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Ideas for Training Staff

Literacy Development: Back to the Real Basics

by Margie Carter

The early childhood field has been invaded in the past few years with a proliferation of everything but the needed funds and qualified staff which create the foundation for quality programs. We now have enough commercial products, conferences, and dot-coms to last a lifetime. A prime example can be found in the explosion of interest and materials centered on developing literacy skills in a child's early years. Whirling around in this storm are some valuable resources, but it takes time and a discerning eye to pluck them out and put them to use.

Within the educational field and wider community, government, and corporate arenas, multiple efforts are underway to address our population's growing illiteracy, school failure, violence, and media addiction. There is recognition that something is terribly wrong, but most of the discussion diverts attention away from the deeper roots of these problems.

Little reference is given to what Jonathan Kozol calls the "Savage Inequalities" between funding and related support for suburban schools versus urban ones, or the racial disproportionality of school failure, drop out, and incarceration. We are told that progressive ideas like whole language instruction and bilingual education haven't worked, without a deeper analysis of the flaws in the implementation and the failure to adequately resource these approaches. The battle cry for "Back to Basics" has been renewed and early childhood programs are once again under siege with a push-down academic standards thrust.

Within our own early childhood education ranks, we are wrestling with the implications of brain research and misunderstandings about the teacher's role in providing for literacy as part of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). Literacy-focused studies and our professional literature on the topic are expanding exponentially. Commercial interests are responding with "teacher-proof" curriculum packages and an array of literacy-related products promising to make learning easy and successful.

My study of the new literature leads me to believe that what we have professed about literacy development all along is substantially supported by the latest research:

- Literacy grows out of meaningful relationships and the contexts of children's lives in daily human interactions.
- Literacy learning starts at birth with children beginning to represent and "read" ideas through body language, oral language, use of materials, and dramatic play.
- Adults can contribute to literacy learning by providing props for children to include literacy-related activities in their play; we can show them the relationship between the spoken and written word through our narration, sketching, photographing, and written documentation of what they are doing.
- We need to model the usefulness and pleasure of literacy activities, exposing children to print-rich environments and regular language-rich activities and interactive reading with quality books.
- Direct instruction on phonological awareness, letters, words, spelling, and penmanship should happen with content that is meaningful to children, following their interests and efforts to construct an understanding of literacy skills.
- Recitation drills and worksheets are less useful in developing early skills and an eagerness to read and write.
- All of these strategies work best in partnership between teachers and the children's families where there is mutual awareness of home and program literacy activities and efforts.

Recent studies have also discovered that over the last few decades natural

experiences with reading and writing are disappearing from children's home lives, a phenomenon cutting across all socio-economic lines. This suggests we need a stronger emphasis on appropriate literacy activities in our work with parents, offering them concrete strategies to use, along with encouragement to reduce the amount of time children spend with TV and electronic media.

Here are some strategies I've been using in staff meetings to help teachers gain confidence in building these literacy-related partnerships with families.

STRATEGY
Recognize literacy that already exists

An important starting place is recognizing the broad scope of literacy and what children already know about it before coming to our programs. Literacy is a process of representing and decoding ideas expressed in symbols, including facial expressions, words, logos, art, music, and computer programming code.

On big chart paper, brainstorm all the things children have already shown you they know how to read. This will typically include such things as traffic signals, fast food and store signs, cereal boxes and product symbols, t-shirts, picture labels, where to point and click on the computer screen, the clean-up song, laughter, tears, and "the look" which means you better behave.

We typically think of literacy as "reading the word," but we want to encourage children to continue to "read the world," which Brazilian literacy specialist and popular educator Paulo Freire reminds us is about recognizing the systems and structures of power, how to negotiate and, in some cases, redesign them.

STRATEGY
Get clear about the basics

It's critical to define "the basics," not as learning the ABCs but as developing a positive association with literacy functions. Literacy is learned not primarily from school lessons but from meaningful relationships and contexts where the purpose of literacy becomes clear, and the power, usefulness, and enjoyment it offers is modeled and attracts children's interest.

Again on chart paper, brainstorm the typical daily activities in which children already see adults reading or writing, at home and in your program. How can these simple routines be made more visible to involve the children?

Assessing our homes, we hopefully find literacy-related materials everywhere — pen and paper by the telephone, in the kitchen for shopping lists, along with cookbooks and recipe cards; there may be newspapers, junk mail, magazines, and books in the living room, bedroom, and bathroom; manuals and instructions for operating a game, an appliance, tools, or an electronic gizmo. The more we narrate our use of these with children, the more they see the value of reading and writing.

