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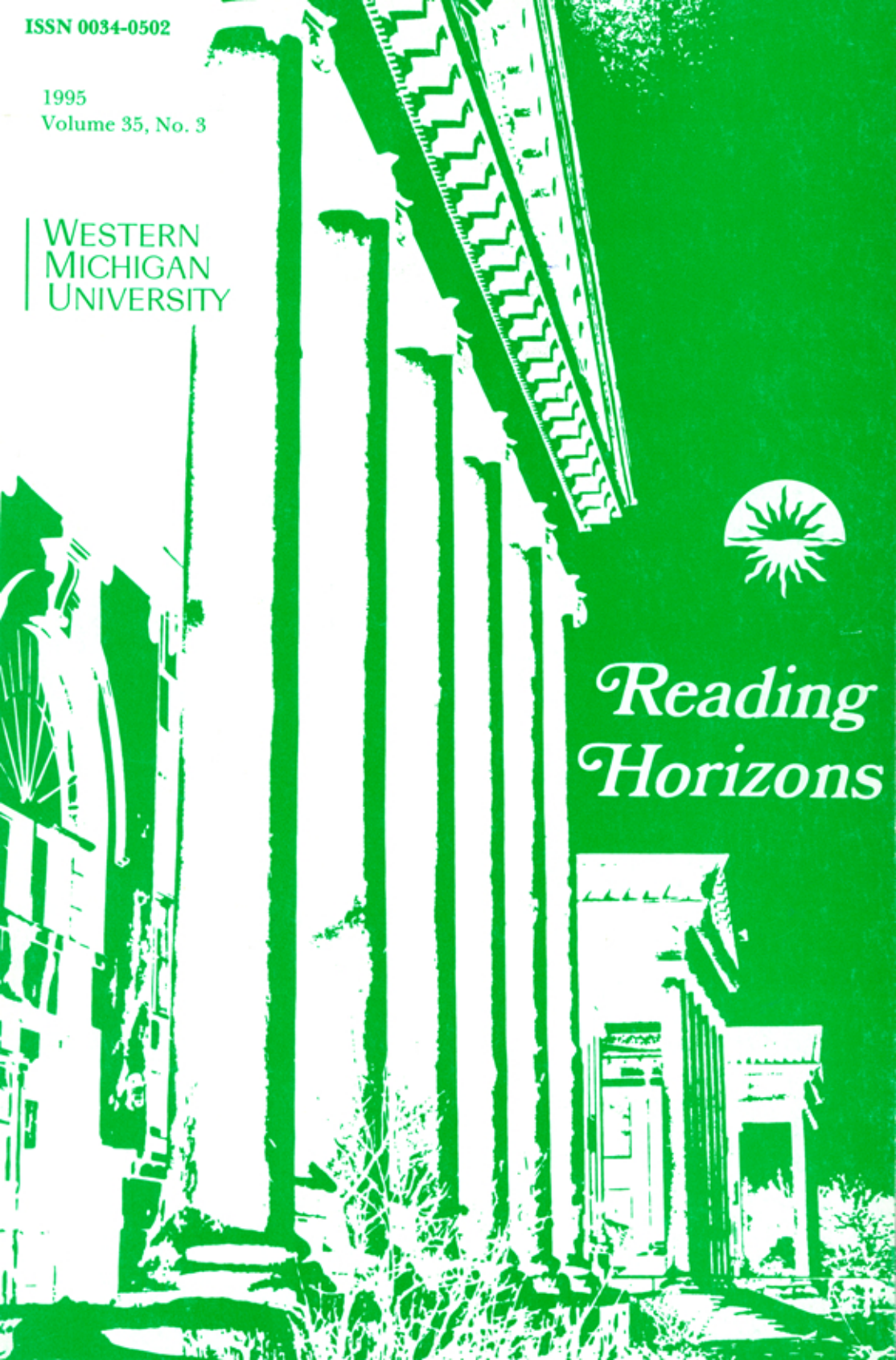
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# *Reading Horizons*







## **READING HORIZONS**

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# **Looking Into the Mirror: Chinese Children's Responses to Chinese Children's Books**

**Meei-Ling Liaw**

As educators are learning to relate whole language theory and philosophy to literature-based instruction, children's books are finding their way into reading classrooms (Pace, 1991). Not only has literature-based instruction become a common theme in recent national conferences and journals in the field of reading but the use of literature has also been mandated in some places (English-Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, 1987). Significantly more classroom teachers are adopting children's books for literacy instruction than previously (Harris, 1993).

The use of children's books has also made an impact on the education of minority children. Educators are exploring ways to integrate children's literature into a multicultural classroom (Martinez and Nash, 1990; Sassar, 1992). Allen (1989) claimed that by acquiring the language of children's books, minority children can gain access to intensive knowledge and language models which facilitate academic success. Spears (1990) examined the cultural dimensions of reader response among poor and working-class African-American students and concluded that the reading of culturally conscious texts can provide a bridge upon which both African-American

and European-American adolescent readers may build and ultimately expand their literacy experiences.

Because of the increasing use of multicultural children's literature, researchers are noticing the cultural elements in the responses toward literary text. Sims (1983) investigated a ten-year-old African-American girl's responses to thirty books with African-American characters. Sims found that her subject responded positively to experiences similar to hers, to distinctly African-American cultural experiences, and to African-American female characters with whom she could identify; unfavorable responses were due to books that she considered boring and to events in which African-American characters were denied human dignity or treated unjustly. Sims suggested that more research should be done on responses to literature for or about African-Americans from African-American and non-African-American youth and from elementary school-age children.

Echoing Sims' (1983) plea for more research on minority children's responses to children's literature, Grice and Vaughn (1992) conducted an interview-based study with thirteen African-American and Anglo third graders to determine whether or not the children appreciated 20 culturally conscious and 4 "melting pot" books. They found that the paucity of knowledge and understanding of African and African-American studies robbed the children of the ability to embrace certain books. They argued that news media and textbooks have created a negative perception of African culture and tradition, and that such misconceptions have prevented children from appreciating books with African cultural themes; merely purchasing these books for a school or public library or even reading and discussing them in class does not ensure that the literature will fulfill its intended purposes.



The study by Mikkelsen (1990) demonstrated how differently non-mainstream children respond to children's books. Mikkelsen examined the storymaking of eight African-American children from working class families. She found that neither were the children simply reciting the stories nor were they merely creating stories of their own; they were making stories out of stories that they had encountered in literature or experienced in life. In other words, through storytelling, non-mainstream children's personal experiences were translated into dramatic form and enriched the literary pictures in the stories. Based on the study results, Mikkelsen suggested that teachers should stop imposing mainstream culture on minority children and listen to them, so the children could grow more as themselves.

Based on the literature reviewed, it seems that many questions remain despite the increased presence of multicultural children's books in the classroom for purposes such as fostering literacy skills, increasing multicultural sensitivity and awareness, and cultivating self-concept and minority pride (Early, 1990; Rasinski and Padak, 1990). We still have a very limited understanding about how minority children respond to these books, what type of multicultural books can be considered as authentic, and what constitutes a quality multicultural book. Evidently, more studies are needed to draw instructional implications. The rationale of this study, therefore, was two-fold. First, it was the purpose of this study to add to the literature of minority children's responses to multicultural children's books. The few studies investigating minority children's responses have been limited to children from African-American backgrounds. Hardly any research has been done on other minority groups. The literary responses of Chinese children, a rapidly growing minority population in the United States, await close examination. The second purpose of this study was to report whether a

group of Chinese children could appreciate some well-known Chinese children's books. The study was intended to provide insight into how a group of Chinese children interpreted well-known Chinese children's stories and whether they drew personal relevance from these stories.

## Method

**Subjects.** The subjects for this study were eleven Chinese children living in a southwest suburban community in the United States, where half of the population was affiliated with a university. This group of children came mainly from families whose parents were graduate students or university faculty members. The children included two six-year-olds, one seven-year-old, four eight-year-olds, and four ten-year-olds. The selection of subjects was based on their proximity to the researcher so consistent interaction with the children could be accomplished. All children attended community Chinese schools on Sundays and spoke both Chinese and English fluently. Three of the children were born in the United States and the other eight children had lived in the States for three to four years. When asked what types of books were their favorites, they gave titles such as *The Berenstain Bears*, *Donald Duck Treasury*, *The Funny Little Woman*, and *The Secret Garden*. All of these books are popular American children's books.

**Materials.** The books selected were stories written for younger readers and contained protagonists approximating the age of the children in the study. A total of three books was chosen. The titles of the three books were *Lon Po Po* by Ed Young, *Tikki Tikki Tembo* by Arlene Mosel, and *I Hate English* by Ellen Levine. (For synopses of the stories, see the appendix.) *Lon Po Po* was chosen because of its familiar theme to children. It was expected that the children would not have problems understanding the story because of the

similarities between *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Lon Po Po*. *Tikki Tikki Tembo* distorts the Chinese custom of choosing names for children and depicts Chinese parents treating their children differently according to birth order. It was the researcher's intention to see if the children would pick up the misrepresentation of Chinese culture while reading the book. *I Hate English* was chosen because it describes the difficulty experienced by the protagonist, Mei Mei, in acquiring English; since most of the children were born overseas, the book could provide a scenario of personal relevance for the children.

**Procedure.** Data were collected in two settings. In the first setting, eight children responded to the stories. The story books were brought into the children's Chinese classrooms, the teacher read to the children, and the children responded to questions in writing. In the second setting, three children were invited to the researcher's house to read these story books on their own and then wrote their responses to the questions. In both settings, the children were informed that the reading was for enjoyment and they could answer the questions freely. Questions asked were to elicit responses regarding the children's comprehension of, involvement with, and evaluation of the stories. They included: What was the book about? Could the story or any of the characters be real? Could you be in this story? Did you like the book — why or why not? The questions were asked in the same order for all children.

## Results

**Comprehension of the stories.** Questions were asked to find out if these children had comprehended the stories or if there were any obstacles preventing these children from understanding the stories. To answer such questions, the children summarized the stories in brief sentences and the answers sometimes involved partial or selected retelling of the

stories. Answers to *Lon Po Po* were "it's about a wolf and three children;" "the book is about a wolf that pretended to be the grandma Po Po;" and "it was about a wolf who tried to eat three children." The answers reflected a basic comprehension of the major plots. Only one child answered "The wolf's heart was broken" — an answer which did not cover the whole storyline but was a scene described in the story. Answers to *I Hate English* followed the same pattern. Typically children summarized the story as "a girl who hated English" or "a Chinese girl learned to speak English."

Answers to *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, however, were more diversified. The answers ranged from an answer as simple as "it's about Tikki Tikki Tembo" to selected retelling of the story — such as "it was a story about two children who fell into a well," and "the story was about a well and the children and an old man." Some children focused their attention on the action part of the story and wrote "it's about an old man who rescued two children," and "it's Tikki and Chang's adventure story." Two children seemed to be concerned about the moral of the story and wrote, "it's about listening to your mother or something might happen," and "this story is about the two children that went to a well when their mother told them not to and they fell in the well." Finally, one child answered that the story was about "why Chinese people gave short names to children instead of long names."

**Involvement with the stories through realism.** When asked if they thought the stories or any of the characters could be real, the children answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. Some gave further explanations. Only three children thought that the stories of *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* could be real. They reasoned that the story of *Lon Po Po* couldn't be real because "the wolf can't get into a basket, it can't knock on the door and get into the bed, and a wolf cannot talk." The

children argued that Tikki Tikki Tembo couldn't be a real person because "no one could hold his nose in the water for such a long time" and no one could be as stupid as Tikki Tikki Tembo because "he could have turned the bucket in the well the other way and stood on it to keep his nose above the water" (the child was referring to a picture illustrating that Tikki Tikki Tembo sat on a bucket inside the well with his nose immersed in the water). The very few children who agreed that *Tikki Tikki Tembo* could be a real story thought so because "there could have been two boys that didn't listen to their mother and fell into a well" and "there could be a mother that has two boys that didn't listen to her."

Of the three books, *I Hate English* was considered the most realistic. Most of the children believed a story like that could happen in real life. They reasoned that "there are people who act like Mei Mei."

**Involvement through identification.** The majority of the children could not identify themselves in the three stories. The reason why they could not be in *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* was because the stories were not real to them and "I always listened to my mother." Why they couldn't be in *I Hate English* was because "I never hated English." Interestingly, one child identified herself in the story *I Hate English* because the girl in the story had long hair like hers.

**Evaluation of the stories.** Most children responded positively to the three books. The children seemed to like stories that had happy endings. For example, they responded to *Lon Po Po* that "I like the story because the wolf was dead" or "the wolf died. His heart broke into pieces."

The children seemed to be very concerned about drawing morals from the stories. Answers such as the following were typical: in response to *Tikki Tikki Tembo* one said, "it taught you a lesson that you should listen to your mom or you might get into trouble;" in response to *Lon Po Po*, one said, "I like the book because the story has a lesson to be told;" and, in response to *I Hate English*, one said, "I like the book because it tells children not to be scared when you move."

