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An Environmental Impact Statement: Designing Supportive Literacy Classrooms for Young Children

**D. Ray Reutzel
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The physical environment of the classroom can be a powerful tool in support of literacy learning or an unrecognized and undirected influence (Loughlin and Martin, 1987). Teachers who organize, arrange, and dress up their classrooms intuitively understand that, "Every home, every classroom, every school contains a certain atmosphere" (Van Manen, 1986, p. 31). Although peripherally accepted as an important part of literacy instruction for many years, too little attention has been focused on what the literacy environment of the classroom brings to children and their learning. Recent research by Neuman and Roskos (1990, 1992) demonstrates a clear relationship between the quality of classroom environments and literacy related behaviors and learning.

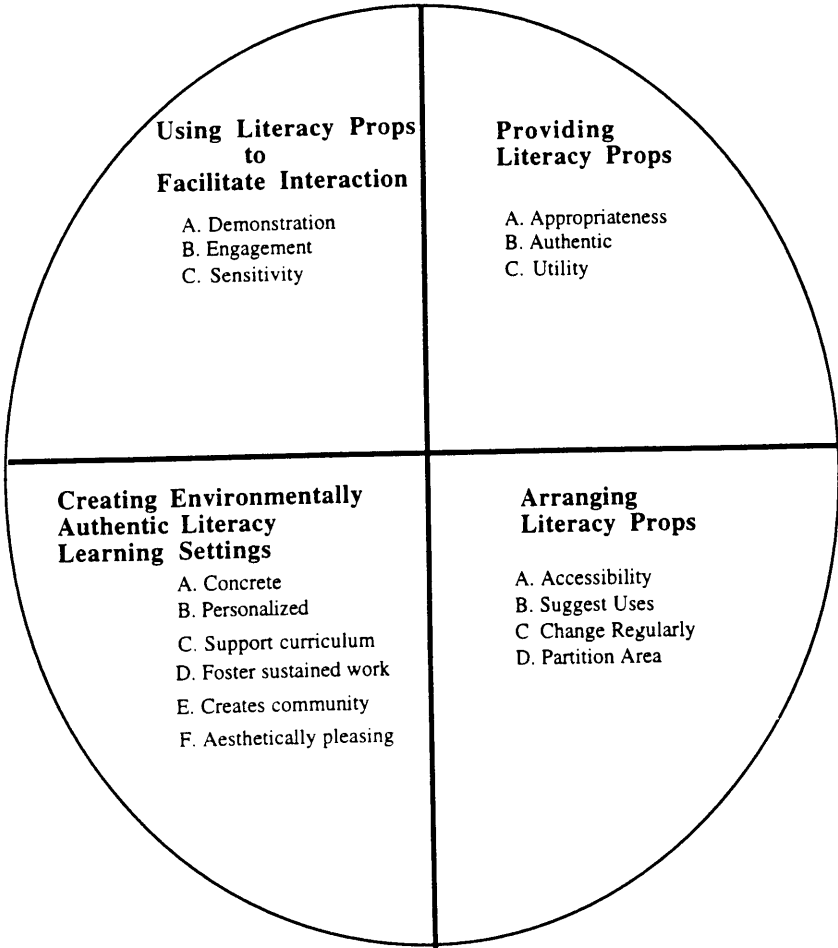
Four effective design concepts for literacy learning classrooms

Young children's literacy learning is facilitated through immersion in language- and print-rich environments (Holdaway, 1979, 1984; Reutzel and Hollingsworth, 1988;

Reutzell, Oda, and Moore, 1989; Goodman, 1986; Taylor, Blum and Logsdon, 1986). Studies of the homes of early readers and the effects of classroom design changes on children's literate behavior indicate several important concepts related to the development of classroom environments which support young children's literacy learning. Based on recent literacy environmental research, we present four basic concepts (See Figure 1) to help teachers of young children understand various aspects of the environment-behavior-learning relationships that condition and shape literacy acquisition in school classrooms where "literacy is inseparable from living" (Calkins, 1991, p. 13).

