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A Boost for the “Basics” Through Children’s Literature

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Abstract

The most persistent hazard in skills emphasis is that we become so busy teaching them that we forget about the important goal- to develop readers and writers. I know children who can perform skills in isolation to 80 percent proficiency, 95 percent proficiency, yes, even 100 percent proficiency. But, they can’t read where it counts-in the real world of books. What is even more distressing is that some of them don’t even want to enter this real world because they have never had a taste.

A BOOST FOR THE "BASICS" THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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While I am in complete agreement with the notion of teaching basics, I am not in total agreement with some of the strange connotations that the term "basics" conjures up in some circles. If, indeed, this means drudgery, rigidity and regimentation, I demur. If it lines up with a concerted effort to assess needs and then to organize an environment that helps children in attaining these needs, I am with the basics movement with one further qualification, that is – that whatever basics are taught transfer immediately to a real life situation. Perhaps this criterion can best be guaranteed if learning takes place in a context that is as life-like as possible in the first place. I share Nancy Whitelaw's (Duffy and Sherman, 1977, p. 56) concern about teaching skills in a vacuum:

Having a reading program based on just diagnosis and prescription is like making a cake and not tasting it

Like notes of music on paper -

Like a library with closed doors—

Like a marriage by contract.

Explaining the rule for determining whether g is "hard" or "soft" is like outlining how to play jazz

Like instructing how to kiss—

Like using a compass without a map—

Like explaining a bad joke.

Reading is not a Forty-five Minute

Period of Instruction with Behavioral

Objectives and Predictable Outcomes.

Reading is enjoying, learning, feeling, becoming, sensing, laughing, crying, hating, deciding, loving, growing, sympathizing, listening.

Reading is All Day -

Being and Becoming—

Growing and Growing.

The most persistent hazard in skills emphasis is that we become so busy teaching them that we forget about the important goal – to develop readers and writers. I know children who can perform skills in isolation to 80 percent proficiency, 95 percent proficiency, yes, even 100 percent proficiency. But, they can't read where it counts – in the real world of books. What is even more distressing is that some of them don't even want to enter this real world because they have never had a taste.

With this background let me demonstrate to you, with my apologies to any children's literature purists in the audience, how we can, with careful selection of material and with well defined goals, avoid the polar positions

that skills are the answer to everything or, on the other hand, that kids learn to read by reading and that skills are just deadening mechanics. There must be a balance.

Before I proceed to offer some suggestions about a few of the basics that can easily be taught through children's literature, let me make abundantly clear that what I am advocating is not a bandwagon to replace your basal program, your individualized program or whatever program; I am suggesting activities that all children should be exposed to for ten minutes here and there (I might add as often as possible) regardless of the program you are following. You may even decide at times to replace certain aspects of your present program with some of the things I am suggesting.

While the need to underpin the discussion with a detailed theoretical rationale may be dubious, a brief context might be helpful. Few would argue that reading is, first and foremost, language-based. The reader who has the greatest resource of language cues available has the chance of becoming the most powerful reader. These cues include grapho-phonetic (the sounds and patterns of oral language and the squiggles and patterns of squiggles of the written language); syntactic (word order); and semantic-associational (knowledge of what words refer to in the real world and how words are hierarchically related). (Pearson, 1976). Efficient reading demands that these cues be used in concert. The efficient reader, in essence, predicts or anticipates what is coming in print and uses grapho-phonetic information to verify his predictions. To summarize, the most powerful predictions occur where the strongest language base exists.

I am wiser than to enter into a "phonic or not-to-phonic" debate. I believe, however, that often we have misconstrued "basics" in reading to relate to the grapho-phonetic segment only. I'm sure I have 10,000 feet of oral reading tapes from readers who use only these cues to attest to my point. The vast majority of work-book pages in the primary grades relate to activities in the grapho-phonetic realm. Only a few days ago I observed a reader who attempted the word "revolve" in a meaningful context. He stumbled over various attempts all the way from "revel," "revole" to "revolve." He came to the word "material." His attempts, again, made no sense – "materral," etc. It would be tempting to say that this reader needs work in the grapho-phonetic area. However, it was clear to me that these words were not in his readily available listening-speaking vocabulary (semantic-association). So, in fact, his inability to say these words correctly in my judgment is not a reading problem but a symptom of something far more basic – an impoverished meaning vocabulary. To treat these words from a grapho-phonetic standpoint (i.e., to use phonic and structure clues) at this stage is nonsense. The problem lies in the semantic-associational area. To illustrate further, another child ran across the sentence "The queen will reign over England." The child was unable to make any sense out of the word "reign" even from the associations that might have been available from "queen" and "over England." When the teacher pronounced the word for the youngster and asked what the sentence meant, the response was, "The queen will fly over England." Again, not necessarily a reading

problem—a problem that goes back to the child's store of oral language. Efficient reading, then, is dependent upon what the reader is able to bring to the printed page—grapho-phonically, syntactically and semantically.

