***The Role of Specific Activities in Children’s Literacy Development***

Reading to Children

The literature is virtually unanimous on the benefits

of reading to children. These include developing a

love of books; learning to distinguish types of lan-

guage; developing an understanding of story struc-

ture and narrative; learning to think or imagine

“ahead”; improving vocabulary, listening compre-

hension, and more general“attending”abilities;

strengthening bonds with the reader/caregiver; and

creating a reading“community”(Sipe, 2000, p. 252;

Calkins, 2001). For some children, hearing a story

read aloud fluently lets them experience the story

as a whole, which helps them see the deeper mean-

ings in words or the story that they might not

understand when they read themselves because

they are working too hard (Allen, 2000). Because

children’s oral understanding and listening compre-

hension is at a higher level than their print under-

standing, reading aloud to children can introduce

them to higher-level books than they could read on

their own, exposing them to more interesting and

challenging material. Reading aloud introduces

children to books that they may later chose to read

themselves. Children who are read to gradually

“appropriate”the reading act for themselves

(Resnick, 1990, p. 181).

Sustained Silent Reading

Although there is obviously no substitute for reading itself in learning to read and in making reading part of one’s life, what is sometimes called“sustained silent reading”is often neglected in the settings in which children spend their days. Sustained silent reading provides a good opportunity to read for pleasure, which Resnick (1990) defines as the free- dom to pick up or put down a book at will, with“no need to prove to others that one has read”(p. 182). As Calkins (2001) puts it,“children benefit from daily opportunities to read books they choose for them- selves for their own purposes and pleasures”(p. 8).

Book Discussions

Text can be a stimulus for discussion and creative expression. Talking about what they have read or heard read aloud allows children to connect one text to other texts and to personal experiences. It allows

them to develop—or simply to recognize that they have—a distinct perspective (Wilhelm, 1997). Calkins (2001) writes,“We teach children to think with and between and against texts by helping them say aloud, in conversation with us and others, the thoughts they will eventually be able to develop without the interaction of conversation”(p. 226). There is some debate about how much to structure book discussions with children. Some argue that children do well with free or open discussion, usually finding their way to key elements of the narrative, especially if they have knowledge of key concepts; the group leader directs merely by asking key ques- tions (Sipe, 2000). Others emphasize the value of some adult framing, such as asking children to dis- cuss what they liked or disliked about a text, what puzzled them, or how a book compares to others they have read (Carney, 1990).

Story and Literature Dramatization

Dramatizing stories, plays, and other literature provides an active means of exploring text, one that is therefore more engaging for some

children than passive reading or listening. Acting out a story deepens children’s sense of character, plot, and narrative, thereby providing an opportunity for deeper understanding. Speaking and acting out stories gives children a different pathway into the distinctive language of literature. Dramatization makes abstract attributes of a piece of literature con- crete. When children temporarily take on other identities, they think about what they have in com- mon with and how they differ from others. Thematic fantasy play, akin to story dramatization in some respects, sometimes incorporates stories that children have heard or read. Children“re-tell”those stories in their own ways, perhaps changing characters or other elements, but usually retaining the basic narrative structure (see Pellegrini & Galda, 2002).

Writing Activities

Some have noted that children are more naturally writers than readers. Most children want to share their experiences and internal worlds with others, and most love to experiment with writing in the same way they love to experiment with drawing— as forms of self-expression, as ways of representing experience, their culture, their feelings, even their questions. When children begin to write, they build on what they know. They draw also upon their experiences with other symbolic media—not only talk but also drawing and dramatic play (Dyson, 1993).

A variety of writing experiences for different purposes, both guided by adults and unguided, encourages attention to language and helps children develop understanding of word sounds, sound- spelling relationships, and meanings (Calkins, 1994, 1997; Graves & Stuart, 1986). Open-ended and creative writing activities foster interest in literacy as well as specific skills such as narrative structure or character development. Journal writing encourages children to express their ideas, concerns, and experi- ences in their own way, without fear of censure by an adult. Dialogue journals (with a strong assurance of privacy and confidentiality) provide an opportu- nity for children to record responses to their experi- ences or reading and to share those responses with a teacher or other adult who responds in writing. Collaborative writing groups allow children to stim- ulate, help, and constructively critique each other; they learn to revise and to connect their own ideas to those of others. Children sometimes enjoy read- ing what they have produced, a process that can be invested with a bit of ritual. One idea is to have an “author’s chair”used especially for children to read their writing.

