART reader!" My self-doubts dissolved.

I read with Nick for two years. When I first met him, he had very few reading skills, and he was extremely quiet. But gradually I learned what he liked to read: *Where's Waldo?*, Dr. Seuss, pop-up books, and anything with dinosaurs. Gradually, his reading improved. Eventually, he was able to read *The Cat in the Hat* aloud all the way through. It took us a few weeks to complete the book, and I was amazed after each week had passed that he remembered exactly where we left off the time before. When we were done, I saw his face light up with surprise and pride when I congratulated him on reading a 60-page book from start to finish.

For the last day of the program, the volunteer coordinator organized a farewell ceremony. The tutors and their students shared punch and cake, then waved goodbye to one another with jumbo-sized bubble wands. Each student was presented with a certificate of achievement. As I walked out to my car after that first year of tutoring, I felt grateful for the opportunity to be one of the many people in my community who are trying to help kids get started in lives that I hope will be happy and successful. Come September, I'll be back in the cozy reading room, confident that I can make a difference for a few kids. ☐

**NOTE: Students' names have been changed to protect their privacy. For information about SMART, call the Oregon Children's Foundation, (503) 721-7175.*

Teri Sherman Matias is a Portland graphic designer.

Volunteer Tutors

Across the country, young children are gaining a valuable new resource in learning to read. Spearheaded by two federal initiatives—the Clinton administration's America Reads Challenge, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, and the LEARNS Partnership funded by the Corporation for National Service—thousands of reading tutors are being recruited and trained through partnerships among universities, schools, and communities. Nine of the nation's regional educational laboratories are awarding and administering grants to partnerships in their regions, as well as conducting regional training conferences. The Northwest Lab is coordinating the nationwide effort.

Early findings suggest that volunteer tutoring holds great promise for beginning readers. University pilot projects that match college work-study students with beginning readers found "gains in literacy skills of one year or more" for participating youngsters, researchers from Michigan State University and the University of Wisconsin reported in August.

"Reading is really the key to the world," says Dr. Kay Davis, Director of the Northwest Lab's new Community and Education Volunteer Services Center, which is coordinating a variety of training and outreach activities. For information on the center and its services, call (503) 275-9639.

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nor, one hopes, by the dictates of school administrators or politicians, but by their ongoing assessment of their students' needs. Where teachers work this way—and parents help by reading and talking to their children and taking them places —there are no reading wars and no nonreaders. ☐

Joanne Yatvin, Principal of Cottrell and Bull Run elementary schools in the Oregon Trail School District in Sandy, Oregon, is among 15 members of the National Reading Panel convened in April by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to evaluate research on reading instruction and recommend ways to apply it in the classroom.

PEACEFUL PROPOSAL

"Reading wars" oversimplify the complexity of the process

By Joanne Yatvin

FAR TOO MUCH ENERGY HAS BEEN INVESTED IN FIGHTING THE "READING WARS." If learning to read depended only on using phonics or whole language or some other pure approach, then all children in single-method classrooms would read either well or poorly. School-sponsored testing and research studies do not show anything near such uniform results. Yet, supporters of a particular method claim success when the percentage of children reading at grade level climbs 10 points. That amount of improvement does indicate that something in a classroom is better than it was before, but it also shows that other things are still wrong for a significant number of children.

Righting all wrongs through instruction is impossible because many of those wrongs are environmental or genetic. But as capable teachers prove every day—in all kinds of schools—it is possible for all children to read well enough to succeed in school and life. What works is a broad-based program, personalized by teachers smart enough to give children what they need when they need it. Creating a broad-based reading program starts with the recognition that reading is a mixture of several skills learned and used simultaneously, but not always in the same combinations or strengths. The major skills necessary for reading are:

1. **Phonemic awareness**—the ability to separate streams of speech into their component sounds
2. **Grapho-phonemic correspondence**—being able to match written symbols to the speech sounds they represent
3. **Word analysis and synthesis**—being able to break print words into speech syllables and to blend letter sounds into words
4. **Sight-word vocabulary**—being able to recall automatically the pronunciation of a large number of print words previously learned
5. **Syntactic knowledge**—knowing the permissible order and the proper grammatical inflections of words in English sentences
6. **Semantic knowledge**—understanding the meanings of words alone, combined with other words, and in different contexts
7. **Literary knowledge**—knowing the common forms, narrative patterns, expressions, and conventions used in different types of literature and factual writing so that one can make reasonable predictions about what will come next when reading a particular type of writing

These are the skills directly involved in decoding written language, but readers also need to be able to transfer their oral language skills—such as emphasizing particular words, phrasing, and voice inflection—to reading. This is difficult for many children because there are few written symbols for guidance. Mastery of one cluster of skills is never enough. A child who has only the phonemic skills pronounces words haltingly, without regard to meaning or the natural rhythms of speech. She does not apprehend the written text as a whole. If, in addition, a child has analysis-synthesis skills and a large sight-word vocabulary, she can read rapidly and smoothly, but still may lack understanding and natural phrasing. Such a child can get by in a display of oral reading because she pronounces all the words right, but she is not yet a true reader. Only the mastery of semantic, syntactic, and oral language skills can make her that. When, finally, she has mastered some of the literary skills, she becomes an accomplished reader, able to handle many kinds of material and to grasp a range of meanings, explicit and implicit, contained in quality texts. Although I have specified "mastery" above, an ironic twist is that being pretty good in all types of skills is better than being perfect in one or two of them.

While some children who have had lots of life, language, and literature experiences before coming to school can figure out and gain control of reading skills on their own, most children need broad-based instruction at school. The problem today is that too many children have been raised on television—without books, enriching experiences, or much adult-child conversation—and too many teachers do not recognize these deficits. They teach the obvious print-speech connections and assume that their students will pick up semantic, syntactic, literary, and oral transfer skills on their own just as students did in the past.

Teaching at its best includes instruction in all types of skills and an awareness of children's background knowledge and stages of development. Good teachers continually examine their students' progress, their own experiences and beliefs, and what is possible in their classrooms. They respect research for its insights and direction, but they are not enslaved by it. When they decide on a teaching method—or, more accurately, a combination of methods—they put all their expertise and effort behind it. As time goes by, they make changes, moved not by fads

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