XII. LITERACY

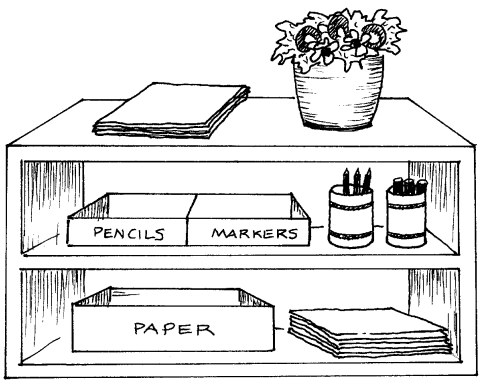
Children at Play: The Literacy Center

Children are curious, spontaneous, concrete thinkers who are anxious to gain access to the adult world. Becoming literate is one of the keys to this world.

In order to meaningfully describe a literacy program for young children, it is important to recognize that the acquisition of language is a natural, biological process. It follows a predictable series of steps, just as learning to walk does. (See Cambourne's: *Conditions for Natural Language Learning* at the end of this chapter.)

Literacy is defined as the acquisition of language-based skills that are socially transmitted within a culture. These skills, which are closely related, include reading, writing, and spelling. Research shows that literacy learning is ongoing from infancy (Heath and Taylor, 1983). For example, most children come to school knowing how to speak. They have been spoken to, listened to, encouraged to articulate correctly, and corrected in their social interactions with the important people in their lives. This interaction takes place regularly and develops over time as children work to become communicators in their societies. In school, children need to build on what they have already learned so that, regardless of culture, background experience, or language facility, they are helped to have a strong, positive feeling about themselves and to see themselves as speakers, readers, and writers (Harste, 1989).

Setting Up the Literacy Program



The physical setting for learning literacy must be carefully planned. A program that nourishes literacy requires a literacy-rich environment, an interdisciplinary approach, and a recognition of individual differences and levels of development (Morrow, 1989). According to Jean Piaget, children come to know the world through their physical interactions with objects and people. They learn by doing (Piaget and

Inhelder, 1969). Therefore, classroom settings should reflect real-life situations. Materials should be familiar as well as appealing.

The literacy center should contain a writing area, library corner, book-making table, and listening center. These areas should be designed to be used daily in a self-selected manner by the children as they respond to experiences in class. In the writing area, the child should have a variety of pens, pencils, markers, crayons, and paper (lined and unlined) from which to choose. These consumables are restocked regularly.

The Library Corner

This area should be inviting and cozy; ideally it should have a rug, small chairs, pillows, and possibly a sofa. The books should be attractively displayed on racks and reflect a range of reading levels, from picture books for early prereaders to more challenging books. Picture books, storybooks, information books, as well as poetry, biography, fairy tales, and resource books, should be included. The types and levels of books depend on the ages and interests of the children.

The Book-Making Center

This area encourages children to think of themselves as authors. Blank books in a variety of sizes elicit a wide range of written responses, from personal reflections and poetry to pages of dialogue with graphic illustrations. Additional paper, staplers, hole punchers, brads, and any items helpful for self-made books should be available. A computer and printer are real assets at this center. These materials allow children to grow in their independence and to realize their developing competencies as they manage their own acquisition of literacy skills. Books made by children can then be included in the library corner.

The "author's chair," situated in the book-making area, is a formal setting from which a child can present a "published" book to the group before it is added to the library collection. Discussions, questions, and comments are encouraged as the children expand their awareness that an author writes for an audience and has a particular voice and point of view.

The Listening Center

This area may be equipped with tape recorders, players, headphones, and audiotapes of stories and books. Children can choose to listen to a story on tape while reading along. The teacher should record the children reciting favorite rhymes, poems, or stories. She can also record stories herself. A variety of tapes should be available, including stories from other cultures, myths, and songs. Ideally, a focused theme or particular interest of the children will determine the selections for the listening and library centers (for example, bones, Japan, or photography).