Now for some illustrations (and just a sampling) of the kinds of “basics” input we look for in children's literature to plug some of the child's gaps in each of the three areas—grapho-phonetic, semantic-associational and syntactic. I choose to begin with the semantic-associational.

Vocabulary Awareness

Barring first-hand experience, involvement in good literature is probably the best source of vocabulary enrichment. Let's look at a few samples to examine the possibilities. Barbara Cooney's *Chanticleer and the Fox*, offers a good example not only of richness in vocabulary, but also, to jump ahead a little, of models of variety of sentence structures.

The poor widow by careful *management* . . . was able to take care of her and her two daughters . . . Her bedroom was very *sooty*, as was her kitchen in which she ate many a *scanty* meal . . . She had a yard, fenced all around with sticks, in which she had a rooster named Chanticleer. For crowing there was not his equal in all the land. His voice was merrier than the merry organ that plays in church, and his crowing from his resting place was more trustworthy than a clock. His comb was redder than fine coral and turreted like a castle wall, his bill was black and shone like jet, and his feathers were like burnished gold. Now this fine rooster had seven hens, all colored exceedingly like him. The hen with the prettiest throat was called fair Demoiselle Partlet. She was polite, discreet, debonair, and companionable, and she conducted herself so well since the time that she was seven days old that, truly, she held the heart of Chanticleer all tightly locked.

Take another example, Lynd Ward's delightful *The Biggest Bear*. Johnny Orchard's strange involvement with the “biggest bear” provides a nice setting for acquisition of words, e.g.

Whenever Johnny went down the road to the store for a piece of maple sugar or something, he always felt humiliated. The other barns in the valley usually had a bearskin nailed up to dry. But never Johnny's barn (p. 4).

The story unfolds as Johnny's befriended bear makes a nuisance of himself in the community drinking milk meant for calves, raiding smokehouses for bacon and raiding cornfields at night. It is not surprising to learn that the bear grows quickly to an enormous size when he goes as far as to drink up the McLean's store of maple syrup. Indeed,

What they had to say about Johnny's bear was plenty. He was a *trial* and a *tribulation* to the whole valley. (p. 46).

The vividness of the illustrations accompanying the text add considerably to the excitement and meaning of the story. There will be little doubt about how Johnny feels when he is “humiliated.” There will be even less doubt about what is meant when the author relates that the bear was “a trial and a tribulation.”

I am talking about more than simply providing children with verbal labels; I am talking about providing labels that connect with meaning. In fact, I believe that children’s books provide a ready avenue to back up first-hand experience to help children develop concepts. Joan Sullivan’s popular *Round is a Pancake* with its vivid illustrations come readily to mind. The delightful rhythm aids in children’s repeating the patterns.

Round is a daisy,
And a fisherman’s reel,
Round is a hamburger,
Round is a cake,
Round is a cherry,
And the cookies we bake,
Round is a puppy,
Curled up in a rug,
Round are the spots
On a wee ladybug. (pp. 17-23).

Still on the topic of vocabulary and concepts, we know that many children experience difficulty with many of the signal words for which there is no pictorial representation or concrete object. My strong view is that the best approach to helping them overcome this problem at a reading level is to provide much input of the right sort at a listening level to bring the function of these important signals to a level of awareness.

To illustrate, let us look at signals of time and sequence. Again, of the hundreds of books ready to be used for this purpose, I have chosen *The Biggest Bear*. The sequence is unmistakable:

He (the bear) likes pancakes on Sunday Morning . . . In the *fall* Mr. McCarroll got pretty upset *when* the bear spent a night in his corn-field . . . In the *winter* he had a wonderful time with the bacons and hams . . . But it was worse *later* . . . *Finally* Mr. McLean started talking to Mr. Pennell . . . *After* the neighbors had left . . . So the *next morning* . . . (pp. 30-54).