The illustrations also played a part when the children determined whether they liked the books or not. Several of the children responded that they liked the books because of the beautiful pictures in them. One child wrote, "the pictures are pretty and artistic" in response to *Lon Po Po*. Another child wrote, "the pictures look like real," also referring to the illustrations in *Lon Po Po*.

The children also gave generic comments. For instance, one wrote, "I found it very interesting," in response to *Lon Po Po*. Another wrote, "it was funny" in response to *I Hate English*. The other child wrote, "it was exciting," in response to *Tikki Tikki Tembo*.

Cultural elements, however, elicited contradictory responses in terms of the judgment of the book *Tikki Tikki Tembo*. One child pointed out that she liked the book because "there is a lot of things about China." On the other hand, another child criticized that the book "said many things that was not true about China."

Some children had difficulties appreciating the story *I Hate English*. One child did not put down any comments about the story but crossed out the title of the book and changed it to *I Like English*. Most children reported that learning English was easy for them.

## Limitations

It is obvious that there were limitations to the study. First of all, the number of subjects involved in the study was limited. Had more subjects been involved in the study, the responses might have been more varied. Secondly, the number of books read by the children was small. These books only represented a small spectrum of the Chinese children's books available.

Despite the limitations of the study, several interesting results were found. These children were able to go beyond the comprehension of the stories at the literal level and to draw personal relevance. They not only recited the stories accurately but also retold the parts which most impressed them. They responded that the stories were quite adventurous and there were lessons to be learned from them. This finding corroborated the reader response theory that the young child is an active constructor of language and is capable of inference and abstract thought (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The children found the stories of *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* unrealistic and *I Hate English* to be very realistic. This result could be due to the genre of the stories. *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* both were folktales of what happened "a long, long time ago." *Lon Po Po* was a fantasy which contained elements that could not happen in the natural world. Although *Tikki Tikki Tembo* did not contain supernatural events, the exotic setting and absurdity of the story might have caused the children to disbelieve. On the other hand, *I Hate English* was contemporary realistic fiction in which the story was more likely to happen to real people. The children, thus, found it quite real. However, when asked if they could be in the stories, the children exhibited the same kind of detachment from all three books. This is probably due

to the fact that their experience in learning English as a second language was a different one from that of the protagonist in *I Hate English*. This difference in experience also seemed to affect their rating of the books. *I Hate English* was the least liked among the three books. This finding seems to be in congruence with Purves and Beach's (1972) research findings that readers tend to turn away from works with which they can't identify.

The children's response to *Tikki Tikki Tembo* is an issue that deserves further discussion. The children have demonstrated an array of interpretations of the major theme in the story. Out of the eleven children, only a ten-year-old pointed out that it was about why Chinese had short names and that the cultural representation about Chinese in the story was inaccurate. One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that these children were not yet mature enough to possess the cultural sensitivity to detect the inappropriate depiction of Chinese customs and people in the book. As Galda (1982) and other researchers (Cullinan, Harwood, and Galda, 1983) have suggested, developmental maturity of the reader has an influence on the responses to text. It would be a worthwhile effort to have a group of older children respond to *Tikki Tikki Tembo* and compare the responses to those of this group. In addition, the length of stay in the United States could also be a factor affecting the responses. The ten-year-old who pointed out the inaccurate cultural information in *Tikki Tikki Tembo* happened to have stayed in the U.S. for the least amount of time (i.e., three years) among the eleven children. There is a possibility that the child had more exposure to Chinese culture and possessed more understanding of the native culture than did other children.

Most of the children involved in this study were very concerned about learning a lesson from the stories and



abiding by filial piety. Although these children were informed that the reading was for sheer enjoyment, they might already have adopted certain attitudes through prior reading experiences. Harris (1993) points out that adults have never perceived reading literature as simply for the pleasure for children:

*Historically, it has served socialization, educational, and moral functions — it was something that was good for children or taught them a lesson. Although proponents of literature-based approaches assert that pleasure and entertainment principles should become an integral component of the approach, the exhortation is typically paired with other functions (p. 277).*

For this reason, the children have presumed that they needed to learn something from the stories to meet adults' expectations of a good reader. Nevertheless, since this group of children were all Chinese, the concern for filial piety might have been a culturally specific phenomenon. Chinese culture places filial piety as the highest virtue and it wouldn't be a surprise that the parents of these children have emphasized the importance of this virtue to them. However, further study will be needed if such conclusions are to be drawn.

In summary, this study seems to have raised more questions than it has answered. There is no doubt that literature-based instruction has its merits. However, how to reap the full benefit of using children's literature in the classroom is still a topic that deserves exploration. If we agree that literature cannot be divorced from the social and cultural milieus that engender it, reading children's literature is a lot more complicated than just comprehending the text. The issue gets even more complex when cultural stereotypes, false claims about the minority heritage, or inaccurate presentation of cultural information occur in children's literature.

Multicultural children's literature does not necessarily reflect the true images of minority culture. Although researchers have started to examine children's responses to multicultural children's books in terms of cultural authenticity and involvement, the number of studies is still small. More research on minority children's responses to literature is evidently needed. This study has revealed that Chinese children's responses to Chinese children's books are diversified, which corroborates the reader response theory that "a single, authoritative interpretation of a text does not exist but that a range of interpretations are possible" (Harris, 1993, p. 283). This study also revealed several culturally related issues such as cultural sensitivity and its relationship to age difference and the influence of traditional cultural values on readers' responses. As the Chinese population is increasing rapidly in the United States and Chinese and Chinese-American literature is becoming more available than before, studies on this group of children's literary responses are needed in order to help educators shape their literacy instruction programs.

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## APPENDIX

Levine, A. (1989). *I Hate English!* A story about a Chinese girl, Mei Mei, who moved from Hong Kong to New York. She resisted speaking English at first but was then able to feel comfortable speaking both Chinese and English because of an understanding English teacher. NY: Scholastic.

Young, E. (1989). *Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood story from China*. The Chinese version of the *Little Red Riding Hood*. A mother went to the grandmother's house and left her three children at home. A big bad wolf, dressed up as the grandmother, tried to get into the house to eat up the children. The three children outwitted the wolf and saved their own lives. This book was the 1990 Caldecott Medal winner. NY: Philomel.

Mosel, A. (1971). *Tikki Tikki Tembo*. A story about why Chinese people name their children with short names instead of long ones. A long time ago, Chinese parents named their first born sons great long names. A child named Tikki Tikki Tembo-no Sa Rembo-Chari Bari Ruchi-pip Peri Pembo fell into a well but could not be rescued immediately because his younger brother was not able to say his name well. Although Tikki Tikki Tembo was finally saved, the people learned the lesson never to give their children long names.



# Using Action Research To Assess Instruction

Carole Schulte Johnson  
Inga Kromann-Kelly

For years teachers have used self assessment as one way to improve the learning environment in their classrooms. Such assessment, however, tended to be of a private, nonsystematic nature and often was not clearly focused on a central question. Today more and more teachers are developing and experiencing an organized approach to classroom inquiry, known as action research, a concept which has evolved over the past several years. This approach entails stepping back from the immediate concern in order to gain a broader perspective on a problem; then collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data on the basis of a defined plan, and often sharing the results with professional colleagues.

Rather than formulating complex research procedures, perhaps best left to experts, we recommend beginning action research by answering these five basic questions: 1) What is the main question I am interested in pursuing? 2) What data are relevant? 3) What specific data will be collected, and how? 4) How will the data be analyzed? 5) What interpretations or implications can be drawn from the data?

## **The question**

Teachers often have several questions they wish to explore; however, in order to keep the research manageable you

as a teacher embarking on action research need to decide your basic or most important question. Limited questions related to what you are doing in your classroom, such as "Are my students learning from this strategy?" or "What strategies do students use most successfully in performing some particular task?" work well for action research. For example, suppose we are interested in learning more about our students' attitude toward reading. We realize that various elements of the literacy program probably affect those attitudes so our basic question could be "How do the students feel about the different methods and materials used in the literacy program?"

## Collecting data

Data can be gathered from transactions/interactions, products and cued or structured responses. Figure 1, while not all inclusive, suggests various sources of data within each category.

Triangulation of data (using at least three different data sources) is recommended. The value of using triangulation is in analyzing the question from several different viewpoints. For instance, one data set could be from each of the three categories on the chart or from two of the three categories. If only three data sources are used, it is recommended that no more than one cued or structured response source be included since these data usually are collected only at specific points of time, thus limiting the information to the context of those times.

When the different data sources are congruent, the acceptance of the results is strengthened. Conflicting data raise questions such as: Should other types of data sets have been used? Should some data sources carry more weight — for example, were the cued responses too structured or answered to please the teacher? Would it be valuable to refine or do additional research on this question?

**Figure 1**  
***Data Sources***

	<i>From Teacher</i>	<i>From Students</i>
Transactions/ Interactions	Field/observation/anecdotal notes  Video/audio tapes	Video/audio tapes
Products		Written products  Artifacts  Open-ended interviews  Open-ended conferences
Cued/Structured Responses	Ratings  Checklists  Tally of behaviors	Tests  Questionnaires  Attitude measures  Structured interviews  Structured conferences  Writing/work samples  Checklists  Ratings  Logs

We make decisions regarding the specific data to collect on the basis of its importance in seeking answers to the question and also the feasibility of collecting and analyzing it. In general, quantifiable data take less time to collect and analyze; however, meaningful data are not always readily quantifiable. While importance and feasibility are basic, other aspects are considered. Using excessive class, student and/or teacher time is avoided by collecting data from ongoing class activities such as journals and portfolios, the taping of class or small

group activities as well as from brief cued or structured responses.

Unless individual conferences are part of the ongoing program and the data to be collected a normal part of the conferences, they may not be a feasible source of information. However, if a second person is available or only a small subset of students is involved, individual conferences become a possibility.

Another consideration is that students may tell teachers what they think the teacher wants to hear when cued or structured responses are obtained face-to-face. Responses on paper may be similarly biased, but such data-gathering instruments are generally viewed as providing a degree of anonymity.

When teacher observations are used, consideration is given to how structured and systematic they will be. Ways to provide structure include using a checklist of behaviors (e.g., answering, volunteering, getting out of seat) and keeping a tally of the number of times a behavior occurs, or by describing behavior at set time intervals. Audio/videotaping of an on-going class activity is an example of an unstructured observation. Systematic observations are made on a regular basis such as daily or weekly. The data can be taped; however, if teacher notes are used, it is recommended they be written daily. Less systematic observations are those noted occasionally, when the teacher has time or when something strikes the teacher as important to note.

When writing notes, we need to remind ourselves that we see what we expect, so there is danger of bias. For example, as teachers, we know that certain of our students love to read while others do not. Thus, in examining attitudes, we are



more inclined to note student behaviors which confirm what we already believe than those which conflict with our expectations.

Each source of data requires decisions on the part of the teacher. With materials such as journals, portfolios, or tapes, you decide what data to include and then structure the class or group so it can be collected. When a checklist or questionnaire is involved, you decide its content and how students (or teacher) will respond. Among the possibilities for such instruments are open ended questions or statements, items for the respondent to check off, or some type of rating system.

If you use a rating scale, you need to decide whether it will be an even numbered scale, thus avoiding a neutral position, or an odd numbered one which includes it. A two or three point scale is simpler for students in the primary grades; a five to seven point scale is common in upper grades and has the advantage of identifying subtle differences. Common terms for labeling points on a scale are *agree/disagree*, *like most/like least*, or 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*highest*).

A simple format is helpful. Present the ratings at the top of the page; then list the items below with a blank for the number rating in front of each item. With instruments such as this, it is important to remind the students that you really want to know what they think so their opinions can be considered in making decisions about materials or procedures. From whom will student data be collected — the entire class, a small group or groups of students, individuals or some combination? For our research on student attitudes, we prefer information from the class rather than from selected representative students. The latter may well provide the

spectrum of attitudes regarding reading, but not its strength related to specific methods or materials.

In examining student attitudes toward reading, the feelings of students constitute important and relevant data. To collect such information, we might use informal teacher observations, preferably collected on a regular basis, and student records of books and pages read daily and brief comments or reactions to what they have read. All of these items are easily obtained as a normal part of classroom activity.

Additionally, we would include a questionnaire asking students to rate what they think about each of the different literacy materials and activities used in the program. If many items are included, the questionnaire can be divided into several parts. Class discussion of the results would provide a useful source of additional information. Neither activity would take an inordinate amount of time and the findings could result in an improved curriculum. Our questionnaire requires limited teacher preparation time since it only involves developing a list of the materials and activities used, deciding their order as well as the kind of rating scale to use, and formatting the instrument.

### **Analyzing and interpreting data**

When analyzing data, teachers may want information about the class as a whole, about individual children, or about certain subgroups. Subgroups might include students at certain achievement levels, such as above grade level, at grade level, students with special needs, boys at different achievement levels, or girls at different ones. When data are kept for each student, teachers can decide at any time what individuals or subgroups they may wish to study.

