

I have always defined myself as a kindergarten teacher. When asked what I do for a living, I never answer, "I am a teacher"; I always say, "I am a *kindergarten* teacher." The kindergarten piece of that answer is an integral part of how I define my role.

Last year I moved to a new city and, to my great relief, secured a kindergarten position at Parklawn Elementary School. It is a half-day program, and there are more than 13 different languages spoken between my morning and afternoon classes. After teaching for three years in my previous district, I was excited about the change but most definitely pleased to be remaining in kindergarten. Little did I know what drastic changes would be in store. Throughout the year I redefined my concept of *kindergarten teacher*, reexamined my classroom, and researched what it meant to teach kindergarten children to become readers.

Shifting the focus of my teaching

During my four years as a kindergarten teacher, I have always maintained that besides the emotional and social goals that I wanted for all children, my main academic goal was to *prepare* the children for reading. I looked to prepare them for reading by teaching them letters and letter sounds, immersing them in print, and inspiring in them a love of literature.

As I have reexamined my role as a kindergarten teacher, I have shifted my focus subtly but dramatically. Rather than doing all those things to pre-

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Learning to Teach Reading in a Developmentally Appropriate Kindergarten

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pare children for reading, I now do them as simultaneous and essential components in teaching them how to read.

By making the subtle shift from preparing to teaching, the questions that I ask myself, and the questions that I research in the classroom, have changed. In the past I asked myself three questions:

- How do I inspire my kindergarten children to be lifelong readers?
- How can I most fully immerse my children in literacy in the classroom?
- How can I honor the developmental literacy needs of five-year-old children?



Now I ask myself an additional question:

- How do I teach my kindergarten children to read?

While I am still absolutely committed to honoring and fulfilling those first three questions, I now believe that they must be answered in conjunction with the new fourth question. I believe that because my overall goal is that my children become competent and eager readers, I need not only to bring them to the path of reading but also to guide them on their first steps up that path.

Answering the original questions

In my teaching I believe I have been successful at finding and implementing the answers to my old questions. A love of reading is in everything we do in the classroom. Children read enthusiastically, eagerly, and independently. Our D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read) time is always a favorite activity and often lasts beyond the time I plan for it. Pairs and groups of children come together to read charts, songs, and poems around the room. Children play teacher and read from my rocking chair, holding the book up and telling the story. I notice one child in my classroom, for whom

English is an entirely new language, rocking in that chair and reading to a friend one of the stories we read in class. Excited choral reading can be heard from children in my most beginning ESL (English as a Second Language) group, and fluent reading comes from every child's mouth. The children frequently express disappointment when I apologetically announce cleanup time.

In answer to my second question, the children in my classroom are utterly immersed in literacy. Print is found in every

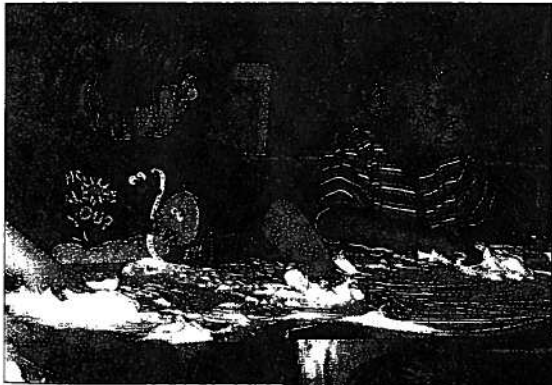
part of the classroom, and our focus is constantly on reading the world around us. By integrating multisensory activities with literacy, I honor the developmental literacy needs found in my third question. Drama, songs, and hands-on activities are connected to the stories we read and reread. I always remember that young children need time to think, talk, and move through literacy in the classroom.

My new question emerged last year, and it fully shook up my way of thinking about myself as a kindergarten teacher. I have spent much of the year in the full throes of cognitive dissonance, and my ideas have changed far more than I thought possible. It has been an exhilarating and challenging year, and my teacher research has focused on the evolution of my changing questions and my first look at some answers.

