

Integrating Literacy Development into School-Age Care Programs

by Sue Edwards and Kathleen Martinez

Dr. Kathleen Martinez started her career teaching remedial reading in northern New Mexico. After getting her doctorate at Florida State, she taught at NM Highlands University. In 1992, she became director of community-based resources for behaviorally different children in Taos, New Mexico. After raising her two children she moved to Berkeley, CA to pursue a master's in theology at the Graduate Theological Union. She now provides training and support to out-of-school programs through her private consulting company, Creative Out-Of-School Learning. Along with her colleague, Sue Edwards, she is busy writing a second book, *33 Colossal Clubs for After-School* that will be published by School-Age NOTES.



Sue Edwards M. Ed. began working with children in her home as a family care provider. Soon, she founded a districtwide program in Petaluma, CA. At this time she was also working as a Project Consultant and Kids' Time Trainer for California School-Age Consortium and a NAA Endorser. Recently, Sue began instructing at local community colleges and is the Program Director for the Bodega Bay After-School program. Sue continues to live in Petaluma with her husband and three fabulous children.



"Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not a preparation for life but is life itself."

John Dewey

Sitting in rows, children are making puppets of the characters in the story they have just read. Two middle school boys work together on a script for their upcoming play. An eight-year-old girl works with a mentor to sound out an unfamiliar word. Three adolescents write a letter to the local restaurant requesting a donated meal for the upcoming fundraiser. All these activities are common enough in our schools today. However, more frequently, these scenes are also taking place in school-age care programs as these programs take on a larger role in the literacy development of young people. Many school-age care programs have traditionally been involved in such efforts through tutoring and mentoring programs, homework assistance, as well as sponsoring book clubs, reading corners, and libraries. They engage participants in literacy activities as a part of their every day practices, often without being consciously aware that they are doing so. But, pressure is increasing to expand and become intentional in that involvement.

This push is coming from many different directions. As funding for school-age care programs increasingly flows through school districts, the schools are in a position to demand that these programs become involved in their agenda: academic achievement. Many foundations require that organizations address academic issues as part of their grant proposals. School-age care program staff recognize that young people need added support in developing essential literacy skills. For all these reasons, out-of school staff are looking for ways to increase their capabilities in supporting literacy, and still stay faithful to their unique mission of being something different than more school.

So what is our role in developing literacy skills? School-age care staff play a supportive role through:

- reinforcing individual literacy skills
- providing experiences that develop concepts and vocabulary
- providing opportunities to apply literacy skills in new and practical ways
- providing fun and engaging activities in which children use literacy skills in non-intimidating ways
- providing opportunities for children to learn to enjoy books, writing, and playing with language

Remember, school-age care programs are in a privileged position to support literacy development in a variety of enriching ways. School-age care programs do not have to imitate the school day to successfully integrate literacy, but we must be intentional in our efforts.

As stated before, one of the driving forces in school-age care programs becoming more intentional in literacy development is the growing relationships between the after-school and school communities. It is critical to understand the differences and similarities between the communities to assure the proper role of each. So what are the differences and similarities?

The goal of both school and school-age care is to support young people in the development of their language literacy skills.

The goal of school is to support the development of children's literacy in a direct instructional manner. Most schools approach that goal through the development of the *academic* skills of the children and by directly instructing the children in reading. Part of the goal of schools is reflected in their accountability for meeting academic standards.

School-age care programs are not held to the same degree of accountability for helping children meet

academic standards. However, they also have the goal of literacy development by providing skill reinforcement and also by providing opportunities for children to use the skills in new and practical ways.

Hints for getting the most literacy development out of activities

- Surround the participants with the written word. Signs, posters, books, all kinds of writing, especially participants' writing should be all over the program area. Many programs share space and cannot leave material posted. Look for ways to show participants' works, such as portable display boards or a display case that has been designated by the site.
- Provide many samples of completed projects so the participants have new ideas on how to approach literacy activities. If the young people want to take their projects home, you can take pictures or make copies of projects.
- Always be aware of the literacy component of the activities. Some activities, especially arts and crafts and science, could be done without integrating literacy skills. Stay intentional!
- Before you ask participants to write anything, brainstorm vocabulary words with the whole group. Write the words on chart paper or a board. This will increase both the quantity and quality of their writing.
- When you are discussing books, ideas for writing, or plans for doing projects with the participants, make sure to keep questions open-ended. Ask yourself, "Does this question have a yes or no answer?" If it does, re-word the question so that the participants will have to give a thoughtful response.
- Be open to the creativity of the participants. In other settings such as school, participants are often required to write or complete assignments in very specific ways in order to demonstrate that they have mastered a skill. One of the advantages of school-age care is that the staff and the participants are not limited in this way. School-age care programs are a place where the participants can experiment and try out their own voices.
- If you want the children to rewrite or take care with the projects, have an audience in mind for the final product. Have an art or drama show. Have them make the product for their families. Give the projects a purpose.