The Teaching Team's Role

An effective teacher of literacy focuses on learning. Learning proceeds from the known to the unknown. It is, therefore, the teacher's job to find out what the child knows and then to extend that knowledge. Teachers can learn from what parents tell them about their child's interests in books, letters, drawing, literature, music, and other social arts. Ideally, such information can be conveyed during a teacher-parent meeting before the school term begins. Opening remarks to help an easy exchange might be, "Tell me some of your child's favorite things to do. Does he have a favorite fairy tale, story, song? What are some of his favorite games? Is she interested in looking at books? Does she attempt to write?" Communication between parents and teacher is vital in establishing a shared focus on the child's learning.

The teacher is not only a communicator but also an architect who designs the classroom space and selects age-appropriate materials. Through thoughtful selection of a variety of literature and tools for literacy, the teacher sets the stage for active language use. Within the planned setting of the literacy center, the teacher is the child's partner in language exploration, the resource guide, and the caring adult who models enjoyment of literature. As she comes to know each child, the teacher guides his and her literacy growth. She aids them in making book choices, takes dictation for their stories, helps pair children to share books, and answer questions.

The teacher is also a record keeper. He observes and records each child's progress. He thinks and cares about each child as he works to know every member of his class individually.

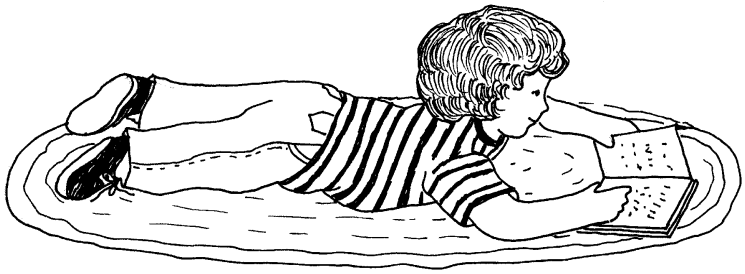
Activities and Projects

Literacy is a social activity. Children learn best in low-risk environments where exploration is supported and accepted. The teacher creates the classroom climate that establishes such support. The social aspect of language is one of the things that determines growth. Becoming literate is dependent on interactions with others. A strong literacy program enables teachers and children to exchange ideas about the world in a secure, print-rich environment.

Continuous exposure to, and experience with, various forms of oral and written language will help children construct their own personal knowledge about what it means to be literate. Adults who read aloud and silently, write letters, open mail, take notes, make lists, and use computers to communicate are modeling the functional aspects of reading and writing. Communicating within the conventions of society, learning to use good grammar, and building vocabulary can be easily done when these activities are engaged naturally, as a result of spontaneous questions based on real needs.

To encourage discussion among all children, questions and story telling are vital. Paper and pencils should be in every activity center and easily accessible throughout the room. Visual information, in the form of pictures, labels, charts, and graphs can provide constant challenges. Access to scissors, crayons, paint, paste, paint, clay, and a varied choice of arts and crafts materials, as well as woodworking equipment, provides the opportunity for expression of thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

An effective literacy program respects the child's early efforts in reading, writing, spelling, and speaking. This respect and recognition is shown by encouraging meaningful and purposeful communication experiences. The



young child's natural curiosity about print and language is the starting point of a literacy program. All children will eagerly imitate written language as they pretend to write. The early markings on paper of three- and four-year-old children progress from drawings to more refined attempts to imitate letters. These early exercises are important as the child establishes the language conventions of his or her particular culture; for example, the direction that print is read on a page, how a book or paper is oriented, spacing between words, and the use of punctuation. In a classroom one might see children gathered at the writing center busily writing page after page, then moving about the room passing out the newly produced notices. These children are demonstrating their awareness of the functional aspect of writing. Still another may be copying the labels located in all the areas around the room. Another child may be looking at a picture book and sharing the "story" with his friend, while a visiting parent reads to a small group of children.