A new question emerges

There were two events that precipitated the emergence of my new question, How do I teach my kindergarten children to read? The first occurred when my principal gave money to each grade level to choose and purchase books. I was in seventh heaven, thrilled to have the opportunity to select all my favorites—books rich with rhyming, repetition, alliteration, and some solid classic stories. When my principal saw our kindergarten order, she asked, “Where are your book sets?” I was aghast! I was insistent in my assertion, “Book sets are for first grade; this is kindergarten!”

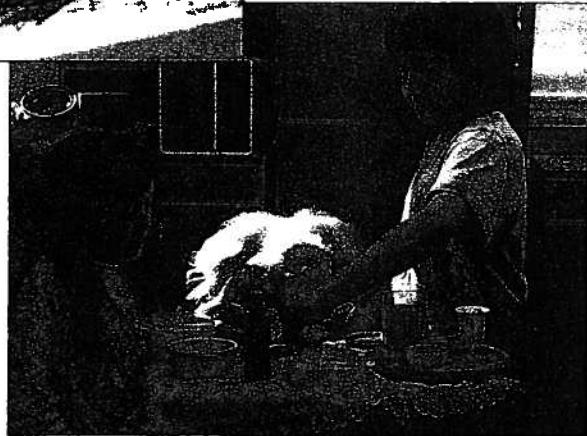
I asked around at kindergarten meetings and in the class I was taking designed specifically for kindergarten teachers, and agreement was absolute. When the principal, the other kindergarten teacher, and I sat down to talk about the book order, it was agreed that we could still order our books, but that we would also order a Big Book with small book copies. It was a perfect agreement, and I still thrill when I look over at my classroom bookcase or see the children using those little book sets to read together. Still, my principal’s original question and intent about book sets and reading



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groups kept coming back to me, and I decided to take a course on teaching beginning reading strategies.

A class for the teacher

Attending the course *Beginning Reading Strategies* was the second event that prompted my new question. Offered through Fairfax County Public Schools, it was geared mostly to first-grade teachers. The four kindergarten teachers in the class were originally met with "What are you doing here?" by the other teachers enrolled in the course. We were asking ourselves the same question. Yet, after the first few classes, it became clear that we were there because we were all in the business of teaching children to read. And while my focus had been on exposing my children to reading so that they would read sometime down the road, I realized that my goal had always been that they would read confidently and eagerly. I just had thought it would happen when they had gone on to the greener pastures of first grade.

The course instructors outlined the specific strategies that children need to develop in order to become fluent readers, based on the research and approach of Marie Clay (1991) as outlined in *Becoming Literate*. The instructors stressed that the earlier children make use of these reading strategies, the easier reading will be for them along the way. I realized with a start that I could teach my children to begin to use these strategies, basing their future reading success on this groundwork; this would not only prepare them for the path of reading but also start them on their way.

Reflecting on new knowledge

I realized that I needed to reexamine my attitude toward teaching reading so that I could meet the instructional needs of all my children. Previously, when I had thought about direct reading instruction, I had thought it applied to only a few children in my class each year. And when I spoke to kindergarten teachers about directly teaching reading, the conversation was always about how to teach those kindergarten children who were "ready" to read. I had bought into the *readiness concept*, about which Clay writes, "One consequence of the readiness concept is that the education system, the school and the teacher expect all children to get to where the program starts before they are ready for formal instruction and some will be identified as 'not ready'" (1991, 19).

I began to realize that it wasn't about teaching the higher-level students how to read, but reaching each child at her reading level and moving her along the literacy continuum. Clay continues, "If the con-

cept of emerging literacy is accepted, then the school's program must go to wherever each child is and take his learning on from that point" (1991, 19).

Our school had been discussing the possibility of moving to multi-age kindergarten/first-grade classrooms, and in those discussions my principal kept saying, "We need to get out of the box of 'I teach kindergarten' or 'I teach first grade.'" I can honestly say that it was a tremendous struggle to crawl out of that box, but slowly I have emerged. Coming out of that kindergarten box brought new questions, a few answers, and new directions for my classroom teaching.

