

Our Children: Are Public Schools Giving Them a Fair Shake?



Angela Valenzuela

Linda McNeil

Elnora Harcombe

**Creekmore Memorial Symposium: Monday, April 22, 2002, 4:30 p.m.
Grand Hall, Ley Student Center, Rice University**

Research from the Center for Education is shaping the national debate on the issues most critical to educating our children: Latino children's education, standardized testing, and the quality of urban teachers. Nationally-acclaimed authors, Angela Valenzuela, Linda McNeil and Elnora Harcombe will address the diverse challenges confronting children in public education and offer positive approaches to overcoming them at the upcoming Hazel G. Creekmore Memorial Symposium on Monday, April 22, 2002. A book signing and reception will follow the symposium.

Recipient of the Outstanding Book Award for 2000 from the American Educational Research Association, Angela Valenzuela will discuss how schools can actually subtract from children's academic achievement. Based on her celebrated book, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S. Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (SUNY Press, 1999), Dr. Valenzuela will show how forms of schooling can undervalue Latino students' culture and language and are detrimental to learning. Dr. Valenzuela conducted her research at the Center for Education and is currently associate professor of education and Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Featured on "60 Minutes" and PBS's News Hour with Jim Lehrer, Linda McNeil will speak about how high-

stakes testing drives many students out of school and reduces the quality of education for those who remain. Based on more than 15 years of research in Texas schools, her book, *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing* (Routledge, 2000), has garnered national media attention. Dr. McNeil is professor of education at Rice University and codirector of the Center for Education. She has taught at Harvard Graduate School of Education and is the editor of the Social and Institutional Analysis section of the *American Educational Research Journal*.

Elnora Harcombe will show how powerful teaching and learning occur in classrooms where teachers are passionate about their subject and communicate deep knowledge of their subject matters and students. Her widely-regarded *Science Teaching/Science Learning* (Teachers College Press, 2001) is based on her work at the Center for Education's Model Science Lab, where she has been director since its inception in 1988. Dr. Harcombe holds a Ph.D. in neurophysiology from Yale University and has conducted research on small neural networks. The Model Science Lab has received the Exemplary Partnership Award presented by the Texas Alliance for Science, Technology, and Mathematics Education.

Powerful Learning: Instruction at the Center

by Linda McNeil, Codirector, Center for Education

The Center for Education gives teachers a chance to learn. Every year, more than 1,500 teachers participate in our teacher development projects. What happens in their classrooms? How is their teaching transformed? How does teacher learning translate into powerful learning for children? This issue of CenterPiece shows the power of informed, inspired teaching - by teachers we have supported in the study of their craft and have encouraged to listen to children.

What's Inside

- *Teaching in TEAMS: Authentic Mentoring Strategies for Science Teachers* p. 2
- *Teachers Learn to Question in the Model Science Lab* p. 3
- *Classroom Storytelling Project: The Power of Young Children's Stories* p. 4
- *Cultural Conversations Transforms Teachers and Their Classrooms* p. 6
- *Teachers Learn to Listen in the School Writing Project* p. 7
- *New Video Projects at the Center* p. 8
- *Teachers Learn to View the World from a Different Perspective in East Asia Institute* p. 8
- *What Mothers Really Know About Literacy Learning* p. 9
- *Upcoming Events* p. 16

Teaching in TEAMS: Authentic Mentoring Strategies for Science Teachers

by Wallace Dominey, Project Director, School Science Project

The vast majority of teachers do not observe other teachers teach. Without such observation and feedback, it is difficult to assess and improve one's teaching practice. Teachers are seldom given the time and opportunity for such assessments.

Collaborative reflection, such as occurs in TEAMS, serves to support the community of learners in schools and to improve instruction.

The Rice University School Science Project has initiated a new program, TEAMS (Teachers Engaged in Authentic Mentoring Strategies) to provide that connection. An expansion of the Rice/ Aldine Science Collaborative (RASC), TEAMS pairs more experienced teachers with less experienced teachers to the benefit of both. Each nine weeks, the mentor teachers observe the team members

teach and the team members observe the more experienced colleagues teach. Prior to these observation periods, the teachers meet to discuss the educational goals, activities, and focus of the observed lesson. Data is collected by the observer and shared with the instructor during a post-observation conference.

Collaborative reflection, such as occurs in TEAMS, serves to support the community of learners in



Sharon Kennedy, a 2nd grade teacher at Ermel Elementary in Aldine ISD, and her students conduct an experiment about the water cycle and cloud formation.