Concept 1: Children's literacy learning is affected by the presence or absence of literacy tools. Early readers and writers (children who read and/or write before formal instruction) come from homes where a wide range of printed materials, paper, and pencils are readily available (Durkin, 1966; Teale, 1978, 1980). Homes of low socio-economic early readers often contain abundant supplies of non conventional print e.g., fliers, advertisements, and scraps of paper with messages rather than books and newspapers (Taylor, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Research by Neuman and Roskos (1990, 1992) has shown that enriching play centers in school classrooms with a variety of literacy props leads to dramatic increases in literacy learning. Similarly, when children's play areas are impoverished by the lack of literacy tools, it stands to reason that opportunities for engaging in literate behaviors become limited and the classroom environment is characterized as setting deprived (Spivek, 1973).

Figure 1
Concept Model for Designing Classroom Literacy Environments



Concept 2: Children's literacy learning is affected by the arrangement of space and the placement of literacy tools within the arranged space. Clearly defined areas which provide readily accessible literacy tools increase children's demonstrations of literate behavior. The addition of a well-designed library corner to a classroom increased the number of children who used the corner voluntarily during free-choice periods (Morrow, 1982, 1989, 1990; Morrow and Weinstein, 1982, 1986). Conversely, poorly designed library corners are among the least chosen areas during free-choice periods in early childhood classrooms (Morrow and Weinstein, 1982). In the homes of early readers, literacy tools are easily accessed (in plain sight and underfoot) (Clark, 1984; Durkin, 1966; Taylor, 1983) and kept in special storage places located throughout the house (especially in the kitchen and child's bedroom) (Morrow, 1983; Teale, 1978, 1986).

Concept 3: Children's literacy learning is affected by social interaction using literacy tools. Early conventional reading is associated with interaction between the child, literacy tools and an adult or another child (Teale, 1978; Sulzby, 1985). In studies of early readers, the most frequently mentioned sources of stimulation for literate behaviors are vast displays of environmental print and an adult reading aloud to the early reader. In contrast to Freire's (1993) banking concept of education where children become passive recipients of information deposited by an all-knowing adult, early readers have been shown to acquire literacy through interactions with literacy tools in conjunction with other language users — both children and adults.

Concept 4: Children's literacy learning is affected by the authenticity of the context into which literacy tools are placed. In the homes of early readers, literacy is presented as purposeful, inviting, authentic, and associated with deep satisfaction

(Durkin, 1966; Holdaway, 1984). Neuman and Roskos (1993) suggest three primary considerations regarding how literacy props can be used to establish authentic literacy learning settings in school classrooms: 1) create clearly identifiable spatial boundaries, 2) display literacy props prominently, and 3) include personal touches. At the core of each of these recommendations is the concept of organization — organizing the classroom to inform children in concrete, authentic, developmentally appropriate, and personal ways.

Strategies for creating supportive early literacy classrooms

Based on the preceding concepts related to research and practice, we present strategies within four categories, provisioning, arranging, interacting, and authenticating, to help teachers create supportive literacy classrooms for young learners.

Provisioning literacy classrooms for young children

Fill the classroom with print. Professionally produced printed materials and children's own language products form the foundation for enriching the print examples available to young learners in classrooms. Printed materials might be selected to show classroom organization, charts and signs provide directions and schedules. Displays for lunch count, attendance, center and material use, and classroom responsibilities provide structure for daily routines. Labeling objects, storage containers, shelves and other areas of the classroom helps young children take responsibility for the maintenance and orderliness of their classroom environment.

Displays, experiments, observations, graphs, charts of familiar poems and songs, and captioned pictures and photographs are used to celebrate class or student discoveries and activities. Charts (e.g., birthday list, upper and lower case letter

formation, frequently misspelled or misused words, word banks) provide children with ready language references to support reading and writing activities. Message boards and activity centers stocked with abundant writing tools encourage young children to use print to communicate with others. Child-authored products, such as letters, notes, murals, books, or cards are displayed prominently in all areas of the classroom.

