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## MAKING STORY TIME A LITERACY EVENT FOR THE YOUNG CHILD

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A literacy event is "any action or sequence, involving one or more persons in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role" (Anderson, Teale & Estrada, 1980). Story reading by a parent or teacher is perhaps the single most effective literacy event in a young child's experience with written language. Increasingly, reports suggest children's development of skills associated with ease of reading acquisition are enhanced with regular readings of storybooks both prior to and concomitant with formal instruction.

Oral language competence is an early developing reading related skill. Children who exhibit proficiency with complex grammatical forms tend to find the process of learning to read easier than those children who are less competent (Hiebert, 1980; Share, Jorm, MacClean, Mathews, & Waterman, 1983). Facility with grammatical structures is enhanced with regular story reading at the preschool level (Durkin, 1978; McCormick, 1983).

Development of early reading knowledge; ability to differentiate between the front and back of a book, awareness of the direction in which print is to be read, understanding that print provides salient information is associated with regular story reading at the preschool level (Durkin, 1974-75, Teale, 1978). Likewise, motivation to deal with the process of learning to read is fostered in children who are read to consistently at home (Freeman & Wasserman, 1987).

Children beginning the formal process of reading acquisition also benefit from consistent story reading.

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Comprehension skills and decoding ability of low socio-economic first-grade children read to daily for six months were superior to the control group (Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1986).

Reading stories also benefits those whose experience deviates from "normal". Hearing impaired children performed at or above grade level in reading instruction after participating in a prereading program with a significant story-reading component (Lieding & Gammel, 1982).

Interest has recently focused on aspects of the story reading act as investigators report "being read to in itself does not necessarily enhance literacy" (Morrow, 1988, p. 91). Quality of instruction, quality of time and quality of books are significant factors in ensuring story reading is a true literacy event.

### Quality Instruction

The primary purpose of story reading is pleasure. However, a number of instructional approaches may be adopted to both enhance enjoyment of stories and awareness of literacy.

**Interactive Discussion** occurs when questions and comments are initiated by both the children and the reader (Cochran-Smith, 1984). Initial evidence suggests the quantity and the nature of questions and comments by all participants, dictate how effective a story reading is in promoting readiness for formal instruction.

After observing parents with preschool children, Flood (1977) reported the number of questions asked by both the reader and the child was one of the best predictors of success on reading readiness scores. He suggests interactive questioning occur before, during and after the reading with much positive reinforcement of children's responses.

While not directed at the classroom story time situation, Flood's (1977) report and recommendations have relevance for it. His suggestions support such time honored practices as initial discussion of title, author, and a guess at the story line. Also implicated as appropriate instructional activity is the practice of having children predict events at regular intervals. Finally,

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discussion in which an emotional reaction to the story is required is also a justifiable story reading activity.

Children less experienced with the story reading process may require assistance in dealing with interactive discussion. When uncertainty is displayed the teacher can both ask and answer such a question. Such a practice is often referred to as "scaffolding" (Ninio & Bruner, 1978) and the intent is to provide the student with a model for future behavior. Over time the extent of teacher participation should be dropped in favor of more extensive contributions on the part of the children (Combs, 1987).

**Shared Reading** is an instructional activity that can be conducted with a whole class or a small group. Children not yet able to read formally are encouraged to join in or read in place of the teacher whenever possible (Holdaway, 1982). Predictable books, those with a recurring phrase or sentence are the most appropriate for this activity. Outsize texts with enlarged print are sometimes used to ensure all children can see the text and pictures.

Practices associated with an interactive reading of a story book are equally appropriate in the shared reading context. Like a "simple story reading", the initial reading of a new story is conducted in one sitting. Unlike a simple story reading the children are encouraged to join it and "read" where possible. This expectation is conveyed easily by stopping and waiting for the children to take up the refrain--" . . . and that was the end of that." While this occurs the teacher can sweep her hand under the text to identify the printed form of the spoken words.

The book is reread only if both teacher and children are eager to return to it. Subsequent readings can be handled in a variety of ways. Children may listen to a taped version of the story and "read along" endeavoring to match the words they see with the words they hear. The teacher and children may read in unison from individual copies. If appropriate, the children's attention may be drawn to book or print conventions or to word and letter details.

**Repeated Readings:**

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Recently, support has also been offered for multiple readings of the same story. Repeated readings have been found to encourage increasing amounts of discussion with each reiteration (Martinez, 1983; Yaden, 1988). Growth of interest in a different aspect of the story; characters, plot and vocabulary, is evident with each reading (Martinez & Roser, 1985). This implies insight into one component of the story frees the child to explore and process another in greater depth. Thus, children should listen to the same story as often as interest dictates.

Morrow (1988) reports a differential effect of repeated readings on low and high ability children. More questions and comments were made by low ability children than by higher ability children across subsequent reading of the same books. Such a finding suggests less academically able children would benefit from hearing stories read repeatedly.

**Children as Story Tellers:** Having the child become the storyteller is a teaching strategy directed at making storytime an intensely personal experience for the student. This can be done in a number of ways once children have gained a little competence with the reading process. Anecdotal reports suggest interest in reading and books is stimulated through such approaches, thus enhancing the value of story time as a literacy event.