In another part of the room, one child may be performing a puppet show for two friends, repeating, in his own words, a story that the teacher read earlier. Every day, stories are read aloud to the whole class as well as to small groups of children who request a book of particular interest. Rereading old favorites is important. Repetition helps the children come to know the regularity of language and the permanence of symbols.

Children gain communication or language skills when their classroom is immersed in language experiences — talking, dramatic play, and singing. As teachers talk with children about their interests and ask questions to expand their answers, children develop the capacity to share their personal experiences and thoughts.

Real-life adventures such as games or visits to museums, libraries, shops, the zoo or a concert, provide common experiences to talk about, in groups or one-on-one.

Play telephones, props that stimulate acting, puppets, and dramatic play encourage dynamic conversations between children.

Using large and small group opportunities for finger plays, music and singing, and rhyming games help children enjoy the fun and repetition in language.

Children can name objects or describe what they see in pictures and then teachers can remove the object or cover part of the picture and ask, "What is missing?"

Flannel boards equipped with the characters from favorite nursery rhymes and fairy tales should be available in the literacy center. They are an important way

for children to feel successful with sequencing a story line, developing characters, and using language for entertainment.

Having children work in groups to develop a list of visits the class might take, supplies that may be needed, or projects that the children might like to do gives them a practical understanding of one of the purposes of writing. Older children can write their own lists, while younger children can dictate the lists for the teacher to write.

Classroom tasks, such as jobs for classroom helpers, daily attendance charts, written notes, and special news, should be prominently displayed. Pictures and words help children of all ages begin to understand the importance of writing and reading. As children are involved with putting ideas on paper, they are establishing the foundations of reading. They are doing this same thing as they develop a sight vocabulary and begin to associate sounds with letters.

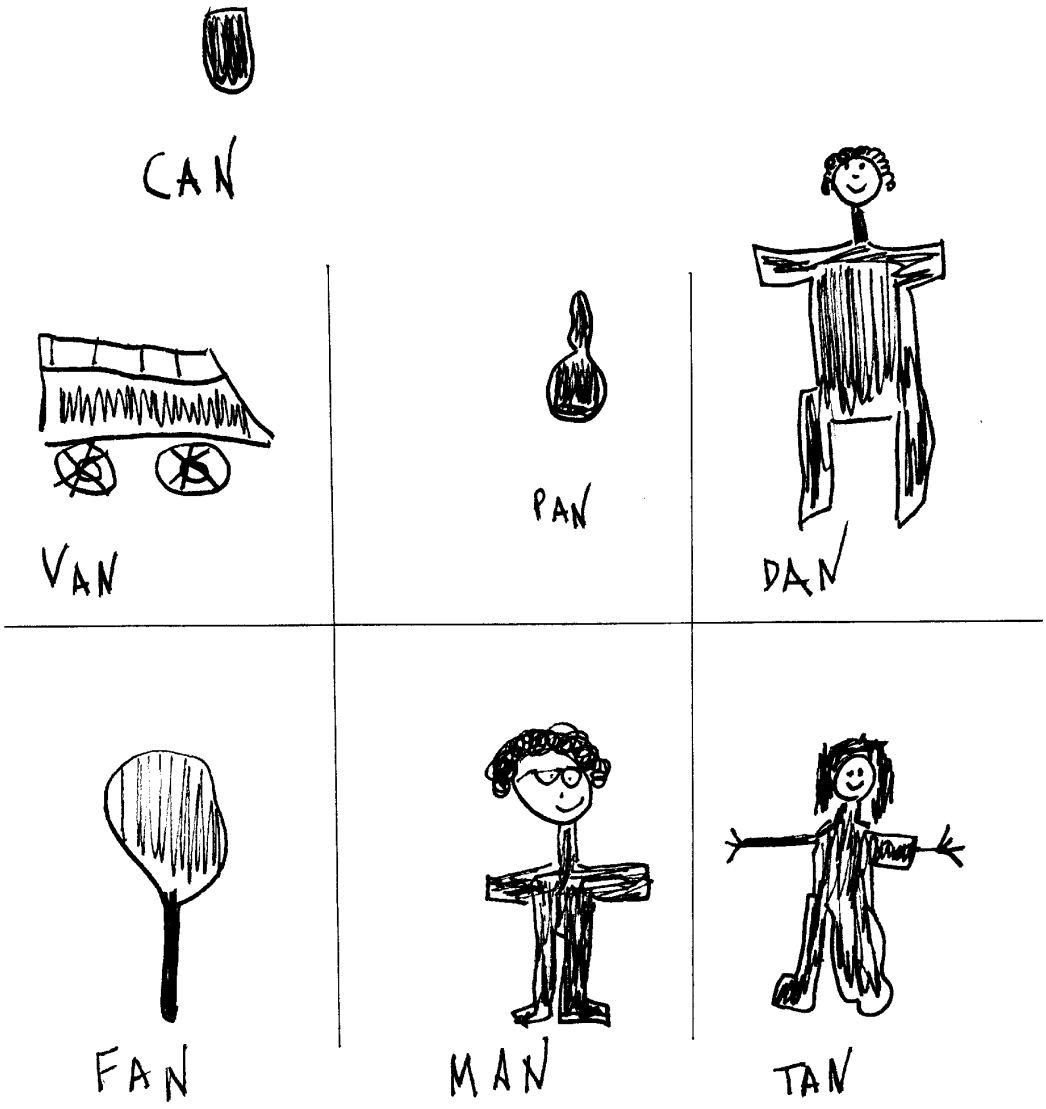
It is important to offer opportunities for letter matching and sorting, forming letters with clay, sand writing, and manipulating movable letters. These activities emphasize the basic sensory motor elements of reading. Surrounding children with a print-rich environment in which they are free to choose, to follow their interests, and to imitate the important adults in their world are some of the ways to create an effective literacy program.