Some of the data teachers gather are quantifiable and can be analyzed without the use of statistics. Under some circumstances, statistical analyses show significance with only small differences in raw data, and such results may not be particularly useful. For example, knowing the percent of the class rating an item *very low* or *highest* may be more important for your consideration in curriculum change. Again, it is the teacher who must interpret the data and decide what is meaningful. What do the results mean in your classroom? How do they answer your original question? Were they what you expected? Any surprises? What was successful or not successful?

Our questionnaire regarding student opinion about materials and activities can best be summarized with tables for the class and for each subgroup. We would list the materials and activities in a column with the ratings listed across the top. Then for each item, the percent choosing the rating is listed.

To interpret the tables, we would consider the class or group distribution across the continuum: Were responses concentrated at one end of the continuum? Were there gross differences such as a large group at each end of the continuum, or was there a fairly even distribution across it? If the distribution is mainly at one end, we would decide what percent of the class or group to consider significant in our decision making: it might be 40 percent, 1/3, 1/4 or whatever we feel is appropriate. For example, if 40 percent of students rate something *very low* while few or no students rate it *highest*, or the reverse, that clearly is important information.

Data which are not readily quantifiable, such as that from logs, journals, informal observations, conferences or tapes of class activities, are usually reviewed by teachers so they can pull out what appear to be trends, major ideas, or

important elements related to the question at hand. If these data are collected over a period of time, or if the material is extensive, it will need to be reviewed periodically, and preferably over a time frame which allows for reflection. This is an important and valuable process because it often leads to further insights and refinements. In general, for non-quantified data, we would review all the categories and subcategories and draw conclusions related to the original question. The conclusions may be firm or tentative. In either case, it is important to consider whether data from other sources agree with it. Informal observations, anecdotal notes, and class discussion of results are used to confirm, disconfirm or raise questions about findings from the rest of the data.

In the case of our question about students' attitudes, we would review teacher observations and anecdotal notes as well as student logs for indication of feelings about reading, positive, negative, or general reactions indicating that students are or are not involved with their reading. While we would start with categories such as *positive* and *negative*, as the data collection grows we would expect subcategories to develop. For example, we might subcategorize aspects related to writing, to self-selected reading, to assigned reading, or to informational reading. Categories are flexible and can change as we continue to review the data. Which categories make sense and help answer the question? How do these data fit with the results of the questionnaire?

Finally, we would review the data as a whole. What is supported by all data sources? What is partially supported? Is anything not supported? What conclusions do you draw?

We piloted a questionnaire in a fourth grade class which used both trade books and children's literature. The results indicated that boys and girls were quite similar in their high

and low ratings, as were the readers who were mature, on-grade level or special needs readers. However, when we looked at the groups of items rated *high* or *low*, we noticed those rated *low* tended to be the type of activities associated with the basal while those rated *high* were those traditionally considered enrichment activities. In terms of materials, with the exception of the special needs readers, all rated using literature books higher than using basals. The students in the class willingly informed us why they responded as they did. In general, the special needs readers felt they could handle the grade level basal but with literature books they had trouble keeping pace with others in their groups, and in some cases with the vocabulary as well.

Since there was nothing in teacher notes or student logs to contradict this, we would use literature books as the core of the literacy program, avoiding "basalizing" them by incorporating writing and enrichment activities similar to those suggested by Yopp and Yopp (1992). In selecting and gathering books related to themes or units, we would seek to include books special needs readers would feel successful in using. Then while implementing this program, we'd probably start a new action research project concentrating on the special needs readers.

### **Considerations for involvement in action research**

There are four important factors to consider in planning action research. First, action research requires additional planning time. However, useful and successful projects can be accomplished without consuming an inordinate amount of additional time. Second, action research is improved when teachers discuss the five questions with colleagues because the interaction provides a supportive environment which helps clarify and solidify thinking regarding the project. Sharing ideas and suggestions, whether for the same question or

different ones, can be valuable. Colleagues not involved in action research also can provide helpful insights.

Third, teachers undertaking action research should be aware that expectations affect what we see and how we interpret data. Triangulation of data is helpful as are our awareness of this effect, discussion with others as the research evolves, and an effort on our part to be open to alternative explanations as well as to surprises in the data. Finally, teachers can use the results of action research in their classrooms. Action research can improve the teaching/learning process in classrooms by reinforcing, modifying and/or changing perceptions based solely on more informal techniques such as non-systematic observations.

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# **How Parents' Perceptions of Literacy Acquisition Relate To Their Children's Emerging Literacy Knowledge**

**Jim Anderson**

There is increasing recognition that literacy learning is a sociocultural phenomenon and that the ways in which the learning is mediated, the meanings which are ascribed to literacy, and the literacy activities in which members of a cultural group engage are determined by the beliefs and values held by the participants (Clay, 1993). For example, in her work with three different cultural groups in the southeastern United States, Heath (1983) documented qualitative differences between the early literacy experiences of working class children and their middle class counterparts. Tracking the children's literacy development in school, she found that the middle class children whose early literacy experiences approximated the experiences which they subsequently encountered in school were successful; working class children whose preschool literacy experiences were not congruent with those at school experienced difficulty and failure and consequently dropped out of school.

Shapiro investigated relationships between home literacy environment and the early literacy knowledge of

preschoolers attending the University of British Columbia Child Study Center and who came from an upper middle class socioeconomic area of Vancouver. He found differences in the home literacy environments and differences in children's early literacy knowledge even within this homogeneous population. An earlier study of the perceptions of literacy learning held by parents of preschoolers who attend the U.B.C. Child Study Center, found that parents' beliefs fall along a continuum; while some parents held beliefs that are congruent with an emergent literacy paradigm, others held much more traditional beliefs.

Another line of research with school age children has shown that the beliefs which teachers hold about literacy learning influence how they teach literacy (Bondy, 1985; Deford, 1978) and that children subsequently develop beliefs about literacy learning which are congruent with those of their teachers (Rasinski and Deford, 1988). As well, some researchers and theorists (Fitzgerald, 1993) have argued that when there is conflict between literacy learning at home and at school, children's literacy learning may be jeopardized. And while Heath's work lends support to this position, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that the impoverished inner-city children in their study were successful in learning to read and write despite the lack of harmony between literacy learning at home and at school.

The purpose of this article is to report the findings of a study designed to investigate the relationships between the beliefs which parents hold about literacy learning and their children's early literacy knowledge and their perceptions of learning to read and to write. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions: 1) Do three and four year old children hold beliefs about learning to read and write consistent with the beliefs of their parents; and 2) Are there differences



in early literacy knowledge between children whose parents believe in a traditional readiness model of learning to read and write and children whose parents believe in an emergent literacy orientation?

## Subjects

The sample consisted of 16 three and four year old children who attended the U.B.C. Child Study Center and whose parents were the subjects of the research on parents' perceptions about literacy learning referred to earlier. Eight children were from the group whose parents held views more consistent with an emergent literacy paradigm and eight were from the group whose parents held more traditional views.

## Instruments

**Home Literacy Environment Index (HLEI).** Initially designed by Shapiro (1979) as a 16 item questionnaire "designed to elicit information regarding the literacy environment and interaction with literacy materials in the home" (Reeder and Shapiro, 1993, p. 5), the index was used as an interview guide in this study. The answers were coded using a Likert-like scale.

**Parents' Perceptions of Literacy Learning Interview Schedule (PPLLIS).** This instrument, somewhat similar to Deford's Theoretical Orientation Profile, is a 33-item interview guide developed by the author. A review of the literature revealed a number of salient features of emergent literacy (e.g., children use inventive spelling as they begin to write) which were then reformulated into questions (e.g. "should you correct your child if she wrote *kt* for the word *cat*?) and grouped thematically into reading, writing and literacy-general. Two university professors whose expertise is in early literacy reviewed the instrument to establish face validity and content validity. The instrument was then administered to a

class of 40 senior undergraduate primary education students who had studied emergent literacy in-depth in language arts/reading methods courses. Half the students were instructed to answer as if they believed in a traditional readiness orientation while the others were asked to answer as if they subscribed to an emergent literacy view. The answers were then coded as to anticipated responses and a reliability of 95 percent was established.

**Concepts of print test.** This instrument was developed by Clay (1979) to assess children's concepts of print such as book orientation, directionality, concepts of letter and word, and punctuation. Twenty four questions were asked the child as a book (*Sand*) which is part of the battery was being read. Responses on each question were scored 1 or 0 according to explicit instructions on the test.

**Letter identification.** This instrument is part of the Clay (1979) battery. The child was asked to identify in turn 54 upper and lower case letters which were ordered randomly. The child was credited with a correct response for naming the letter, producing an appropriate sound for the letter stimulus (e.g. /b/ for *b*) or indicating a word which has the letter in the initial position in the word.

**Storybook reading reenactment.** This procedure was developed by Sulzby (1985). In this study, all of the children were read *Are You My Mother* (Eastman, 1960) on four occasions by their respective preschool teachers in the month prior to the study. For the enactment, the children were presented with the book and the examiner asked "Would you read this book for me please?" Story book reenactments were scored independently by two raters on an 11-point scale using a classification scheme developed by Sulzby (1985).

**Writing task.** This task used the prompts from Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982). Children were asked to write (print) the following words: 1) the child's name, 2) MOM, 3) DAD, 4) BEAR, and 5) DUCK. Responses on each prompt were scored independently by two raters on a 1-6 scale developed by the author. This scale in part used Chow's (1986) developmental stages and scores were assigned as follows: scribbling and drawing-1; pre-phonetic-2; semi-phonetic-3; phonetic-4; transitional-5 and conventional or mature-6.

**Children's concepts of reading and writing.** Each child was asked four questions: 1) [*Child's name*] Do you know how to read? 2) How do children learn how to read? 3) [*Child's name*] Do you know how to write/print? and 4) How do children learn how to write/print?

## Procedure

In phase one of the study, 25 parents of three and four year old children from the U.B.C. Child Study Center were interviewed by the researcher using the HLEI and the PPLLIS. Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed and coded and it was found that while some parents held views consistent with emergent literacy, others held more traditional views. Furthermore, all of the homes provided a rich literacy environment although there was considerable variation even within this relatively homogeneous population.

In the second phase of the study, five audiotaped interviews using the instruments described earlier were conducted with each child at the Child Study Center by a graduate assistant who is a trained clinician and a doctoral candidate in educational psychology. The audiotaped interviews were then transcribed in their totality by a second graduate assistant and the data were analyzed. To triangulate these data, an attempt was made to contact the parents of each of the children and to

conduct a follow-up interview with them using the protocol in Figure 1. For various reasons, only twelve of the parents were available — seven whose perceptions were congruent with emergent literacy and five whose perceptions were more traditional.

**Figure 1**  
*Follow-up interview protocol*

1. Please describe what you do as you read to and with (child's name). (If no mention is made of drawing child's attention to the text, words, letters, letter-sounds, probe to see if this occurs.)
2. Do you encourage (child's name) to read along with you?  
Do you encourage child to read on his or her own?
3. Does (child's name) "pretend" read? If so, do you refer to this as reading?
4. Do you help (child's name) with writing? What do you do to help (child's name) with writing?
5. Does (child's name) try to write/print messages or scribble? Do you refer to this as writing?

## Results

The results for this study are presented under two headings: children's literacy knowledge and children's perceptions of literacy.

**Children's literacy knowledge.** To facilitate data analysis, the children were grouped on the basis of their parents' score on the PPLLIS. The eight children whose parents' scores were above the mean were designated the Emergent Literacy Group while those whose parents' scores were below the mean were designated the Traditional Group.

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**Table 1**  
*Means for age and literacy measures*

	Age	Letter	Concept	Story	Writing	HLEI	PPLLIS
Emergent	4-2	16	5.25	3.9	9	60.5	31.1
Traditional	4-3	22	7.35	4.0	12.75	53	25

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It is important to note here that none of the children knew how to read in the traditional sense of being able to decode print. As can be seen in Table 1, the group means were higher for the children in the traditional group on all of the measures of children's emergent literacy knowledge than they were for the emergent group although only minimally so on the story reenactment task. Although *t*-tests revealed that there are no significant differences between the groups on the various measures, the results are interesting. We would expect perhaps that children whose parents have a more traditional orientation would outperform their peers whose parents have perceptions which are more congruent with an emergent literacy perspective on letter recognition since the former group indicated that as they read to their children, they pointed out and discussed letters and letter sounds whereas the latter group indicated that they emphasized enjoyment while reading and did not draw children's attention to print. However, the opposite would be expected on the story reenactment, writing, and perhaps the concepts of print tasks since these tasks are more congruent with an emergent literacy perspective and measuring those aspects of literacy (e.g., meaning of story, writing) which the parents with an

emergent literacy perspective indicated that they attended to more so than specific skills (e.g., letter-sound relationships, letter formation). Again, though, the means favored the traditional group. It should be noted that the children in the traditional group were on average one month older than the children in the emergent literacy group and age could be a confounding variable with measures such as these.

Of course, whether these differences are of educational significance remains to be seen. For example, despite the fact that the research suggests that knowledge of letters is "the best predictor of beginning reading achievement" (Adams, 1991, p. 55), this might not be so for children at this age. Perhaps it is more important that meaning and enjoyment be the goals of reading for children at this stage so that they will have developed schemata of reading and writing which will allow them to make sense of formal instruction in the more mechanistic aspects upon school entry.

