

## Are There Really 3 R's?

Many teachers are creating literacy-learning environments in which students' uses of reading and writing are inseparable. These teachers can now find support in promising research developments that focus on the connections among the language arts.

Dee Gibson gathers her kindergarten class around her on the rug. "Have you noticed," she asks them in a hushed voice, "something different about our crayfish?" Her children offer their observations, excitedly describing the crayfish eggs they have spotted in the classroom aquarium. "I've been wondering," muses Mrs. Gibson, "how long it takes for crayfish eggs to hatch. It's a question I have." As she turns to write the question on chart paper, she adds, "Do you have questions, too?"

The children, accustomed to framing their questions and seeing them recorded on chart paper or chalkboard, ask readily: "Will the mother crayfish keep the eggs warm?" "What will she do when they hatch?" These questions are no doubt prompted by the fact that the children supervised the hatching of chicks in an incubator not long before. But there are also new observations and concerns: "Are the eggs stuck on her tail?"

The children sense that knowing where to find answers is as important as the questions they have. Mrs. Gibson has helped them to understand that answers to important questions can be gleaned from many sources—from pictures and posted charts, from observation, from experts, and from books and print of all kinds. So the children plan ways to learn what they want to know about their crayfish. Their plans and responses are saved for later reference because Mrs. Gibson takes written dictation on the chart

paper and refers her children to the print often and easily as they learn more about crayfish.

All about the classroom, children's drawings bear their own independent attempts at writing and labeling. In addition, these five- and six-year-olds are comfortable with reference books that have too many words for them to read. They put their fingers on the captions under the pictures of crayfish in hefty volumes and talk together about those pictures. Mrs. Gibson stops by to read, too: "Here it says that the female crayfish carries the eggs on her swimmerets. Where should we keep that information?"

These kindergarten children think and talk and read and write as they learn together. Reading and writing serve their purposes as ways to record information and share findings. On the way to becoming literate, they are behaving as literate individuals.

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Principal Kay Montgomery points with pride to the rows of colorful hand-bound books that occupy a place of honor in the Braun Station Elementary School Library. "Our children are authors here," she explains. "Every child in the school



Photographs by Nancy Roser

has at least one published book in the school library for others to check out and read. It's our Braun Station Publishing House!"

She reaches for one of the stitched and bound books arranged alphabetically by authors' last names to point out the author information page and the library pocket that appear in each. "It's a big deal to be on the library shelf here," she says. "We even put every new book and author into the card catalog. And over here, there is a board for children to recommend books to others. Enthusiasm is really contagious when a reader suggests a book."

Nearby, two parent volunteers sit among the residue of their work—paper and notes, clippings and coversheets—talking over plans with two young authors for the layout and illustrations of the children's upcoming publications.

"It works like this," Kay explains. "Teachers and children in each classroom decide together when a piece is a likely one for publication. The *only* guideline is that every child who wants to be published will be—and so far we have had no one who has turned down the chance. Once the decision is made, the revision and polishing procedures of that particular classroom kick in, whether it be self-polishing, peer editing, conferencing, group discussions, or a combination of these. Of course, there is less revision in the kindergarten than in the 5th grade, but even so, every author is convinced of the importance of making the piece as appealing as possible to the 'real' readers in the library.

"When the young authors are satisfied, they just sign up for their first appointment with a parent in the library. On the day of the first appointment, the volunteer and the child read the book together, plan the number of pages the book will require, and where the text and illustrations will be placed. The parents then type the manuscript onto the folded 'signatures.'"

"Then comes the second appointment, which means another reading, as well as planning and taking notes about the illustrations that are to come. When the illustrations have been com-

pleted, the book is returned to the library for binding. The librarian treats the book as any new acquisition to be logged into the collection. And, most often, the very first reader to check out the book is the proud author."

The children in Braun Station Elementary School read and write not only for themselves but for a school-wide audience of other readers and authors.

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Fourth-grade teacher Stella Mata closes the book she has just finished reading aloud to her class of children learning English as a second language. "That Amelia Bedelia!" she sighs, "Doesn't she get mixed up?" The children laugh as they recall the misadventures of the house servant who takes all her directions literally. "Let's see if we can keep track of her



confusions," says Stella. She writes "What Amelia Bedelia was supposed to do" at the top of one column on the board and "What Amelia Bedelia did" at the top of the second column. Then the children talk and write ("She was supposed to dust the furniture and she put powder dust on it!").

As the list grows, Stella reminds them that there are other Amelia Bedelia books in the room, ones in which Amelia Bedelia continues to maintain disorder while she attempts to do exactly what Mrs. Rogers asks. "You can use your response logs after you read," says Stella, "to keep track of some of the funniest things that Amelia Bedelia does—just as we've done with this list on the board."

