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Creating Classroom Contexts for Readers: Linking Children With Books

Susan Lehr

Earlier in this century John Dewey proposed a view of the child as an active learner involved with meaningful content; he regarded the reading instruction of his day as being passive and mechanical. In 1908 Huey, a student of John Dewey's, wrote about the natural literacy environments of the preschool child at home and contrasted that to the unnatural way in which reading was taught in the school.

The premise that learning is an active process has been at the core of many theories of learning and today these theories find broad support in reading programs as well as in content areas. A growing body of research which informs educators as to how children learn optimally is appearing across the content areas and has at its heart the notion that the child must learn to think critically rather than by rote, actively rather than passively, while at the same time interacting with meaningful content. In other words, reading skills are necessary tools to be used with content rather than a separate content area to be studied in isolation. How can teachers begin to create contexts in which reading excites children and links them effectively with books in a variety of genres?

SSR and fluency

Frank Smith (1988) has told us for years that children learn to read by reading. One cannot assume that children who do
not read at school will read at home, nor can one assume that children will be encouraged or given the time to read at home. This may occur if it is perceived as being valuable by the child and/or the child's family (Durkin, 1966). *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1984) reports results of a study in south Chicago which found that 50% of the fifth graders read four minutes or less each day when they were not in school. Thus the children in this study spent about 1% or less of their free time reading books. In the classroom the primary age subjects spent an average of 7-8 minutes a day in silent reading and their middle-grade counterparts spent about 15 minutes a day reading silently. Compare this to 130 minutes a day spent watching television as reported by the same children.

Allington (1983) discusses the importance of producing fluent readers. This will not occur in a vacuum: practice is essential to building reading fluency. Children need to read widely and deeply (Britton 1978) if they are to become fluent readers, and need diversity in reading materials to make this happen. Genre variety is the key to this wide and deep reading. Children can be exposed to realistic fiction, historical fiction, poetry, information books, newspapers, diaries, fantasy, folklore, picture books, biographies — a rich and extensive list.

One fifth grade child read *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, a tightly written historical fiction about life in a puritan village, by Elizabeth Speare (1958), and then immediately read about Nancy Drew and her escapades. At first the teacher was puzzled by the complex book and the easier series book both being read by the same child. This child was sampling new thought in the former, experiencing life under difficult times in the 1700's, and building skills of fluency in the latter. In
essence, she was reading for mere enjoyment with the second title, whereas she had to work harder with the content of the first. Fluent readers do this constantly and teachers need to be aware of children's needs for variety with topics, difficulty of material and genres.

Huck (1987) has suggested that sustained silent reading should occur daily in the classroom, perhaps 10 minutes in kindergarten which builds up to 20-30 minutes a day and by the fifth grade builds to 45 minutes a day. Reading stretches the imagination and helps the child sort out the world. It also has the capacity to extend the child's perceptions about other people and their problems and dilemmas. A variety of perspectives can be presented if there are many books available for discussion and comparison. This richness can be the springboard for writing and displays. This is less likely to happen, however, if there is only one reading text in the classroom. With the many well written pieces of literature available today it is difficult to conceive of a classroom which uses only one or two books as the basis for its reading program.

And what about the exciting literature connections that can be made with other content areas? *Rose Blanche*, a picture book by Roberto Innocenti (1985), is about a little German girl who discovers the people behind barbed wire out in the woods and brings them her gifts of bread. Sadako, in *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, by Eleanor Coerr (1977), tries to fold 1000 paper cranes after she discovers that she is dying of leukemia, contracted because she was a victim of the bombing of Hiroshima ten years earlier. Twelve-year-old Matt must tend the cabin in the wilderness of 18th century Maine while his parents are away in the exciting survival book by Elizabeth Speare, *Sign of the Beaver* (1983). These are
all examples of historical connections waiting to be made between social studies and literature. Using substantial books with substantial plots can help children make connections with history.

