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Reading, Writing, Talking, Thinking, and Caring in the Kindergarten Classroom

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New state kindergarten standards in California list reading content that used to be more commonly taught in first grade. This article examines some of the thinking behind this change and argues that beginning reading can be incorporated into the kindergarten curriculum but not at the expense of two other key components—socialization and language development. Ways in which these three goals can be strengthened and combined are described. Developing a caring community with an emphasis on intrinsic motivation and collaborative learning positively affects students' sense of worth and is associated with higher academic achievement. Academic language development through challenging read alouds and through "talking and writing to learn" builds the comprehension base that is so critical in the upper grades. Finally, kindergarten students can begin to master beginning reading strategies when instruction is carefully scaffolded to meet their varying developmental levels and when "hybrid" text is used as a transition from predictable to decodable text.

So little time, so much to do. Teachers have probably thought this so often that its audible expression has been reduced to a simple sigh. Now they are being asked to do even more—teachers are being asked to teach their students the basic reading and writing skills that have traditionally been taught during the first half of first grade. It is tempting to think that the people making the decisions do not have a clue about the reality teachers face, which to some extent is correct. However, there are sound reasons to fit more formal reading and writing instruction into the kindergarten curriculum, and equally strong reasons to maintain the traditional focus on socialization, language development, and listening comprehension. While it may seem impossible to think about adding the teaching of beginning reading and writing to the already full traditional kindergarten curriculum, we propose that it is both possible and desirable.

This paper describes an approach to the language arts curriculum that combines (a) an explicit focus on building caring classroom communities, (b) an indirect constructivist approach to fostering language development and comprehension, and (c) a direct instruction approach to teaching the skills and concepts needed for beginning reading. Our thinking represents a collaboration among Marilyn Watson and Cindy Litman, both at the Developmental Studies Center, John Shefelbine at California State University Sacramento, and, for the reading part, kindergarten teachers in two school districts who have been using the approach we describe for several years. We propose that imbedding language instruction in virtually everything teachers do and taking the time, during the first half of the school year, to build a caring community and to teach children how to productively engage in

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many informal literacy learning activities will make it possible for the kindergarten teacher, during the second half of the year, to directly teach in small groups the decoding skills needed for beginning reading.

What we have discovered in our work is that creating a caring classroom community, a traditional goal of kindergarten, not only supports children's social, emotional and ethical development, but it also supports their development as readers, writers, and thinkers. Likewise, a carefully chosen reading and language arts curriculum supports not only children's literacy development, but it also helps create a caring classroom community.

In this paper we will briefly underscore the importance of beginning the year with a focus on community building and describe a structured approach to teaching beginning reading and writing that is developmentally appropriate. We will also describe how this approach depends on and contributes to the establishment of a caring classroom community. This approach allows teachers to accomplish more within the confines of the kindergarten day.

Beginning with Community

In today's high stakes testing, high academic accountability world, it is tempting to think that teachers cannot afford to take the time to build classroom community. We argue that they cannot afford *not* to do so. While building a caring community takes time and teachers are not "being held accountable" for how much their students like school or how well they have learned to regulate their emotions, resolve conflicts, or empathize with others, these things are vital to children's development as people and as readers (Greenberg, 1998). For example, children who succeed in making friends in kindergarten not only liked school better, they performed better academically (Ladd, 1990). At-risk children who have a close relationship with their teacher perform better academically and, conversely, those who have a conflictual relationship show a decline in performance (Pianta, 1999). Students in schools that have a strong sense of community and a strong academic program out-perform on standardized tests students in schools that have only one or the other (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999). Even to achieve optimal academic learning, it is essential that teachers begin the year as they always have, with a strong focus on building classroom community.

Combining Community Building with the Literacy Curriculum

The dilemma is how to fit an expanded literacy curriculum into an already crowded day. One answer to this dilemma is to combine the focus on community building with the literacy curriculum, thereby serving multiple goals with the same activities. Through book selection and the focus of its suggested activities, "Reading For Real," the program we have developed, can help. In this program, many of the books and activities explore issues of friendship, interpersonal conflict, and personal responsibility. For example, reading, talking about, and role playing scenes from such books as *Ruby the Copycat* (Rathmann, 1991), *Matthew and Tilly* (Jones, 1995), and *No Good in Art* (Cohen, 1996) can help students

be more aware of the values and behaviors that go into a caring community while they are building their language, listening comprehension, and concepts of print.

Collaborative Learning Can Foster Both Community and Literacy

Additionally, if teachers build and scaffold collaborative processes into their literacy lessons, they will not only foster a deeper understanding of the ideas in the text and enhance oral language, but they will also help students learn the skills of effective peer relationships. For example, teachers can establish learning partners each day and ask students to sit with their learning partners to hear and discuss the books that have been read aloud. When teachers then ask a question related to the reading, they ask the students to discuss the question first with their partner, thereby providing everyone with the chance to talk before some are given the opportunity to share their thinking with the whole class. This simple procedure provides students with more opportunities to talk, and it also reduces the self-control demands of group discussion sessions, thereby helping students stay more focused on the content. Moreover, as a special bonus, it helps the students like one another better, since they are serving the positive function of being listeners for one another. Finally, the fact that everyone has an opportunity to share his or her thinking lessens a major source of competition in the classroom—the desire to have one's voice heard above the others.

To use partnerships in this way and in a myriad of other ways, it is necessary to teach children how to engage one another respectfully. The teacher will also need to provide lots of opportunities for students to get to know one another as people as well as partners. For example, having children create class books about themselves, interview one another about a way they helped a classmate, create group collages of their favorite things that begin with various letters of the alphabet are all ways to build community and literacy simultaneously. These and many other ideas are outlined in two books produced by Developmental Studies Center. One, *Blueprints For a Collaborative Classroom* (DSC, 1997), focuses on ways to help children learn the skills and values of respectful collaboration, and the other, *Among Friends: Classrooms Where Caring and Learning Prevail* (Dalton & Watson, 1997), focuses on building community. We turn now to the part of our program about developing children's language, listening comprehension, and concepts of print.

Building Language and Comprehension

Kindergartners benefit from reading/language arts instruction that builds academic language and comprehension with direct instruction in decoding. Our program was designed to create this combination of experiences. The program emphasizes a handful of instructional strategies that get to the heart of what is critical for kindergartners to know and be able to do. These strategies include:

- talking to learn;
- reading (and being read to) to learn;
- writing to learn (about language and print); and

- learning word recognition strategies (phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight words).

In this section, we will focus on language and comprehension instruction in kindergarten. We will begin by reexamining the role of oral language in literacy development. We will then view academic language through a kindergarten lens and, finally, offer strategies for tweaking traditional kindergarten activities to increase their effectiveness for building language and comprehension.

Some lucky children have over 1,000 hours of literacy experience prior to kindergarten; others arrive with as few as five (Adams, 1990). Children with limited literacy experience are at a serious disadvantage, not only in learning concepts of print, but also in developing the academic language that is the foundation of literacy. While all young children need opportunities to develop vocabulary and background knowledge, a purposeful, efficient approach to building academic language is absolutely essential for kindergartners with limited prior literacy experiences.

The Role of Language in Literacy Development

Although vocabulary is the strongest predictor of reading comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981), research indicates that language plays little role in early reading achievement (Juel, 1994). Given this, it is tempting to conclude that the traditional kindergarten emphasis on oral language development is misinformed. Indeed, it has become popular to describe the developmental course of reading as one that begins with "learning to read" in the primary grades, then shifts to the stage of "reading to learn" in the intermediate grades. The new state standards reflect this point of view. Why then do we argue for an even greater emphasis on developing language in kindergarten?