A student storytelling session may be established as part of classroom routine. Capetty (1986) describes one successful attempt to incorporate students as readers into the class program. Groups were formed and one child designated a reader, the other children listeners for that week. A prepared portion of the story was read by the reader to each of the groups in the room. Capetty reports interest in personal reading is heightened as children both become aware of books enjoyed by their peers and wish to know the end of the story.

Children can be encouraged to tell, orally, their own stories in a class or group context. A singularly important benefit that accrues from this practice is the development of a sense of story; awareness of story elements such as the beginning, time and location, characters, sequence of events and endings (Hough, Nurss & Wood, 1987). Awareness of story structure is significant

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as it helps the child know what to expect in a story (Sadow, 1982; Whaley, 1981a) and plays a role in children's interpretation and construction of stories (Golden 1984).

Stories related orally by students may ultimately be copied down by the teacher, illustrated by the author and made available for class members to read. Such activity, of course, provides young children opportunity to develop the essential understanding that oral and written language are corresponding codes.

A related instructional activity is oral retelling of stories that have been read aloud (Golden, 1984; Morrow, 1985a). Young children may require assistance with the structural elements of a tale; the setting, locations, etc. throughout the process. This can be offered in the form of prompts; "Who was the story about? When did the story happen? Where did the story happen? What was the problem (main character) had to face? What did s/he do about it?" Consistent instruction with story retelling has positive effects for literacy acquisition. It has been found to improve the sense of a story (Morrow 1986), comprehension (Brown, 1975; Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985) and complexity of oral language used (Morrow, 1985a).

Theater: Reader's theater in which we encourage children to develop a play from a story is recommended as an activity for creating interest in reading (Cox, 1988; Stoodt, 1988). Gray's (1987) report suggests that dramatics increase comprehension.

Adapting a story for a radio play is an enjoyable and novel experience for most children. Stories may be rewritten as an alternative to reading of stories at story time. In presenting a radio play, readers are stationed behind a screen serving as "radio station". To add realism the performers are encouraged to introduce the performance and broadcast the station call letters. Children must read their parts loudly and clearly so that all members of the audience can hear.

No accounts could be located in the literature about the efficacy of this procedure. The author's experience with the practice, however, has been positive. Since the

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participants perform in relative anonymity they often feel secure enough to read confidently and with expression. Furthermore, the audience enjoys guessing who is taking the various parts of the characters.

#### Quality Time

The amount of time spent engaged in story reading is felt to be a significant factor in fostering literacy acquisition. Shanahan & Hogan (1983) report the most significant factor in predicting children's achievement on a test of print awareness is the minutes per week spent in book reading. Equally important, though, is the quality of time spent engaged in story reading and related activity. Essentially, this refers to allowing children opportunity to reflect upon stories and the reading process.

Prerequisite to reflection is familiarity with the story (Miles, 1985; Minns, 1988). After a number of readings and full discussion of a given book, the teacher may ask or encourage a response to it. One approach is to have the children try to relate the stories to their own situation. "What was the story trying to say? Have the things that happened in the story ever happened to you?" Miles (1985) characterizes such activity as "making meaning with a story" (p. 343). The intent is to have children make sense of a book on a deep and personal level by relating experiences described in literature to their own lives. Teale (1981) states that these events provide a "range of reinforcements and extensions which build a child's typification of literacy" (p. 907).

Opportunity to individually read a book quietly or to share a story with friends can also be quality time. Children with some reading competence can use designated "sustained silent reading" periods, now fully described in the literature (e.g., Kaisen, 1987).

However, children who cannot read in the traditional sense also need a personal reflective reading time built into the daily schedule. Reports (Holdaway, 1979; Minns, 1988) suggest opportunity to reread familiar books provides children with a chance to "rehearse" the reading process. Formal structures of written language are tried out and corrected as stories are re-enacted. Additionally,

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reading like behaviors are adopted as children begin to fully understand book handling conventions.

### Quality Books

Anecdotal accounts (e.g., Huffman, 1981) and research reports (Chandler & Baghban, 1986) suggest stories with repetitive rhythmic and cumulative refrains are suitable for introducing children to the literary experience. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, (Viorst, 1975) and The Hungry Giant (Cowley & Melser, 1980) are examples of stories employing this convention. Repeated phrases or sentences such as " 'I'll hit you with my bommy-knocker' said the giant" begin to be anticipated and identified in print by the young reader after several hearings. This experience gives the child a sense of his/her potential ability to deal with the reading acquisition process.

While colorful or imaginative graphics enhance the appeal of a book, the language employed is the significant component of quality literature. It must be forceful enough to evoke images in the mind of the listener (Martin, 1978). A simple test of appeal of the language of a book is a story reading since children will rarely attend to a poorly written tale (Cullinan, 1987).

Quality books for the young reader also incorporate an easily identifiable plot and sequence of events that build suspense. Such stories provide children opportunity to develop the sense of story necessary for comprehension (Stein, 1979).

### Conclusions

Consistent story readings provide young children with opportunity to construct concepts and understandings about reading that will facilitate the acquisition process. Reports suggest some instructional practices, such as careful questioning and rereadings of the tale optimize these learning opportunities. Also significant in developing awareness of the literacy process is individual time for reflection upon the books read. Such personal reading time permits the young child

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opportunity to practice reading-like behaviors that encourage understanding of written language structures and book handling conventions. Finally, quality books, books with natural sentence, a plausible plot and appealing graphics are essential to hold the interest of young learners.

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