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Professional Book Review

Much More Than The ABC's: A Balanced Approach to Teaching Early Literacy

Amy Triplett and Regena Fails Nelson

As an early childhood teacher educator, I am well aware of the phonics versus whole language debate and its implications for literacy instruction in kindergarten. Many educators have taken a phonics-only or a whole language-only approach to teaching reading. In my opinion, this is a misinterpretation of both approaches to teaching reading. The best instruction exposes children to letters, sounds and words through meaningful activities and age appropriate texts. There is a need for more books on how to present this balanced approach to literacy to children. *Much more Than the ABCs: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing* by Judith A. Schickedanz is a great example of such a book. The author focused on three main areas of literacy development in kindergarten: reading, storytelling and writing.

I was delighted when one of my master's students in early childhood education, Amy Triplett, read the book and asked to develop an independent study project to test the validity of the activities. Together we decided on the following assignments for the independent study project:

- Write a synopsis and reflection for each chapter in the book.
- Develop lesson plans and materials for the literacy activities in the book.
- Implement the activities and collect student samples of students' work.
- Write a reflection essay on the entire experience.
- What follows are Amy's reflections on how this book changed her literacy instruction in kindergarten.

Reading

I gained a lot from the author's discussion of word learning from books. She discusses the importance of predictable books, but cautions against only providing predictable books for the students. My students love *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* and other books that allow them to read independently. I use a curriculum of reproducible pattern books all year long with the children. I had noticed that many of the children simply memorize the books, so I took some steps this year to avoid that problem and teach the children to pay attention to the text. I taught them some strategies such as pointing to each word

as you say it, looking at the pictures for clues, highlighting the sight words such as “the,” “a,” “see.” We also paid careful attention to beginning sounds, for example to find out if it said “alligator” or “crocodile.” These techniques worked for my students.

Because we already know the story, the second reading gives us an opportunity to talk more about characters’ motivations, feelings, details in the illustrations, and the print.

I believe that I use “cognitively challenging talk” with my students (56). We talk extensively about books every time we read. During a first reading, we make predictions and explain vocabulary. Many times the children will comment if the book reminds them of another book we’ve read, and we compare the two. I often read several books during the same week to purposely generate these kinds of discussions. If the children really enjoy a book, we will read it again. Because we already know the story, the second reading gives us an opportunity to talk more about characters’ motivations, feelings, details in the illustrations, and the print. The author states that reading many different types of books to children helps them learn about how different texts are organized (60). As I mentioned previously, my students were identifying the book type after the first page was read. I learned from my reading that I really should be reading an even greater variety of texts. I mostly read picture books to the children. I should be reading more non-fiction and poetry to them.

The most important thing I have learned from this book is found on page 62: *“Until children have had experience thinking about words in terms of their sound components, or phonemes, . . . they can be puzzled when moving from print to sound.”* This concept is at the root of so many difficulties I observe with my students’ learning. Children who have difficulty rhyming, identifying beginning sounds, sound spelling, and learning letter sounds, have not made this mental connection yet. I think that my teaching can be improved by helping children understand phonemes, the concept that words

are made up of sounds, and the letters represent those sounds. I have been assuming that all of my students already had this understanding, and I could not figure out why they did not understand what I was asking them to do. The book says that children first learn rhyming and alliteration, which paves the way for phonemic awareness. So many children do not hear the rhyme, or the same beginning sound, because they lack experience. I need to teach them to hear the sounds before I expect them to know which letter represents the sound. Reading and writing will then follow.

Another point in the book that has changed my behavior is the author’s advocacy of teachers spending time reading with individual children during choice time. I am guilty of ignoring the book area during choice time to focus on monitoring painting, or re-teaching a child who’s having difficulty, or extending math manipulative activities. Since reading the book, I have been more willing to read to children during choice time when they ask to hear a book. Whenever I begin to read, at least one other child comes over to hear the story, too. I can offer more individualized instruction during this time and find out more about each child’s strengths and areas of need.

Storytelling

Since reading about the importance of children’s personal storytelling on page 82, I have been taking a different approach to listening to the children in my classroom. They come to school every day with a million stories to tell me. I listen to as many as I can, and I always try to offer feedback and questions. I have always thought I was just showing them interest and respect; I didn’t realize I was helping their reading!

I have been trying to help my students tell about their event as a story by asking them what happened first, next, and last. I ask them to give me more details if it seems appropriate. It is interesting to watch them try to think things through and remember the details of their stories.

I also have been asking small groups of students to dictate a group experience story to me. I

did this with four groups after our field trip to the zoo. They began by just telling things out of sequence and without paying attention to the members of their group. I had to help them by asking, "What did we do first? Does anyone want to say more about that?" They did a great job with some guidance.

Writing

I am very interested in early writing, and I admit that I have not included it in my classroom as much as I could and should. I believe that next year I will include a daily journal time for the children to draw and write. The most difficult thing for me is to get the children started. It is difficult to convince them that they can write and to understand that there are many stages of writing. Some of them have been told they cannot read or write, and they believe it. Others have just never considered that they may be able to write.

I really liked reading that children learn about "the relations between the finger movements that guide the tool and resulting visual feedback" when they scribble. This gives more validation to the early stages of writing. It also makes me realize that this is what my kindergarten students do when they experiment with paint and markers for the first time. Often they just paint to paint, just for the experience, not to create a specific picture or representation.

The "Helping Young Children Learn to Form Letters" section on pages 110-111 is very helpful. I already provide the students with many opportunities to see the letters. I like the suggestions for helping the children identify different line segments in the letters. Providing daily demonstrations is something that I began to work on this year. Next year, I plan to have a daily "news" time. Every day, a different child can tell a sentence. The whole class will help write the sentence, then the child can illustrate the page. I have done this with older children before, and it was very effective. I am looking forward to trying it with my kindergarten students.

I like the cautionary statement the author makes about sound spelling on page 125. When I help children spell a word, I help them sound it out, and they

often tell me the correct letter that represents the sound they hear when they say the word. Currently, I tell them about silent letters, or letters that do not follow the usual sound rules. However, I want the children to be able to write without an adult present at every moment, and this is what I need to be better at next year. I want them to learn that when they are working in their journal, they should just do the best they can to get their ideas down on paper. Then, if there is a specific word they want to work on, or if they ask specifically if something is spelled conventionally, I can help with that after they are finished.

I have a writing center in my room, but it is not stocked with all of the exciting materials suggested on page 131. I want to better equip this area for next year. The children always really enjoy making books and creating wonderful little projects with the supplies.

Conclusion

The author provides many suggestions for classroom activities. This is what I needed—concrete ways to include some new literacy activities in my classroom. The longer I teach, the more I realize that my primary objectives are to teach the children how to get along as a group, to make them interested in learning, and to give them a good literacy foundation. These are the things that they take with them throughout their education.

Works Cited

Schickedanz, Judith. *Much More Than the ABCs: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1999.

About the Author

Amy Triplett teaches kindergarten at Parchment Northwood Elementary School. She earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Western Michigan University.

Regena Fails Nelson, an associate professor of early childhood education at Western Michigan University, researches developmentally appropriate practices.