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ABSTRACT

Most very young children seem to have a natural interest in books. As children grow, some maintain this disposition, learn to read early, and become lifelong lovers of books; however, some children lose the disposition or do not develop it at all, and they never experience the joy of the written word. This paper looks at the educator's role in developing and sustaining this disposition in young children. The paper explores the characteristics of a child who has a disposition to be a reader, what can be learned from literacy-rich home environments where children learn to read "on their own," and which classroom strategies might discourage the disposition to read and which strategies might enhance or help develop the disposition to be a reader. (Contains 14 references.) (Author)

Developing the Disposition to be a Reader: The Educator's Role

Debbie Noyes

Abstract

Most very young children seem to have a disposition to explore books—that is, they "naturally" have an interest in books. As children grow, some children maintain this disposition, learn to read early, and become lifelong lovers of books; however, some children lose the disposition or do not develop it at all, and they never experience the joy of the written word. This paper looks at the educator's role in developing and sustaining this disposition in young children. It explores the characteristics of a child who has a disposition to be a reader, what can be learned from literacy-rich home environments where children learn to read "on their own," and which classroom strategies might discourage the disposition to read and which strategies might enhance or help develop the disposition to be a reader.

A Disposition to Read

What is a disposition to read? First of all, what is reading? Is it the ability to say words that are written on a page? *World Book Encyclopedia* (Farr, 1992) defines reading as the act of getting meaning from the printed or written word. According to McGee and Richgels (1990), children are novice readers when they intend to get meaning from written symbols even when those symbols are highly familiar signs, labels, and logos. Reading is a language process that emerges simultaneously with writing, speaking, and listening and is a process that actually begins in infancy (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

"A disposition is a tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed to a broad goal. It is possible to have the skills and lack a taste for or habit of using them. Similarly, knowledge can be acquired without having the disposition to use it" (Katz, 1993, p. 1). Dispositions are usually learned through modeling. Children develop dispositions by observing them in other people and by having opportunities to use them.

Many young children have an interest in books, stories, and pictures—the foundation of a disposition to be a reader. Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp (2000) write: "Beginning in infancy and continuing throughout childhood, children may learn from those around them that in language and literacy there is value, enjoyment, and sheer power. If they do not develop such an interest in reading and writing—an eager desire for initiation into print's mysteries and skills—children's progress toward literacy is uncertain. When the going gets tough, they may drop out of the game. While eagerness does not guarantee success, motivated children are far more likely to persist and succeed than are children who see no point in all the hard work of learning to read and write" (p. 28). There is good reason for educators to be concerned about aliteracy, the lack of desire to read.

Aliterate children can read, but they tend to avoid the activity. Aliteracy seems to reinforce itself. Children who do not read do not develop their reading skills. Children, like most of us, dislike doing things they do

poorly, so they tend to read less and less. This reinforcement is especially true in the classroom, where the child who does not read sits with skilled readers and continues to feel more inept about reading.

Aliteracy is potentially as alarming as illiteracy. Educators need to look at factors such as their attitude toward children, the way children learn, and the curriculum. These factors may have an enormous impact on creating lifelong positive attitudes about reading.

Literacy-rich Home Environments

Many children come to kindergarten already reading, and their parents claim that they "must have taught themselves to read." These children love books, and their interest seems to never end. What is it about these children or their homes that gives them the love for reading at such an early age?

If we took a look in these homes, we would see reading material for a variety of purposes—books and magazines for pleasure (and adults who read them) and materials for information such as recipes, *TV Guide*, and instruction booklets. We would also see adults who value reading and who enjoy reading with their children.

One of the most important things children can learn at the beginning of their literacy experiences is that reading is a pleasurable activity. When children are read to early in their lives, they play with books as a preferred and frequent activity. Book reading is one of the closest activities parents and children share. Children nestle in Dad's lap or lean over Mom's arm while they take part in this activity. The special feelings that come from this closeness of parents and children are associated with books. It is no wonder that some children will sit alone and look at books far longer than they will with their other toys (McGee & Richgels, 1990).

Judith Schickedanz (1999) says that a major contribution of story-reading experience is the pleasure that it can bring. To enter into the world of stories on their own is something that many children want to do once they have experienced the joy that stories bring. Therefore, experience with stories can build a positive attitude toward reading and can help children develop a strong desire to learn to read.