***"The best way for the receiver to learn to comprehend is to compose. A learner needs to practice all roles and relations of the communication structure. This amounts to being sender, receiver, and sometimes even subject in all kinds of discourse."***

***James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner, 1983***

When some of the children offer to draw a two-part picture to explain a misunderstanding, Stella acknowledges that pictures will be a terrific addition to the response logs.

Writing in this classroom serves as a good companion to reading a book because writing extends and clarifies meaning and helps readers and speakers make a book and its language their own.

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**T**hese three educators are by no means unique. In many schools across this country and elsewhere, children encounter literacy-learning environments that make sense to them—ones in which they use reading and writing in purposeful and related ways. They make choices about what to write and read, find opportunities to talk over both what is read and what is written, revisit texts they have created and texts that other authors have produced, and discover the joys of sharing their written efforts as well as the efforts of other authors.

In the professional literature, one can read about classrooms like Ellen Blackburn's (1984) 1st grade in Somersworth, New Hampshire, where children discover the complementary relationship between reading and writing as they "write" pictures, pretend-read stories, and use invented spellings to record their ideas. They move toward conventional literacy surrounded by books, talking about books, reading and writing and sharing their literacy.

Blackburn describes her classroom as a place in which connections are made. In a similar way, Mary Mercer Krogness (1989) writes that her low-achieving 8th graders in Shaker Heights, Ohio, find opportunities to connect with literature that make sense to them. They share their ideas orally and then write their personal responses to literature.

In Donna Carrara's print-rich 4th grade classroom in Montclair, New Jersey, children are read to every day. Time is provided for their independent reading and daily writing. Each confers often with Donna and with

***"How could a person possibly write better than he or she can read? One has to read one's own writing, after all, in making the most elemental stylistic choices."***

***E.D. Hirsch, Jr., 1980***

other children about books they and others have read and written. And every day they reflect on their reading and writing experiences in their learning logs (Jagger, Carrara, and Weiss 1986).

Are there really 3 R's in classrooms such as these? Readin' and 'Ritin' may be distinguishable from 'Rithmetic but not from each other in the classrooms of growing numbers of contemporary teachers. In these classrooms, students' uses of reading and writing are inseparable, and children's in-school uses of literacy are wholly consistent with the reading and writing experiences that occur in their daily lives. Neither students nor teachers are distracted by clocks and textbooks which signal spelling time, handwriting time, English time, reading time, and writing time. Rather, teachers as well as students are propelled by their questions about cray-

***"Early in the morning this infant room gets underway on organic writing, and it is this writing that I use in relative proportions as the reading for the day. . . . In this way we have a set of graded brand-new stories every morning, each sprung from the circumstances of their lives and illustrated unmatchably in the mind."***

***Sylvia Ashton-Warner, 1963***

fish, their needs to communicate something in writing, and their strong desires to share responses to a book—all tasks that demand proficiency in language.

It would be inaccurate to call these teachers and others like them pioneers. Although the linking of reading and writing instruction represents a departure from the norm of a fractured curriculum—often one that requires a real act of courage—this weaving together of the arts of language into a richly textured fabric may be more accurately termed a reaffirmation or a rediscovery of natural connections. Indeed, the roots of an integrated language arts curriculum are deep and wide, given voice over decades by a range of theorists, writers, and practitioners.

Even so, typical practice has neglected to capitalize on the activities and processes that reading and writing share and has too often ignored their commonalities:

- Reading and writing are both forms of communication;
- Readers and writers actively compose meaning; their goal is to create coherent texts;
- Readers and writers are thinkers: they analyze and synthesize; they compare and contrast; they assimilate and accommodate; they weigh and refine ideas.

Teachers who *do* see the connections among the language arts and who lead students to use language to learn about their world are threatened by legislative mandates that undermine sound instruction. Ill-grounded tests reduce reading and writing to collections of separate skills that, even when mastered, do not add up to literacy. Legislated interference with curriculum in classrooms occurs through such prescriptions as minute-by-minute use of instructional time and textbook adoption policies that prohibit flexible use of educational dollars.

### **Promising Developments**

But at the same time these teachers find support in promising developments both within and outside the profession. We offer a beginning account of those developments that are contributing to renewed attention to

the merging of reading and writing in the classroom.

*Teachers are supported by recent trends in language arts research.* Changes are occurring in (1) the sites where research on reading and writing is conducted; (2) the backgrounds and interests of the researchers themselves; (3) the research questions that are being asked; and (4) the procedures that are being used for answering those questions.

