

The Dispositions to Write and Read

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Introduction

The goal of becoming literate is acknowledged and accepted by all in the United States and around the world. Yet the strategies by which to achieve this goal and the age at which it should be reached are both matters of constant dispute. As disagreements continue about the best age to begin the process of becoming literate and about the right methods to employ, some important issues are overlooked. In particular, issues of motivation and dispositions frequently get lost in the fray. Good project work addresses both of these issues, as can be seen in the summaries of projects included in this catalog.

Motivation and Engagement

There are many ways to approach the topic of motivation (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996). Much recent research has adopted the term *engagement*, which refers to “active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions with the social and physical environments” (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, p. 149). The concept of engagement becomes clearer by contrasting it with what Furrer and Skinner refer to as patterns of disaffection in which individuals are “alienated, apathetic, rebellious, frightened, or burned out” (p. 149). Projects in which children investigate topics of interest or concern to them typically engender high levels of engagement, as is clear in the projects described in the pages that follow.

The use of early preliteracy skills, particularly in the form of writing or dictating to others with the intention to have messages written, are clear in the Stringed Instrument Project, when the child dictated the sign “It’s about guitars, cellos, and bass,” and in the McDonald’s Project, when children painted a sign for the McDonald’s restaurant. In these as well as each of the other

projects, children take an active role as they use writing with a purpose that is quite clear to them.

It is interesting to note parents’ awareness of the children’s engagement and motivation. The parents of the children in Harkema and Lanenga’s project on snakes noted “their children’s excitement, depth of focus, increased love of learning, [and] eagerness to do research”—indications of high levels of engagement.

Skills and the Disposition to Apply Them

Writing and reading both consist of a wide variety of skills. However, the overall goal of literacy is not limited simply to the acquisition of skills alone; it includes the acquisition of the disposition to be a writer and reader. There are at least two reasons to emphasize the distinctions between the acquisition of skills and the dispositions to use them. The first is that both writing and reading improve with use—not only in the form of exercises, practice, and drills—but in the purposeful application of these skills. These purposes are evident to the children themselves. The more the skills are used, the more proficient the children become, and the more likely they are to acquire strong dispositions to become writers and readers.

The second reason why the distinction between having skills and having the disposition to use them is important is because it reminds us of the risk of introducing the skills in ways that could damage the dispositions to use them. Not all children are ready at the same age to learn to write and read. Judgment about individual children’s readiness to acquire these complex literacy skills in ways that will not endanger their dispositions to use them, but on the contrary will support them, are part of the complexity of teaching young children. As can be seen in the description of the projects

reported here, project work provides opportunities for individual children to take on different kinds of responsibilities in the work undertaken; those ready to write can do so; they can help others not quite at the same place in skillfulness. The children can also use books to find ideas and information related to their projects. The 4-year-olds in the Egg Project used many books to deepen their understanding of birds and eggs. Books also enabled the 5- and 6-year-olds in the Bird Project to discover that the bird that flew over them on their outings was a hawk and not an eagle. Even the 2-year-olds “used factual books” as part of their investigation of butterflies—a nice early beginning of the disposition to be readers! The emphasis here is on their “use” of books rather than on instruction or drill in discrete bits of information about sounds and letters.

An Active versus Passive Role of the Children

Finally, another contribution of good project work is that it is the part of the early childhood curriculum in which children take an *active* rather than *passive-receptive* role in the learning experiences provided for them. The importance of the active role is one reason why it seems best to begin children’s literacy development by encouraging them to write before worrying about teaching them to read.

The 4-year-olds in the Salt Truck Project made lists of those invited to see their work, and they wrote the invitations. The 5-year-olds in the Greenhouse Project dictated the material to be included in their book about the life cycle of plants. The 5- and 6-year-olds who developed the Fashions, Beauty, and Barber Shop were “inspired to write about the shop in their journals.” The second-graders who studied their community represented their new knowledge in a wide variety of ways. In a study of worms, a mixed-age group applied their dispositions to measure, count, as well as write about worms. In another school setting, 4-year-olds studied where their clothes came from and as part of the project filled out clothing orders for the newly established department store in their classroom.

These activities are all examples of the active roles young children are motivated to take in the course

of good projects. In these ways, children can strengthen their developing dispositions to be writers and readers for the rest of their lives.

References

- Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of relatedness as a factor in children’s academic engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(1), 148-162.
- Greeno, J. G., Collins, A. M., & Resnick, L. B. (1996). Cognition and learning. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 15-46). New York: Simon & Schuster.