Several of the parents in the emergent literacy group expressed such a position by indicating that the emphasis should be on meaning and enjoyment when they read to their children and that they "do not dwell on words and letters," as one of these parents stated. In fact, some of the parents appeared to believe that attending to print during book reading would be detrimental to the child's literacy development. However, Pellegrini (1991) maintains that "...in the course of reading books, mainstream-culture mothers draw children's attention to grapheme-phoneme relations" (p. 382) and indeed the parents in the traditional group confirm that they did this. Whether this difference in book reading between the groups made a difference in terms of the children's current literacy knowledge and subsequent literacy development remains open to speculation.

**Figure 2**

*Question 1: "(Child's name), do you know how to read?"*

**Emergent Literacy Group:**

M: "No."  
 K: "No."  
 N: "No."  
 I: "No."  
 H: "No."  
 Q: "No."  
 C: "No, but I know how to read this book."  
 E: "Yes."

**Traditional Group**

T: "No."  
 L: "No."  
 A: "Not really. Not the days but only one book."  
 G: "Not lots of books. I just know how to read some."  
 R: "Only that book. And I can read to Jessie and to you but not to anyone else."  
 F: "Yes, I know how to read Brian's books. They're really tiny."  
 Y: "Yes."  
 B: "Yes."

Pearson product moment correlations were computed between the PPLLIS and the other measures excluding the Children's Concepts of Reading and Writing, (The data from this instrument are treated descriptively.) As can be seen in Table 2, only very weak relationships existed between parents' perceptions and the measures of the children's literacy knowledge. On the other hand, there was a strong relationship between parents' perceptions and the home literacy environment. Working with three, four and five year olds, Shapiro (1993) found moderate relationships between home literacy environment and other literacy measures. However,

he found much stronger relationships between home literacy environment and the other measures with the five year olds. Thus, the findings from this study are congruent with those of Shapiro.

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**Table 2**  
*Correlations between parents' perceptions and measures of  
children's literacy knowledge*

	Letter	Concepts	Story	Writing	HLEI
Parent's perceptions	.21	.13	.08	.16	.82

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**Children's perceptions of literacy.** In this section, children's perceptions of literacy are examined. Again, the children were assigned to the emergent literacy group and the traditional group on the basis of their parents' score on the PPLLIS. The responses of the children were then analyzed by grouping them into themes. These were then grouped by an independent rater and an inter-rater reliability of 86 percent was achieved. It should be noted that prior to interviewing the children, it was decided not to probe the children's answers since to do so might lead children into providing responses which they believed the research assistant wanted to hear. Consequently, the children's responses are not elaborated, though a probing interview might have provided valuable insights into the children's perceptions of learning to read and write.

Question 1 (*Do you know how to read?*) was designed to elicit children's perceptions of themselves as readers. That only one child in the emergent literacy group (E) answered this question affirmatively while six of the children (M, K, N, I, H, and O) responded with an unqualified "no" was



unanticipated, for a key assumption underlying emergent literacy is that children's initial attempts at reading — which all of these children were able to engage in to varying degrees in the story reenactment task — are legitimate in their own right (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Intuitively one would expect that these parents whose views about learning to read reflected an emergent literacy orientation would be helping children develop the perception that their early attempts were real reading. On the other hand in the traditional group, only two of the children (T and L) contended that they could not read while the other children saw themselves as readers or as having some ability in this regard. Note "G's" response: "Not lots of books. I just know how to read some." Again, intuitively, one would expect that parents who hold more traditional beliefs would be helping children develop the perception that reading means being able to identify the words on a page and that reading-like behavior (Holdaway, 1979), is not really reading. However, this appeared not to be the case for in the follow-up interviews, all of the parents in both groups indicated that their children engaged in reading-like behavior (Figure 1, Question 2) — of which storybook reenactment would be an example — and all of the parents agreed that they would refer to such "pretend" reading as reading.

There appear to be two viable explanations for this finding. Given the strong correlation between parents' perceptions and home literacy environment reported earlier, we can conclude that the children in the emergent literacy group have experienced a richer literacy environment than the children in the traditional group. Therefore, because of this increased exposure to reading, the children in the emergent group might have a broader view of reading than being able to read particular words or particular books and recognize that they are unable to do this. This finding might also be attributable to the fact that six of the parents of children in the emergent literacy group indicated that they did not draw

attention to words, letters, or letter sounds while reading (Figure 1, Question 1), but instead emphasized meaning and enjoyment in the shared reading.

### Figure 3

#### Question 2: "How do children learn how to read?"

##### Emergent Literacy Group

- M: "I don't know. (Inaudible) big child's. By learning — I don't know what they do."  
 O: "I don't know. Grownups know how to read."  
 E: "They read books. They read writing and they read Valentines."  
 N: "By practicing. I'm looking at books and by my Mommy and daddy. Their mommy and daddy reading books to them."  
 H: "People teach them. They can read them stories. They can help each other. They can read a book again."  
 K: "T-I-S-N-P-C-W. We read a book *Cat in the Hat*."  
 C: "My brother was teaching me. [He] tells me."  
 I: "They just try to spell something and it's a word and maybe if they try they can spell *hat* or *bat* or *milk*. They learn their letters. They go to school and they learn to sing songs."

##### Traditional Group

- A: "Oh I know how to spell *arm*, *cat* and *dog*. I know how to spell my sister's and mom's and dad's and my nanny's names... I don't know... Maybe [they] listen to [their] mother reading a book and [they] remembered the words."  
 T: "They got so smart. He got some books from school and he knows what they spell."  
 F: "They learn at school."  
 L: "I don't know — just at school (inaudible) just with my teacher (inaudible) reads a book."  
 R: "Because they can watch their mothers how they do it. They can even learn without their mothers sometimes. They think how you do it."  
 G: "They just read — keep reading until they learn how to read the right words. They're just reading wrong words and they're reading some of the right words, more right words, more right, and finally they learn to read all the right words."  
 Y: "By writing. I learned to read by writing my name."  
 B: "A-B-C. They go home and watch the video & learn their A-B-C."

In addition, three of these parents indicated that they did not encourage their children to join in the reading. On the other hand, three of the five parents of children in the traditional group indicated that they usually drew children's attention to words, letters and letter sounds as they read and the other two parents indicated that they sometimes did so. Three of these parents also reported that they had their children practice letter identification and symbol-sound relationships on computer programs. As well, all five of these parents indicated that they encouraged their children to join in as they read.

Thus, the tendency of these children to see themselves as readers could be attributable to the mediation of print by the parents in combination with the encouragement to join in the reading, whereas the relative lack of mediation of print and less emphasis on overt participation by the parents of the children in the emergent group could account for the fact that fewer of these children saw themselves as readers.

The second question was designed to ascertain what children perceive about learning to read. The perceptions of the children were generally congruent with those of their parents. As can be seen in Figure 3, reading books was identified by four of the children (E, N, H, and K) in the emergent literacy group as the means by which children learn to read. As well, three children (N, H, and C) recognized the role of a significant other. The research in emergent literacy has demonstrated that being read to by a significant other plays an important role in children's early literacy development. These children, whose parents subscribe to this model of learning to read and who actualize this model through the experiences they provide for their children, appeared to be developing perceptions congruent with those of their parents. Only one

child (I) from the emergent group suggested that learning to read entails learning letters and spelling.

**Figure 4**

*Question 3: "(Child's Name), do you know how to write?"*

**Emergent Literacy Group**

- E. "Yes."  
 K. "Yes."  
 N: "Yes."  
 I: "Yes."  
 C: "Yes."  
 M: "No. I know how to write my own name."  
 H: "No."  
 O: "No."

**Traditional Group**

- Y: "Yes."  
 B: "Yes."  
 G: "I know how to write some words."  
 R: "I can write a bit."  
 F: "Only some words. I can write *J*, I can write *fox*."  
 A: "Well, I tried to copy a love card I was giving to my friend but I couldn't copy it. (Inaudible) so hard. I know how to write my name."  
 L: "No."  
 T: "No."

Of course, learning letters and spelling are regarded as important within an emergent literacy model. However, the primacy which this child afforded this knowledge seems to suggest a more traditional perception of reading on her part. Children in the traditional group were developing perceptions of reading which reflected a more traditional orientation. For example, only two children (A and T) mentioned the importance of books and both referred to spelling at the same time, perhaps indicating the centrality which they

ascribed to this skill in learning to read. In contrast to the emergent group, only one child (R) in the traditional group talked about the role of a significant other. G's response is quite interesting and can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand it could suggest the perception that learning to read involves much practice and successive approximations toward exactitude — a basic tenet of emergent literacy; on the other hand it could reflect the belief that learning to read means learning to memorize words and that one becomes a reader when one gets the words right. Two of the children in this group (F and L) saw learning to read as a school based phenomenon and again this reflects a traditional orientation where children became ready to read prior to schooling and then learned to read in school (Teale and Sulzby, 1986).

As can be seen in Figure 4, the third question was designed to ascertain whether children saw themselves as writers. While most of the children in the emergent literacy group did not perceive themselves as readers, the opposite was true for writing in that five of the children responded with an unequivocal *yes* to this question. Children's early attempts at writing are valued and seen as important steps in a child's literacy development from an emergent literacy perspective. And indeed, it appears that most parents in this group were helping children develop a perception of themselves as writers as we would expect. The two children who said that they could not write were also two of the children who had indicated that they did not know how to read. Within the traditional group, only two (Y and B) of the children answered with an unequivocal "yes" in response to this question. Four of the children (G, R, F, and A) indicated that they could write specific items (e.g., "I can write some words"). It is worth noting that three of these children (A, G, and R) had very similar perceptions of themselves as readers. As well, two of the children indicated that they did not know

how to write. Again, it appears that the children in this group were developing more traditional perceptions of writing. It is interesting that the two children in this group who saw themselves as writers also saw themselves as readers. And all of the parents except one from the traditional group indicated that their children engaged in scribbling notes, lists, captions and so forth. And all of the parents except one from the traditional group whose children engaged in scribbling indicated that they referred to these early attempts at writing. However, despite parents' overt acknowledgment of the role of scribbling in learning to write, the children in the traditional group appeared not to have internalized this perception to the same extent as did the children in the emergent group although the mean scores on the writing tasks (Table 1) were higher for the former group than for the latter.

Question 4 was designed to elicit children's perceptions of how children learn to write. Six of the children (M, E, N, I, K and O) in the emergent literacy group mentioned the role of a significant other in learning to write (e.g., M: "By telling their mommy 'how do I write?' She tells me how to write my own name"). Again, this recognition of the role of the significant other was highlighted by this group of children in response to a similar question about reading. O's mention of puzzles is quite interesting. Unfortunately, a portion of his response is inaudible on the audiotape and it was not possible to determine if he was comparing learning to write with solving a puzzle or whether he had simply changed the topic and was referring to some other type of puzzle. Three of the children (K, C, and H) alluded to learning how to print letters as opposed to words or books which reflects a traditional view of learning to write. None of these three children mentioned such sub-skills in relation to reading although K did respond to question 2 (Figure 3) by reciting a number of letters.

## Figure 5

### Question 4: "How do children learn how to write?"

#### Emergent Literacy Group

- M: "By telling their mommy 'How do I write?' She tells me how to write my own name."
- E: "They write books. They write books at school. (Inaudible) write a picture and paint. I saw my dad write books."
- N: "My mommy teach me how to write my name. And when I've done my picture like painting, I put my name down on it at the end. And my sister taught me how to write *rain*."
- I: "Well, they just write something. Maybe their mother could write something and they could spell it... I just kept practicing and did it."
- O: "Grownups need to help children... help them with puzzles."
- K: "You do one tiny little circle. My brother showed me."
- C: "My dad has a computer. I can draw a *P*. I just knowed."
- H: "I don't know. I can color. My brother already knows. You need to have a pencil and write some letters."

#### Traditional Group

- R: "They copy how their mother does. They learn by themselves sometimes. They copy their dads and their mothers. They copy them writing."
- Y: "A long time ago I learned how to write *apple*. By practicing. They go to school."
- F: "At school. Cause they try to write. Then they keep writing, keep going to school, keep going to school — then they learn."
- T: "I don't know. I know how to print."
- B: "They learn how to write *B* for *Brian* and *A* for *apple* and *N* for *pen*."
- L: "Trace the *W* on my name. I don't know. Maybe they just play Leggo. Tracing."
- A: "I know how to write my name... Well, maybe there's special something that you learn without teaching. A miracle. Maybe the books tell them how to write."
- G: "They write wrong words and then the right words all the time. Finally they learn to write the right word. They circle wrong words and then they keep on trying and finally they learn how to do the right words."