While it is true that oral language does not predict reading ability in first grade, oral language in kindergarten is highly correlated with reading comprehension in the upper grades. One longitudinal study found a strong relationship between oral language in kindergarten and children's reading ability *eight years later* (Loban, 1964), and the correlation increased incrementally with time—from .36 in grade 4, to .52 in grade 8.

A more recent longitudinal study of reading comprehension corroborates those findings. Juel (1994) found that reading comprehension in the first grade was predicted almost exclusively by decoding. By second grade, however, deficiencies in vocabulary, world knowledge, and critical thinking became limiting factors, and this effect increased with each grade. While poor readers were most vulnerable, even initially good readers were at risk when they moved beyond basal readers. "[W]e noted that they had increasing difficulty, inasmuch as these good readers lacked the world knowledge and vocabulary necessary to understand these more challenging materials" (p. 126). Thus, early oral language development plays a critical role in literacy development—although the relationship does not emerge until later.

There are two likely explanations for the negligible relationship between language and reading in the early stages of reading: 1) reading test performance in the beginning stages of

reading primarily reflects differences in decoding ability, and 2) easy reading materials place little demand on language and background knowledge.

The academic language and critical thinking experience that students need to comprehend more difficult text does not develop through exposure to beginning reading text. For example, children have little problem understanding what is happening with the ant in this beginning reader (Shefelbine, 1996):

> Can you see the man?
> Yes. The man is on the car.
> Can you see the rat?
> Yes. The rat is on the car.
> Can you see the ant?
> Yes. The ant is on the car.
> I see the man and the rat.
> I can see the ant.

But look at what happens to bug watching just a few years later!

> One type of insect that Charles Henry Turner kept in his insectary was the ant lion. Have you ever noticed funnel-shaped pits in the sand or in loose, dry soil? These pits are made by ant lion larvae. Even though they are small, ant lion pits are large enough that ants and other tiny creatures tumble into them. Once inside, they try to clamber out, but many an unfortunate creature gets snatched by the ant lion larva waiting in ambush at the bottom. The ant lion sucks the body fluids of its prey through hollow jaws, before discarding its empty shell (Ross, 1997, p. 37, original bold).

Not only do readers encounter an increasing number of challenging words (e.g., **insectary**, **larvae**, **clamber**), but many familiar words are used in new and potentially confusing ways (e.g., **loose**, **shell**). Developing facility with challenging texts requires explicit attention—whether at school, home, or both.

Academic Language through a Kindergarten Lens

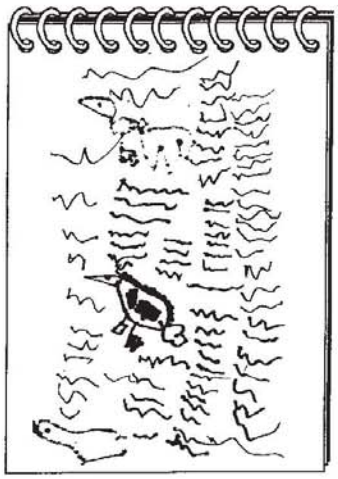

Figure 1. Field notes.

Academic language, or the language of books, develops quite independently of decoding ability. To emphasize this point, consider these field notes "written" by a kindergartner observing a flock of birds. Notice how well the writing captures the field note genre. The scribble writing and use of carefully rendered illustrations interspersed with text exactly mimics the style and purpose of scientific field notes.

Even without print, this simple piece of kindergarten "writing" reflects a deep understanding of both the purpose and form of written language—an understanding that comes only from immersion in written text. Thus the

term academic language incorporates knowledge of text structure and genre, as well as vocabulary.

Of course, vocabulary is a major component of academic language. Here is how the kindergarten author of the bird field notes translated her notes:

> *Jay birds land on wires very quickly. I see lands of trees ahead of me when I look.*

Notice the figurative language. A metaphor like *lands of trees* rarely appears in everyday speech, but is a regular feature of academic language. The vocabulary, though relatively simple, has a precision that is characteristic of written text: *Jay* birds *land* on wires *very quickly*. This precision is a necessary feature of academic language because writing is by its very nature decontextualized, or abstract. It depends on language alone to convey the writer's ideas, without the benefit of contextual cues (e.g., pointing, intonation) that anchor meaning in face to face conversations.

The writing anticipates the limitations of the reader. Note that the author avoids expressions like "over there" or even, "*Those* birds land on wires very quickly." She recognizes that the person reading the message, possibly at a much later date, will not have the benefit of the context, and that anything she wants to say must be said with language alone.

Finally, notice that the text adheres to an expository language structure. The author writes "Jay birds," generalizing to the whole category of jay birds, rather than "The jay bird" or "A little bird landed in the wires..." as in narrative storytelling.

Thus, children can begin developing a sophisticated awareness of and facility with academic language even before they gain an understanding of the alphabetic nature of reading and writing.

Strategies For Building Language In The Classroom

Academic language is developed through immersion in books and instructionally focused conversations about books and children's experiences. This means that kindergarten teachers who use rich vocabulary in their conversations with children and who read aloud books that challenge students' current language abilities are providing a critical component of reading instruction. These two activities form the core of our approach to teaching language and comprehension in kindergarten.

Fortunately, kindergarten teachers have long recognized the value of reading aloud and talking with children about books, so an increased emphasis on developing academic language does not require a major shift in instruction. Rather, we will suggest ways that teachers can tweak language and comprehension activities they already use to make them more effective.

Talking to Learn

Talking like an author. One way teachers can expose children to rich vocabulary is by modeling their own language on the way children's authors write. At first, it helps to plan this in the same way as any other part of the curriculum. To get started, the teacher chooses an everyday routine e.g., lining up for recess, and transform it into a language development activity by replacing ordinary ways of saying things with more literary language. Instead of

addressing students as *boys* and *girls*, the teacher uses *males* and *females*, *gentlemen* (or gents) and *ladies*, *lads* and *lassies*, *guys* and *gals*, *lords* and *damsels*, *masters* and *mistresses*, *hermanos* y *hermanas*, etc. Instead of lining up *quickly*, the teachers asks students to line up *swiftly*, *rapidly*, *fleetly*, *speedily*, *promptly*, *instantaneously*, *tout de suite*, *sharply*, *lickety-split*, *posthaste*, *expeditiously*, or *pronto*. Instead of *walking* down the halls, students *stroll*, *promenade*, *saunter*, *amble*, *meander*, *ambulate*, *scuttle*, *cruise*, etc. The teacher need not limit the utterance to a single word. Rather, the teacher should be on the look-out for interesting phrases and ways of saying things—and encourage students to do the same. Imagination, a sense of humor, and a good thesaurus are all that are needed to succeed.

Decontextualized talk. Adults can boost children's language development simply by talking with them. But not all talk is the same. More important than the shear amount of talk is the nature of the discourse.

The most effective kind of talk is the kind that sometimes happens around the dinner table—high interest conversations about people, places, things and events that are not immediately present. The news, a playground incident, a surprising bit of information, an upcoming event, a novel idea, a problem or concern, beliefs about why things are the way they are or opinions about how they should be, reminiscences about a shared experience, or sharing unique experiences or knowledge about an interesting topic are all grist for classroom discussion. Such decontexualized talk requires children to use language itself—rather than context—to understand and convey their message.