Out of the box . . . And where to go next?

Once I finally concluded that I did have an obligation to teach reading on a more systematic, sequential, and individualized basis to *all* of my children, the question became, "Where's the time to do it?" I examined my schedule, which I had been tinkering with and changing throughout the year in order to maximize our limited minutes. There was so much in our day that the children and I simply could not cut out. I saved D.E.A.R. time and settling in, free choice centers, and our extensive meeting time in which the class worked together on shared reading, dramatization of stories, songs, poetry, and class discussions. Those activities were as vital to my reading instruction as the more individualized instruction for which I was trying to make time. In the end, I could maneuver only the large block of time I had been using for small group work on science or social studies literature-based activities.

The literature-based activities were a part of our integrated social studies or science thematic units, and while the children needed to

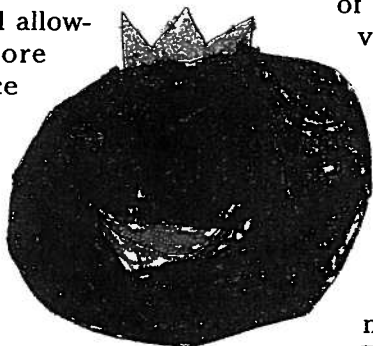




have that block of time, I began to question where I needed to be during that time. I wondered, if the children took more of an active role in creating, planning, and directing these activities, could they then work more independently and thereby free me up to work on individualized reading instruction? I began planning more with the children during our meeting time and allowing them more independence to respond to classroom work in their own ways.

For example, when the children were discovering the parts of the flower during our Growth and Change unit, I used the whole group time to let the children dissect a flower and we labeled the parts on a large chart. Then the children worked on creating their own flowers and labeling their parts. Some children used blocks to show the flowers' parts, some used toilet paper rolls and tissue paper, while still others used markers on large chart paper. The key was that I no longer needed to show them how to complete the project, because they were finding their own ways. And so in one fell swoop, I not only freed myself up for individualized reading instruction, but I managed to increase the value of social studies and science work exponentially by allowing the children more control, more choice, and more independence.

With my instructional assistant on hand to help groups with their projects, written responses, drawings, murals, and so on, I was in a little corner with my handy literacy cart on wheels. I called over children for individualized reading instruction and began discovering what works, while bumbling over what doesn't!



Found the time . . . Now what?

During individualized reading instruction, I examined which pieces of my Beginning Reading Strategies course worked for my kindergarten children and which did not. I found that because of the diverse levels of learners, various pieces fit for various children. While some had not yet established one-to-one correspondence, others were reading complex and nonrepetitive text. And yet at every level, I needed simply to find the right book for the right child, put it in his hands, and listen. The child then guided me to the next step.

The first challenge was always in finding that right book. I consulted the book lists found in *Guided Reading*, by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), and *Invitations*, by Routman (1994). I also raided my school book room, spoke with first-grade teachers in my building, and consulted our school reading teacher.

For my children at the earliest reading levels, the most crucial first step was to establish one-to-one correspondence or the knowledge that for each word read or spoken there is a word in print. I had pointers scattered around the room, and I constantly modeled one-to-one correspondence when I read a Big Book, poem, or song chart. Nevertheless, by April some children had not yet established a firm understanding of one-to-one correspondence. With those children, I began with interactive writing of a sentence of their choosing, and then I copied the sentence onto a sentence strip that we cut apart as they read each word. The children then read the sentence by pushing each word up, and then pulling each word down to read it over and over again. They also mixed up the words in the sentence and pulled down each word in correct order as they read the sen-

tence. The children isolated words in the sentence, noticed print as they were challenged to mix up the words and pull them down correctly, and were consistently forced back to correct one-to-one tracking as they pulled down each word in their sentence. Indeed, one child in my class still pulls his finger under each word, even as he reads much higher-level text.