Only one child referred to the role of a significant other in the traditional group where most of the responses tended to reflect traditional perceptions. For example, two of the children (F and Y) saw learning to write as a school based task. Likewise, B and L referred to letters and tracing letters. And as was the case in the parallel question on reading, one can interpret G's response either as an insightful analysis of the emerging nature of young children's writing or as a belief that learning to write simply means learning to spell correctly. Likewise, it is difficult to categorize A's response, although she seemed to be alluding to the fact that children learn about writing from books, which of course would be congruent with emergent literacy.

## Conclusion

Given the homogeneous nature of the sample in this study and the fact that the participants were not randomly selected, caution should be used in interpreting the results. And of course, because of these limitations, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, certain trends were apparent which could conceivably be more pronounced were a more diverse sample involved.

The results of this study suggest that there is a relationship between parents' perceptions of literacy learning and the perceptions of literacy learning which their children were developing. However, with this group, there was an extremely weak relationship between parents' perceptions of literacy learning and their children's emerging literacy knowledge. And there were no statistically significant differences between the measures of early literacy knowledge of children whose parents subscribed to an emergent literacy view and children whose parents held more traditional views of learning to read and to write.



Several researchers (Bondy, 1985; Rasinski and Deford, 1988) have suggested that school-age children develop perceptions about literacy consistent with that which is mediated to them through the instruction of their teachers. The findings here suggested that children were developing perceptions of literacy consistent with those of their parents before they began literacy programs in school. Whether they maintain these perceptions after they enter school or indeed adopt perceptions of literacy as a result of instruction, as suggested by the research cited, needs further investigation.

Finally, it is often implied in the research (Bondy, 1985; Church and Newman, 1985) that literacy learning is imperiled for children who develop narrow, traditional perceptions of reading. Interestingly, the opposite appeared to be the case here. Further research with a more diverse population is needed as is longitudinal research which would follow children from preschool into the primary grades.

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# **Altering the Succession of Illiteracy in Families: A Tutoring/Home Intervention Model**

**Ruth Crawford**

The influence of the family and home environment on children's acquisition of literacy has been well documented (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1986). As a result, many school and family literacy programs have begun to focus on involving parents in the schooling of their children. The public schools systems have realized that it is beneficial to involve non-reading parents in the literacy development of their children. One of the best ways to provide family literacy services which accomplish this is to create collaboration efforts between home and school.

This study demonstrates the significance of combining family literacy home intervention programs with one on one intense tutoring for non-reading families. For almost two years this family participated in the home intervention/tutoring program. Prior to the study, Chad — the child in this family — had tested two years behind his grade level. Chad's biological mother, who was fourteen when Chad was born and a high school dropout, ran away after he was born. Chad was left to be raised by his grandparents — Juan and Maria — both self-proclaimed non-readers. Since these grandparents had legally adopted Chad as their son, they are

referred to as his parents. Despite the fact that they could not read, Juan and Maria considered themselves successful parents and citizens. This contention was based upon the fact that they both held jobs, were able to pay their bills, and were providing well for their son materially. Thus, Juan and Maria were reportedly content as non-readers and uninterested in seeking reading assistance. This contentment, however, was soon shattered by a series of events involving their son.

The parents reported that during his first grade year, Chad began to have problems at school. Suddenly, he seemed to be singled out. He was placed in a Chapter 1 reading class. He was told by his teacher that he was lazy. He was ridiculed by his classmates. He was falling further and further behind the other children at school. Then one night Chad called out in his sleep "I am not stupid!" Horrified, Juan and Maria determined that they must do something to come to their child's aid.

Consequently, this family decided that they would pay to have their son tutored at a nearby university reading clinic. Juan and Maria demonstrated great determination in helping their son. This determination was exemplified by the fact that the university reading clinic cost more per hour than Juan made in an entire day. Furthermore, Juan had to arrange to leave work twice a week, every week, in order to take his son to tutoring. Most of the time Juan worked nights. Since the child was in school during the day, this was the only time that he could attend tutoring. The particular job that Juan had allowed him the freedom to leave and return. Though this leaving meant a drive from one town to the next, he did not seem to mind. Despite these deterrents, Juan and Maria made arrangements to send Chad to tutoring.

The first meeting between the tutor and this child occurred on his first day of tutoring. The tutor's impression of Juan was that he was a pleasant and polite man. Her first impression of Chad was that he would rather have been anywhere but there. After the introductions were made all around, the tutor directed Chad toward her office where the tutoring sessions were to be held. Chad, however, had other ideas, and he turned to his father and begged him not to leave. Juan comforted his son but firmly told him that he *would* go with this teacher. As Juan left he called to the tutor, "You make him work, okay?"

The tutor observed that Chad sat on the edge of his seat. The awkward silence which filled the office during that first tutoring session caused the tutor to believe that getting to know this young man would take some time and effort on her part. Chad demonstrated an interest in the many children's books that were in the tutor's office; however, when asked to pick out some books that he would like to read, Chad answered with an air of disgust, "I *can't* read, remember?" Searching, the tutor asked Chad to name some books that had been read to him. There was no answer, and the blank look on Chad's face caused the tutor to probe even further. This probing revealed that no one had ever read to Chad at home — not even a bed-time story. Chad also reported that he had never seen either of his parents read. He knew that his mother definitely could not read. In fact, when asked if his mother had ever read to him, he repeated in the same disgusted tone, "My mom can't *read*." Although Chad felt sure that his father could probably read something he had never actually seen Juan read anything.

In an effort to find *someone* who was reading, or had read, to this child, the tutor asked, "What kind of books does your teacher read to you?" Chad reported that the teacher did

not read any books to his group because she read to the children while he was gone to his Chapter I class. He added that he was only on the worksheets and not the real books. He then reported that this was because he was in the "dumb" group. To provide Chad with an element of success, the tutor began this first session by reading predictable pattern books to him. It was explained to Chad that these books had a pattern that was easy to follow so he should join in and read with her anytime he felt comfortable. However, on this first day of tutoring Chad did not attempt to read along with the tutor.

After Chad left that afternoon, the tutor could not stop thinking about the fact that reportedly no one had ever read a book to him. There was obviously more behind this child's lack of ability than the fact that he was lazy, as his parents thought. The tutor was interested in finding out more about Chad's past experiences. Thus, on the afternoon of the next tutoring session, she asked Juan to name any books which might have been read to his son in the past. The tutor was unprepared for the blunt admission that Juan knew of no one who had ever read to his son. Further questioning revealed that Chad had reported correctly when he stated he had never seen either of his parents read. Juan never came right out and said if he or his wife could read. It was at this point that the tutor knew she had only scraped the surface of this family's literacy background. She believed that in order to fulfill the needs of this family as a tutor, she must understand their history. Through further examinations and interviews it was discovered that Juan possessed a very limited reading ability, and Maria had virtually none. Therefore, in order to promote the literacy development of both the child and his parents, a combination tutoring and home intervention program was created.

The program developed to aid this non-reading family involved both tutoring the child and providing home intervention to foster the family's literacy development. The tutoring consisted of an in-depth bi-weekly tutoring session with the child. This session focused upon increasing his reading ability and improving his self-confidence. The home intervention program provided suggestions and aid to support the entire family's literacy development.

### **A model for tutoring**

The Reading Recovery approach (Clay, 1993), was adapted and used as a tutoring procedure. A model for tutoring was created using several of the basic Reading Recovery components. The following components were taken from Reading Recovery's description of a typical tutoring session (p. 14): reread two or more familiar books; reread yesterday's new book; write a story; introduce a new book; attempt a new book. Each day at tutoring Chad would begin by selecting a book to read. The books Chad could select from were organized by the tutor in groups of six. The books were of an appropriate reading and interest level. The tutor endeavored to insure that the groups included several books that Chad would be able to read with ease, either because of their level of difficulty or predictable nature. Hence, there was always a book that Chad could successfully read and remove. A new book was added to the group each time to replace the one that had been removed. The fact that Chad encountered repeated readings of the books helped insure that at least one book could be successfully read and replaced.

Toward the end of each tutoring session, Chad was introduced to a new book. The tutor used strategies such as the Directed Reading and Thinking Activity (DRTA), and K-W-L in order to support the introduction of the new book. These strategies allowed Chad to prepare for reading by discussing the new book, interacting with it, and thinking about it

(Sampson, Van Allen and Sampson, 1991). The DRTA procedure was developed by Russell Stauffer (1976) to help students become involved in the materials that they read. This procedure has students read, make predictions, and think about what they are reading. The strength of a DRTA is that it allows students to clarify their thoughts and engage in personal reflection and semantic analysis (Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, 1990).

Using the DRTA, the tutor would first ask Chad to examine the cover and title in order to make predictions of what he thought the story might be about. Next, Chad would read a section of the book in order to confirm his predictions and make new ones. The tutor would periodically stop Chad to ask question such as "Were you correct?" or "Now what do you think will happen?" Sometimes, if the book was not lengthy or Chad was reading with great fluency, the tutor did not interrupt the flow of the story. In these instances she waited until Chad was finished to ask him to confirm his predictions. Although this activity proved effective, Chad often tired of it. Thus, the tutor varied the supportive reading activities used in the first reading of a book.

Another supportive reading activity used during the tutoring sessions was the K-W-L procedure (Carr and Ogle, 1987). First, the tutor wrote the letter *K* at the top of a piece of paper and recorded on this sheet what Chad *knew* about the topic of the book. The next piece of paper had the letter *W* at the top and on this paper the tutor recorded what Chad *wanted to find out* from reading the book. The final sheet of paper had the letter *L* on the top and it was on this sheet that the tutor recorded all of the things that Chad *learned* after having read the book. The K-W-L procedure seemed to work best when Chad was reading an informational book, while the DRTA proved most effective with narrative-type texts.



Finally, during the reading of any text the tutor assisted or supported Chad in his reading by "prompting, priming, and telling (words) if need be (Clay, 1993, p. 17). This was done in order to support and encourage Chad's fluent reading of a text. Other recommendations incorporated from the Reading Recovery approach were those for selecting texts in order to facilitate fluent reading. These recommendations included the following:

*Use known texts, or texts with rhythm-like songs, poems (or sometimes prose) because they carry the reader forward. Choose repetitive texts which are better read with exaggerated expressions. Read a story to the child, emphasizing the phrasing. This should provide support for the feel and sound of the patterns of words and breaks, or pauses. Write down a repetitive sentence or phrase from a specially selected story for later use with the child (p. 53).*

Reading Recovery includes, as one of its components, a focus upon isolated words. Some of the activities completed by children in Reading Recovery include tracing, writing, and speaking certain sets of words in isolation from text. In order to provide a more holistic tutoring approach, these word-oriented activities were omitted and replaced with a variety of other writing activities. When Chad first came to tutoring he did not want to write. In fact, he stated, "I can't write." Thus, in order to support Chad's writing, several meaning-centered activities were used during the tutoring sessions. These activities included patterned writing activities, journal writing, written conversations and the use of a word wall.

Although the tutor encouraged Chad to engage in invented spelling, he initially refused. Instead he would look around the tutor's office for any words that he might use, so the tutor created a word wall to support his writing. The word wall was created by placing words on note cards which

were then stuck on the wall. Chad chose most of the words present on the word wall. However, the tutor did make suggestions for additional words taken from writing activities and books that they encountered. The word wall proved an effective aid to Chad in his writing. Furthermore, the use of a word wall supported him in both his vocabulary development and spelling.

Patterned writing activities were also used during the tutoring sessions. The patterns were taken from the predictable books Chad read, and were used to help him create his own books. Sampson, Van Allen and Sampson (1991) discuss the fact that redundant or predictable patterns provide a dependable repetition of a sentence pattern with variations in sentences, repetition for easy reading, and a spelling aid for many words. One of the patterns Chad adapted came from Bill Martin's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1992). In this activity Chad changed the wording of the pattern from the book in order to include things that were familiar to him. His book was entitled *VCR, VCR, What Do You See?* Another highly successful writing activity was written conversation. The written conversation activity was just that — a conversation between Chad and the tutor which had been written down. The tutor would usually begin by writing a question to Chad such as, "How was your day?" At first Chad often answered back by copying exactly what the tutor had written and assigning the print different meanings. As time went on, however, Chad began to answer questions in his own words, even initiating some new ideas. Several times during this activity, Chad used invented spelling. The tutor believed that this use of invented spelling demonstrated that Chad was feeling supported enough to engage in risk-taking.

In order to provide an avenue for free expression, the tutoring session included a daily journal writing activity which

was completely unstructured. During this activity Chad was given the choice of *if*, *and*, or *what* he wanted to write in his journal. Many times Chad simply drew pictures. Other times he declined the invitation to write in his journal. Yet each session Chad was at least given the opportunity to express himself freely through his writing. One of the most important steps in learning to use language proficiently is understanding its possibility for expression (Sampson, Van Allen, and Sampson, 1991). The goals of the tutoring sessions were to provide Chad opportunities to read fluently, perceive and practice patterns through reading and writing, and to express himself freely. While the writing activities differed, these tutoring goals were similar to those of the Reading Recovery program.

### **Home intervention model**

Family literacy home intervention can involve many forms. One of the most successful forms requires the interventionist to visit the home setting in order to interact, and support the family's literacy development (Darling and Hayes, 1989). The tutor in this study went into the home to study the family, and all intervention with this family took place in their own home during this time. Twice weekly the tutor went to the home in order to monitor the progress of the family literacy intervention, and to provide support and further assistance.