Alejandro Martinez, 3rd grade teacher at Ermel Elementary in Aldine ISD, redesigned an experiment about density after feedback from his TEAMS mentor indicated students did not grasp his original lesson.

schools and to improve instruction. The value of a program like TEAMS is that the professional development comes from within the schools and from the teachers themselves. This sort of collaboration and reflection is a highly desirable approach to changing teacher practice.

Although TEAMS has only been in existence for a few months, there is a sense among the TEAMS teachers that they are gaining and sharing knowledge and forming a community of learners. Sharon Kennedy, 2nd grade teacher at Ermel Elementary, puts it this way

"I think of ants that collect seeds; by winter they have collected enough seeds to survive and to share with other ants. This is just what the TEAMS program is doing. Teachers are sharing knowledge with other teachers and with students, knowledge that can be shared with others. If TEAMS happened district wide, our students would be able to pass any assessment at any grade level."

Alejandro Martinez, a 3rd grade teacher also at Ermel Elementary notes that

"Being observed while teaching can bring deeper understanding of how teaching methods can impact students. A recent classroom experience emphasized this for me. I was being observed while teaching the concept of density to my third grade class. I repeatedly asked my students to 'measure out exactly 15 ml of substance (water, oil, syrup, or liquid soap), then compare their densities.' Although I never intended it, my students developed a misconception that the AMOUNT of a substance would affect its density since I repeatedly asked my students to measure out exactly the same amount of each substance. My students came to believe that MORE of a substance would make it less dense and LESS of a substance would make it more dense."

continued on page ten



Teachers Learn to Question in Ways that Stimulate Students' Thinking in the Model Science Lab

By Elnora Harcombe, Project Director, Model Science Lab

Reprinted with permission from *Science Teaching/Science Learning* (Teachers College Press, 2001)

Asking "What If" Questions

Learning to question in ways that stimulated students' thinking, rather than closing it off, became important to the teachers [during their year at the Model Science Lab]. Teachers were accustomed to eliciting a certain correct answer and moving on to another question. They came to see that such limited recitation questions proved only how well the student could memorize or guess. Probing questions and "what if" questions were modeled frequently in both the pedagogy class and science class. For example, the teachers were asked: (1) What would happen to the seasons if the axis of the earth were vertical; or if it were tipped 10° further? (2) Why would a baby need surgery if it were born with the aorta and pulmonary artery connected in each other's place? (3) What else could be done to correct the situation when the aorta and pulmonary artery could not be switched back to their proper locations? An example of questioning strategies and creative use of a discrepant event was provided by Model Lab teacher Shannon Weigel. Even 4 years after her training in the Model Lab, she still continued to improve her questioning skills. She began this school year with the discrepant event of putting a burning paper in a bottle, setting an inflated balloon on the mouth, and watching the balloon move into the bottle. She wrote the following report about the first 3 days with her seventh-grade class:

I was particularly excited about teaching a unit about air pressure. The kids were amazed that they got to "use dangerous stuff" (matches) the very first day! Imagine their frustration when I challenged them to determine how the balloon got into the jar, and then wouldn't give them the answer!

One group said, "It's the fire, it must be the fire!"

So I asked, "Is it possible to get the balloon in the jar without fire?"

I was secretly delighted when met with a resounding "NO!" I picked up the biggest balloon I could find and turned my back to the audience.

Taking a straw from my pocket, I slipped the balloon easily into the jar, replaced the straw in my pocket and turned around. The kids were amazed. No amount of pushing or pulling could get the balloon out of the jar. Hoping to give them a hint and advance them in the right direction, I used the straw in my pocket to blow the balloon out of the jar. When asked again, the children all believed that the balloon could get into the jar without fire.

Another group of children hypothesized that it must be gravity that sooner or later it must have pulled hard enough for the balloon to go in the jar. So, I set one jar on the table with a balloon on it and left it there for gravity to act. I took another jar and lit the paper, placing it in the bottom of the jar, set the balloon on top, and as soon as I could feel the suction, I inverted the system – apparently defying gravity! The kids all agreed it must not be a gravity problem after all.

Science Teaching/Science Learning explores the successes and struggles of middle school science teachers in Houston during the first ten years of the Rice/HISD Model Science Laboratory Project. Each year eight teachers were chosen to participate in an intense residency program conducted at Lanier Middle School where they worked together to develop greater effectiveness in motivating urban students and in guiding these students to construct deeper understandings of science concepts. The teachers alternated between teaching one class of students and being students themselves: enhancing their science content, awareness of national curricula, knowledge of different teaching approaches; use of technology in the classroom, familiarity with alternative assessment, methodology for elucidating student perceptions, and connections to the community.