Examine your classrooms to see where more reading and writing materials can be added to encourage the children to play with the functions of literacy. Beyond a reading or writing corner, do you have books and writing materials in most areas of your room? Many early childhood books have lists of props that can be put into the environment. The point here is to help children begin to incorporate reading and writing functions into their daily activities. In addition, we want to expose them to other ways adults use literacy for work routines, reference, and enjoyment.

STRATEGY
Look for teachable moments to coach children in reading and writing

Rather than worksheets and recitation drills, children need repeated exposure to the function of print in the normal course of their daily lives and relationships. They need people in their lives who are naturally demonstrating the value of reading and writing, and then opportunities to be coached with skills as they show a need for or interest in them.

Periodically pointing to and saying words children encounter on labels, packaging, signs, captions, notes, cards, and books will help them discover that spoken words can be written down and read back. Incorporating rhythm, rhyme, and predictable phrases into conversations and activities will heighten children's awareness of the sound structure of language. This leads to phonological awareness and letter-sound associations which can be drawn upon later as they are needed to write or decode a desired word.

As a group, share examples of how teachers or family members have done this. Discuss how to spot a "teachable moment" and the best approaches to skill coaching. Again, you can find specific strategies in many early childhood resources such as those listed at the end of this article.

Literacy specialist Evie Lieberman suggests that children's names are a perfect place to begin work on the reading and writing process. She recommends that our programs provide at least ten ways for children to see or write their names each day. This might include such things as opportunities to sign in and out each day in a book next to where their adult family members do this. Their names with photos on their cub-

bies, supplemented in the coming months with self-portraits and writing, on toothbrushes and other belongings offer further opportunities. Giving them multiple opportunities to add their names to lists is another — for instance, waiting for a turn to use some equipment, feeding the fish, or on graphs indicating preferences or facts about themselves.

STRATEGY
Explore what makes a book "good"

Everywhere we are hearing how important it is that children be read to on a regular basis. The first component of this reading experience is the relationship being offered. Some research indicates that sitting on a family member's lap and focusing together on reading is initially the most important act, regardless of whether the sports page, comics, or cookbook is being read. While the context of a positive relationship is an important starting place, we must soon pay attention to what we are reading to children.

Get out that chart paper again and brainstorm ideas on what makes a children's book "good." Explore language, illustrations, layout, content, and predictability. Also consider things that make a book less desirable, including lack of these things, promotion of commercial products, violence, or bias. Consider different kinds of books for different purposes — wordless books, rhyming books, storybooks with meaningful themes, folk tales, biographies, and books to get information or instructions.

Then gather up the books you have and assess them in light of the list on your chart paper. Are you satisfied with the selection? Are the books attractive and in good condition? What's missing? What needs to be eliminated? Literacy is a hot topic today, which means if you are a non-profit program, you can easily get grants to increase your children's library.

STRATEGY
Partner with families to make literacy practical and enjoyable

Each of the strategies above can be used in meetings with families. In addition, you might want to develop documentation displays which highlight the various ways children are learning literacy as they play in your program.

With photos and the writing of simple sentences, you can begin to make a variety of little books about the children's interests and activities which can be taken home for reading. You can send home book-making materials and loan a camera for families to create little books for themselves. Tape recorders and blank 15 minute tapes are a nice addition, so that oral stories can be brought in by individual children, perhaps followed by an illustrative homemade book. This is especially effective where you are trying to support a language other than English at home.

A further extension of this is developing literacy backpacks to send home. One model for this is described in a January 1997 article in *Young Children* — "How I Developed My Kindergarten Book Backpack Program" by Lynn Cohen.

With today's pressure on literacy development, it's our job to sniff out the smoke and get clear about the basics of learning to read and write. Our very young children don't need some fancy curriculum or software package or isolated lessons that require manipulation of phonemes. Rather, they need adults around them who model the purpose, power, and fun of reading and writing. In the course of everyday living at home and in our programs, children need multiple experiences of literacy awareness, encouragement to experiment and invent with reading and writing, and playful opportunities to discover letter-sound associations and the blending and segmenting of letters that create words. These activities are basic to literacy development and becoming a successful reader for lifelong learning and enjoyment of books.

Recommended Resources

Beginnings Workshop. (1999). Building literacy. *Child Care Information Exchange*, September/October, 43-62.

Gallas, K. (1994). *The languages of learning.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Handel, R. (1999). *Building family literacy in an urban community.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Martens, P. (1996). *I already know how to read.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Neuman, S., Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. (2000). *Learning to read and write.* Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Owocki, G. (1999). *Literacy through play.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Schickedanz, J. (1999). *Much more than the ABCs.* Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Taylor, D. (1998). *Family literacy.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Wilson, C. (2000). *Telling a different story: Teaching and literacy in an urban preschool.* New York: Teachers College Press.