4-1-1990

Reviews: Professional Materials/Books for Children

J. H. Kaufman

Cindy Overly

Camela Vossen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Part of the Education Commons

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic

REVIEWS

Professional Materials

Children's Literature in the Elementary Classroom. Peter Langford. 1989. Technomic Publishing Company, 851 New Holland Avenue, Box 3535, Lancaster, PA 17604. ISBN 0-87762-604-9. Hardcover. 171 pp. USS $29.00

Reviewed by J.H. Kaufman

How do children come to build meaning, to understand and make sense of their/our world? What is the nature of the young child's cognitive development, what patterns are revealed, what perplexities? What is the relation between thought and practical activity in children's learning? How might the insights generated through such explorations guide the practices, projects and musings of the elementary school culture? In reading Peter Langford's *Children's Thinking and Learning in the Elementary Classroom*, these questions percolated and emerged to highlight both the glimmerings and the shadows inherent in Langford's text.

Langford's thesis, synthesized in the first chapter, stems largely from his concern over the dominance Piagetian theory has had in shaping educational practice. Drawing primarily on the works of Bruner, Gagné, and Ausubel, Langford critiques both Piaget's delineation of children's stages of cognitive development, and his emphasis on practical activity and discovery as the appropriate manner through which children should be engaged in learning. Langford regards Piaget's descriptions of children's thinking as valuable, but argues that Piaget underestimates the abilities of children at each stage.

In addition, he calls for a greater focus on the role of the teacher in facilitating children's learning. His analysis here may, at best, provide an introduction to the theoretical debate shaping our understanding of how children learn; however, his analysis is narrowed by its failure adequately to address the relation between children's thought and language.

In the remaining chapters, Langford considers the implications of this critique for the teaching of reading, writing, art, science, and mathematics in the elementary school. Here again, Langford seems to have provided an overview rather than a substantive analysis of each area. His analysis turns on the understanding of expressive versus logical hierarchies. In the former, he includes reading, writing, and art and he suggests the need to build up "that level of skills which has been left weakest by previous learning" (p. 14). In the latter, he includes science and mathematics and suggests the need for teachers to develop first simpler and more basic concepts and later to use these concepts to build higher-order conceptualizations (p. 16).

In his chapter on reading, primarily centered on Goodman's psycholinguistic model, the categorization of reading as an expression hierarchy leads him to conclude that because children entering school are weakest in graphophonic skills, most emphasis in initial reading should be placed on this element (p. 29). This statement seems to disregard the current understanding of the transactional nature of reading, as well as the importance of oral language and background knowledge in beginning reading. In his chapter on writing, Langford provides an analysis of Graves' process approach to writing. He argues that Graves' approach is "excessively learner-centered" and places too much emphasis on "incidental learning." Additionally, he

finds Graves limits the purposes of writing in the classroom by his emphasis on individual story-writing and personal-interest based products of a separated writing class; here Langford seems not to recognize the interactive and dialogic nature of Graves' approach.

Langford's analysis and implications for teaching in the chapters on art, science and mathematics are more explicitly connected with the particulars and limitations of Piagetian theory. His chapter on art is perhaps the strongest. Here, Langford gets beyond specific educational theory to provide an insightful synopsis of the historical and cultural influences on art instruction. It is in the context of this chapter that the author most successfully helps the reader focus on the notion that Piaget's work, and his focus on the child, is a counter-balancing force in education's historically adult-centering. Piaget gave children a presence and with this presence, dignity. It is for this reason that we are indebted to Piaget.

Books for Children

Where Is the Bear at School? Written by Bonnie Larkin Nims; illustrated by Madelaine Gill. 1989. Albert Whitman & Co., 5747 West Howard Street, Niles, IL 60648. ISBN 0-8075-8935-7. Hardcover. 19 pp. USS $10.95.

Reviewed by Cindy Overly

Author Bonnie Larkin Nims invites young readers to help answer the question, *Where is the bear at school?* Nims' story, along with Madelaine Gill's illustrations, depicts a busy pre-school attended by boys and girls of many races, a child who uses a wheelchair, and a bear who hides in the midst of a variety of delightful school activities. Very young children

will enjoy the challenge of finding the hiding bear. Older children can participate even more by anticipating and repeating the predictable passage which asks, "where is the bear?"

The language and pictures so vividly re-create the pleasure and excitement found in a happy pre-school that when the story is over, readers will want to hear it again.

Computer Software

Story Tailor. 1989. Humanities Software, PO Box 950, 408 Columbia, Suite #209, Hood River, OR 97031.

Reviewed by Camela Vossen

Designed to teach basic reading and writing skills, Story Tailor is a series of poems, plays, and stories that can be personalized in numerous ways. A class list, as well as reading groups of up to 40 first names including gender (so that appropriate pronouns are also incorporated in the readings) can be entered. For further customization, the name of the teacher, school, town, state, a local park, and a street can be included. Once the class list has been created, the names will automatically be inserted to the selected story.

The program also has word processing capabilities so the students can rewrite the text. Additionally, frames can be inserted throughout the story, providing blank spaces for student drawings. The stories can be printed out for rereading and illustrating. Story Tailor consists of a driver program for the personalization of the texts and Story Tailor Library disks which each contain between five to twelve stories. Currently, 18 different disks are available. Ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade, 13 of them focus on the K through three

grade levels. The company plans to develop content disks in the science and history areas. The stories included on the demonstration diskette were fun to read and easy to revise. The software would be further enhanced if it included graphic images for context clues and audio capabilities.

Although the company provides a toll-free customer support line and the two representatives I talked with were friendly and helpful, it was disconcerting to be informed that some of the library disks listed in the company's catalog are not currently available. Most are scheduled for release later this year. On the positive side, the company welcomes suggestions and comments from teachers for implementation in future program upgrades.

The driver program is $60.00 for an individual copy, a backup copy, and the teacher's manual. A full use license for $199.00 allows unlimited copies within one school site and can be installed on the following networks: AppleShare, Corvus, Digicard, LAN-TECH, and Velan. The library disks are $75.00 each. The complete Story Tailor collection, the driver program and the 18 library disks, is $1,339.50. Upgrades are provided free of charge. There is also a 45 day risk-free evaluation period on any of the company's programs. The Story Tailor program requires an Apple II computer with 128K RAM, one disk drive, and a monitor. The MS-DOS version is scheduled to be released later this year.