Science Teaching/Science Learning utilizes many excerpts from journals and portfolios written by teachers to authentically document the transformations of the teachers as they moved from fairly traditional practices to more child-centered styles involving inquiry, critical thinking, experimental design, problem solving, and teacher as guide. The successes of the teachers are celebrated (including strong increases on math TAAS by their science students), and a plea is made for similar professional development opportunities for additional grade levels, fields, and locations.

Science Teaching/Science Learning is available from Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027.

Continued on page ten



The Classroom Storytelling Project: The Power of Young Children's Stories

by Bernie Mathes, Project Director, School Literacy & Culture Project

Children telling stories; children acting out stories. Such are the simple acts that form the basis of the Classroom Storytelling Project, a year-long professional development program offered by the School Literacy and Culture Project. For 14 years teachers in the greater Houston area have been learning to use Vivian Paley's storytelling and story acting activities to further the literacy and social growth of the young children in their classrooms. When it was founded by Patsy Cooper, who worked with Paley in Chicago, the School Literacy and Culture Project worked with two teachers. Now, more than a decade later, over 60 teachers each year participate, each welcoming a Mentor Teacher to their classroom every other week and attending monthly literacy seminars. Teachers learn how and why to write down children's dictated stories; they learn how to implement many research-based early literacy activities; they learn to listen to and know their students. Below are reflections from a cross-section of the teachers currently working with the Classroom Storytelling Project: two Mentor Teachers and a teacher in her training year. They speak of the reading and writing skills their students achieve. They describe the sense of classroom community the Storytelling Project fosters. And they reflect on their own professional growth.



DeeDee Kibodeaux is a bilingual prekindergarten teacher at Metcalf Elementary in CyFair ISD. She has taught pre-k through second grade and has been involved with the Classroom Storytelling Project for eight years as a Resident Teacher and Mentor Teacher.

Dee Dee Kibodeaux 'The Storytelling Lady is Here.'

I was a typical prekindergarten teacher. My students sang, danced, painted, played, and of course, I never ended the day without reading a story. Occasionally, I would act out a story and use puppets. It was a happy class.

Then, I was chosen to be a Resident Teacher in the Classroom Storytelling Project. I thought to myself, "This will be easy. I love to tell stories." Little did I know what was in store for me. I was to take story dictations from my students every day. No longer was I in the spotlight. Instead, my students were the stars and I was their director. I immediately saw a transformation of my class. My students were active and independent learners. The pocket charts with songs, alphabet charts, calendar (anything on the wall with print) were read by the kids. They chose to read and write because it was a reflection of the passion their teacher demonstrated. I was taught to reflect about what should be posted on my walls. Instead of putting really cute stuff up, I NOW was putting up work that reflected a purpose for learning. As the year progressed, I had teachers asking me how could it be that my students could do this level of work. They asked the principal to come and watch me teach.

My relationship grew with each of the students, and I no longer taught topics that were meaningless to them. My lessons were planned around their interests. I knew that their families and what they did on a daily basis were important, but I never really talked or listened until their story dictations. As I listened and gave those children time to tell their story, I felt so honored that they were letting me get to know them. We had our little community of learners in my classroom. Through these precious stories, the children learned that there were many similarities among them, a true sense of understanding and a connection of real life seen in writing. Then, their stories came to life. My students dramatized their stories. As each scene of their story was enacted, they just glowed with happiness and pride.

continued on page eleven



Flora Henry Smith Stories Help Create a Sense of Community in the Classroom

At the beginning of the year, the children were afraid of me because I was not like them. I'm Black and they're all Hispanic, except for one. When they first saw me, they said, 'She's Black, she's Black.' Everyone was new and was crying. The children's stories were a way of breaking the ice. My taking stories with each of them gave me an opportunity to spend time with them. They became more comfortable with me. And now we are so close. That's the best part.

They just like telling stories. It pleases them; it makes them happy. They love stories. It's like one big family. Before everyone kept to themselves. Now they mingle and talk about stories. Their social skills have improved. Before, we had hitters. By using words, by talking with the stories, I think that helped. There was a little boy who always hit. Now Estevan talks. He'll express himself. Even though he still has some problems, it's a drastic change from where he was.

We also ask children to tell their news, and we write it down for them. We usually do it around circle time after lunch. There are just some things kids want their classmates to know about. When one child talks about something, like chocolate candy, everyone talks about chocolate candy. It is fun to see the community of children interact. The sense of community is so strong in my classes since I've been using stories.