**The print environment.** One of the first goals for this home intervention program was to increase the print environment. At the time of the first home observation there were no books, other than one family Bible present in the home. The only other print materials were a phone book, a few recipe books, and two of Chad's school papers. There was a clear need to stimulate the print environment of this home. This stimulation was achieved by providing commercially-

created books, encouraging the family to create original books, creating a writing box, and collecting and managing newspapers, magazines, and various other environmental print sources.

The writing box was created in order to supply the family with ample print materials for engaging in suggested or self-directed literacy activities. The use of a writing box in family literacy home interventions has been shown to "generate new writing activities by children and different literacy interactions between parents and children" (Maloy and Edwards, 1990, p. 199). The initial writing box used in this home intervention program contained 50 sheets of white paper, 50 sheets of colored paper, 1 package of markers, 5 pencils, 1 pair of scissors, 1 box of crayons, 1 newspaper, and 1 magazine. Throughout the course of the intervention, new materials were added or removed by the tutor and the family.

Another way that the print-environment of the home was stimulated was through the introduction of various forms of books into the home. Both commercially-created and family-created books were used. Most of the commercially-created books were brought into the home by the tutor. These books were usually predictable pattern books such as Bill Martin's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (1992). Many times the tutor brought books that Chad had previously encountered during tutoring. As the intervention continued, the family was encouraged to borrow books from the library. Some commercially-created books were also bought by the parents. The family-created books, for the most part, were created by adapting simple patterns from books that Chad had encountered during tutoring. The family was also encouraged to collect other sources of print-materials such as newspapers, magazines, and junk mail. These articles could be easily obtained by the family at no expense. Once a week a

free newspaper was delivered to the family's home. Maria had access to the out-of-date magazines from her workplace. Furthermore, the receiving of junk mail is a common occurrence for almost every family (Taylor, 1983).

**Managing the materials.** Simply having print materials available for this family was not enough. The family needed methods for managing these articles. Thus, another step in the intervention was to show the family ways to use these materials. These interactions included examining and discussing materials for the writing box, having nightly read-aloud sessions, using environmental print, and engaging in pattern writing activities. In each case the tutor modeled these procedures before the activities were actually employed by the family. The writing box was used to provide materials for the creation of books or other literacy endeavors. The parents were encouraged to devise ways to use these materials and to allow Chad free access to the materials for his own creation. Supplies in the box were to be monitored by the family and periodically cleaned out. These procedures required the family to discuss their choices of materials and their reasons for wanting to keep or discard materials. Consequently, the family engaged in conversations concerning the necessity and uses of print-materials.

As previously mentioned, the tutor encouraged Chad to adapt patterns from predictable books in order to create his own books. On several occasions the parents were asked to make additions to the books that Chad had created during tutoring. In order to elicit participation from the non-reading parents, simple repetitive patterns were used. The finished books were added to the family's reading list and kept for use in the nightly read-aloud sessions. The family's reading list was comprised of the titles of any books that they had read together or separately. The nightly read-aloud sessions were

adapted from Jim Trelease's (1985) *Read Aloud Handbook*. During these sessions the parents were encouraged to listen to Chad read and to read with him when they felt able.

Throughout the intervention, it was stressed to the family that they should take advantage of the environmental print which surrounded them. Thus word hunts were conducted during which the family read and discussed print as they were driving or walking through their community. During word hunts the parents often asked Chad to search for words that he could read. On one occasion the father took advantage of his own print knowledge to point out the differences in *Pizza Hut* and *Pizza Inn* to his son. Consequently, a long discussion ensued between father and son concerning the differences in the words *in* and *inn*. Print located in newspapers or advertisements was similarly discussed.

The family was encouraged to examine and discuss the junk mail which was sent to their home. Taylor (1983) describes the sorting of junk mail as an obligatory literacy task that most families encounter. This task can be used by families to stimulate interactions with print. The parents were thus encouraged to save the junk mail to be sorted with their son. As the mail was examined, the parents were instructed to ask their son questions concerning the purpose of the mail, who had sent it, and what parts of the mail should be saved. The same type of questions were to be asked about magazines and newspapers which were brought into the home. Through these discussions the parents were afforded the chance to guide Chad in literacy interactions and to reinforce the communicative purposes of literacy.

**Recording the growth.** The final step of the intervention involved recording the family's literacy growth. This growth was recorded through a family portfolio, the family's reading list, observations and interviews completed by the tutor, and

regular family conferences. The family's literacy growth was recorded for two reasons: to discover the influences of the intervention and to allow the family a means for monitoring their own progress.

The family portfolio consisted of a collection of artifacts selected by the family to represent their literacy interactions. The family decided to use a commercially-created scrapbook to display these artifacts. The tutor's only role in this endeavor was to offer suggestions and periodically monitor the upkeep of the portfolio. The parents reported that the portfolio gave them a great sense of pride, and was valued as a memento and a keepsake. The family's reading list was placed in the last five pages of the portfolio. This list recorded all of the books that the family read during the read-aloud sessions or at other times as well as any books Chad read during tutoring or school activities. Again, the family was responsible for copying the titles of the books onto the list. The tutor periodically reviewed the family reading list and added suggestions for further reading.

The regular family conferences took place once a week during the time that the tutor visited the family. During these conferences, the family discussed their interactions and any problems or successes that they had encountered. The conferences provided a chance for the tutor to monitor the family's progress. The conferences also provided the family an opportunity to vent frustrations and receive support from the tutor.

## **Conclusion**

This program was designed to combine the effectiveness of tutoring and home intervention. Through the tutoring sessions the child received intense instruction geared to foster positive literacy perceptions and competencies. The home

intervention program extended these developing competencies by reinforcing the child's learning and the parental role and abilities. While this program was designed for use by a home interventionist, the program's strategies could be easily adopted for use by a classroom teacher. The tutoring techniques would work well in a classroom setting. Likewise, the home intervention strategies could be implemented by a classroom teacher who met regularly with parents through conferences or family literacy sessions where activities were modeled and progress was monitored. The goal of this program to supply more than just isolated literacy instruction (Winter and Rouse, 1990), by involving the parents as models and teachers for their children.

This study demonstrated the benefits of working with non-reading families in combined intervention and tutoring programs. Through this type of program the family in this study began to make positive changes in their reading environment, attitudes, and interactions which had a positive effect on their child's reading progress at school. Concurrently, the parents' realization that their actions influenced their child's literacy development fostered their desire to improve their own literacy. By the end of the study Chad had become a successful reader, removed from the Chapter One reading program, and placed at the top of his regular reading class at school. The parents had improved both their personal literacy skills and their awareness of the types of literacy activities and support that they could facilitate in their home. As a result, the parents developed a desire to be active in their son's literacy development, and to improve their own literacy abilities.

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# Applying Effective Reading Techniques In Content Area Classes

Candace Poindexter

*I'm a history teacher. Why should I use reading strategies? — Learn reading techniques for a math class? Gimme a break!*

These comments are typical of the ones heard at the beginning of every semester in my class titled "Improving Reading in the Secondary Schools." This course is required of all candidates for a secondary teaching credential so attendance is not voluntary and, as might be noted from the above comments, not especially desired. Even the body language of my students was telling — many of the students did not want to be there. They were content teachers, not reading teachers. To exacerbate the problem, the class was comprised of both preservice undergraduates and those who were already in the classroom teaching with an emergency credential. I knew that the information I had to present was useful for any content area and I was determined to prove to these students the many benefits of applying reading techniques in all classes. The methods presented in class are interdisciplinary in nature; they are just as useful in a social studies class as they are in an English class.

## **Effective techniques**

Most teachers teach the way that they were taught, and most of us were taught by being lectured to. The practice of

assigning reading, lecturing and then answering the questions at the end of the chapter, while getting the job done, is not a very inspired way to teach. Instead, some of the newer techniques which provide for active class involvement and demand a higher level of thinking by the students are a more effective way of educating secondary students. Two underlying themes predominated in this class for secondary teachers — active involvement and strategies using metacognition. Below is a short discussion of some of the strategies which were used in class to prove the efficacy of using reading strategies in content area classes.

**Active involvement.** Techniques which encourage the active involvement of students were primarily thought to be best suited to elementary school. I have found that secondary students respond just as well to activities which both mentally and physically involve them to a higher degree than merely sitting in the classroom listening and taking notes. One of the best means to accomplish active involvement is through cooperative learning techniques. Cooperative learning is a "structured experience where students, preferably in groups of two, three, and four, practice learning by using study skills emphasized by the teacher for a particular lesson" (Richardson and Morgan, 1990). Even high school students will participate if they are held accountable for some type of product. Vaughan and Estes (1986) note that one advantage of cooperative learning is there is "an increase in the amount of understanding of ideas; with two people studying a text, the chances are that one of them will understand something that confuses the other. Hence we find again... that the object of study is understanding."

**The Jigsaw method.** The jigsaw method (Aronson, 1978) is a cooperative learning technique which has proved to be an effective means to promote comprehension of material as well as working to reduce the anxiety of some students who

are intimidated by the length of required reading. In Jigsaw, students are assigned to teams of four to six members. Academic material is broken down into as many parts as there are members of the team, with each member being assigned a particular section. Members of the different teams who have the same section form expert groups and study together. Experts then return to their teams and teach the section to that group. A quiz on the entire set of material is often given to the class following the cooperative study. The only way students can do well on this quiz is to pay close attention to their teammates' sections: therefore students are more motivated to support and show interest in each other's work.

**Figure 1**  
*Anticipation/reaction guide: Social studies*

Read the statements below carefully. In the "Before reading" column, check those statements with which you agree. After reading the selection, re-read the statements and check those with which you still agree in the "After reading" column.

BEFORE READING	AFTER READING	
-----	-----	1. Fidel Castro's rise to power was based primarily on the business and professional classes alienated by President Batista.
-----	-----	2. Castro's political philosophy was originally based on ideas of Marxist-Leninist thought.
-----	-----	3. Castro was greatly admired by the United States when he came to power.
-----	-----	4. United States intervention in Cuba had little or no effect on Castro's political beliefs.

**Anticipation/reaction guides.** These guides are another means of getting students to become more actively involved with their reading. An anticipation/reaction guide consists of a series of statements to which students must respond individually before and after reading the text. Anticipation/reaction guides help activate thought about the content before students begin reading and then allows students to use the knowledge gained from reading to validate or reformulate their earlier predictions (see Figure 1).

**Metacognition.** Metacognition is usually defined as thinking about thinking. It involves the knowledge and control individuals have over their own thinking and learning activities (Baker and Brown, 1984). Skilled readers are aware that different types of reading demand different strategies. When they come to a word or a concept that they don't understand, they have a variety of strategies at hand to help them solve their problem. Poor readers, however, do not have such an arsenal of strategies. They usually know one technique and try to apply it in all situations (Paris and Myers, 1981). Metacognitive strategies can be taught. Fitzgerald (1983) suggests that the development of metacognition can be enhanced if students 1) watch the teacher model comprehension monitoring; 2) rate their own confidence in what they've read; 3) rate the adequacy of instruction; 4) question themselves while reading; and 5) use some type of question-answer relations technique to find where the answer lies. Two strategies I present to my students which encourage metacognitive thinking are the *What I know* chart and *Self-questioning* techniques.

**What I know charts.** Mary Heller (1986) suggests using a chart (see Figure 2) as a structured procedure for modeling metacognitive strategies in content area classrooms. The *What I know* chart is made up of three columns to help students differentiate between their previous and new

knowledge and to help determine what it is they still need to know about a topic.

**Figure 2**  
*What I know chart*

<b>TOPIC:</b>		Earthquakes		
<b>PURPOSE QUESTION:</b>		What is the cause of earthquakes?		
<b>A</b>		<b>B</b>		<b>C</b>
<i>What I already knew</i>		<i>What I now know</i>		<i>What I don't know</i>
Earthquakes are associated with faults.		Energy waves released by earthquakes are detected by a seismograph.		How do <i>P</i> waves differ from <i>S</i> waves?
Earthquake magnitudes are measured by the <i>Richter Scale</i> .		The epicenter is the point on the surface directly above the focus of an earthquake.		What is a <i>tsunami</i> ?
Earthquakes can be destructive.		Three kinds of earthquake waves are 1) a compressed wave, 2) a shear wave, 3) a Rayleigh wave.		Can earthquakes be predicted?

**Self-questioning.** Encouraging students to raise questions such as *What is the main idea of this selection?* and *Is there anything I don't understand in this paragraph?* is a way of encouraging metacognition (Tierney and Cunningham, 1984). Teachers can teach students to generate different types of questions (literal, inferential, critical, and creative), by modeling these in their oral discussions. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to formulate these types of questions (Roe, Stoodt, Burns, 1991).