The whole story is literally “glued” together with words depicting time and sequence. These words are the basis of the structure or organization for the entire story. They are not nearly as critical here as they are in certain other contexts as, for example, in much of the social studies material.

I mentioned earlier the fact that structure words cannot be represented by concrete or pictorial referents. What does give these words their meaning is the total context and how these words are said. I cannot overemphasize

the importance of effective use of intonation and juncture in helping children develop a consciousness of these key words in speech and reading and, I must not forget, their own writing.

Syntactic Awareness

The foregoing comments related to filling gaps in the semantic-associational aspect of language. Certainly, I am not advocating developing vocabulary in the absence of syntax (the examples used prove this). However, it might be worthwhile to look at some literature that can be used expressly to develop awareness and competence in varied syntactic patterns.

There is perhaps no principle more important in selecting these activities than to base them on the child's natural interests and the universal appeal for rhythm. An environment "thick" with poetry, verse and song is likely the best guarantee that this interest and appeal is going to be satisfied. Library shelves are bursting at the seams with stories waiting to be read, chanted and listened to. Many of these are particularly useful in aiding the development of patterns of varying structures. It is important to note here that the emphasis at the beginning is on listening—listening to the ideas and the vehicles that carry these ideas. Children will become sensitized to the peculiar intonation patterns that characterize certain syntactic elements, the junctures and the stresses that are as essential to the meaning as the arrangement of the words themselves. There are many stories which will only be listened to. However, there are many that children will want to hear often enough for them to memorize and chant along as the teacher reads. This is excellent. The sound patterns they have listened to are becoming the sound patterns of their own productions.

Take as an example, Leland Jacobs' "Old Lucy and the Pigeons" (Martin, Jr., 1966). Not only does the poem use varied and recurring sentence patterns, but it also expands these same patterns with phrases, adjectives and adverbs so that the kernel sentence repeats with one variable added.

Old Lucy Lindy lived alone.
 She lived alone (in an old stone house).
 . . . She didn't like dogs.
 She didn't like cats.
 And (especially) she didn't like pigeons.
 All day she was busy.
 She was busy (with a hammer).
 She was busy (with nails).
 She was busy (with a brush).
 (pp. 16-17).

The poem illustrates well how sentence patterns (and corresponding rhythmic patterns) repeat and how the basic pattern can repeat but at the same time be expanded with an additional rhythmic and meaning element. It is often valuable to have children add their own expansions simply to add

to the fun and their linguistic awareness. For instance, they might be encouraged to add to the following:

Go away, pigeons.
 Go away (from my fence).
 Go away (from my yard).
 Go away (from my house).

If children are unable to add additional elements (phrases), discussion will produce the basic ideas necessary for such expansions. The teacher might ask, "Where else might Old Lucy Lindy find pigeons?" It is likely that responses such as "on the grass," "on the roof," "on the gate" will emerge. These, then, become the source for the expansions.

To add just one further example of how the poem might be used to develop awareness of syntactic elements, have children listen to (and read) a version like the following:

She did not like cats
 She did not like dogs.

Then have them listen to the original version demonstrating how the use of the contraction "didn't" helps to create a more desirable rhythm than "did not." The point to be made here is that children need to be strongly attuned to the aural, as well as meaning aspects of language.

There are many children's books on the market which use effectively the cumulative recurring sentence pattern to build up a sequence of events.

Barbara Emberley's *Drummer Hoff* illustrates the notion well. The events leading up to Drummer Hoff's firing off the canon begin with "Private Parriage brought the carriage." Each soldier appearing brings one part of the remarkable machine. One event per page is added so that on the last page the whole series is repeated:

General Border gave the order,
 Major Scott brought the shot,
 Captain Bammer brought the rammer,
 Sergeant Chowder brought the powder,
 Corporal Farrell brought the barrel,
 Private Parriage brought the carriage,
 but Drummer Hoff fired it off.
 (p. 22).

Again, the opportunity to develop awareness of very basic syntactic units is there and in interesting format.

Grapho-phonics Elements

There is no suggestion here that the basic teaching of the graphophonic elements of reading have to be taught through literature. It seems, though,

that so many visual, auditory and visual-auditory association elements can be brought in without compromising the enjoyment of literature that it seems a shame not to do so.

To sample some of the possibilities for extending knowledge of rhyming elements either at the auditory or reading-writing stage, let us go back to the Lucy Lindy example again. The teacher might ask the class to imagine all the things that Lucy Lindy didn't like. She might start them with "She didn't like dogs" and have them finish "She didn't like _____" (rhyming element).

