

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 closely 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 by-product 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



At home the child can select the book, observe the print as well as the pictures, recite or co-tell familiar lines, interrupt to ask questions or to comment, and have a relaxed, positive experience. The shared book experience brings these qualities to school.

1977, Clay 1979, Smith 1978, Doake 1981, Hoffman 1982, Wells 1982, Teale 1981). A benefit of home reading is that children develop a "literacy set" (Holdaway 1979), which includes familiarity with book handling—top to bottom, front to back, and page turning (Ilg and Ames 1965, Heath 1983, Taylor 1983, Teale 1985).

Home story reading by parents appears to be more effective than the traditional group story reading in pre-schools and primary classes. This suggests that not only is reading to children important, but that the setting in which the reading occurs may also be significant. There is a qualitative difference in story reading at school and at home. At school the child sits some distance away from the teacher-reader and sees only the cover of the book and its pictures. At home the child can select the book, sit on the parent's lap, observe the print as well as the pictures, turn pages, recite or co-tell familiar lines, interrupt to ask questions or to comment, and have a relaxed, positive experience (Schickendanz 1978).

These differences in the typical home and school story-reading episodes have led theorists to suggest that teachers and other group care-givers should provide children with "homestyle" stories (Holdaway 1979, Cazden 1981, Teale 1981, Smith 1983). Homestyle reading at school provides the child with contextual support more closely resembling the natural learning 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, Scallan and Scallan 1982).

Children who have been read to understand what literacy is even before they receive any formal instruction (Heath 1983). Later on, when the first grade teacher begins formal reading instruction, these children have a context in which to apply the newly taught skills. Children who have difficulty 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 children the positive experience that happens 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 increased 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 dramatics and art activities, clearly indicates 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 information, such as "draw the word for wolf," or "where does it say 'I'll blow your house down?'" The children incorporate more letters, numbers, and squiggle 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 earlier experiences, using them to build a context for literacy. Thus it can significantly 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 literacy 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 ability 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 himself because we do not understand them."

The shared book experience in a developmental kindergarten can increase children's awareness of literacy and their competence to become readers and writers. Experiences with such an environment enable children 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 to 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, have 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?"

—By Mac H. Brown, Sylvia H. Weinberg, and Pamela S. Cromer.

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Authors' Note: The National Council of Teachers of English has designated the Manning Primary School as a Center of Excellence for 1985-1987 based on the Shared Book Experience. In addition, the South Carolina Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development gave the Shared Book Experience program its First Place Award for Excellence in Education in 1985. A descriptive brochure of the current program is available on request from Manning Primary School, 125 N. Boundary St., Manning, SC 29102.

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