Every prekindergarten teacher needs to be trained in the Storytelling Project. It's wonderful. Children learn faster. It's a great social type of project. It bonds everybody together.



Flora Henry Smith is a Head Start teacher with Neighborhood Centers, Inc. and teaches at Crockett Elementary School. She has been an early childhood educator for ten years, working for Head Start and in the Fifth Ward to promote parenting skills.

Joan Katrib 'Teaching Came to Life' Through the Classroom Storytelling Project

"Everybody has a story. Look for that.... (story)" says early childhood teacher Joan Katrib. When she first started teaching, she paid careful attention to the curriculum; counting, writing, graphing. Then she became a Resident Teacher in the Classroom Storytelling Project. Working with her mentor teacher, she learned to script the children's dictated stories. At first she just got their words down on paper. In time she began to hear each individual child in his story. Joan thinks that's when "My teaching came to life."

She could customize her interactions with the children to their needs and interests. When she writes news that children share, she can discuss hypotheses that explain real life events that they report. She can count words, graph opinions, demonstrate writing that is real communication

between people. "I can teach anything with the stories - math, science, anything," she reports. "But beyond that, when you seek diligently to understand a child's words, you know how to relate to the whole child". Now she pays attention to what's best for the child.



Joan Katrib teaches three-year olds at St. Luke's Methodist Day School, and has been a Mentor with the Classroom Storytelling Project for eight years.

There is enthusiasm and joy in Joan's voice as she talks about her students' stories with other teachers in the Storytelling Project. Joan questions what each child means to say; she studies current research on development and education; and she asks critical questions. Besides leading her to encourage the children to ask critical questions, these collaborative meetings have led Joan to explore her own story. She has returned to school to further her own education. She has become a valuable Mentor to other teachers who seek to understand what each child has to tell. Joan has gone way beyond the curriculum, or maybe deeper into the curriculum. She has gone to bigger and better places, not only for herself but for the little children in her class.

By Judy Rolke, Codirector, School Literacy & Culture Project



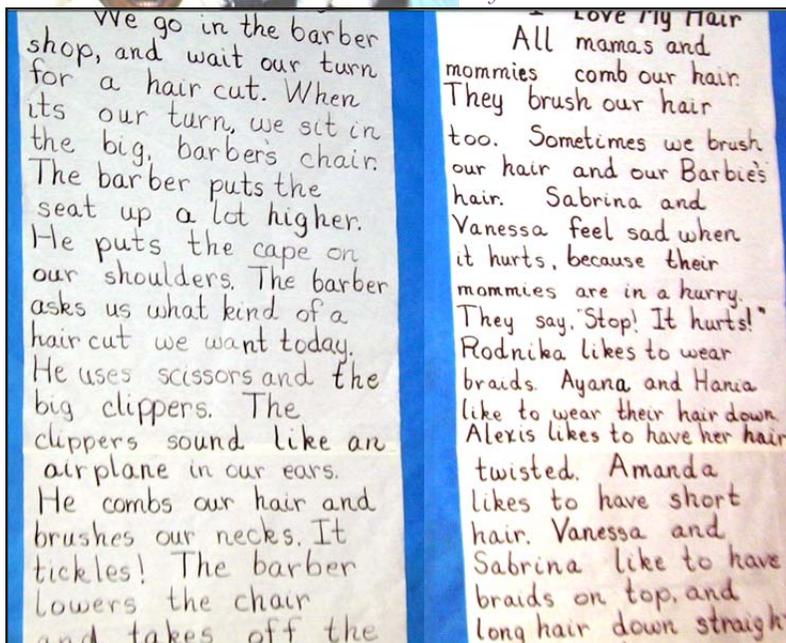
Cathy Morris, a pre-kindergarten teacher at Kennedy Elementary in Alief ISD, feels she has become a more active listener and has learned more about her culturally diverse students as a result of Cultural Conversations. When she overheard her boy students talking about hair, she created a literacy lesson using *Bippity Bop Barbershop* and *I Love my Hair*, both by Natasha Tarpley. Below are the stories as retold by Ms. Morris' boy students (story on left) and girl students (story on right) and transcribed by her.

Cultural Conversations Project Transforms Teachers and Their Classrooms

by Connie Floyd, Director, Cultural Conversations

For many teachers, the Cultural Conversations Project has been the vehicle for acquiring new experiences that inform and transform them and their classrooms. Cultural Conversations has helped these teachers and others in the school think about how race, culture and ethnicity impact teaching and learning.