**Conclusion**

The techniques and strategies mentioned above have been singled out by members of my class as being responsible for their change in attitude about the use of reading

techniques in the content area. Many students came up to me at the end of the semester and told me that they were one of the ones who didn't believe that the knowledge and application of these strategies could be beneficial in a math, physical education, or history class. They said, however, that they had completely changed their minds and were eager to try out some of the techniques presented in class. They realized that no matter what the subject area, the students had to be able to read the text in order to comprehend the material. Using a variety of techniques which keep the students more actively involved with their reading, increase the likelihood that they will master their content area material.

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# Teaching Students About Reading: A Fluency Example

Charles H. Clark

The purpose of this article is to discuss the elements of reading instruction which are necessary for success with students who have not benefited from indirect or implicit instruction. Most articles which cover this ground do so in terms of comprehension (Dole, Duffy, Roehler and Pearson, 1991; Pressley, Johnson, Symons, McGoldrick and Kurita, 1989; Spiegel, 1992) or, more rarely, word and letter identification (Cunningham and Cunningham, 1992). Reading fluency, often perceived as a rather mechanical skill, is generally ignored in the literature on modern effective instructional techniques, despite its importance. Many of the proven instructional techniques for fluency are described elsewhere (Allington, 1983; Anderson, 1981; Dowhower, 1989; Henk, Helfeldt, and Platt, 1986; Koskinen and Blum, 1986; Moyer, 1982; Rasinski, 1989), but they are treated as stand-alone methods without the integration of comprehension, metacognitive knowledge, and student insight which are considered absolutely essential for long-term success.

Effective instruction has a number of universal characteristics (Delpit, 1988; Dole et al., 1991; Spiegel, 1992). Several of those will be focused on here and fluency instruction will be discussed with those characteristics in mind. First, effective



instruction involves high but achievable expectations. The teacher must know what the students are capable of, help them on their journey to achieve the goals, and clearly expect the students to be successful. Second, effective instruction is direct and explicit. While it is true that many students learn from indirect and implicit instruction, it is also true that they learn more efficiently from direct and explicit instruction (Pressley et al., 1989). On the other hand, many students do not learn well from indirect and implicit instruction, though they are perfectly capable of learning through more direct and explicit instruction (Delpit, 1988; Dole et al., 1991; Duffy, Roehler, Sivan, Rackliffe, Book, Meloth, Vavrus, Wesselman, Putnam, and Bassiri, 1987; Spiegel, 1992). Special education students and others who have trouble reading particularly benefit from direct explicit instruction. Third, the tasks that the students engage in to learn and practice should be meaningful and functional for them. If students feel that a task is not personally relevant, that it seems to have no relationship to what they know of the world, or that it will not be useful, they are less likely to attend to the instruction and the tasks, they will be less motivated to participate, and they are less likely to apply the information in other situations. The purposes for reading, learning to read, and for the tasks involved in both must be authentic and real.

One important aspect of high expectations in reading instruction is understanding what it is that readers should be doing to be successful (what good readers do and what it is that makes them good readers). For the most part, this knowledge is currently available to teachers and is a constant theme of articles appearing in many readily available journals. However, not only is it crucial for teachers to understand how reading develops and what makes someone a good reader, it is also equally important for teachers to convey that information to their students. All students at some point

have a goal of becoming expert readers. One of the easiest ways to make reading instruction more meaningful and functional is to help students understand what it is that they are expected to be able to do in order to become good readers and how to get there (Duffy, et al., 1987). The instruction and tasks that students are engaged in must be perceived by them as important for achieving this goal. Regretfully, meaningfulness and functionality is often interpreted as entertainment. Learning and practice does not have to be fun to be motivating, and pointless fun will not motivate for long. Meaningfulness and functionality derive from two principles. The first is that something is perceived as meaningful and functional when it is understood to help a student reach a goal. This is one of the reasons it is so important to teach students about reading and learning to read. The second principle is that the goal itself and the tasks used to reach that goal must be authentic, relevant to the student, and the relationship between the goal and the tasks must be obvious.

Helping students understand what is expected of them and helping them see the value of instruction and instructional tasks are crucial elements in direct explicit instruction (Delpit, 1988; Dole, et al., 1991; Duffy, et al., 1987; Spiegel, 1992). The first step is explaining to the students what it is they are to learn, what their goals will be, how they will be taught, and how they are expected to learn. The strategy is then demonstrated (modeled) and discussed, after which students are engaged in tasks which will promote their learning and mastery under the guidance of the teacher. Thus, effective instruction requires the teacher to explain to the students what is expected of them, to demonstrate the strategy, and then to involve the students in meaningful and functional practice.

Following is a discussion of instruction in oral reading fluency. It is used to demonstrate how the above

characteristics can be integrated into instruction. Fluency is a crucial aspect of learning to read. It helps students understand the function of automaticity in learning to read, the integration of comprehension and word identification, and the role and value of reading and writing as communication and entertainment.

### **A fluency example**

The origin of the word *fluency* is the Latin word *fluens*, which means to flow. A reader who is fluent reads smoothly and effortlessly: the reading flows. This smoothness and effortlessness are dependent upon the reader being automatic at word identification and at comprehension to the point where it is possible to read with meaningful expression. Full comprehension requires attention and cannot be automated, but the phrase-level comprehension needed for expression can become automatic (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974).

The fluent reader sounds good, is easy to listen to, and reads with enough expression to help the listener understand and enjoy the material. This requires an intelligent interpretation of the text, with meaning as the guide to intonation and expression. The best fluent readers convey this meaning and their own sense of enjoyment of the text to the listener. It is these aspects of good oral reading which make it a performance activity. Obviously, this is almost impossible unless the individual has read the text prior to the oral reading: even good readers cannot attend to the comprehension, word recognition, and the performance aspects simultaneously.

A lesson on fluency instruction should begin with the definition of automaticity, fluency, and performance reading and a demonstration by the teacher. Automaticity should be defined as knowing how to do something so well that you don't have to think about it (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). An

adult example is driving a car. Many of us occasionally find ourselves at home without remembering beginning the trip. A universal example is our receptive and expressive language. We speak without thinking about forming the words or constructing sentences; we think only of the message we wish to convey. Children also experience automaticity in athletic activities, such as bicycle riding, and everyday activities such as eating. Bicycle riding is a good initial example to use. Most students can remember learning how, they can remember when they needed to think about each element of bicycle riding, and when they felt awkward and often made mistakes. The same principle applies to reading. When you are just learning, you will be awkward, you will make mistakes, and you will need to think about letters and words. The only way that humans become automatic at something is through practice (and lots of it: remember how much time you spent driving), whether the goal is riding a bicycle or reading. Good readers are fluent because they are automatic at all of the lower-level aspects of the task (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). They become automatic through practice, and in order to practice they had to want to read and they had to have opportunities to read (Stanovich, 1980).

A crucial related point here is that students should not be asked to read materials which are too difficult or uninteresting. The former will affect the sense of success and the fluency, while the latter will decrease the likelihood of enthusiastic practice. Students should be allowed to choose books themselves and encouraged to pick their favorites. They often get the most enjoyment from becoming successful with a book they've heard the teacher read in class or one which they've enjoyed reading over and over. Though some teachers are afraid that this familiarity will decrease student growth, just the opposite is true. Such student-oriented selections will actually improve motivation and speed the

development of reading. We often do more harm than good by worrying about constantly challenging students, particularly students who are learning disabled and others who have experienced repeated failure.

Appropriate fluency work is particularly effective in helping these students understand and develop automaticity. Much of this fluency instruction is best organized in brief mini-lessons, followed by meaningful and enjoyable opportunities to practice. The mini-lessons can be done with the whole class, with small groups, or with individuals. In a regular classroom, whole class and small group instruction will be the norm, while in special education and Chapter 1 classes small group and individual instruction will be more common. Whatever the format, the content of the lessons will be essentially the same. The first goal is to help the students understand what fluency is and how it relates to good reading, as described above. The next step is to help the students set their own expectations and goals and to provide them with techniques and practice which will enable them to achieve those goals.

### **Expectations, goals, and techniques**

Setting the expectations for fluency is easy. Probably all teachers reading this article read to their students every day. When you do so you are modeling fluent reading (Perez, 1986). The students may not, however, think about that aspect of your reading, so it needs to be discussed. During your daily reading, you should talk about fluency how you achieve it and why it is important.

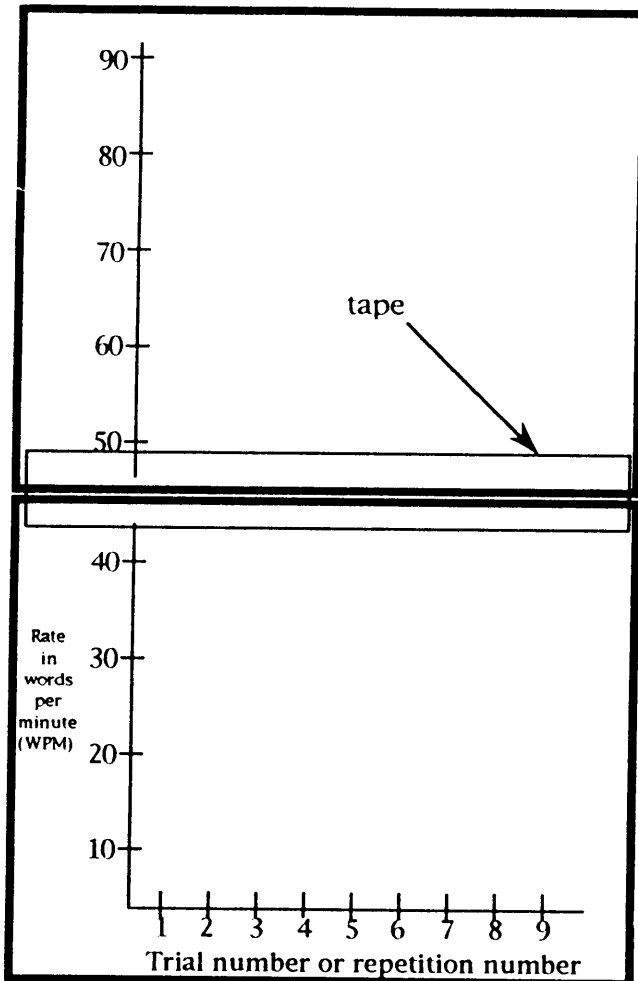
In fluency work, expectations play two roles. First, the students need to be constantly reminded of the goal of fluency practice and the fact that they can achieve fluency. Second, in order for students to be able to self-monitor their oral reading, they must have a model voice in their heads to which they

can refer. The model voice can be the teacher's, but it is also important to encourage students to use other figures for models, such as television personalities, readers of commercially available recorded books, adults from the community who come to read to the students, etc. When students know they should have model voices stored in memory to use for self-monitoring they treat the listening experience differently and they consciously think about how they are going to achieve their goals. Of course, students need to add their own voices to this bank of stored fluent readers as they meet with success. Frequent use of tape recorders during practices and performances will help students develop their own personal voice and style.

Once the students understand what fluency is and they have begun to focus on it as an important and achievable goal, it is time to give them techniques which will make them successful. Probably the most important technique is repeated readings, which has been discussed in a number of other articles (Dowhower, 1987, 1989; Henk, et al., 1986; Koskinen and Blum, 1986; Moyer, 1982). Basically, repeated readings involves reading the same text over and over while recording the rate on a graph or chart. This accomplishes a number of important instructional objectives. First, students become focused on their own mastery of the task and competition with their own past performance (Ames, 1990; Ames and Ames, 1984a, 1984b). This is very motivating. Second, students have concrete and undeniable proof of their progress. They *will* make progress, and the constant graphic reminder is highly rewarding, particularly for students who have trouble believing they can become good at anything. (Try using a graph, with the y-axis as the rate and the x-axis to mark each repetition. Make the graph cover an entire 8 1/2 x 11 inch sheet of paper held sideways, but make the y-axis increments large so that the graph only goes to about 50 words per minute. When they exceed 50 words per minute, you'll be

faced with amazed students who discover they have done so well that you need to tape new pieces of paper above the old to extent the graph [see Figure 1]. Even the most reluctant students almost explode with pride and a sense of accomplishment at this point.)

**Figure 1**  
*Example of repeated reading chart with additional sheet of paper taped to the original graph*



The typical experience with repeated reading graphing is that students' rate will increase rather rapidly when repeatedly reading the same passage. A reasonable goal is 100 words per minute. Though some students like to go even faster, the teacher should switch the student to a new book or story when the rate reaches 90-100 words per minute. The rate on the new text will be quite a bit slower, but probably not as slow as the initial reading of the first text. Normally, the curve for the rate increase will be steeper (rate will increase faster) for each subsequent text read and the initial drop-off will decrease. When this pattern is established and students find it relatively easy to become fast with a new text, repeated reading graphing should be stopped.

One obvious problem with repeated reading is that the students quite logically focus on rate rather than on sounding good, since that is what is being measured and displayed. For that reason, repeated reading is useful primarily for choppy and slow readers and the rate calculation and graphing should be discontinued as soon as it has served its purpose. When students are confident and have developed a feeling of success, the emphasis should be explicitly changed from reading fast to sounding good, entertaining, and communicating meaning and feeling.