All children bring their experiences with them to the reading process. Children from homes where story reading, conversation, and ideas are valued will have a broader base of experiences to bring and therefore have an advantage when learning to read. Children with limited experiences generally have more difficulty learning to read. Current research indicates that the factor correlating most highly with a child's learning to read easily in primary school is whether she or he has been read to as a young child (Gottschall, 1995). As educators of young children, we must not forget that some children will need that one-on-one story reading, as well as other important experiences, when they come to school. Many children are coming to school with the love of reading already developing. Others will need to have experiences provided in the classroom to lay the foundation for lifelong reading. Barclay, Benelli, and Curtis (1995) found that child care settings are capable of developing and promoting children's literacy in some of the same ways found in literacy-rich homes.

Is it possible to replicate within a kindergarten or elementary classroom those elements found in homes of early readers? Absolutely. Here are only a few ideas:

- Provide a comfortable place for children to explore books independently or in small groups (include pillows, carpet, or other soft areas for book browsing).
- Provide interesting reading materials for children on a variety of topics and of various reading levels.
- Plan a story-reading time for the class each day (adult reads aloud to whole class).
- Provide functional reading materials (recipes, phonebook, game instructions, words to songs and fingerplays, classroom rules, etc.).
- Plan an individual reading time each day (SSR—Sustained Silent Reading, DEAR—Drop Everything And Read, etc.).
- Allow children to talk to each other about books they are reading.

- Let children see adults reading for pleasure and to get information.
- Provide resource materials so children may find answers to their questions in books.
- Display pictures or posters of children and adults enjoying reading.
- Use labels and other environmental print in the classroom.
- Read to children individually with the child on your lap or sitting nearby.
- Allow children to read or listen to the same story over and over and over.
- Talk to children about what you are reading.
- Allow children to dictate words, sentences, or a story.
- Provide tape-recorded stories for children to listen to.

Emotions, Attitudes, and Learning to Read

There seems to be growing evidence that emotions are closely related to learning to read. In addition to the emotional bond that is formed when a young child and an adult read books together, the attitude of the elementary school teacher and the emotional climate of the classroom seem to be important variables. "What a teacher believes about teaching, learning, and the nature of children will expand or limit the opportunities for her children to achieve their potential" (Mills & Clyde, 1991, p. 54). There is much more to effective reading instruction than the actual instruction itself and the multitude of materials that sometime make up a "reading program." What may be more important is the emotional climate a teacher creates in the classroom (Greenberg, 1998).

Gottschall (1995) notes that it is the intimate sharing of books between a child and a caring adult (as found in literacy-rich homes) that helps the child grow to love and bond with books. It seems that children of all ages love the intimacy of reading with an adult. If experiences with books are enjoyable, and if these experiences occur under especially nurturing conditions, the feelings associated with books and reading are likely to be highly positive (Schickedanz, 1999). The development of positive attitudes towards books and reading is the beginning of a disposition to be a lifelong reader.

Educators of young children can have a great impact on the development of this disposition. The climate of the classroom and the attitude of the teacher can either encourage this development or keep it from developing at all. A recent article in *Young Children* (Greenberg, 1998) suggests that a warm and calm climate is optimal for children learning to read. Some children will survive no matter what. But other children really need that calm and accepting classroom atmosphere. Greenberg writes, "Personally, I've never known a five-, six-, or seven-year-old who requires cold relationships and a cold classroom climate to thrive and learn optimally" (p. 69). Teachers need to be keenly aware of the emotional atmosphere of the classroom and especially how it affects the process of reading. Every child needs to feel successful at some point, even the slow-to-catch-on readers. Reading can be taught in a way that all children feel intelligent and competent, or it can be taught in a way that children feel stupid and incompetent. Learning to read can be highly charged with emotions. Successful readers feel happy, confident, and powerful. Not-so-successful readers feel anxious, angry, and inferior.

Children who have not had an opportunity to develop a disposition to read may struggle when traditional reading programs are started. They are scared to admit that they don't understand. They are afraid to ask for help, fearing ridicule from peers and reprimands from teachers. Unnecessary facts and rules, along with frequent put-downs, are swimming around in their heads, making it impossible to see reading as enjoyable. For some children, these classroom experiences may feel like emotional torture. Excess pressure and stress have many negative effects on adults. We certainly don't want that stress for children. Making children feel frightened and anxious is not necessary to teach them to read. From time to time, children will have fears, anger, and feelings of inferiority. It is a tragedy if as teachers we are exacerbating or giving children those feelings in the process of teaching them to read (Greenberg, 1998).