Children become excited about what they read and have a need to share what they are reading with others. Susan Hepler’s study with a fifth and sixth grade class showed us that reading is a social act and that a community of readers can build in the classroom (1982). All of the readers in this classroom read between 25 and 122 books during the school year, from the slowest reader to the most voracious reader. They were not limited by one or two texts and the less active readers read much more by becoming book consumers than they would have if limited to one text.

The word “silent” during SSR is a misconception. Hepler’s community of readers were lively, talkative and shared titles constantly with each other. They laughed together over funny bits and passed exciting episodes along to peers. One thing is clear: the children in this fifth and sixth grade classroom read constantly every day and clamored for more. A key concept in pulling all children into the act of reading is modeling. A teacher who reads throughout the SSR session is sending a loud and clear message to the children. What the teacher values will be valued by the children.

How can kindergarten children read for 10 minutes or longer? Children who perceive themselves as readers and take on literate behaviors are building successful self images. They will begin, as Moira McKenzie writes, by approximating to text (1977). This means that they understand that the message is contained in the print, they can tell about the story and thus have a sense of how stories operate, and that they
can sequence the events of the story by retelling it. This means also that kindergarten children need to hear lots of stories and have opportunities to tell stories to each other. Literate behaviors develop over time. In my own research with the child's developing sense of theme, I found that children with a high exposure to children's literature were able to talk about the stories they heard at higher abstractive levels than their less well read counterparts, suggesting that familiarity with a wide range of stories impacts on critical thinking skills as early as kindergarten (Lehr, 1988). The children with a higher exposure to literature, ranging in age from 5-10, were familiar with folktales, fables, poetry, nursery rhymes and picture books and were able to discuss themes of books heard.

**Reading strategies**

What can a teacher do to facilitate the reading strategies which fluent readers employ? The goal of reading instruction is to create independence in reading. Much has been written about the role of phonics in reading instruction. Children need to understand the sound/symbol relationships between letters and words. This is quite different from learning 149 phonics rules which Hanna, Hanna and Hodges (1982) have told us work only 49% of the time. Awareness of sound/symbol relationships means, for example, that the reader understands that certain words contain certain sounds which are clustered together, and can apply this knowledge when new words are encountered. It also suggests an awareness of some of the patterns found in words and development of spelling ability.

How teachers encourage students to develop this knowledge in a whole language format may be different from traditional methods which drill children with cards and focus
on rote memorization and isolated rules. Instead, the teacher may read a story about Mrs. Wishy-Washy (Cowley, 1989), and within the context of that highly entertaining, rhythmic and predictable story may point out the sound /sh/ found in the middle of her name and have the children signal when they hear the sound read. Note that this type of instruction still focuses on the story and that the sound is highlighted within the context of the story. This kind of activity should only be undertaken after children have listened to the story several times, so that the story is familiar.

Another strategy used by fluent readers is the ability to focus on meaning rather than mere word calling; therefore, when a child substitutes 'a rabbit' for 'the rabbit,' a knowledgeable teacher will ignore that miscue, tuck away the information for future reference and let the child continue reading. In this example the child has successfully substituted the article 'a' for the article 'the' and is apparently reading for meaning. If, on the other hand, the child makes a mistake which makes no sense, disrupts the passage and continues reading, the teacher may stop and encourage the child to explore the surrounding context. Teacher and child may talk about the meaning that should be building as the child reads the story. For example, a child reading come with a long vowel is using sounding out as a strategy; if this miscue is left uncorrected the child will not create a meaningful segment of text, and may need to be shown how to focus on context clues.

Meaning getting is the goal of reading and the use of context is one of the earliest strategies exhibited by emergent readers (Biemiller, 1970). When correctness in word identification is the focus of instruction, one of the child's strongest reading strategies, that of interacting meaningfully with a story, is ignored. A focus on meaning has implications for the
quality of materials selected for use with emerging readers. The stories must be well written and interesting, and should be somewhat predictable.