Indeed, it is largely through decontextualized talk that children develop the kind of oral language and thinking skills that are the foundation for literacy. Furthermore, it is not enough for children to listen passively. Students must participate actively in decontextualized talk to reap the benefits. (This does not mean that children must be talking constantly, of course. Learning also happens when students actively reflect on what others say.)

Admittedly, it is a challenge to engage a whole class of kindergartners—all with different interests, temperaments, and experiences—in one conversation. In addition to promoting whole class discussions, the teacher should use every available opportunity, however brief, to talk with individuals and small groups—during center time, snack time, while walking students to recess, etc. One way is to engage students by asking *open-ended questions* that require an *elaborated* response: "Who would like to tell us about something they saw (or something that surprised/ delighted/interested or intrigued them) in the school garden?...Why was it interesting to you?...Can you describe it to us?" instead of, "Who saw the new flower in the garden?...Wasn't it gorgeous?...Can you tell us what color it was?"

The way the teacher answers students can also foster language and thinking (Whitehurst, et al., 1988). One way is to respond to what children are *trying* to say. Another way is to expand on a child's remark by providing concepts or language the child is lacking and by using corrective modeling and other kinds of feedback to bridge the gap between what the child said and what he or she *might have* said: "Those

'wiggly things' on the ants' head are *antennae*. What do you suppose the purpose of antennae might be?" Or, "That *was* quite a *coincidence* that you and Marti both wore the same *outfit*!"

Kid-kid talk. Students share their teacher with many other children. While the teacher can create an environment that fosters language development, children cannot and should not depend on the teacher for all their language experience. In addition to teacher-guided talk, children need opportunities to develop and practice language skills with peers. Few activities support child-child talk better than dramatic play. If planned thoughtfully to evoke language, dramatic play is an important academic component of a kindergarten classroom.

Partner reading is another activity that encourages children to talk to one another. Furthermore, children are more likely to use academic language when interacting around books. Wordless books, which require students to supply the text themselves, are an especially rich context for evoking academic language in kindergarten.

Reading Aloud

Even when teachers make a conscious effort to use novel and varied language in their conversations with children, it is difficult for them to match the rich and far-ranging vocabulary of written language. Indeed, children's picture books contain more uncommon words than the everyday conversations of college graduates (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998)! Furthermore, written language is necessarily decontextualized—an author conveys his or her message to the reader using language alone, without the assistance of gestures, expressions, and other cues that support face-to-face discourse. Of course, few kindergartners can read on their own. Therefore, building kindergartners' vocabulary and background knowledge depends to a large extent on the teacher reading aloud.

Read every day. We rarely learn a new word or concept after hearing it just once. Instead, vocabulary and background knowledge build over time as a result of encountering words and concepts over and over again in different contexts. Because the chances of encountering uncommon words increase with more reading, it is imperative to read aloud daily—for at least 30 minutes, using this 30 minutes to expose students to a wide range of vocabulary, ideas, and information.

Read a variety of texts. Since there is no scope and sequence for acquiring vocabulary and background knowledge, the corpus of read-aloud materials appropriate for kindergarten is very large. The teacher may choose any book that engages students and stretches their vocabulary and world knowledge, including children's classics such as *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A. A. Milne or *Stuart Little* by E.B. White; magazine articles from *Cricket* or *Spider*; as well as contemporary children's literature (candidates for Children's Choice, American Library Association, or Caldecott awards, for example) and expository text. Teachers should aim high and adjust downward if necessary.

Predictable Text and Language Development

Children's literature is a rich source of information about many things, including such "kindergarten"

concepts as color, shape, directionality, and spatial relations. Indeed, literature can help students develop a more elaborated understanding of these concepts than materials designed with this goal in mind.

The book *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1968), used by many teachers to teach the concepts *across, around, over, past, through, under*, and *back*, mentions each of these words once in a single context. In contrast, the *first two pages* of *Winnie-the-Pooh* (Milne, 1992) contain multiple references to prepositions and relational words—*downstairs* (3), *back* (1), *behind* (1), *bottom* (1), *in front of* (1), *upon* (1), *in* (2), *under* (3), and *over* (1)—in varied contexts. They end with the following delightful passage:

> Once upon a time, a very long time ago now, about last Friday, Winnie-the-Pooh lived in a forest all by himself under the name of Sanders.
>
> *("What does 'under the name' mean?" asked Christopher Robin.*
>
> *"It means he had the name over the door in gold letters, and lived under it."*
>
> *"Winnie-the-Pooh wasn't quite sure," said Christopher Robin...* (Milne, 1992, pp. 3-4)

While *Rosie's Walk* does a wonderful job of introducing the concepts of across, around, over, etc., developing a complex understanding of these concepts depends on repeated exposure through texts like *Winnie-the-Pooh*. One would never choose *Winnie-the-Pooh* specifically to teach spatial relationships—but developing conceptual knowledge is one of the many fringe benefits of reading challenging text.

Indeed, books with predictable text may be a poor choice for developing language. A study of the long-term effects of reading aloud on low-income children's vocabulary and comprehension found that a shared book approach to reading, characterized by children chiming a repeated phrase or familiar pattern and recall of recently read text, was associated with lower vocabulary development. This led the authors of this study to speculate that "a steady diet of books with predictable text may not be optimal" (Dickinson & Smith, 1994, p. 119).

The Role of Informational Text

While children's literature is a wonderful source of incidental knowledge, teachers should make a conscious effort to alternate narrative and expository texts. Expository text has a language of its own, and the abrupt introduction of content area reading in the intermediate grades is a major contributor to reading difficulties among children with little prior experience with informational text (Chall & Jacobs, 1983). However, regular exposure to informational books in kindergarten may alleviate the problem in part. A recent study found that when kindergarten teachers read aloud informational books on a daily basis, students begin incorporating expository language and thinking strategies, such as comparing and contrasting, spontaneously in their own speech (Duke and Kays, 1998). An added benefit of reading aloud informational texts is that the same activity that develops students' academic language and listening comprehension fosters subject matter knowledge in social studies, science, art, etc.

Increasing the Efficiency of Read-Alouds

While reading aloud is a major contributor to academic language, it is also not an especially efficient way to build vocabulary (Nagy, 1988). Indeed, the chances of a child learning a new word from a single reading is about 5%. Challenging books will naturally contain words kindergartners do not know—and will not learn from a single exposure. The following strategies, which add little time to the read-aloud experience, substantially boost the chances of students learning new vocabulary from read-alouds:

Read in ways that heighten students' attention to language and comprehension. Read expressively—vary pitch, rate, and volume appropriately to provide a context for unfamiliar language. As the book is previewed in preparation for the lesson, the teacher needs to plan for how to read so as to engage students and support comprehension and language learning.

Read the book more than once. Research shows that children benefit from hearing books more than once (Elley, 1989). If a book is challenging and the content worthwhile, the teacher should consider reading it twice, or even three or four times.

1. Read the sentence containing the unfamiliar word.
2. Define the word in a brief aside.
3. Reread the sentence, replacing the unfamiliar word with the definition.

Example.