There are a number of techniques for encouraging and structuring fluency practice which are less structured than repeated reading graphics, such as Reader's Theatre, echo reading, choral reading, and paired reading (Allington, 1983; Anderson, 1981; Burns, 1989; Dowhower, 1987, 1989; Henk, et al., 1986; Koskinen and Blum, 1986; Moyer, 1982; Rasinski, 1989; Schreiber, 1980). These methods should be used simultaneously with repeated readings and can continue to be used well after the rate graphing has been phased out. Though they don't directly emphasize the type of insights into reading



that are the focus of this article, they are crucial for promoting practice in interesting, non-threatening, and meaningful ways. In addition, whenever fluency and performance reading is a topic of behavior and discussion, opportunities for mini-lessons, direct instruction, and other techniques abound. There are three fluency techniques which give students insight into the reading process, improve their metacognitive awareness, expand their expectations and understanding, and increase their power and confidence in reading situations. These are not techniques for practicing fluency, like repeated reading and Reader's Theatre, as much as they are ways to explain how fluency works and to directly teach students what is necessary for them to become fluent; in other words, they teach students about reading.

The first, and simplest of the three, I call "smooshing" the words together. In oral speech there are no vocal breaks between words. We perceive words as units because we know the words already. To demonstrate this play a tape of a foreign language. In a language where we don't know the words, we hear no breaks and it sounds as though the speaker is speaking very fast, as if there aren't any individual words at all. Demonstrate this to the students and then read part of a story both fluently and with pauses between the words. The difference is obvious. Once demonstrated, constantly encourage the students to smoosh the words together while they read, leaving pauses only where there is punctuation. (I call this *The Nagging Technique*: its components are explanation; demonstration; and encouraging, friendly, and humorous nagging.) The improvement in students' fluency is immediate. Many poor readers mistakenly believe that they are supposed to read each word separately, consequently they always sound like they are reading a list of words rather than connected text. The smooshing explanation and practice tends to change this believe and the related behavior.

The second technique is to explain the return sweep eye movement to students. The return sweep is the long eye movement from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. It is difficult for beginning and poor readers because of its length and because it has a downward vertical component. (Some students may temporarily need a finger along with the left margin as a marker to help them place the return sweep. Commonly, students are encouraged to use a card or marker held under the line being read to help focus their attention and avoid skipping or repeating lines. This is a counter-productive technique and it should never be used, since it covers up the line to be read and makes the return sweep abnormal. If a card is used, it should be only temporary and it should always be placed above the line being read.) To demonstrate eye movements to students distribute a photocopy of a page of easy text to one member of each partner team. Have the students poke a pencil-sized hole through the center of the paper, hold the back of the paper and the hole up to their eye and about 12 inches from their partner, and watch their partner's eyes through the hole for a short period of silent reading. They will see the jerky eye movements and pauses for fixations and the return sweep at the end of each line. Explaining and demonstrating this to students helps them understand more about the reading act. Making an accurate and rapid return sweep is necessary to maintain fluency and meaning between the last word on a line and the first word on the next. Simply having some understanding of what occurs during reading that affects their fluency, particularly between lines, tends to give students more control and confidence over their reading. They understand that there is a logical reason for between-line pauses and that they are not used by some personal deficiency. The next method helps them eliminate this pause.

The third technique is to teach students about the eye-voice span. The eye-voice span (EVS) is the distance between the eyes and the voice during oral reading (Levin, 1979). As you have probably noticed in your own oral reading, your eyes are one to three words ahead of your voice, particularly in the beginning and middle of a sentence. This distance allows the reader's mind to use meaning clues to help with word recognition, to use expression to compliment meaning, and to use punctuation to guide intonation. It is impossible to be fluent without an eye-voice span. After explaining the EVS to the students, who are likely to be quite skeptical, you must demonstrate it, preferably a number of times over several days. The demonstration is easy. Use a page of a story on an overhead projector. Have a volunteer student (use a different one each time) come up to the overhead and while you are reading aloud to the class cover the transparency with a piece of paper or turn the power off so that the screen goes dark. You will be able to "read" several words after the story is gone. The students will be amazed, which will precipitate a repeat of the EVS explanation and more demonstrations. As with eye movements, poor and beginning readers will not be sufficiently automatic to use an EVS unless they are repeatedly reading the same text. This repeated reading allows them to become automatic with a particular story and to begin to use an EVS to increase their fluency and to improve their expression and attention to punctuation.

### **Functionality: Getting students to practice**

With the above demonstrations and explanations fluency will become more meaningful and functional for students because they will begin to understand its purposes and how they can achieve it. The problem remains, however, of how to keep the students interested and involved in the extensive practice necessary for achieving their goals. This is one of the areas where the once common practice of round

robin oral reading is particularly weak. Because such reading involves so little actual practice and is inherently competitive, students correctly infer that the purpose of round robin reading is to attend to the position in the text where they are likely to be asked to read, to get the words right, and to avoid embarrassing themselves (Bondy, 1990). Round robin reading also destroys the sense of real purposes for reading and performing for real audiences. Oral reading practice should instead be seen by the students as a way to improve their own skills and to reach individual and personal goals. The individual charts used in repeated readings, the sense of an inner model, and performing for real audiences make these goals concrete and obvious.

In addition to the meaningfulness and functionality which are inherent in the instructional practices described above, there are a number of oral reading activities which are highly motivating because they are purposeful, productive, and rewarding. One of the most effective is to have students practice reading a favorite story or book in order to share their enthusiasm for the text with another student or class. Oral reading is essentially a performance. One reads out loud to share with and to entertain others. When students are given the opportunity (but not pressured) to perform a story of their own choice for other students and when they know that they can be successful with practice and help, they will invariably practice many times. They will also perform in trial situations for the teacher and for other students in the class who are working toward similar goals. Many teachers already have their students reading to younger or older students and know how effective this is. It is very rewarding for the teacher to see poor and otherwise reluctant readers practicing their reading in order to be entertaining for their audience.

The concept of performance reading also applies to plays, Reader's Theatre, and poetry. Classroom plays always seem to be motivating for students, and it is obvious to them that being fluent and sounding good are important. With both plays and poetry it is helpful to start performance reading chorally. Most school plays have fewer characters than there are students in the class. Several students can be assigned to each character with the understanding that they are to practice together. When students read the same material together much of the pressure is relieved. If a student has difficulty with a word or stumbles, the others will carry the moment. Students can be assigned to characters according to their own preferences or according to their vocal characteristics. In the latter case, the teacher functions somewhat like a choir director.

The use of tape recorders can also add to the meaningfulness and functionality. Once the students have been exposed to books on tape, they often become quite excited about the prospect of making their own taped books for themselves, their classmates, or for students in other classes. They begin to develop their own voices and to expand their performances. This can become a real production, with background music and sound effects supplied by cohorts in the class. These tapes should be copied so that they are available for others to listen to in the class or to check out for home listening. Making such tapes for other classes, particularly for younger students, is extremely motivating and provides a significant boost to poor readers' self-esteem. Recorded readings are also often advocated for inclusion in student portfolios. If the students have assumed some ownership over their portfolios, this will provide additional meaningfulness and functionality to motivate practice.

### **A final word**

Instruction like that described above which helps students understand the nature of reading, what good readers do,

and how they can become successful has one over-riding advantage over less explicit instruction. It empowers the students. When learners understand their goals and how to achieve them, and when they can talk and think about something like fluency using appropriate language, then the learners have control. This power and control greatly improves motivation and helps the students keep a fair sense of their own progress. Without ownership, control, and power, student learning is often haphazard and their involvement in learning is often lost. Students who have not been successful in school do not feel that they can succeed, they don't understand how to succeed, they are not involved in learning, and they feel that they have no control or power in school learning situations (Covington, 1992).

Many of these problems can be avoided if the students understand what and how they are to learn, if they are let in on the processes and language of learning, and if they are allowed to practice in ways which they find rewarding and purposeful. Teach your students about reading and teach them the language which goes with this knowledge. Very young students and older disabled students are quite capable of learning, understanding, and using terms such as *automaticity*, *eye-voice span*, and *fluency*. If you help them with this, you and they will all become more successful and more powerful.

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## Professional Materials

*Literature Instruction: Practice and Policy.* Edited by James Flood and Judith A. Langer. Scholastic, 2891 East McCarty St., Jefferson City MO 65102. 1994. ISBN: 0-590-49756-1. 184 pp.

Written with logic, elegance and passion, the nine essays in this eminently readable and quotable collection inspire as they inform. Judith Langer's opening essay sets a positive tone, based on her own experience in classrooms where students' interactions about literature take the form of "reaching toward a horizon of possibilities," and learner-centered instruction enables all to develop rich understandings and find joy in reading. But her essay is not wholly optimistic. In most classrooms, she notes, the study of literature still has a right-answer focus. Two of the most joyous chapters are those by Victoria Purcell-Gates and Nancy L. Roser, whose descriptions of young children's responses to literature demonstrate how enriching it would be if literature instruction were guided by best existing practice in preschools and kindergartens. In contrast, James Marshall's powerful essay on "Ability Grouping and the Teaching of Literature," is the most somber. Tracking practices at the high school drive earlier teaching, and are driven by forces outside the school, so that even teachers of advanced placement students feel constrained to prepare their students for narrowly envisioned higher learning and careers, while teachers of students referred to by classmates as bottom-of-the barrel must cope with student rage. The concluding essay, by James Flood and Diane Lapp, discusses "winds of change," urging attention to the success stories that already exist, and noting that for widespread change in literature instruction to occur, "ample time has to elapse for success stories to amass." (JMJ)



# Children's Reviews

## Counting and Poetry: Two Reviews

*Mary Ann Homan  
Hamilton Elementary School,  
Hamilton Indiana*

*Old Dame Counterpane.* Written by Jane Yolen. Illustrated by Ruth Tietjen Cuncell. Philomel Books, 200 Madison Avenue, New York NY 10016. ISBN: 0-399-22686-9. 1994. 32 pp. US\$14.95.

Working hand in hand the author and illustrator have created a dreamy counting book for children. With her white hair piled high, her glasses inched down upon her nose, and in her work clothes, Old Dame Counterpane sits high in the sky upon her rocking chair. Beginning with the number *one*, she gently picks up her needle and begins stitching her quilt. Square by square the sun appears along with the sea, clouds, birds, animals, flowers, bees, towns, and you and me. She takes time out only for a cup of tea. The verses are lyrical, repetitive, and contagious.

Cuncell's watercolor illustrations are soft and round, and filled with hues of gold and violet. *Old Dame Counterpane* is wonderful for pre-school through third grade. Be prepared to share it many times, as once will never do — and then, of course, make your own watercolor quilt.



*Winter Poems*. Selected by Barbara Rogasky. Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. Scholastic, Inc., 555 Broadway, New York NY 10012. ISBN: 0-590-42872-1. 1994. 40 pp. US\$15.95.

When the frost is etched on the window and the tea kettle sings in the kitchen, it is time to pull *Winter Poems* from the shelf. From beginning to end, the poetry journeys from the last fall apples, through winter, and into the spring thaw. Barbara Rogasky has carefully selected twenty-five pieces of poetry which represent the winter months without mention of Christmas or Hanukkah. Among others, authors include Rachel Field, William Shakespeare, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Frost, and Carl Sandburg. The sparkling illustrations by Trina Schart Hyman enhance each poem with full page art and a story border. The artwork is based on the winter scenes found on the artist's New Hampshire farm. Author and illustrator, as well as other family members and farm animals, are represented in the illustrations. *Winter Poems* should be shared with children of all ages as an introduction to some of the great poets. Adults will love hearing the beloved poems once again — especially on a cold winter night in front of a roaring fire.

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## *Snowfall And An Imaginary Garden*

Kimberly DeYoung

*Rose Park Christian School, Holland Michigan*

*The Snow Angel.* Written by Angela McAllister. Illustrated by Claire Fletcher. Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN: 0-688-04569-3. 1993. US\$14.00.

Who can doubt the magic of a new snowfall? Not Jack! When the new snow is spread like a blanket on the ground Elsa takes full advantage of it. She makes giant footprints and snow castles. She goes sliding down the hill. She spreads her arms and makes a beautiful snow angel. She tells her believing little brother Jack that the Snow Queen slept there. The next three mornings Jack tells his own tales about the Snow Queen. Could it be that he is a very good pretender, or does he know some snow truth? Elsa investigates. This is a delightful winter story with charming illustrations — a hot cocoa, warm blanket book which is sure to chase away your winter time blues.

*Grandma's Garden.* Written by Elaine Moore. Illustrated by Dan Anderson. Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard Books, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10019. ISBN: 0-688-08693-4. 1994. US\$15.00.

*Grandma's Garden* is a realistic story filled with magical moments. Kim is at Grandma's house to help her wake up the garden. Together they plant the garden, cuddle through a thunderstorm, share the disappointment of a ruined garden, enjoy flying a kite, trick Jack Frost, and replant the garden. Kim doesn't think she can wait until summer when she can again go visit Grandma, but Grandma finds a way to make the waiting a little easier. This is a heartwarming story that everyone in the family will enjoy.

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