Samples of Children's Work

Children develop skills and interests in literacy at different ages. The following are examples of writings done by children in the United States at four-, five- and six-years of age. They illustrate a developing awareness of the purposes of writing, particular skills and conventions, and the pleasure of literature.

This is an example of a dictated story in which a four-year-old child sequenced the events of a class trip.

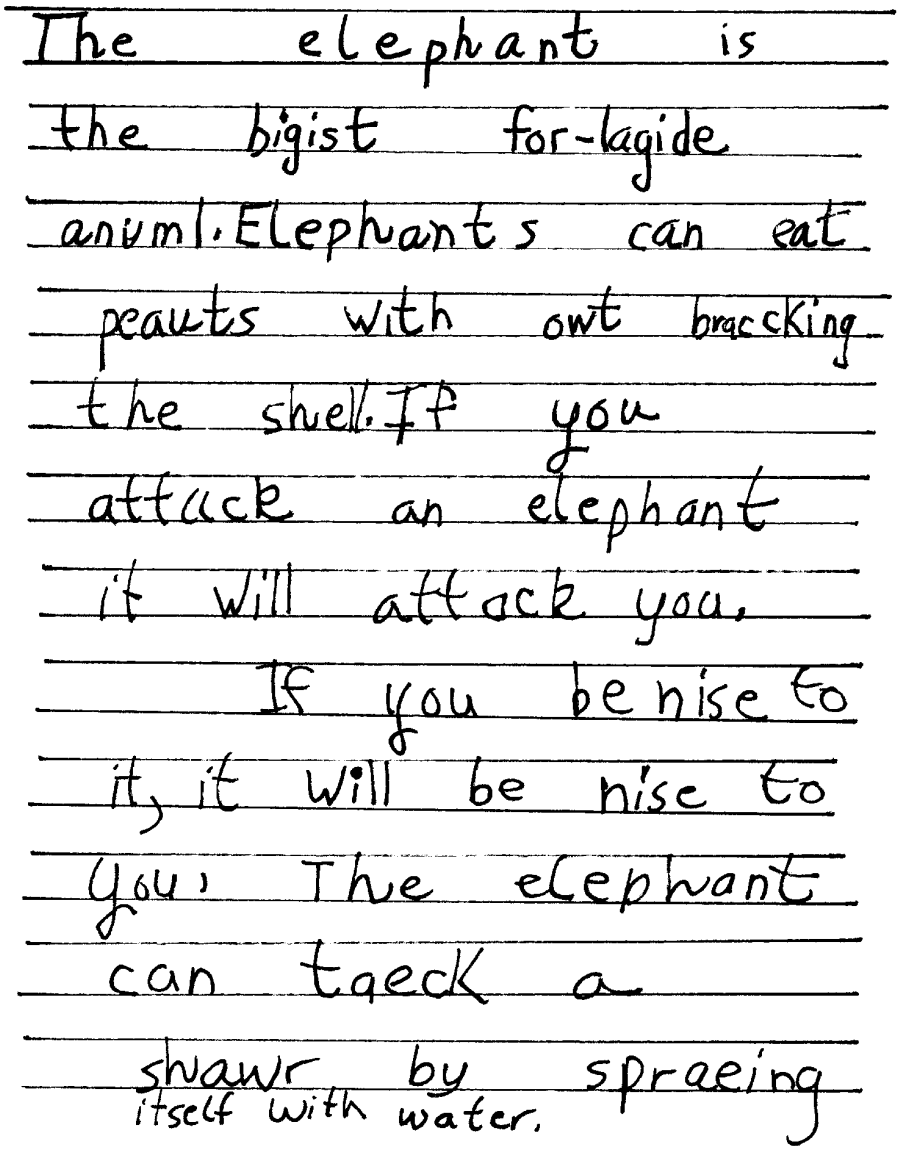
Five-year-olds are frequently interested in words that rhyme. Below is a sample of a word-family book in which a five-year-old child used the "-an" word-family group to make rhyming words.



A six-year-old who was interested in elephants and had read a book about them wrote:

The elephant is the biggest four legged animal. Elephants can eat peanuts without breaking the shell. If you attack an elephant it will attack you.

If you be nice to an elephant, it will be nice to you. The elephant can take a shower by spraying itself with water.



CONDITIONS FOR NATURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

IMMERSION
From the moment a child is born, meaningful, purposeful, "whole" spoken language washes over and surrounds the child. The child is immersed in a "language flood" for most of his or her waking hours.

DEMONSTRATION
As they learn to talk, children receive thousands of demonstrations (models or examples) of the spoken language being used in functional ways.

EXPECTATION
Unless the infant is severely damaged, all parents expect the child to walk and talk. So strong is this expectation, that parents "give off" subtle forms of communication, to which learners respond, and "do" learn to walk and talk.

RESPONSIBILITY
When learning to talk, children take responsibility for what they learn about their language and when. Each child decides which set of conventions to master and by which route he or she will get there, yet all children eventually arrive at the same destination. This is natural learning.

EMPLOYMENT
Ample time and opportunity to use spoken language are provided when children are learning to talk.

APPROXIMATION
Children just beginning to talk are not expected to display complete adult competence. They are rewarded not for being "right," but for being "close."

FEEDBACK
Adults and older siblings who teach young children give them a special kind of feedback (e.g., Toddler: "Dat cup." Adult: "Yes, that's a cup." The message is received ("yes"), and the conventional, adult response is given back in a nonthreatening, meaning-centered way. Furthermore, recognition is given to the fact that " baby" talk and other immature communication attempts will continue until the child decides to change, and the conventional adult form would not be expected the very next time the child uses it.

(Brian Cambourne, Workshop Handout)

MATHEMATICS/ MANIPULAYIVES