Read: "*Boris had forgotten for a moment that he had a passenger on his back and had sounded*" (from *Amos and Boris* by William Steig, 1971, unpaginated)

Define the word: *The word sound means to dive quickly downward.*

Reread, replacing the unfamiliar word with the definition: *Boris had forgotten for a moment that he had a passenger on his back and had dived quickly downward.*

Generate a teacher vocabulary list. After identifying two or three interesting words from the book, the teacher uses them when talking with the students. As a general rule, the words chosen should have broad application across contexts, such as *atmosphere, intention, soothing, antennae*, or *coincidence*, rather than words with very specific and limited application, such as *diploducus, helium, troglodyte*, or *photosynthesis*. The teacher uses the words (and variations of them) in many different ways in the context of normal conversation and challenges students to use the new words in *their* conversations and writing as well.

Example.

> "I think the bees *suspect* something!"
>
> "What sort of thing?"
>
> "I don't know. But something tells me that they're suspicious!"
>
> —from *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A.A.Milne, 1992, p. 15

The word *suspect* is an example of academic language—rare in everyday speech, but frequently found in books; it is a word that is worth knowing. After encountering the suspect in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, the teacher uses it (and its derivatives) in conversations with the students:

- Mary, when did you begin to *suspect* that the answer was going to be different this time?
- The person who left us this gorgeous

bouquet didn't leave a note, but Mr. James is my number one *suspect* because I was telling him about our flower study and he told me that he is an avid gardener and promised to bring us a surprise!

- Bo, I get *suspicious* when you finish your work so soon. Let's look at it together.
- What are your *suspicions* about what is going to happen to the seeds that are growing in our file cabinet?

Comprehension strategies instruction. In addition to creating a language-rich environment, read-alouds should be used in kindergarten to explicitly teach comprehension strategies. "Think-alouds" can be used to model for children how readers monitor and check their comprehension by retelling the story, tackle difficult passages by rereading and reading ahead, and make inferences by bringing in prior knowledge. The teacher can discuss and model comprehension strategies to help students form mental representations of language, e.g., "Imagine you are right there in the book (or one of the characters) and that the events in the story are happening to you." Or, "Try to create a picture in your mind of what you hear...Who wants to tell us about what they pictured in their mind as they listened to....?" While children who have been read to a lot may have picked up some of these strategies through interactions with their parents, students with little prior experience listening to books are likely to need some explicit instruction to "catch up."

Combining Good Books and Good Talk

Talking to learn and reading aloud are effective strategies for building academic language, but combining the two strategies is even more powerful! In addition to daily read alouds aimed at exposing students to a wide range of vocabulary, ideas, and information, students should engage regularly in instructional conversations that deepen comprehension by bringing together good books and good talk. (We used *Reading, Thinking and Caring*, the instructional conversations curriculum developed by Developmental Studies Center, a nonprofit educational organization.)

Writing to Learn

In addition to listening to written language, children need opportunities to compose their own stories or compositions. Writing is critical for both building language and comprehension and learning about print. Effective beginning reading programs contain a strong writing component.

As we mentioned earlier, writing is decontextualized by its very nature; writers do not have the luxury of gestures, facial expressions, vocal cues, or interactions that speakers use to gauge and convey meaning; they must use language alone to communicate. Because most children are interested in telling others about their ideas and experiences, writing provides incentive for paying attention to language. Young children who rely on context to convey their message—"That thing, over there," "She did it like this...," etc.—are forced to find words to get their meaning across in writing. Writing is a powerful venue for honing language skills and increasing word awareness—

thoughtful attention to how words work together to convey meaning.

Write every day. Kindergarten children need opportunities to write on a daily basis. At the beginning of the year, "writing" will generally take the form of drawing. However, drawing is more than a place-holder for writing. Drawing has many of the same characteristics as written language and creates a foundation for writing. Like writing, drawing is decontextualized and uses symbols to represent ideas, events, and feelings. Furthermore, children can be taught to attend to many qualities of good writing in their drawings—ideas, organization (composition), voice, description (details), etc. Of course, students should be encouraged to use whatever print knowledge they have in their writing. (For concrete suggestions for teaching and assessing beginning writing, see *Seeing with New Eyes*, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999.)

Encourage inventive spelling. The benefits of writing are greatest in classrooms that encourage inventive spelling, and these benefits are greatest for low-readiness students. In addition to fostering an avid interest in the phonetic structure of words, inventive spellers are more prolific and eager writers. Inventive spelling appears, as Adams (1990) noted:

> incomparable for purposes of developing their (students) abilities to reflect on their own thoughts, to elaborate and organize their ideas, and to express themselves in print. Moreover, whether viewed at the level of text generation, sentence generation, or word generation, it is an activity that inherently requires children to think actively—and such activities are both invaluable and hard to come by in the classroom (pp. 386-387).

Additionally, because inventive spelling allows children to write quite independently, the teacher is freed to work with individuals and small groups in focused instruction.

Write a variety of texts. Just as their reading experiences need to be wide and varied, children also need opportunities for writing in a variety of forms:

- *Notebooks/journals/response-journals.* Writing daily enables children to have opportunities to select their own topic; in addition, providing writing prompts expands students' appreciation for the many things people can write about. (Teachers may want to use separate notebooks for these two different activities.)
- *Response to literature.* Children can respond in writing to read-alouds by making lists of words that describe a character, or lists of reasons why they think a character's actions are wise and unwise; creating Venn diagrams or other graphic organizers that compare and contrast characters' different points of view; using writing notebooks to collect evidence of what they know and what they are learning about a setting, concept or issue; and recording words and phrases that "sound good" to them or ideas from the story that strike them. These written responses need to occur on a regular basis.
- *Write in the content areas.* Kindergartners should be encouraged to bring their emerging writing skills to the science table, recording the growth

of plants, silk worms, brine shrimp, and describing what they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch both in and outside the classroom. In social studies, students can draw and label maps of the classroom, school and the community.

• *Dramatic play with literacy emphasis.* By adding reading and writing materials to dramatic play areas (Vukelich, 1990), the teacher will be promoting literacy learning. These materials can represent the following themes: a restaurant, grocery store, doctor, veterinarian, bank, or office, all of which are better than a housekeeping corner for fostering literacy. However, it is not enough to make reading and writing materials available. It is essential for teachers to model and regularly reinforce and expand how materials can be used as part of dramatic play, always keeping pace with children's expanding literacy.

• *Writing center.* Every kindergarten classroom needs a writing center with a variety of writing materials, including various colors and sizes of paper, forms, envelopes, scissors, pens and pencils, stapler, whole punchers, picture dictionaries, word processor, etc. Teachers can add mail boxes (milk cartons work well) so children can exchange notes with one another and with the teacher. Once again, it is rarely enough to simply have materials available. Teachers must demonstrate possibilities for using the materials—how to construct little books, the form for writing letters and addresses, writing to a favorite author or story character, etc. This use of materials is especially important for children who arrive at school with limited literacy experience.

• *Daily routines.* Kindergartners are eager to contribute their growing writing skills to classroom management and community. Students can assume responsibility by signing in each morning. They can help make signs about class routines and norms. Children can also get to know one another by registering opinions and data on charts, diagrams, graffiti boards, etc.

Dictation. In general, writing activities should encourage independent writing. However, when it is important to capture the content of students' words and ideas, children can dictate their "text" to a skilled reader, such as a teacher, parent, or an older buddy. Recall that the five-year-old who "wrote" the bird field notes subsequently dictated the text and that the two forms of writing yielded very different information about her abilities. Thus, paralleling the benefits of listening to challenging literature before children can read independently, dictation allows emergent writers to use (and teachers to assess) academic language in their "writing" before they are able to write fluently on their own.

