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Building an early reading process: Active from the start!

What do young children do as readers and writers? How can teachers become better observers of children's actions in order to foster literacy development?

As Peter entered the door of his kindergarten classroom, he could see his photograph and his name on Mrs. Prime's door, along with pictures of his teacher and his classmates.

"My name is the same as Mrs. Prime. *Peter* and *Prime* are the same," he commented.

Sam chimed in, "Mine is the same, too. *Sam* and *Prime*," pointing to the *m* in Mrs. Prime's name on the door.

The two young boys went to their cubbies to place their snacks, noticing their names once again, and then proceeded to view their painted wall mural of *The Three Bears*.

"There's my bear," said Peter, as he pointed and read the words *Father Bear* written on the paper strip below.

Then Sam took a wooden pointer and read, "*Mother Bear, Baby Bear.*"

The boys proceeded to the rug to begin their morning routine of independent reading. They could be seen rereading simple little books the teacher had introduced to them in recent days. Peter chose the book *My School* and began to read, placing his finger under each word as he moved his eyes left to right across each page. "See the teacher. See my friend." He quickly returned to the beginning of the previous page to correct himself, this time reading "See *my* teacher. See my friend."

As a "noticing" teacher, Mrs. Prime can observe that Peter and Sam are actively attending to and processing print. These beginning readers are attending to details, engaging with text, and sometimes working out what is familiar yet not firmly known until they are satisfied with their response.

Peter and Sam are active participants in their own literacy development. They are actively building theories and testing hypotheses as they go (Clay, 1991, 1993b; Holdaway, 1979; Morrow, 1997; Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994). However, children who become passive in their confusions often fail to progress in reading (Johnston & Winograd, 1985). Therefore, early interactions with children are needed to make active learners out of passive ones.

Children need opportunities to develop actions that are productive as they begin to build an early reading and writing process. These opportunities put children in control of what they know—even if it seems to be very little at first.

One purpose of this article is to consider what children *do* when they actively engage in reading and writing tasks. A second purpose is to explore ways to foster active processing behaviors in children. A third purpose supports the second: to consider how we can become better observers of children's actions in order to foster active processing.

To actively engage in the reading process, children must use all the sources of informa-

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tion available to them (Clay, 1991; Goodman, 1994). These sources may include the meaning of the story, the pictures, the language structures, the vocabulary, and the print in all of its detail, such as layout, spacing, letter patterns, punctuation, and other visual features.

Consider the information that Peter and Sam used. They linked information about letters in words, relating their actions to experiences with their own names and their teacher's name. They used information from the pictures and corresponding printed captions in their mural contributions. Peter showed his control of directionality and word matching as he pointed while reading a familiar text. He also possibly used several sources of information from the text to change *the* to *my* when reading one of his stories. He became an active problem solver.

Because the processes involved in reading and in writing are interrelated (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991), both processes receive attention in this article. What is learned in one process makes it easier to actively engage in the other. "Through writing, children are manipulating and using symbols, and in the process learning how written language works" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 15).

In addition to creating a message, children actively seek solutions to problems they encounter while writing their messages. For example, children may need to analyze a new word by hearing and recording the sounds in the word (Bissex, 1980; Clay, 1991; Ehri, 1979; Elkonin, 1973). Or they may need to use parts of known words to help in writing new words (Clay, 1991; Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Treiman, 1992).

Three important early actions for children

> Be careful not to establish a pattern where the child waits for the teacher to do the work. This is the point at which the child must learn that he must work at a difficulty, take some initiative, make some links. (Clay, 1993b, p. 40)

Just as Peter and Sam demonstrated these early actions, *all* children must learn to work at a difficulty, take some initiative, and make some links with what they already know. Engaging in these actions from the beginning of literacy learning is important.

Instructional interactions in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms during small-group guided reading sessions and during individual student-teacher conferences are used in this article to further illustrate these actions. In a guided reading lesson the teacher works with a small group of children who are able to read at a similar level of text, supporting each reader's development of effective strategies for reading new texts at increasing levels of difficulty (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Examples are also taken from one-to-one tutorial sessions

Children actively seek solutions to problems they encounter while writing their messages. Photo by Robert Finken

with first graders in the Reading Recovery program. In most cases, the examples are verbatim excerpts from actual interactions; some are modified to conserve space.

Action 1: Work at the point of difficulty. The expectation that children need to work at the point of difficulty must be established early. The teacher can convey this general principle by using appropriate tasks within the child's reach and by offering support for problem solving as needed. In the following example, the child has made a meaning-altering error that the teacher knows he can work out. The teacher illustrates the principle of working at the point of difficulty.

Young children are experimenters who are trying out many pieces of the literacy puzzle.

T: O-o-o-o. Wasn't quite right, was it?
C: (Child reads page correctly.)
T: Were you right that time?
C: (Child nods.)
T: What are you going to do when you know it's not right?
C: I'm going to do it all over again.
T: Yes. Without me saying anything. When you know by yourself, I'm not going to tell you.

In another example, the child has finished writing a sentence and is asking for the teacher to help with the appropriate end punctuation.

C: A period?
T: *You* read it and decide how it should end.
C: (Child writes an *!* and rereads the sentence with emphasis.)
T: Yes! That's how it should sound!

The goal is a reader or writer who is actively *working*. The work should not be too hard. In fact, when it is not too hard, the reader can proceed more efficiently and learn more about the process. When texts or tasks are too hard, the child will be less active and require more support from the teacher, thus taking the control away from the child.

Young children, then, are experimenters who are trying out many pieces of the literacy puzzle. They will work intensely in reading and writing tasks if they know they can ask for help and if they know they do not need to do a perfect job (McGee & Richgels, 1996).

Action 2: Take some initiative. Children must be encouraged to actively respond from the start, even if the teacher does not expect a solution to the problem. What is important here is that children are engaged in the process and understand that they can do *something* without passively waiting. Again, the teacher needs to provide opportunities for this initiative by choosing tasks and texts within the child's reach and confirming the child's efforts at taking the initiative to solve problems.

In the example below, the teacher calls for *some* initiating action even when telling the child an unknown word during text reading. The child has stopped at the unknown word *barked* and appealed for help.

T: Could it be *barked*? Would it begin with a *b* like in your name…Brandon?
C: Yes.

Teachers can also confirm children's initiative as shown in this writing example.

T: I like how you fixed that up after you realized that you had left off the *ing* at the end of that word.

In this example, the teacher challenges the child to initiate meaningful text reading. Support is provided to facilitate the child's initiating actions.

T: What would make sense?
C: (no response)
T: Look at the picture. Will that help you?
C: (read the text successfully)

In another example, the teacher challenges the child to consider the meaning of the entire story to initiate action when reading: "Think about what would make sense here. Are they going to want another bowl of ice cream—after all those bowls?"

Action 3: Make some links. When something is completely new, it requires greater effort to learn. However, if the new item can be related to something already known, it is much easier to learn. Recall how Peter and Sam both initiated a link from their names to Mrs. Prime's name.