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Holly Rivest

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Emergent Literacy Attitudes in Intermediate Elementary Grades



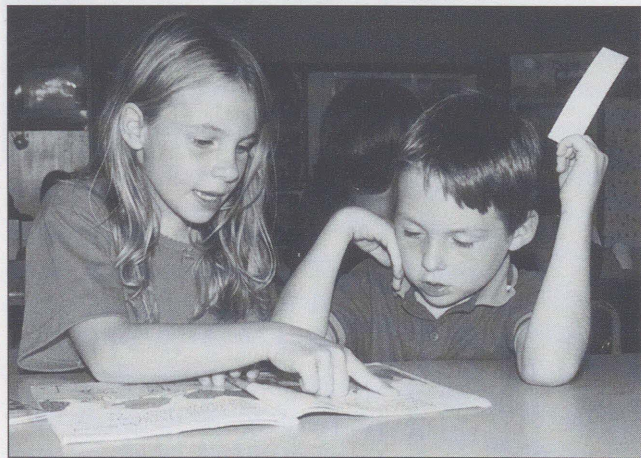
ARTICLE BY **HOLLY RIVEST**

Intermediate??? Yes! Typically, when emerging literacy is discussed or studied, most educators assume that the children involved are in preschool through first grade. In this article I examine the application of my knowledge in emergent literacy in a third grade classroom and the usefulness of using that knowledge in all intermediate grade elementary levels. Having taught pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first, second and third grades, I have observed emergent literacy in a linear fashion and have examined the struggles and accomplishments students have undergone while developing their reading proficiency prior to their induction into the intermediate grades. These experiences, as well as my tutoring background, have convinced me that emergent literacy should be taken seriously after children have become literate.

I have discovered that my teaching style is based on my attitude about emergent literacy, largely shaped by an interest that grew while teaching young

children, with the help of some terrific mentors who stirred excitement, wonder and awe of children's development. Is the same attitude toward learning and teaching necessary *after* children have "learned to read"? Would it be helpful for all elementary teachers to be aware of the implications that language stories tell with respect to the natural emergence of literacy? The "whole language" or whole learning concept depends on this attitude. "Teachers who are guided by a whole language framework set expectations based upon our theoretical knowledge, and we encourage learners to impose increasingly demanding expectations for themselves" (Newman, 1992). The theoretical knowledge of whole language philosophy parallels in many ways the theoretical knowledge of emergent literacy because insights into these learning theories are comparable. It is through inquiries that "teachers create a theoretically based curriculum" (Watson, 1994).

Language stories, the recording and



Third-grader Ericka Jakeway reads to 6-year-old Jesse Wellman. Both are students at Sheridan Elementary in Petoskey, Michigan.

analyzing of what children do with language in any type of setting, are avenues for a child to teach you what they know or need to know about literacy. For example, a child in a pretend-reading stage may begin every book with "Once upon a time" This would tell you that the child has probably had many experiences with print and knows how to begin telling a story. Tutoring sessions can be the perfect settings for in-depth language stories, but they are equally exciting to capture in the classroom. Taking the time to analyze language stories is a fascinating tool for watching literacy emerge in all stages of development. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (National Academy of Education Commission on Reading, 1985) suggests that we "estimate where each student is and build on that base." If we do not take the time and effort to learn from the child, to be observant and aware of the implications of language stories, experiences, and strategies used, our teaching becomes less effective and inefficient. Teachers do not have time to be inefficient!

What we now know about emerging literacy is "brain-compatible" and closely correlates with Susan Kovalik's model for Integrated Thematic Instruction (1992). This model can be drawn upon as part of our theoretical knowledge while making decisions about instruction after analyzing language stories. Susan Kovalik's model is not limited to young children.

A child's development is directly related to learning. A child's experiences with print before formal schooling are foundations to build reading upon. Since learning is continual throughout life, we are always *emerging* into something new. Therefore, emergent literacy is always happening; that foundations continue to be built upon. It broadens and is constantly reorganized. Children must be viewed seriously as teachers as well

as students, and teachers must always be willing to learn as well as to teach. "As children discover the world around them, they come to understand how they can use literacy to make sense of things and communicate their understanding to others. Teachers are the beneficiaries of this communication" (Fallon, 1994).

Portfolios give teachers that base on which to build. They reinforce the concept that children already know a great deal. They can be valuable tools that demonstrate the belief in building on a base for each student. Portfolios are a way to continually evaluate the progress of the individual, using not only what they have learned but how they have learned it (Newman, 1992).

By the time children reach third grade, they are often considered "readers" who need to be fine-tuned. I believe the children have grown into, or have naturally emerged into, literate young people because they were provided with the learning experiences they needed. This runs counter to the traditional view that children have learned to read because they have been taught how to read. If we take into consideration the fact that letters are symbols that stand for sounds, just as a red octagon on a street corner is a symbol for "stop," we can conclude that in all actuality, most children have been "reading" well before formal schooling begins. How old do you have to be to recognize the yellow "golden arches" which stands for "McDonald's"? Recognition of that symbol uses the same process as recognizing the symbol-sound relationship of letters. Since I hold the attitude that preschoolers can read, I do not consider third graders new readers. Individual students have brought to third, fourth, or fifth grade an abundance of background knowledge, never to be duplicated by another. As a teacher, I cannot efficiently teach a child how to improve reading skills without giving the child the oppor-

tunity to teach me what he or she already knows about reading.

Teaching reading strategies to children who are good readers is easy. They already possess and use many strategies, although they are often unaware of doing so. Children who struggle to keep up with peers during reading instruction often have poor attitudes about reading; therefore, they make the teaching and learning process somewhat more difficult. This is where a philosophy "that literacy emerges" comfortably meshes with reading instruction at the intermediate grade levels. An understanding of emergent literacy depends upon an attitude, and a student with a poor attitude in reading is desperately looking for a teacher who seeks to understand why he is reading the way that he does. A reading attitude survey is a good place to start. There are many available that are excellent. One of my favorites is published in *The Reading Teacher* (McKenna, Kear, 1990).

More and more, educators are becoming excited about the "whole language" attitude. Instructional implications grow out of a definition of reading adopted by the Michigan State Board of Education: "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation" (Michigan Department of Education). This definition applies to all readers young and old, experienced and inexperienced.

In conclusion, it is apparent to me as a classroom teacher that literacy is always emerging. We are all emerging readers building from a base throughout our lives. The more a person reads, the more that person's schemata are adjusted; therefore, it does not matter whether students are three or fifteen years of age, they should all be considered learners who have foundations to build upon.

Using that foundation effectively depends on being both teacher and learner. Students can always be encouraged to emerge further as literate members of society. It is the attitude that teachers acquire that makes the difference between a child naturally learning to read in the right environment and a child being taught how to read.

"Everyone in a dynamic learning environment is both a teacher and a learner" (Fallon, 1994). We can, as educators and parents, use this information, along with language stories that we have come across personally, to learn strategies for improving instruction. It is well worth an educator's time to know the intricate workings of reading acquisition in the early stages. Attention must be given to the natural language stories of children so that we capitalize on their natural yearning to read. With a focus on emergent literacy, the "whole language" approach comes very easily and is certainly an exciting prospect for today's schools and tomorrow's future in both primary and intermediate elementary classrooms.

Holly Rivest teaches third grade in the Petosky area. Turning research into reality is an important part of her teaching.

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