The strategies of building oral and written language we have described need to be part of the kindergarten curriculum. In the next section we discuss our rationale for developmentally appropriate instruction of reading and writing in kindergarten and present a developmental sequence for teaching beginning reading.

An Instructional Approach and Routine for Teaching Reading and Writing in Kindergarten

Because written text is a major source of academic language, it is desirable for children to read on their own. Kindergartners with limited literacy

experience who lack basic print concepts—the very children for whom literacy learning is most critical—may need extra time to learn decoding skills. It is, therefore, important for students to begin formal reading instruction in kindergarten.

For kindergarten teachers, probably no topic is more controversial than teaching beginning reading and writing. While teachers commonly have taught such "emergent" literacy skills as letter names and sounds, concepts of print, and a few sight words, recently adopted state standards for reading and language arts in California now list content that used to be more commonly taught in first grade (California Department of Education, 1999). Examples of the new standards include:

- phoneme awareness (especially blending and segmentation)
- reading and writing consonant-short vowel-consonant words
- sight words

Two common reactions to more formal reading instruction in kindergarten are that: (a) students are not developmentally ready to learn to read, and (b) an academic emphasis will crowd out other important goals (such as language development and socialization).

In this section we first consider reasons for the stronger emphasis on reading and writing. Then, we examine why learning to read and write is unnatural for most students. Finally, we propose an instructional approach that is developmentally appropriate and that still leaves room for language development and community.

Why the New Emphasis on Reading and Writing?

We maintain that reading and writing can and should be taught in kindergarten to all children as long as the instruction is developmentally appropriate. Currently, when reading receives more serious attention in kindergarten, it typically seems to occur in more affluent schools where parents want a more academic curriculum and where students are deemed "ready" for this kind of instruction. Many of these children have received substantial informal reading instruction from parents during storybook reading (Bus & VanIJzendoorn, 1988). Other students, often from homes offering few if any informal reading experiences, are regarded as not "developmentally" ready. However, we contend that the "not ready" students are most in need of serious reading instruction because they will need more time to learn to read. It is important to "take" this time *before* first grade rather than after.

Students who do not learn to read "on time," generally do not catch up. Our current system of schooling is rather unforgiving of students who are not fluent readers by the end of second grade. Those who are behind in the early grades frequently are still behind in the higher grades (Juel, 1988). Furthermore, these same students who struggle with reading early on tend to avoid reading in succeeding grades, thereby losing the opportunity to learn through reading—a major source of cognitive and language growth (Stanovich, 1986).

Some students need more instructional time. Students begin school with very different levels of emergent literacy (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). Some have been read to over 1000 hours and already know their letters and sounds, and a

fair number of sight words (Adams, 1990). Others do not know any letters or sounds and cannot turn the pages of a book in the proper direction. These latter students are going to need more time to learn to read.

Some students also need additional time because they have more difficulty figuring out the alphabetic nature of reading regardless of how much they were read to at home (Adams, 1990; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). One reason involves difficulty developing phonological and phonemic awareness, an issue that we discuss in greater detail later on.

Strong predictors of early reading success. Children may begin kindergarten with limited knowledge of "school" language; some cannot count to five or identify four primary colors. It is tempting to conclude that these students are not "ready" for reading instruction because language development is a more critical instructional goal and even a prerequisite to learning to read. This conclusion does not seem to be justified. While language development is crucial for long-term reading success and needs to be fostered in kindergarten, it is not a strong predictor of learning to read by the end of first grade. Stronger predictors of learning to read are (a) phoneme awareness, (b) print knowledge (names and sounds), and (c) concepts of print (Juel,1988). An exclusive focus on language development in kindergarten will not compensenate for children's lack of phoneme awareness and print knowledge. It must also be recognized that developing language is a long-term endeavor that starts in kindergarten but must continue throughout the grades.

Students can learn to read if instruction is developmentally appropriate. While students start school at widely different levels, current curriculum and instruction are geared to the students in the "middle." When students do not succeed in such programs, it is tempting to conclude they are not "developmentally ready." While it may be true that they are not developmentally ready for that program of instruction, they are still developmentally ready to learn if the curriculum and instruction is made more appropriate. In other words, instead of focusing on whether students are developmentally ready for a set curriculum, we need to ask whether we are providing students developmentally appropriate instruction.

Characteristics of developmentally appropriate instruction include: (a) taking advantage of students' desire to learn culturally relevant competencies—reading and writing, (b) continually ensuring that students both are and feel successful, (c) beginning where students are, (d) engaging them in active rather than passive activities, (e) supporting and scaffolding complex processes, (f) providing opportunities to apply skills and knowledge in meaningful situations, and (g) making provisions for students' learning at different rates while de-emphasizing comparisons and competition (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Writing contributes to both language development and growth in spelling, decoding, and phoneme awareness. Effective beginning reading programs include a strong writing component for several reasons. Extended writing in which students are encouraged to describe past events and experiences is a powerful way for students to practice and develop more formal kinds of language. Writing also contributes to

an understanding of the functions of print and enhances students' interest in literacy (Holdaway, 1979; Sulzby, 1985). Such writing may begin with scribble writing in response to pictures that students have drawn.

Furthermore, writing makes a significant contribution to students' understanding of the alphabetic nature of reading and spelling. This includes phoneme awareness and knowledge of spelling-sound relationships, as well as knowledge of concepts of print. As mentioned in the preceding section, there is considerable evidence that encouraging inventive (or phonic) spelling contributes to spelling development and an understanding of how sounds map on to print (Chomsky, 1979; Clarke, 1989; Treiman, 1993). Additionally, more formal instruction in phoneme awareness and spelling enhances growth in inventive spelling (Tangel & Blachman, 1992).

To summarize, reading and writing instruction that is more formal but still developmentally appropriate can help give kindergarten students the extra time they need to acquire the fundamental skills needed to meet the rigorous standards in grades one and two.

Learning to Read is Unnatural

Before describing the instructional approach and routine that we are recommending to kindergarten teachers, we need to briefly explain the theory and research that influence our thinking. The paradigm that guides our view of language is wholistic and constructivist in nature because humans seem to be "wired" or naturally disposed to learn language and construct their understanding of words and concepts (Liberman, 1997). Language is simply a characteristic of human behavior—all human societies possess language. Reading and writing, on the other hand, are not found in every culture. Wherever they occur, there are formal procedures for instruction. Learning to read and write requires a significant amount of associative learning as well as an understanding of the alphabetic nature of reading—a difficult cognitive insight.

Beginning readers use context as a decoding strategy. Naive beginning readers naturally rely on context to "read" print (Juel, 1991). This use of context takes several forms: predicting words from what has been read, using pictures, and memorizing stories. Studies by Gough and Hillinger (1980) further indicate that some beginning readers may even focus on such idiosyncratic clues as a smudged letter or the bent corner of a flashcard.

Attending to spelling-sound strategies is a more powerful decoding strategy. Adams (1990) notes that alphabetic languages such as English and Spanish are a marvelously efficient invention because they enable people to read any number of words without having to memorize each, one-by-one. Contrary to popular notions that some students learn to read by sight and others through phonics, all students need to understand and use spelling-sound relationships in order to become fluent readers. Students who stick with a sight approach usually get bogged down in second grade where they cannot keep up with the large number of new words that are being encountered in reading.