In order for meaning-making to occur a child must have a well developed sense of story and must be encouraged to use that sense of story to predict. Mandler and Johnson (1977) discuss the importance of story grammar and Rhodes (1981) emphasizes the importance of providing young readers with predictable stories. Children need well written texts which enable them to make logical predictions. Emergent readers also need extensive experience with stories so that they understand their conventions, which include beginnings, middles, endings, protagonists, antagonists, settings, and other literary devices.

Marie Clay (1985) has developed Reading Recovery, a program of remediation with readers at risk. The program, which has at its core a one on one approach to working with at-risk first graders, has a high success rate. Central to this program is the concept of self correction; children learn to monitor their own reading. Books used in the program are well written and invite the child into the reading process. Self correction is a powerful reading strategy because it fosters independence. It allows children to analyze and use context to read new vocabulary words. Mistakes are important and young learners should not be deprived of the opportunity to make them, and ultimately learn from them. Self correction is a powerful device for learning — at the basis of learning language, taking the first steps in walking, learning to ride a bike. Word perfect reading is not the goal of reading instruction. The goal is for children to become independent readers, capable of monitoring their own mistakes.
Matthew effects in reading

From the Gospel according to Matthew: “For unto every one that hath shall be given and he shall have abundance; But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.” Keith Stanovich (1986) uses the term Matthew effects to emphasize the increasing disparity between good and poor readers. The more a child reads in the classroom the more the child is allowed to read, and the more vocabulary develops and background knowledge is built, which in turn improves comprehension of harder materials. Conversely, poorer readers are allowed to read very little, and therefore, have a slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability.

Nagy and Anderson (1985) estimate that for in-school reading the least motivated children in the middle grades may read 100,000 words a year, while the average children at this level may read 1,000,000 words a year. A voracious middle grade reader may be reading as many as 50,000,000 words per year. We need to allow time for reading in the classroom if we expect children to become fluent readers.

The reading/writing connection

Writing develops in a parallel fashion along with reading. Writing and reading are most effective when used across the curriculum as a means of learning interesting content. Teaching reading and writing as separate subjects is not as effective or as interesting as using reading and writing skills during thematic studies in the classroom. In this manner the writing arises naturally out of the themes the children are exploring.

For example, if children are studying the life cycle of certain insects in science, the writing program can be based on the
studies of the children. Writing in a variety of formats and for a variety of purposes, some children can keep charts or diaries about the real insects which are being kept in the classroom, a chrysalis, or forms of life found in a small section of a school yard (Reed, 1987). Other children can devise informational reports about the insects being studied and also include labeled diagrams of insects and their habitats. A Little Book of Little Beasts (Hoberman, 1973) can provide models for factual bug poetry and at the same time introduce children to well written poetry. In these lively and rhythmic poems Hoberman introduces readers to the sounds, sights and traits of insects, even including a poem told from a spider's perspective which clearly proves that spiders are not bugs. A nonfiction selection entitled Bugs by Nancy Parker and Joan Wright (1987) provides a model for creating factual bug cartoons, coupled with accurate information. The illustrations also include clearly labeled insect parts. Texts in both genres are written accurately yet with a humorous stance. Both have high appeal to young readers, and also provide excellent experiences with literature and models for young writers.

For additional experiences with writing, children can be encouraged to write insect adventures, treating their individual traits as William Kotzwinkle did in the well written fantasy, Trouble in Bugland: A Collection of Inspector Mantis Mysteries (1986). This book could be read aloud by the teacher, thereby integrating the theme of insects into the reading program, or multiple copies could be used in literature groups. The book can inspire many types of writing by the children, including sequels to adventures, new episodes, diary entries from characters' points of view, letters from one character to another, maps and timelines of events and journeys. Children can also be encouraged to illustrate and label scenes and sequences from the story.
Why is it crucial to provide well written texts for children in a balanced reading and writing program? DeFord (1981) found that the type of reading program affects the writing of first grade children. The following three samples of writing indicate the type of reading program that children experienced in three different first grade classrooms:

- I had a gag. I had a dad. I had a cat. (phonics)
- Bill can run. Jill can run. Jeff can run. I can run. (basal)
- Iran is fighting us. 19 bombers went down. 14 fighters. We only have 3 bombers down 6 fighters. we have droped 9 bombs over iran the hostages have been ther to long. Now we head towards them. It's like a game of checers. (whole language)

As evidenced above by the child who is writing about the conflict in Iran, the focus of the whole language approach is on content, on using skills to talk about world events rather than using skills to read meaningless text. Writing skills are used to teach content. Therefore, the curriculum is dictated by teaching content, not premised on a set of workbooks and skill sheets that students must work their way through over the course of the school year. It is worth mentioning that the child's writing shown above indicates a wealth of rich experiences, a depth of background knowledge and the ability to think critically about world events. Can anyone doubt that this six year old child will eventually be able to sort out the conventional spelling for towards, dropped, there and checkers or supply a missing capital letter?

Topics for classroom writing can arise out of the activities and good literature being used in the classroom more effectively than from artificial story starters. Daily journals are effective, but only if teachers respond to content. Children need audiences when they write.
**Reading aloud**

Children need to hear stories and books read aloud on a daily basis. The academic benefits are many, but the main advantage children cite is that they like to hear stories. What does a daily read aloud program do for children?

Hearing books read aloud exposes children to a variety of genres, genres that they may not typically encounter on their own. We can offer children challenging books by Betsy Byars, Katherine Paterson, Cynthia Voigt, Philippa Pearce, Nina Bawden, Gary Paulsen, Jean Craighead George, Nancy Bond, Virginia Hamilton, Beverly Cleary, Carol and Donald Carrick, Lucille Clifton, Jane Resh Thomas, Tomie dePaola, Maurice Sendak, Audrey and Don Wood, Eloise Greenfield, and Chris Van Allsburg — to name a few!

Well written books stretch children's minds and expose them to books they may not be able to read independently. Hearing stories allows listeners to focus on content and attend to comprehending, not decoding. Consider the possibilities for poor readers who may not be able to read a novel independently. Reading aloud on a daily basis stimulates new vocabulary and improves vocabulary scores on achievement tests, as well as developing comprehension. Research also indicates the importance of oral language during read aloud time to extend the book and help the child consider various aspects of the book (Cohen 1968; Cullinan, Strickland and Jaggar, 1974). Pearson (1981) tells us that books are where children gain knowledge about the world, which in turns improves comprehension.

Children also need to listen to each other; the teacher should not be seen as the only source of information in the classroom. Direct instruction is useful but is not the only way
of conveying information in the classroom. Book discussions are necessary to extend critical thinking skills. Asking open ended questions which ask for evaluations and interpretations of what is read can richly extend the comprehension processing of information. If the focus is on clear, logical thinking, which is supported by information both in the story and in the child's head, children will be operating at abstract levels of thinking. The notion of right or wrong answers is less important than encouraging children to share their responses to what is read. Children can also become mini-experts when they are working on themes and can share information with each other and with other classes. Children need experiences listening to each other and accepting information from peers.

Sostarich's study (1974) of sixth graders found that active readers were children who had been read aloud to as young children. Some were still being read aloud to. Reading aloud to children on a regular basis contributes to the formation of lifelong reading habits!

Conclusion

Children become competent readers and language users in situations that encourage the use of language in a variety of ways during the course of the school day. Silence is not always golden.

Gregory Anrig, the president of the Education Testing Service, recently spoke to a gathering of educators (1988) and said that scores on tests for basic skills in reading have never been better, but critical thinking skills, he pointed out, need improvement. Children know the basics, but are frequently unable to apply that information in abstract learning situations. Educators need to create contexts for students in
which reading facilitates intellectual growth and encourages diversity in thinking. Literature is an effective vehicle for accomplishing this aim.

References


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**Erratum**

In the winter issue of Reading Horizons, pages were incorrectly numbered. Pages should have been numbered from 81 to 164. The numbers in the spring issue are ordered as they would be if the numbering in the winter issue had been correct; thus the first page of this issue is 165.