Numerous quality books which are readily accessible encourage young children to view literacy as a lifelong source of enjoyment. The young child's classroom should become a "virtual storehouse of literature" (Holdaway, 1984, p. 35). The number of books needed for young children in a classroom setting ranges from a minimum of 90 to approximately 500 books or about 4-20 books per child.

Six criteria should be considered when selecting books to enrich the literacy classroom for young children. First, teachers should select multiple copies of the same title to provide text sets for groups of children. Second, sets of related books should be selected. Books in a set might be related by topic, author, illustrator, series, or awards received. Third, a range of books varying in difficulty from three to four readability levels should be available. Fourth, a variety of genre such as picture storybooks, poetry, fairy and folk tales, fables, short stories, plays, and nonfiction should be gathered. Fifth, books with differing formats, e.g., paperbacks, hard cover, big books, wordless books, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and participation books (e.g., pop-up, lift-the-flap) should be obtained. Finally, teachers should seek to place a variety of printed materials other than story or information books into the classroom such as joke and riddle books, comic books, music books, phone books, directories, catalogues, books reflecting ethnic

and cultural diversity, and books related to television programs or movies.

Include a variety of writing utensils and surfaces. Research has demonstrated that when specific play areas (e.g., kitchen, post office, business office, or libraries) are stocked with an abundance of related literacy props, young children employ speaking, listening, reading and writing behaviors spontaneously and purposefully. In Figure 2, we provide a partial listing of literacy props suitable for suggested play centers.

Figure 2
Selected Literacy Props

Telephone books	Real telephone
Cookbook	Recipe cards
Magnetic letters	Stationery
Message Board	Food coupons
Newspapers	Calendars
Note pads	Writing instruments
Appointment books	Signs
Magazines	Books
Index cards	Business cards
Business forms	Typewriter
Computer	Clipboards
Post-it notes	Envelopes
Posters	Stamps
Paper of assorted sizes	

In addition to the crayons and pencils typically available, more creative writing utensils should be provided (e.g., chalk, highlighter and felt-tip pens, pens in a variety of colors and widths, calligraphy pens, colored pencils, fluorescent crayons). Even with access to computers, young children continue to enjoy producing print with a typewriter, lettering stencils, stick-on letters, or a set of alphabet stamps accompanied by stamp pads of various colors.

Paper, the standard writing surface, should be supplied in various sizes, shapes, types, and colors (e.g., index cards, lined and unlined paper, stationary, post cards, graph paper, post-it notes, butcher paper, chart paper). Additional types of writing surfaces may include blank books, ditto masters, magic slates, overhead transparencies, and individual or wall-mounted chalkboards and wipe-off boards.

Change literacy tools and displays of written language frequently. Literacy props and displays in classrooms designed for young children need to be changed regularly. Two weeks to one month seem to represent a reasonable time frame for planning changes. Children's written language products should be displayed two weeks or less to encourage increased production rates. At least one new book should be introduced to children daily. A balance should exist between the introduction of new books and materials and the recirculation of familiar and favorite ones.

Arranging literacy classrooms for young children

Play is a major component contributing to the development of young children's literacy. The symbolic play of preschoolers (e.g., play involving an object used in literate ways) and the oral language surrounding it are good predictors of reading and writing growth in kindergarten (Pellegrini and Galda, 1993). When preschoolers' play settings are enriched with literacy tools, the frequency, duration, and complexity of literate behaviors occurring during spontaneous free play also increase significantly (Neuman and Roskos, 1992). Taken together, these findings indicate the importance of arranging play areas in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Play areas shown to have greatest utility for fostering literate behaviors include: a kitchen, an office, a post office, a print shop, and a library. Additional settings to develop include: 1) a writing/editing/publishing area, 2) areas for individual

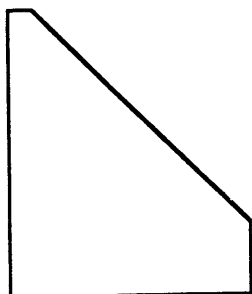
conferences and whole class or small group meetings, 3) areas to display children's written language products including windows, walls, doors and the ceiling, and 4) informational areas focusing on topics of study or interest.