Using Reading and Writing for Research

Putting reading and writing in the service of some other end—say, learning about elephants or plan- ning a group construction project—is also a helpful literacy development activity, because children are not self-consciously focused on learning how to read or write, but are using these tools to think about and learn something new of interest to them. Connecting books to field trips, art, and other activities, such as making applesauce after reading a book about Johnny Appleseed or making origami birds after reading *A Thousand Cranes,* is another common way to extend learning and foster interest in reading.

Reading to acquire information is often neglected. Children have to learn to read for information dif- ferently than they read stories, sometimes scanning and reading selectively. They also have to learn how to read different kinds of documents, including dia- grams, maps, graphs, tables, photographs, and other “visual”texts (Moline, 1995). Children’s understand- ing of literacy expands when they read a schedule in order to see what activities are happening, instruc- tions in order to play a game, or recipes in order to prepare food. Children enjoy informational writing that combines words with pictures or diagrams, as in flow charts, webs, maps, or timelines.

Participation in Visual and Expressive Arts

The arts—drama, movement, photography, video, music, song writing, drawing, mural making, cartooning, comic book illustration— provide other

pathways into literacy. The arts reveal unrecognized abilities in children, allowing children to lead from strength and to gain confidence for taking risks. Some children express themselves better through other symbol systems than through writing and thereby learn they have something to say. Some children’s verbal imagination is sparked by their visual imagination; they express something first in pictures and then move into using words. Some children have difficulty ordering and expressing the ideas in their heads in words and can more easily practice that process using other art forms. For children who are struggling with literacy, re- approaching it through and incorporating it into another art form removes some of the psychological baggage that may have begun to accumulate.

Crossing back and forth between different media—for example, acting out a poem through movement—can lead to understanding and insight. Sometimes activity in one art form stimulates activity in another—a book or story stimulates a child to paint or draw something or to act something out. The arts help children distinguish the subjective from the objective, the concrete from the abstract; they also foster what Shirley Brice Heath (2001) has called conditional reasoning: What if we tried this ...? ■

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The Lower Eastside Girls Club provides a place where girls age 8 to 18 can grow, learn, have fun, and develop confidence in themselves and their ability to make a difference in the world. Through strong and innovative programs in the arts, sciences, literacy, entrepreneurial training, health, and wellness, the Girls Club encourages girls to develop and celebrate their own unique gifts and talents. To learn more about their programs visit: [www.girlsclub.org.](http://www.girlsclub.org/)

### Afterschool Matters Initiative

The Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF), seeking to have a long-term and substantial effect on the field of out-of-school education, launched several new initiatives to accomplish this mission. Afterschool Matters is one of the initiatives, the goals of which are to:

* Generate and disseminate research about community-based organizations serving youth during out-of-school hours
* Build a network of scholars studying community-based organizations serving youth
* Contribute to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice and policy in the area of community-based youth programs

### Afterschool Matters/Occasional Papers

One of the projects of the Afterschool Matters Initiative is the journal *Afterschool Matters,* a national, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism, scholarship, and consciousness of the field of afterschool education. The journal serves those involved in developing and running programs for youth during the out-of-school hours, in addition to those engaged in research and in shaping policy. Articles for the journals are solicited from the field, and a range of academic perspectives are considered along with personal or inspirational narratives and essays, book reviews, artwork, and photographs.

The RBF Occasional Papers is a peer-reviewed series published twice a year. The goal of the Occasional Papers is to provide a venue for publishing research that explores key issues and topics in the practice and theory of afterschool programming, youth development, and learning during the non-school hours. In addition, the Occasional Papers address key policy issues in the area of youth development. The intended audience for this series includes researchers, university staff, afterschool program managers and practitioners, and policy makers. Prospective papers are solicited by the RBF.

Copies of both *Afterschool Matters* and the Occasional Papers are available on the RBF website, [www.robertbownefoundation.org](http://www.robertbownefoundation.org/)

### Research Grants/Research Fellowship

The RBF sponsors a national Research Grant competition. Four grants of $10,000 are awarded to support either original empirical research in or about community-based youth programs during the non-school hours or research syntheses or policy analyses of community-based youth programs.

Now in its second year, the RBF Research Fellowship is dedicated to building the capacity of youth program staff to design and conduct research in the areas of youth development and education during the out-of-school hours. The goals of the Research Fellowship include generating and disseminating research in the area of education in community-based organizations serving youth during the out-of-school hours, building a network of scholars, contributing to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice, and informing policy in the area of community-based youth programs.

RBF Research Fellows are selected by application and work in youth programs in New York City. They meet twice a month for six months and once a month for the remainder of the year. Fellows become members of a community of researchers, learn methods of qualitative research, read and discuss research articles, and conduct site-specific research projects. Finally, fellows participate in a writing institute in which they write a research article or other piece for publication and present it at a research roundtable.

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