Spelling-sound strategies are unnatural for many students. There are at least three reasons why beginning readers prefer to attend to context

rather than letter-sound relationships. First, attending to spelling-sound relationships in words is based, in part, on phoneme awareness; yet most students are not naturally aware that words are made up of phonemes—a difficult, abstract insight (Liberman, 1997). Prior to formal schooling, children do not have to be aware of the units of sound in speech in order to speak and communicate effectively. Furthermore, phonemes are difficult to discern because they are merged together in words (co-articulated); this is particularly true for vowels (Moats, 1995).

Second, in English the spelling patterns that represent the sounds are also complex, especially for vowels where there are over 45 common spellings for 18 vowel sounds (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Learning how sounds are represented by print can be much more time consuming than just learning the sounds.

Finally, the initial application of spelling-sound strategies can be unnaturally slow and laborious, in marked contrast to the automatic decoding of skilled readers. Beginning readers want to sound like good readers and would rather not take the time to attend to all the spelling patterns within a word. Furthermore, since slow and laborious decoding interferes with comprehension, children may not naturally make the connection that carefully attending to print is the pathway to gaining access to the interesting stories and information in books.

Explicit, Systematic Instruction in Beginning Reading in Kindergarten

In this section on teaching reading and writing in kindergarten, we begin by outlining a developmental sequence that begins with concepts of print and playful phonological awareness activities followed by more formal instruction in phoneme awareness, phonics, and sight words. We then discuss the pros and cons of various ways of making beginning reading materials easy enough to read and propose a kind of "hybrid" text that seems more developmentally appropriate. Finally, we describe a lesson structure for explicit, systematic instruction in beginning reading—one that supports and scaffolds the complex processes in beginning reading in a developmentally appropriate manner.

A developmental sequence for teaching beginning reading. Stahl (1997) proposes a model of reading acquisition that begins with an ***awareness stage*** during which students learn four aspects of the "written/oral language" relationship. The four aspects are:

- functions (the purpose of written language is to entertain, inform, and persuade);
- conventions (writing and reading from top to bottom, left to right; sentences and words);
- form of print (letters)
- phoneme awareness (spoken words can be broken down into sounds)

Teaching young children the functions of print increases their intrinsic motivation and helps them understand why literacy is both interesting and important.

Next, during the *accuracy stage*, students learn to use spelling-sound relationships to decode simple texts. Here students gain an understanding of the alphabetic nature of reading and writing and thereby realize that using context and memorizing sight words are

not the best strategies for learning how to read. Reading at this stage often is rather laborious because students have to sound out so many words. Chall (1983) once described this stage as "grunting and groaning."

Finally, during the *automaticity stage*, beginning readers' word recognition begins to become more rapid or automatic. Extensive practice plays a key role here because such fluent reading seems to be based upon experience reading the thousands of different spelling patterns that occur in connected text.

While students progress through the stages at different rates, they are generally expected to be fluent ("automatic") readers at least by the end of the second grade. Since third grade marks the critical transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*, it is essential for students to have developed the reading fluency that is a prerequisite for reading comprehension.

The implications of the above sequence for kindergarten are that we need to recognize the importance of the awareness stage as a prerequisite to the accuracy stage. Clearly, there is justification for starting kindergarten with much of the more traditional reading instruction that involves concepts of print. The question remains: when and how can beginning readers make the transition from one level of reading to the next? In addressing this dilemma, we have considered not only the appropriateness of various instruction strategies but also the usefulness of different types of beginning reading text.

Types of beginning reading text. Since beginning readers cannot read regular books, beginning reading materials have to be simplified in some manner. Historically, there have been three main approaches. (1) High frequency ***sight word readers*** such as Dick and Jane make reading more accessible by repeating sight words that have been carefully introduced and reviewed in a sequential manner. (2) ***Phonic readers*** control words according to the spelling-sound relationships that have been taught. One variety of phonic readers (linguistic readers) emphasizes word families (Dan can fan a tan man.). Another type of phonic reader (synthetic phonics readers) focuses on individual phoneme elements (The ant sat on the man.). (3) A third and more recent approach to simplifying text entails the use of ***predictable readers*** in which a sentence pattern is repeated throughout a story (I love my father. I love my mother. I love my sister.).

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of the above types of text. Predictable readers give students who want to read a sense of success; they also are useful for teaching concepts of print. A disadvantage is that they encourage students to rely on context as a strategy for recognizing words. In this respect, predictable readers, when used too long, give students false messages about both what successful reading is and what is involved in *learning* to read.

An advantage of sight word readers is the relative ease with which many beginning readers can learn sight words. Knowing some sight words enables beginning readers to read different stories as long as the same words are used. A disadvantage is that students are more inclined to rely on context and word memorization. Such decoding strategies are counterproductive in second grade where students cannot easily memorize the many new words that are being

introduced.

Finally, an advantage of phonic readers is that they enable and encourage students to use spelling-sound strategies even when their knowledge of phonics is quite limited. A disadvantage is that phonic decoding strategies take time to learn and initially there is relatively little text reading. Phonic readers can also be rather unnatural sounding and may use decodable words that are unknown to most students (The ant lit on the can.).

A rationale for "hybrid" text. Shefelbine (1995) proposed combining the different types of text in ways that maximize their advantages and minimize their disadvantages, hence the term "*hybrid text.*" He developed reading materials that initially were predictable but added and repeated sight words across stories. For example, the first story utilized an "I see..." pattern, the second, "I see the...," and the third, "I can see the..." Such a combination seems most appropriate for students who are still in the awareness stage of learning to read. While students are reading such text, they are also learning letter-sound relationships and phonemic awareness (especially blending and segmentation). Once students have a firmer grasp of concepts of print as well as knowledge of some consonants and a short vowel, phonic words start appearing in the text. (I can see the ***ant***. The ***ant sat*** on the ***man***.) Over succeeding lessons, the text contains more and more phonic (decodable) words along with a substantial number of sight words but with fewer and fewer predictable sentence patterns. Note how the reading materials evolve to support strategies that are more appropriate for the accuracy stage of learning to read. Developmentally, hybrid text helps students feel successful when they begin reading instruction but still encourages them to use the unnatural print-driven strategies that will eventually lead to independent, fluent reading.

A Proposed Lesson Structure

In this section we describe our approach to developmentally appropriate instruction in letter-sound relationships, blending, and the alphabetic principle using hybrid text. Please note that such instruction does not begin at the very start of the school year. Formal decoding instruction is preceded by less structured activities to build the skills and understandings generally acquired during the awareness stage.

The lesson structure is made up of the following seven parts: a) rereading the previous story chart, b) phoneme play, c) introducing and reviewing sounds and blending decodable words, d) introducing and reviewing sight words, e) reading a new story chart, (f) guided spelling and segmentation, and (g) practice reading "little book" versions of the story charts. The entire lesson lasts from 30 to 40 minutes. Kindergarten teachers often break it into two 20-minute sections. It is important to consistently follow and complete all parts of the lesson plan on a ***daily*** basis because students need regular practice with each component of the lesson. Students also become more comfortable and confident when the procedures and activities for teaching beginning reading follow the same daily routine. In the following lesson components and routines, note how success in learning complex processes is increased by (a) not teaching too much that is

new too fast, (b) constantly reviewing what has already been introduced, (c) modeling and then carefully guiding students through critical skills such as phoneme blending and segmentation, (d) applying lesson content to connected text, and (e) emphasizing the connections between reading and writing. Overall, there is an emphasis on mastery rather than "exposure."