Create a library corner. A well-designed library corner is the focal area of the classroom and should be highly and immediately visible, attractive, and physically accessible. The classroom library should be located in a quiet area, have adequate lighting, and be partitioned off from the rest of the room by bookshelves, file cabinets, moveable bulletin boards, and other pieces of furniture with multiple uses. Although partitioned off, the areas should be visible from any number of classroom locations by the teacher. It is helpful if the classroom library is large enough to accommodate five or more children at one time and occupies about 15% of the floor space. The library corner is named, preferably by the students, and labeled. Posters, book jackets, displays of favorite books, and items related to specific books (e.g., stuffed animals, feltboards with story characters, puppets) encourage reading. Bookcases or racks can be used to display books with both spines and covers out. Multiple copies of a single title can be shelved in cereal boxes cut at a 45 degree angle with the title of the books on the lowest cut side of the cereal box as shown in Figure 3. Furniture should create a comfortable, home-like atmosphere (e.g., a rocking or beanbag chair, pillows, throw rugs, lamps, aquarium) and be arranged so children can sit and lie in various positions.

Finally, research by Morrow and Rand (1991) has shown that the arrangement of literacy props within classroom play centers significantly increases children's literacy learning. Issues specifically related to arranging classroom literacy props for optimal effectiveness focus on two major ideas. First, literacy props should be kept in clearly marked or labeled

containers that can be easily accessed and put away. Children will not use literacy props as readily if they must ask teachers for assistance in accessing them. Likewise, teachers will not want to allow children access to materials if they must take responsibility for their clean up and storage. Second, teachers should suggest possible uses for literacy props. For example a message board may be used to post a grocery list, or take telephone messages. Used in an early childhood science activity center, a message board may be used to make a listing of materials needed to conduct an experiment, record the steps of an experiment, or make a diagram for displaying the process. In any case, suggested uses for literacy props often displayed through the use of picture or icons combined with words help young children to see the many potential uses of reading and writing as they learn.

Figure 3
Cereal Box Storage Containers for
Multiple Copy Book Sets



Side View of Cereal Box



Front View of Cereal Box

Literacy interactions invite young children to learn

Frank Smith (1988) described three interactive conditions which must be present in literacy classrooms for young children to learn successfully: 1) demonstrations, 2) engagement, and 3) sensitivity.

Demonstrations of literacy. When adults and children have access to literacy props, they demonstrate what it means to be literate and how reading and writing are done. When teachers share their favorite books such as *Poems for Laughing Out Loud* (Prelutsky, 1991) and chuckle or laugh or read *A Taste of Blackberries* (Smith, 1976) and tears stream down their cheeks, children learn that books, a literacy prop, evoke an emotional response that teachers and children can share, discuss, and ponder. When a child brings cookies from home and finds a thank you card on her desk from the teacher the following morning, she learns that cards, another literacy prop, facilitate the mutual sharing of gratitude. In each of these examples, demonstrations accomplished using various literacy props help children see the value, utility, and purposes for learning to read and write.

Engaging in literacy. When children engage in the literacy demonstrations of others or engage on their own using available literacy props, they "learn by doing." Having seen, experienced, and understood the value and power of reading and writing through demonstrations, children often choose to engage in literacy related activities themselves or with others. It is no longer enough to allow teachers the singular privilege of using literacy props. Drawing upon the demonstrations provided in the classroom environment and the available literacy props, children engage in reading books, writing notes, telling stories, recording messages, listening to poems, and writing at the board. In short, they come to explore,

experiment with, and use literacy props in ways that approximate the demonstrations they have experienced.

Children do not engage in literate acts without a belief or confidence that learning to read and write is possible. In fact, Frank Smith (1985) maintains that the major precursor of reading and writing difficulties is a belief that learning to read and write is hard, painful, or impossible. Hence student attitudes and interests frame the motivation for engagement. Literacy props, particularly a variety of these tools for reading and writing, must anticipate a broad spectrum of attitudes and interests that spark desire and press children into engaging in literacy learning. A typewriter in the corner of the room may be just what a child needs to move ahead with literacy whose handwriting is difficult to read. A telephone for talking and a notepad for taking down messages may be just the set of tools needed to influence a reluctant student to write. Literacy props influence the motivations or sensitivity of children to engage in literate behaviors in the first place. And conversely, children's engagement in literacy in the classroom affect the tone, the feel, and the available demonstrations of literate behavior for the other children in the classroom as well.