The sites for studying language and language users have expanded. Many researchers are gathering their data where language occurs naturally; they are learning more about the functions reading and writing serve for children by observing on the playground, in the community, and in the home. By so doing, they bridge the gulf between language experiences that occur in children's daily lives and in their schooling.

A particularly noteworthy contribution to the literature has been made by observers of very young children who have described their remarkable language achievements prior to any formal instruction. Such naturalistic observations have opened our eyes to the way children in a variety of settings integrate language activities in order to accomplish their purposes.

The definition of a language arts researcher has broadened. Scholars from a variety of disciplines are affecting thought on language and learning in school settings. Anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, and neuroscientists are affecting educational thinking through the eyes of their own disciplinary traditions.

Also broadening the definition of "researcher" are classroom teachers who capitalize on insights gained from their daily contact with children—teachers who pose questions about their teaching and answer those questions in a disciplined fashion. The "teacher researcher" movement is reflected in a growing number of articles in the professional literature, in papers at professional meetings, and in funding opportunities provided by organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association.

The focus and methods of research in reading and writing have changed as well. From earlier attention in reading research to interpreting symbols and comparing methods and from writing research which studied only the text produced by writers has come an examination of readers in the act of reading and writers in the act of writing. Numerous reports of reading- and writing-in-progress (Dyson 1989, Jensen 1984, Shanahan 1989) testify to the interaction between the two. In order to write, writers read. In order to learn from reading or respond to reading, readers often write.

From process-oriented work have come definitions of reading and writing which highlight their similarities rather than their differences and which, in turn, validate instructional practices that unify rather than separate.

*Teachers are supported by certain aspects of today's political climate that serve to professionalize them.* Interest is high in what capable teachers know and can do, and this interest is driven by such diverse factors as the public attitudes toward today's schools (Elam and Gallup 1989), the proclamation of still

***"... reading is inextricably tied up with both oral and written composition, with experience, with other concepts inside us, and with other reading."***

***George Henry, 1974***

another "Literacy Crisis," and the needs of business and industry. The work of groups such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the influence on a lay readership of best-selling books like Tracy Kidder's *Among Schoolchildren* (1989), and the stated priorities of an "Education President" and a "Literacy First Lady" have also helped this process. These forces urge redirection, rethinking, and the questioning of conventional wisdom.

*Teachers are supported by those education programs that model the same unification of the language arts they advocate for schools.* For example, an integrated preservice experience encompassing language and literature rather than separate methods courses in reading, language arts, and children's literature provides the smoothest transition to classrooms where reading and writing are inextricably linked.

*Teachers are supported by a growing number and variety of resources.* These include influential professional organizations, the forums that journals provide, a grass roots network of teacher support groups, an abundance of exemplary professional books, and the stimulation of model programs. Perhaps the most valuable resources are the thousands of new books created each year by gifted authors and illustrators for children—and blank paper, still the best writing material of all. What better investment than classrooms rich in things to read, things to write about, and things to write with?

*Teachers are gaining support from many in positions of educational leadership.* Educational leaders contribute to the merging of reading and writing instruction in classrooms when they encourage teachers to make decisions, to take risks, and to find their own styles. Those leaders help to create an environment for teachers' continued learning by building professional libraries, urging attendance at professional meetings, and creating faculty study groups. Perhaps the most convincing support of all comes from educational leaders who are themselves students of language teaching and learning.

***"For children who learn to write at the same time as they learn to read, writing plays a significant part in the early reading progress."***  
***Marie M. Clay, 1975***

#### **Toward a Unified Future**

Clearly an awareness of ties between reading and writing is not an invention of the theoreticians and practitioners of today. While many recent theorists (Dyson 1984, Hirsch 1980, Moffett and Wagner 1983) underscore the relationship between reading and writing, we would do well to remember the significant contributions of such diverse thinkers and writers as Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963), Marie M. Clay (1975), E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1980), George Henry (1974), and James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner (1983). From these voices has come the understanding that we compose meaning whether we are reading or writing; that we create meaningful wholes from disparate experiences, memories, information, and associations; and that the "art of language" is a unified one.

If current trends continue, more American classrooms will be characterized by unified language arts instruction and more scholars will work to advance a research agenda that can identify with greater precision the nature of the relationships between reading and writing as well as the influences of specific methods and activities on their development.

For now, educators like Dee Gibson, Kay Montgomery, Stella Mata, and their kindred spirits around the world, fueled by supportive forces, create learning environments for children in which reading and writing are related to each other and to the lives those children lead. To them, accounts of the merging of reading and writing may be less compelling than a search for an explanation of the peculiar practice of separating Readin' and Ritin' in the first place, a practice that occurs nowhere else but in schools. □

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