Flexible grouping. Students are grouped according to their knowledge of phoneme awareness, letter sounds, and sight words. Because students learn at different rates even when extra instruction is provided, they periodically may need to be regrouped. We should also note that the pace at which content is covered varies across groups. Some groups need two lessons for each new story while other groups only need one. The basic principle is: start where students are and proceed as fast as they can master the content.

Seating Arrangement. While some teachers have students sit on the rug, we recommend that they sit on chairs in two rows or a small semicircle facing the story chart and the chalkboard.

For the guided spelling and segmentation portion of the lesson, students need to sit at their desks where writing should be most comfortable.

Arrows. Arrows under letters, words, and sentences are used in most parts of the lesson because students have a difficult time understanding the importance of orientation and left-to-right sequence. It is important to draw arrows in a different color than printed letters so students do not confuse arrows as part of the system of print (see Figure 2).

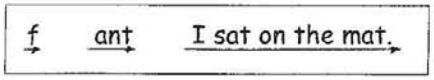

Figure 2: Examples of how arrows are used.

Rereading the previous story chart. Here the students chorally reread the previous story as the teacher points to the words in a poster-sized story chart. Students need this kind of support because they have a difficult time reading text independently in their little books. With the chart, the teacher is also able to model and request certain strategies such as blending decodable words. Rereading the story also makes it easier for the students to independently read their little book versions of the story chart.

Sentences with decodable words are read twice: the first time, decodable words are sounded *("Sound")* and then blended *("Read")*; then the sentence is reread without sounding out words.

After reading the story, the teacher asks comprehension questions.

Phoneme play. Phoneme play consists of a series of phoneme awareness activities that do not involve print. The routines build a foundation for phonemic skills that are necessary for reading and spelling. The phoneme play lessons follow a sequence that incrementally becomes more difficult in at least two ways. Students start with words and syllables and then move on to onset and rimes and then phonemes. Tasks begin with identifying sound units and blending, then bring in segmentation, and conclude with manipulation. This portion of the lesson lasts less than five minutes.

While developing phoneme awareness, the teacher visually represents units of sound by using blanks for phonemes and boxes for words, sylla-

bles, and rimes. For example, to practice oral segmentation with words such as ***ran***, ***sat***, and ***ant***, the teacher draws three blanks on the board and points to them in succession as students say the phoneme that corresponds to each blank—/rrr/ for the first blank, /aaa/ for the second, and /nnn/ for the third.

Sounds and decodable words. In this part of the lesson, phonics is explicitly and systematically taught. There are three basic routines: (a) introducing new spelling-sound relationships, (b) reviewing previously taught phonics relationships on a daily basis, and (c) blending and then reading decodable words. A major objective here is ensuring that students overlearn spelling-sound relationships. Phoneme awareness is also being developed, particularly when blending decodable words; here the oral blending skills that were practiced during phoneme play are now applied to print.

Students begin blending and reading words as soon as a few consonants and a single short vowel have been taught. As more consonants and short vowels are taught, the number of decodable patterns grows dramatically.

As the students chorally say the sounds of spellings presented on cards and as they blend and read decodable words written on the board, the teacher monitors their accuracy and provides extra instruction when needed. When blending words, the teacher carefully shows the students how to say the sounds in a word slowly without pausing between sounds. It is easier to "put the sounds together" for mmmaaannn than for mmm (pause) aaa (pause) nnn.

Sight words. Sight words are included in the instructional sequence for two reasons. Students are taught sight words early on because they have not learned enough letter sounds and have had limited practice with phoneme blending. Irregular sight words, that is, words which cannot be decoded through phonics, are also covered.

The procedure for learning sight words involves introducing a word in a sentence and then having the student read and spell the word when presented on a card. Orally spelling sight words by letter name is a powerful strategy for learning sight words because students' attention is focused on all the letters in a left to right sequence.

Reviewing sight words on a daily basis is necessary for mastery learning. Words that are troublesome are reviewed a second time during the lesson.

Reading the new story chart. The students chorally read the new story in the same way that they reread the previous story chart at the beginning of the lesson. The teacher directs students to blend and then read decodable words even when students may be able to predict the word from context. This "directed" blending procedure counteracts beginning readers' natural tendency to rely on context rather than on spelling-sound patterns.

Because the stories are mostly made up of sight words and decodable words, stories are ***not*** first read to the students by the teacher. Students feel empowered when they can read these stories without first hearing them.

Guided spelling and segmentation. In this section of the lesson, writing is used to reinforce reading and elements of reading are applied to writing. Spelling is "guided" in the sense that the teacher provides enough assistance so all students successfully complete each part of this activity. There are

rather specific procedures for giving help at different levels. Note that students are NOT studying a spelling list on which they will be tested; rather they are learning spelling strategies that can be applied to many words.

Segmentation is included in the activity heading because phoneme segmentation is being practiced and applied while students write decodable words. In order to write the word mat, the student has to be able to orally segment the word into /mmm/ /aaa/ /t/.

There is a standard format to the spelling routine that begins with writing the spellings for two sounds. Then the students write the spellings for the beginning, middle, or last sound in two words. Next, they write two decodable words. Finally, they write a sentence that may contain some sight words (see Figure 3).

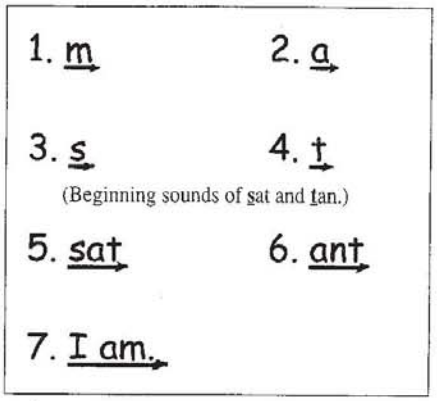

Figure 3:
An example of students' guided spelling.

Practice reading. In this final activity, students sit at their desks and quietly read aloud to themselves the three most recent stories. Here, teachers pass out a "little book" version of the story that was introduced on the chart. The little books are made from two 8½ by 11 black-line masters that are printed on both sides. These are cut in half, folded, and stapled into an 8-page booklet. The stories are reread as many as three times to develop confidence and to begin to build frequency. The teacher and any assistants or volunteers walk around and listen to each child read at least three pages of text. Informal records of students reading accuracy are kept. After students have read the three stories, they can read earlier stories or other material that is at their level. At other times in the day, students may color the illustrations in their little books.

Summary

The phrase "a caring learning community" describes both the classroom context necessary for students to achieve maximum benefit from our program and the kind of community which our program helps to create. If the program and the classroom community were discrete entities like chickens and eggs, this would be a chicken and egg problem. However, the caring nature of the classroom community is something that gradually grows as the year unfolds. It is nurtured by many classroom experiences and interactions, the language arts program providing many of these nurturing experiences. Likewise, the language arts program grows in strength and depth as it is in turn nurtured by the caring nature of the community.

What Are The Parts of Our Program?

Building a caring community. If children in a classroom feel liked and respected by their teacher and fellow stu-

dents, they will experience a sense of belonging; if they achieve success in learning activities that are meaningful and important to them, they will experience a sense of competence; if they are able to influence the course of events in the classroom through suggestions, requests, and the exercise of meaningful choice, they will experience a sense of autonomy.

These three things—meaningful autonomy, a sense of belonging, and competence—are basic human needs. When a school or classroom community creates the conditions that cause these needs to be met for the children and teachers in them, we call these communities caring communities. When children realize that they are in such a community, they become attached to that community. They try to live up to its values and realize the logic of treating others with the same kindness and respect that they experience as a member of the community (Solomon et al., in press).

