Kindergarten Children Coming to Literacy

The shared book experience prepares children for reading the way parents in literate homes do, by stimulating their desire to read and write.

Picture a kindergarten classroom. On the bulletin board are large sheets of drawing paper covered with children's paintings of billy goats. Green grass, planted in pans by the children, grows in the shape of an upper-case G and a lower-case g. Several children are using puppets of three billy goats and a troll to dramatize the story. Three children sit close by an adult, who is reading the classic children's book to them. A small boy stands in front of a large "book" of The Three Billy Goats Gruff, pointing with a ruler to each word as he reads with expression and accuracy. He grins broadly and reports, "I can read. I can read this book, and I can read Brown Bear, too."

This classroom is a fairly typical developmental kindergarten. A multi-sensory approach to learning, hands-on experiences, exposure to good literature, close contact with caring adults, and activities that enhance self-concept are its important elements.

The two noticeable differences are the teacher reading to a trio of children rather than the entire class, and the young boy reading the large book. The adult reads to a small group as part of an experiment designed to improve children's literacy by helping them understand that spoken words also can be read. An unexpected byproduct of the program was that a five-year-old boy learned to read well.

Benefits of Home Reading

The style and approach of the Billy Goats Gruff reading experience represents an attempt to replicate the way parents read to their children at home. Parent educators often recommend that parents read to their children early and frequently. Children who have been read to at home do generally learn to read earlier and with more ease at school (Hymes 1958, Durkin 1978, Sutton-Smith and Sutton-Smith 1964, Gardner 1970, Briggs and Elkind...
gests that not only is reading to chil-
Hale (1979), which includes fa-
that children develop a "literacy set"
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clinicalization process through which the
child with contextual support more
should provide children with "home-
teachers and other group care-givers
home and sch(x)l story-reading epi-
ence in story reading at school and at
The children's play in the block and
These differences in the typical
home and school story-reading epi-
theses have led theorists to suggest that
teachers and other group care-givers
should provide children with "home-
style" stories (Holdaway 1979, Cazden
style reading at school provides the
child with contextual support more
closely resembling the natural learn-
ing with which the child is familiar
(Heibert 1981, Ferreiro and Teberosky
1982, Goodman 1984). In addition, it
more nearly resembles the natural
socialization process through which the
child internalizes literacy behaviors
(Vygotsky 1981, Heath 1982, Scallon
and Scallon 1982).

Children who have been read to
understand what literacy is even be-
fore they receive any formal instruc-
tion (Heath 1983). Later on, when the
first grade teacher begins formal read-
ing instruction, these children have a
context in which to apply the newly
taught skills. Children who have diffi-
culty learning to read, however, often
lack prior experience with books and
thus do not have enough information
to form a context in which to place the
new skills (Schickendanz 1978).

The Shared Book Experience
The shared book experience repli-
cates for a group of kindergarten chil-
dren the positive experience that hap-
pens naturally between parent and
child in a literate home. This means
that in school, teachers read to
children repeatedly, and children receive
multisensory activities related to the
story. After a while, the children begin
dictating their own compositions and
gradually write their own stories and
journals.

Shared book experiences stimulate
children's literacy interests. An in-
creased number of children select
books to read to themselves, other
children, and classroom visitors.
The children's play in the block and
housekeeping centers, and in drama-
tics and art activities, clearly indi-
cates that they are mastering story
lines as well as repetitive dramatic
sequences such as the wolf's approach
to the little pig's door. More children
also request specific literacy informa-
tion, such as "draw the word for wolf"
or "where does it say 'I'll blow your
house down'?" The children incorpo-
rate more letters, numbers, and squig-
gle lines representing print in their
artwork. As the children become more
aware of the components of literacy
and more interested in participating in
these "school" activities, literacy
takes on a positive value in their
lives.