Then this might continue:

She didn't like cats,
 She didn't like _____,
 She didn't like mice,
 She didn't like _____,
 Lucy Lindy liked things, NICE.

For spelling work the same example might be used. Many children's books lend themselves very well to this kind of activity. Langstaff's *Frog Went A-Courtin'* is just one further illustration. The teacher might give the group any two lines, e.g.:

He rode right up to the mouse's hall,
 Where he most tenderly did c_____.

Depending on the children's level of development, they would fill in the whole word, just the initial consonant or the "all" phonogram. This kind of activity can be extended to include new words with the same phonemic base. For example, the "all" base from the example above might be used to develop phonogram practice strips like this:

call/fall	ball	hall	stall
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Depending on individual needs, different cues can be used to elicit the rhyming words. If the basic problem is auditory, the teacher might say, "Which word rhymes with 'call' and begins the same as 'sting'?" If semantic cues are needed, "Which word rhymes with 'call' and is something that bounces." Incidentally, this is an excellent way to teach children to use "in concert" grapho-phonetic and semantic information.

There is probably no more suitable selection for development of beginning consonant awareness and phonemic bases than Edward Lear's *Nonsense Alphabet*. The first stanza is illustrative of its usefulness:

A was once an apple-pie,	
Pidy,	Pidy,
Widy,	Nice insidy,
Tidy,	Apple-pie.

There is an abundance of literature that lends itself ideally to developing the auditory bases of structural analysis. Preston's *Pop Corn and Ma Goodness* is an example in point:

Ma Goodness, she's coming a —
 skipetty skoppetty
 skipetty skoppetty
 skipetty skoppetty

... Pop Corn, he's a-coming a —
 hippetty hoppetty
 hippetty hoppetty
 hippetty hoppetty.

... A chippetty choppetty
 mippetty moppetty
 snippetty snoppetty
 bippetty boppetty
 flippetty floppetty
 Together they go a — lippetty, loppetty . . .
 (pp. 1-20).

Children might benefit from clapping the rhythm as they go chanting along with the teacher. Later they might determine how many claps are needed for each nonsense word. To extend into the spelling-reading domain children might be encouraged to write the first part of each word they hear; e.g., "skip" from the word "skippetty."

A variation for slightly older children involves setting music to some of the refrains from the story, e.g.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in a single system. Each staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 6/8 time signature. The melody is simple and repetitive, consisting of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across two notes. The lyrics are: "THEY CATCH A HORSE GO A-CLIPPETTY CLOPPETTY CATCH A HORSE GO A- CLIPPETTY CLOPPETTY PREACHER HE WEDS THEM A- LIPPETTY LOPPETTY ALL DOWN THE HILL".

Other verses may be introduced emphasizing the difference between a happy section and a sad section (e.g., the wedding and the funeral).

This involves making decisions of how many notes are needed (if the teacher feels uncomfortable about music notation, lines representing word parts are equally effective). At this stage accent is logically stressed.

Another interesting variation involves giving children a suggested scene and producing appropriate refrains. For example, one child when given the suggestion "Pop Corn had a cold" produced the following version:

Pop Corn, he's a-blowing his nose
 a-sniffetty, snoffetty
 blippetty, bloppetty,
 blippetty, bloppetty.

Ma Goodness, comes a mippetty, moppety
 mippetty, moppety.

*Structural Elements As Models for
 Children's Writing*

There is much to be said for using literature to provide basic models on which children can base their own productions. Using fairly well-defined guidelines and structures as a basis for the beginning composer or artist is quite acceptable, if not desirable. There is no reason why these models cannot be employed in children's writing. Good beginning models are the ones that have repetitive elements or refrains. A further consideration is a plot structure that is very obvious. Kipling's *Just So Stories* lend themselves well to this kind of activity. Some of the Eskimo legends like "The Owl and the Lemming" are good. Some of the old traditional tales like "Henny Penny" or "The House That Jack Built" provide a very well-defined structure. It is often helpful for the teacher to work out a story with a group or class before they are "turned loose" on the task.

Summary

I have outlined a mere sampling of activities that can be correlated with children's literature. I haven't begun to tap the possibilities for developing prediction, main idea, inferential skills and so on and on. I believe, though, that the sampling is sufficient to illustrate the tremendous wealth of material waiting to be tapped for the enjoyment of kids and for the development of skills—a nice compromise between learning to read and reading to enjoy.

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