Caring learning communities are not easy to establish. In many situations they can be very difficult, for they require teachers to 1) establish a caring and trusting relationship with each child, 2) facilitate caring relationships among the children, and 3) teach each child the skills, habits, and understandings that enable them to progress socially, ethically, and intellectually. Our experience and that of others indicate that a caring community is an essential condition for helping students develop into good readers as well as good people.

Supporting language development and listening comprehension. We have argued in this paper that two separate but mutually reinforcing aspects of the language arts curriculum need to be combined with an explicit focus on building a caring community in order to provide students with optimal opportunities to learn to read and to care about others. Because language development and listening comprehension involve understanding an essentially limitless body of knowledge, we have argued that they are best fostered in a wide variety of open-ended formal and informal literacy learning activities. Instruction in these areas and in concepts of print is most effective and efficient when it is embedded in open-ended, meaning centered activities such as listening to and talking about a book read aloud, engaging in dramatic play, writing using inventive spelling, and understanding and following the instructions of a teacher who talks like an author.

Decoding. Conversely, beginning reading involves understanding the alphabetic nature of reading—a difficult cognitive insight which includes phoneme awareness and knowledge of letter–sound relationships. Here, instruction is most effective and efficient when it is direct, focused, scaffolded, systematic, and mastery oriented. Furthermore, we maintain that decoding instruction is best done in small groups with students grouped and regrouped according to their current alphabetic knowledge. Finally, we believe specially designed "hybrid" texts contribute to the success of beginning readers by allowing for a smoother transition from the predictable texts that develop concepts of print to the decodable texts that encourage the development of print-based strategies.

Ways Literacy Builds Community

While we have not gone into much detail about the many components that go into creating a caring

community, we would like to close by outlining the mutually reinforcing relationship between a caring classroom community and our approaches to developing children's literacy.

Reading aloud. Reading aloud to the entire class engaging, values-rich literature is an important instructional component in our program. Hearing and discussing well-written text rich in academic language and content will help students build their vocabulary and knowledge of the world. Additionally, sharing the experience of good literature in a whole class setting creates bonds between teacher and students and among students. Such bonds form part of the force working to create a caring community.

Prosocial story content. The content of many of the stories helps children reflect on their own behaviors and attitudes and build their understanding of and empathy for their classmates. In the *Reading, Thinking, and Caring* (Developmental Studies Center, 1998) curriculum we used, all of the stories have a social or prosocial theme. The curriculum unit designed for each book contains a number of correlated activities to help children focus on and apply concepts such as kindness, forgiveness, and fairness to their lives. Each unit contains home activities in which students interview their parents about important ideas in the books that have been read to them. When students share the results of their family conversations with their classmates, they are getting to know one another at deeper levels than ordinary playground and classroom interactions permit, and this too contributes to the force working to create a caring community.

Collaborative learning activities. Many of the activities used to help students deepen their understanding of text are done in collaboration with a partner. When the teacher carefully structures this collaborative work, helping students develop the skills and attitudes they need to work fairly and respectfully with one another, these collaborative experiences further build the force working to create a caring community.

The experience of success. Finally, the decoding instruction uses hybrid texts to increase students initial success and moves at a pace to insure mastery. Thus students experience early success, which is so important to their need for competence.

Ways A Caring Community Builds Literacy

Helps support students' positive self-concept. Students are grouped and regrouped for instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness based on what they know and how fast they master the instruction. This is done so that students do not waste time learning what they already know and so that students are nor pushed to try to learn new things before they have mastered the old. Such grouping raises the age-old concern that placing students in identifiable groups based on what they know will stigmatize them and undermine the self-esteem of the students in the less advanced groups. However, in a caring community students are discouraged from seeing their classmates as their competitors and encouraged to see each of them as possessing worthwhile qualities—although not necessarily the same qualities in the same quantities. Furthermore, children are encouraged

to compete with themselves, to set goals for self-improvement and to celebrate that improvement. In such an environment the potentially harmful effects of grouping students for reading instruction based on their reading ability are substantially ameliorated or eliminated.

Supports risk-taking in talk and in thought. Anyone who has ever been a member of a book club or participated in a well-run seminar knows something about the power of conversation to enhance comprehension. Anyone who has ever been in a poorly run seminar or class also knows something about the power of others, be it teacher or fellow students, to shut down thinking and to leave one feeling battered, inept, angry, or bored. In a caring community students are taught how to have respectful conversations and how to listen to one another. Likewise, in a caring community students can risk thinking for themselves and sharing their thinking, for they know that they will be taken seriously and not derided, even if others do not agree with them.

Supports the growth of academic discourse. A basic tenet of a social constructivist perspective on learning is that the give and take of social discourse literally helps us socially construct our understanding, and that that understanding will be deeper and richer than we could have achieved on our own. It is the presence of the caring community that makes it possible for the social discourse in the classroom to be the kind of discourse that expands and deepens the understanding of all participants in the conversation, whether that conversation is with the teacher, the whole class, or a partner.

Essentially in creating a caring community and teaching children how to talk and listen respectfully to one another, the teacher is providing the context for and instruction and practice in academic discourse. Academic discourse, or the skill of talking with others for the purpose of reaching a better understanding, is an important skill for progressing through the school system and for success in college or in jobs that require collaborative problem solving. Most students have no other place to learn this type of discourse. It is very different from normal everyday conversation. It goes way beyond "Dinner's ready," "Let's play soccer," "What did you do today?" or even "Where did the story take place?".

Provides the foundation for good writing. When students feel safe to use their language productively to deepen their understanding about the books that are being read to them, they are building their ability to use academic language as well as comprehend it. If they can use such language in their conversations, if they can consider alternatives and offer justifications for their thinking, these skills will eventually transfer to their writing. Of course, they will eventually need to learn the many conventions of written language and how to make their writing clear, succinct, and stylish. But for now, getting their ideas down through drawing and invented (phonetic) spelling will help them develop the ability to have, express, and defend interesting ideas and observations—and this is at the core of good writing. Thus, students' writing abilities are honed in the friendly but challenging academic discussions they have with their classmates and teacher about books, their classroom, and their world.

Increases students' desire to

read. Lastly, we turn briefly to the role of community and children's motivation to read. One of the more disturbing facts reported in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* was that, while many of our students eventually learn to read, few do read once out of school (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). An important goal of our work and of most reading and language arts programs is that students develop a love of reading and be well on their way to becoming lifelong readers when they leave the primary grades. Again, a caring community is an important ally. If students experience their classroom as a caring community and reading is a valued skill in the community, students will come to value the skill of reading and want to be good at it. As students in the community read and talk with pleasure about the books they have read, other students will be motivated to want to read those same books. Because the community provides a forum for students to tell others about their books, it provides a further motivation to read, to read in order to have something to talk about with others. Also, the friendly but challenging academic conversations students have about books, both those guided by their teacher and those with partners and friends, not only increase students' understanding of the books, but also increase their enjoyment of them.

This close connection between community and reading and language arts should not be surprising to us. For without community there would be no need for reading, writing, listening or speaking. Our literacy arises out of our need to communicate with others in our community. It is the relationship with caring others that initiates and helps us expand our literacy. As we encounter the world of books and learn to read, our community expands to include the authors and characters who speak to us from printed pages. Our interaction with these authors and characters further expands our ideas and knowledge and therefore our literacy, and so on without limit as long as we keep reading, thinking, and talking with others about what we read.

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