Curriculum for Lifelong Readers

World Book Organized Knowledge in Story and Pictures ("Reading," 1929) discusses reading

instruction: "The reading lesson should be the most interesting period of the day, and the teacher who has acquainted herself thoroughly with her work and with her pupils will have no difficulty in making it so. Some pupils have a pronounced distaste for arithmetic, others seem to have no aptitude for science; but any child may be made to feel a keen interest in his reading lesson if the correct methods are pursued" (p. 4939). Reading instruction should be interesting. A child who has a disposition to be a reader is *interested* in reading (getting meaning from print). Therefore, the curriculum should include books and other reading material that are interesting to the children.

Many reading programs focus on practice and drill of isolated skills. Authentic reading has been replaced with test-like activities. Children from literacy-rich home environments may have already learned to read by the "lap method." They know what reading really is. They are probably bored by paper-and-pencil worksheet activities. But there are other children who have not been read to and do not have a working definition of what reading really is. These children may become confused and lose confidence by the amount of time spent on these skill-oriented exercises (Kamii, 1990). The acquisition of these skills does not guarantee that they will be used or applied. In fact, the instructional processes by which some skills are acquired may actually damage the likelihood that they will be used or applied in the future. Katz (1987) reports that research on the long-term effects of various curriculum models suggests that the introduction of academic work into the early childhood curriculum yields good results on standardized tests in the short term but may be counterproductive in the long term.

Most teachers state "creating lifelong readers" as a goal. But, unfortunately, when some teachers prioritize their reading objectives and skills, this goal is put in the "if there is time" category. This approach will have long-term consequences—students who do not or will not read (students who are not interested in reading anything). Fostering a disposition to be a reader is hardly a "frill activity." If students choose not to read, there will be no opportunities for them to practice and apply (in meaningful contexts) all the carefully drilled skills that have been conveniently isolated and labeled within those workbook pages (Thomas & Moorman, 1983).

Educators must think more seriously about their long-term goals for children. If we intend for them to become lifelong readers, then we must stop concentrating on the drill-and-practice method that improves test scores in the short term but sacrifices children's creativity, self-confidence, and pleasure of reading in the long term (Kamii, 1990). Teaching practices can take into account ways to strengthen the disposition to be a reader. The reading curriculum should include but not be limited to the following:

- *Time:* Children need time to explore reading materials, look at the print, look at the pictures, turn the pages, experience all kinds of books, magazines, etc.
- *Modeling:* Children need to see adults reading for pleasure, using reading to find information, talking about reading, sharing what they have read with others.
- *Listening:* Children need to listen to adults read to them. Children of all ages love to hear stories read aloud. This activity should not stop just because they can read on their own.
- *Talking:* Children need opportunities to talk to each other about things they have read. They need to talk about words they don't know. They need to help each other figure things out.
- *Experience:* Children need experiences to which they can relate the things they read.
- *Writing:* Children need opportunities to explore writing in different ways (remember that writing is emerging also).
- *Opportunities for expression:* Children need opportunities to creatively express their feelings about reading and the things they are reading about.
- *Variety:* Children need interesting material that is relevant to their lives. Provide a variety of topics, styles, and materials.
- *Success:* All children need to succeed, although it may not happen at the same time or in the same way for all children.

Conclusion

Children who have the disposition to be readers obviously do better in school. Mills and Clyde (1991) state that confident and secure children who are interested in print are experienced problem solvers

and decision makers. They are usually reflective about their own learning and will perform well in a variety of settings.

Students who have the disposition to be readers enjoy reading, find reading to be beneficial, and seek out reading. In order for students to seek out reading, Thomas and Moorman (1983) list the following four principles that need to be internalized:

- For me, reading can be an enjoyable and informative activity.
- I am an "okay" reader.
- For me, reading can be a good way to spend some spare time.
- I would like to learn further strategies to become more efficient in learning from what I read.

There is obviously much more to be learned about dispositions and the reading process. However, there seems to be sufficient data to support further investigation and thought about the educator's role in helping children develop the disposition to be readers.

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