The specific missions of schools and school-age care programs are usually different.

The mission of school is to educate in academics. Although the way schools approach that mission varies a great deal from school to school, the development of academic skills usually, as defined by state standards, is the central focus of their work.

The missions of school-age care programs vary extensively. Some programs have a commitment to recreational activities. Others focus on the encouragement of the arts. Others work to increase leadership and service opportunities for the youth involved. Still others see themselves specifically supporting and extending the school mission.

Attendance in school and in school-age care programs affects the kinds of activities that can be planned.

Attendance in school is mandatory. Usually you can count on children being there. Therefore, long-term projects can be planned and carried out over a series of days. You can develop skills sequentially over a long period of time.

Participation in school-age care programs is usually voluntary. Activities must attract the participants by their quality and fun. Attendance is often sporadic. When planning activities, it is not always possible to count on the same participants being there more than one day in a row or the same number of hours per day.

The difference in the way space is allocated affects the kind of activities that can be planned.

In school, the teachers can usually count on a self-contained space where they can keep materials up and display children's work over a period of time. There is space for quiet work and also group work. The teacher usually has control over the environment of the classroom.

In school-age care programs, the staff often have to share space with other programs or has limited space. There is less of an opportunity to keep projects

School-age care program staff recognize that young people need added support in developing essential literacy skills.

Pet Rocks

Here is an example of a 45 minute fun and engaging activity which is intentional in promoting literacy. Enjoy!!!

The purpose of this activity is for children to practice using descriptive words while engaged in careful observation of nature.

Supplies: Index cards, rocks, cotton, wiggly eyes, hot glue gun, shoe boxes or smaller boxes, paper or small note pads, pencils or pens, yarn

Directions: Enjoy a rock collecting adventure with the children. Encourage the children to collect rocks of different shapes and textures. The rocks should be able to fit in the palm of their hands.

Join together and explain that the children will be making a Pet Rock and a home for the Pet Rocks. Have the children share what is special about their rocks: Are there any special shapes? Colors? Texture?

Using index cards have the children write down the name of their rocks and at least three specific and creative things about the rock. Encourage them to be as creative as possible with this activity. Silly descriptions work best. For example:

My Rock, Flying Heart

My rock has super powers and can fly through the air.

My rock fits in my hand perfectly so that it can hide.

My rock is shaped like a heart because it is so sweet.

The children now glue their index cards onto boxes. The children may decide to decorate the outside of the boxes with colorful paper and more writings.

The boxes will be the Rock's home. Line the boxes by gluing down cotton on the inside bottom.

Next, the children may "add life" to their rocks by gluing on wiggly eyes, coloring them, and adding yarn for hair.

When the rocks are completely decorated and dry, children may glue them down in their boxes.

Display Pet Rocks and their homes for parents to enjoy.

To get even more literacy development opportunities, try the following:

- Read the book *Everybody Needs a Rock* by Byrd Baylor to start the activity.
- Begin a rock collecting club and have children write descriptions of the different rocks in their displays or journals.
- Children may write a script and film their Pet Rocks in action. These short films are often hilarious.
- Create Pet Rock journals in shapes of rocks with construction paper covers. Children can write stories and adventures of their Pets.
- Have children type up short stories about their rocks and add pictures. Collect them and create a book for your program.

School-age care programs do not have to imitate the school day to successfully integrate literacy into their program, but we must be intentional in our efforts.

displayed, and often materials have to be carted and repacked after every session. The school-age care staff often have to be creative in how they set up the space for their programs.

So how can we take advantage of our differences in supporting participants' skill development?

Our school-age programs have great potential for supporting children in their positive literacy development.

However, we must be clear on our roles and our intent. If we do not articulate our purpose for presenting literacy activities that are aligned with our mission, then we will be told by others how to incorporate literacy development. Or if this pressure leads us to become more like school in our activities, we do a disservice to ourselves and, more importantly, to the children we serve.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

What is your mission?: Start your work in the area of supporting literacy development by clarifying and refining your program's mission. To make sure you have it right, involve children, families, other stakeholders, and teachers in reviewing and strengthening your mission.

Being intentional: Ask teachers to bring next week's lesson plans to a review session that focuses on being intentional about adding literacy experiences to school-age care activities. Divide into small groups and analyze where literacy experiences could be added or enhanced. Implement the plan and see how it goes. Reconvene to discuss how children responded.