The process used in the shared
book experience is like a dynamic
spiral, reaching back to children's ear-
er experiences, using them to build a
context for literacy. Thus it can sig-
ificantly increase readiness scores for
children when they enter first grade
(Brown et al. in press). We find that
minority boys benefit most, probably
because they are least likely to be read
to at home.

The observation that when schools
provide an environment rich in litera-
cy experiences, children's "reading-
like" behavior will emerge relates to
the work of Clay (1972) and Holdaway
(1979) in New Zealand. Both have
sustained their faith in children's abili-
y to teach themselves when given the
opportunity coupled with rich sources
of information. Smith (1978) summed
up the importance of children's self-
teaching when he said, "There are
some important aspects of learning to
read which the child must teach him-
selves because we do not understand
them."

The shared book experience in a
developmental kindergarten can in-
crease children's awareness of literacy
and their competence to become
readers and writers. Experiences with-
in such an environment enable chil-
dren to become active participants in
their own learning.

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The Shared Book Experience

Step I. Whet the Appetite.
1. Mention the name of the “big book” for several days before the presentation.
2. Mention the activities planned for the class in connection with the “big book.”

Step II. Present the Story.
1. Discuss the cover of the “big book,” the author, the illustrator, the publisher, and place and date of publication.
2. Read the story to the whole group using lots of expression.
3. Point to the words as they are being read, using a sliding motion with a pointer or your hand.
4. Read the story a second time, encouraging the children to supply the words to complete phrases.

Step III. Read the Story Again and Again.
1. Read to individuals or groups of no more than three or four children from a “small book,” which is a replica of the “big book.”
2. Be sure each child is sitting close enough to see the print and maintain physical contact with the adult.
3. Point to the words as they are being read, using a sliding motion with a pointer or your hand.
4. If possible, read the book as often as the children request it.
5. Encourage parents or other adult volunteers to help with small-group readings.
6. Use peer readers from grades one, two, and three, who enjoy reading to kindergarten children.

Step IV. Implement Multisensory Activities.
1. Plan art activities to correlate with the story, such as drawing the characters.
2. Dramatize the story by using puppets or having children portray characters.
3. Sing a song composed from the words of the story, or sing a familiar song about a related character or activity.
4. Use materials related to the story for math activities.
5. Develop science activities to illustrate the story.
6. Carry out a cooking activity related to the story, and let the children eat what they’ve cooked.
7. Let children listen to taped versions of the story, and read along in a small book as they listen.
8. Read other books that reinforce or extend the subject of the story.
9. Have available in the library center other books on the subject for the children to enjoy.

Step V. Expand the Experience.
1. Keep copies of the “big book” and “small book” on hand for children to read whenever they desire.
2. Have tapes and copies of the “small book” available for children to hear the story as they desire.
3. Have books and pictures in the library center that correlate with the subject of the story.
4. Tape children as they “read” the story, and play back the tapes (with children’s permission).
5. Return one of the activities suggested earlier whenever children express interest.

Step VI. Begin the Process of Writing.
1. Children dictate sentences to the teacher, who writes them on a large chart in front of the group.
2. At the end of dictation, children “read” what they have dictated.
3. Systematically zero in on certain things, such as a particular letter, high-frequency word, color words, or punctuation. Use colored markers.
4. Date and keep together daily entries to form a classroom journal. Share journal entries with another class.
5. In the spring, following extensive experience with group journal keeping, children begin to keep individual journals. On Monday, give each child five sheets of plain white paper that have been stapled together, so that they may write something every day. Anything the child “writes,” from squiggles through illustrations, is acceptable. The child may select an entry to share with the class. Send a letter of explanation to parents and let children take their journals home.
6. Teachers should write in their own journals while students write. Children need to see the teacher writing.
7. Have children create a new story by using the format of the “big book” and changing nouns, verbs, or adjectives. An example would be, “Mary, Mary, whom do you see?” “I see Peter looking at me,” following the format of “Brown bear, brown bear, whom do you see?”

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