Sensitivity to literacy. It is important to understand that children do not choose to commit literate behaviors spontaneously without a degree of personal sensitivity to the literate demonstrations of others. When demonstrations are offered and invitations to engage are extended, children typically develop sensitivity to the literacy activities and props in the classroom and desire full participation. Children and teachers must understand and must constantly assess their sensitivity toward the available demonstrations and invitations to engage in the literacy environment. Taken together, literacy props affect the dynamics, existence, and the nature of young children's literacy related interactions in the classroom.

Authenticating literacy classrooms for young children

Divide the classroom into smaller activity settings. The spatial boundaries for each activity center in the classroom need to be clearly identifiable and evident to children. Classrooms for young children, as research suggests, should be broken up into smaller specific activity settings. Doing so encourages quieter classrooms, sustained engagement in literacy learning, more cooperative behaviors, and a sense of privacy to pursue personal projects.

Physical and symbolic cues can be effectively used to create the necessary definition of spatial areas. Physical cues are conveyed by the placement of semi-permanent fixtures (e.g., furniture, bookshelves, moveable bulletin boards, mirrors, artificial trees, boxes, easels, and aquariums). The arrangement of furnishings is one way of cordoning off specific activity areas in the classroom. Symbolic cues use print combined with other items to signal spatial boundaries (e.g., low hanging mobiles and signs, information or direction-giving signs, displays of books or children's written language products). Each of these objects should attract attention, teach, and inform children as they roam the room.

An important concept related to spatial divisions, displays, and storing literacy props is the concept of aggregation. This means that props are collected into a related network of materials or objects for a particular purpose. For example, when designing a classroom library area, teachers would aggregate or collect literacy props such as library books, cards, due date stamps, book marks, posters of favorite children's books, pictures of authors, and advertisements of new books. There might also be a card catalogue, a librarian's desk, a rotating wire book display rack, and a poster explaining the check out system.

Bookshelves could be labeled with section headers such as biographies, fiction, fables, folk tales, and fairy tales.

Aggregated displays and areas in the classroom could also focus on themes taken from curriculum subject areas such as science or social studies. An area could be established in the classroom that focuses on community workers. Literacy props might include student-made maps or murals of the community, commercially produced posters of various community workers, a collection of books related to community workers, and artifacts related to the responsibilities of community workers (e.g., telephone books, catalogues of postage stamps, and newspapers).

Every classroom area should enjoy a personal touch from home. Furnishings and objects provide the key to this concept. Items such as plants, bean bag chairs, pillows, children's portraits, mailboxes, message boards, galleries for art work, and mobiles for displaying the main characters in books enhance the "personal" nature of the classroom. All combined, these elements of literacy classroom design create a press for young children to engage in literacy as an ongoing and enjoyable source of learning, creating, and growing.

Literacy classroom environmental impact statement: Concluding caveats

There are many compelling reasons for using literacy props to create authentic settings for learning literacy. Literacy props properly organized can be used to extend and enrich every area of the curriculum. Because children enjoy using literacy props, they tend to remain on task for longer periods of time. They sustain attention and effort longer. As children work together in activity areas using literacy props, they develop a sense of independence in literacy as well as establishing a strong network of interdependence with their classroom

peers. And when properly designed, authentic literacy learning settings are aesthetically pleasing to children. A warm, comfortable, well-lit reading nook with the quiet bubbling sound of an aquarium has a calming and tranquilizing effect on children's behaviors. This is a place to go to think, experience quiet, and share a peaceful moment with print and peers. Thus, placing literacy props into environmentally authentic literacy learning settings provides not only an aesthetically pleasing learning environment but one indispensable to children's future growth in language and literacy.

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