I also searched out and created books that contain short basic sentences with only one changing variable. Most of the children read such text with a heavy reliance on meaning cues. Yet sometimes they noticed when a word they had said didn't sound quite right, and many noticed that the word they had said didn't match the visual cue of the initial letter sound.

When reading the book *Me*, part of the Scholastic Literacy Tree collection, I felt like jumping up and cheering each time the children noticed that the sentence that they thought would say, "I am smiling," did not include the word *smiling*. The sentence actually reads, "I am laughing," and I watched as many children said the word *smiling*, but then noticed the initial consonant *l*. They went back to look at the picture to try to figure out the word *laughing*. Some children did get the correct word, but I knew even those children who noticed only the discrepancy between the word they thought it would be—*smiling*—and the visual information of the *l* in *laughing* were making progress. According to Fountas and Pinnell, "Young children . . . who notice a mismatch of whatever kind take steps to get rid of the dissonance . . . Although the behavior may not always result in self-correction, nevertheless it indicates a beginning inner control of strategic process" (1996, 152).

For all of the children, I knew I was at least helping them to establish

the beginning use of a three-cue system, based on visual, meaning, and structural cues, and that I was finally leading them up that reading path!

The use of phonetic visual cues came slowly for some children, and while I did not teach letters or sounds in isolation, I did teach them in the context of whatever we were reading. I also used poems, songs, and shared writing to focus on letters and sounds. For example, using the nonsense song "Anna, Fanna, BoBanna," we substituted the children's names in the song, singing "Wendy, Fendy, BoBendy," and the like. Then, using magnetic letters, Wendy wrote out her name and played with its beginning letter and beginning sound. In this way, she not only learned the letters and sounds but also developed a beginning understanding of how to blend sounds together in the most meaningful word of all, her name.

This phonemic awareness piece of my daily reading instruction changed only in that I used some of my individualized reading instruction time to focus more heavily on phonemic awareness with those children who needed it, while continuing the rhyming and alliteration work with the whole class during morning meeting time.

The more I learned about each child's reading, the more I felt I had to do, and the more I began to wish I had more time with the children. I wished that there had been a way to speed up my own learning process. But just as I saw the children gathering lots of information about reading as they read each day, so too did I need lots of information to be convinced that effective kindergarten teaching required not only reading to and with children, but also by children, as Cambourne's "conditions of learning" dictate (1988).

As Carol Avery wrote in her conclusion to *And with a Light Touch*, "We've not been learning about



reading and writing, and math and all the rest, but *been* readers and writers and mathematicians and scientists. We're not getting ready for life; we're living life now" (1993, 460). It is that point of living life in the classroom that I will probably be striving to reach fully throughout my teaching career.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my own learning and research, I know only that next year will bring new questions and probably renew some old ones. Already I find myself itching to further examine the independent project work that was taking place while I was working on direct reading instruction. I have so many questions about how to enhance the children's input into that time, how to plan and implement the complete project approach, and how to fully maximize the literacy learning potential during that block of time.

This year has been a whirlwind of discoveries, challenges, and changes. The rich life of literacy in my classroom has been greatly enhanced by my addition of individualized reading instruction, as I continue to balance the full spectrum of early childhood activities. The play, the discovery, the songs and poems are as critical for the chil-

dren as the reading component, just as the shared reading, dramatizations, and choral reading are as critical as the individualized reading instruction.

Of course, there is no telling which piece of literacy instruction made the difference for each child in my class, although perhaps it was the diversity of the experiences offered that enabled each child to find her way up her own individualized literacy lane. As Karen Gallas wrote, "When a child learns to read, we are awestruck—not knowing absolutely that any one thing we did so systematically caused that outcome. . . . We know that one cannot measure or generalize about in absolute terms how the epiphany of reading happens for each child. Yet we all have important things to say to one another in our stories . . . and those things can improve our teaching of reading" (1994, 3). I only hope that my story has added a word to the conversation about how we can all walk, dance, skip, and hop our children up that literacy lane, rather than simply leading them to the path.

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