Understandably so, because in the Cultural Conversations seminars, we ask them to examine their own biases, to think and learn more about the students in their schools, and to reflect on their classroom practices. We put research on diverse learners into teachers' hands. We discuss strategies and tools other teachers have found successful in their classrooms of diverse learners. We give them time to discuss with each other what they notice about their students. We encourage them to share this knowledge and weigh



what is working against what is not. We don't give them a cookie cutter curriculum that would suddenly make teaching multicultural populations less challenging. All students, teachers, and school settings are different, and what works with one set of students may not work with another.

A commonality we have found in interviewing past participants is that most teachers build upon their existing curriculum and teaching practices. They do what we hoped they would do, take the seeds of ideas planted in the seminar and grow new ideas they put into practice in their work with students. Some of these new ideas may seem small in the overall picture of a school culture but

probably not to the parents, students, and teachers.

The use of multicultural literature for children and young adults, as well as personal stories in classrooms, have become routine activities in our schools. Rudine Sims Bishop, education professor and multiculturalist, sees dual roles for multicultural literature: a window or a mirror. A student may see himself reflected on the pages of a story as in a mirror, and be affirmed. Or he might have the opportunity to glimpse another's world as through a window, and be informed. Louise Derman Sparks, early childhood educator, believes that good multicultural literature can benefit all the students in a classroom by

continued on page twelve



Teachers Learn to Listen in the School Writing Project

By Gastonia (Terri) Pumarejo-Goodman, Project Director, School Writing Project

My daughter Emma never cries. She takes things in stride and is always the first to offer a judicious opinion on any supposed slight with "I'm sure that it was not intentional." This is particularly true at school, where perhaps because her mother is a teacher, she understands the pressures of overcrowded classrooms and the anonymity that often accompanies being in a school with more than three thousand students.

But recently, my daughter Emma came home and cried and because I am both her mother and a teacher, I could not offer her any easy consolation. "Just listen," she said, "I feel like a part of me is dying every time I go into the classroom. They put up lists of words and they tell you what to think. They don't slow down because we have to finish before the next scheduled test. They don't allow you to discover any meaning for yourself, and if you ask a question it's considered wasting time."

It would have been easy to dismiss Emma's comments as the result of a bad day, but I know my daughter and I know what is happening to both students and to teachers in the classrooms. Many of us are watching rich classroom instruction being swallowed whole by more and more standardized testing days which is in a way a type of dying. Last week's three days of TAAS testing were followed by three more days of Stanford testing. This is followed by the necessary field testing of the new TAKS test and End-of-Course exams in subject areas. From February to May the instructional relationship and content area learning that teachers and students so carefully build in the fall will be lost to number two pencils, scantrons, and preprinted scripts to be read word-

by-word to students.

I think about the deadening effects of over-testing on students and teachers as I observe a scene that stands in sharp contrast to many of the classrooms throughout the state and nation. It is a Saturday

afternoon at Border's Bookstore, and a small crowd of almost fifty middle-school students, parents, and teachers are gathered to listen to the poetry, short stories, and memoir pieces that these young writers have produced. I am struck by the

way that the students grasp their writer's notebooks close to their chests and sneak quick peeks at their selected works. School Writing Project (SWP) veterans and leaders, Lanier Middle School teachers Matt Martinez and Melanie Mulhollan, are the first to read their pieces. In true SWP spirit, the two teachers show their students that the risk-taking and joy that is derived from writing is reciprocal -- both teachers and students share their writing. Melanie's memoir piece is about a student who has recently lost her mother. Melanie captures the pain and poignancy of our work as teachers as she describes a peer-response

An Important, But Difficult Role

an excerpt by Melanie Mulhollan, Lanier Middle School teacher and School Writing Project leader

... Today was painful and the most difficult role I've played yet. . . .

As I walked around the room I commented, praised, corrected Brandon's spelling of road and then I approached Lisa, Tina, Marie and Maureen's group. Maureen handed me a paper and said, "This is a poem about how Marie's mother died." Her matter-of-fact-tone surprised me with these words. I looked at Marie's face. Trying to conceal her pain, big wells of water filled her bottom lids. I knew right then that it was time to finally have Marie talk.

She is one of the most reserved little girls I have ever taught. In the beginning of the year I had to speak to her because all she would turn in would be comics of Garfield, the cat. I didn't realize it at the time, but the artwork and Garfield were her escape from the memories of her mother. Now she finally found a new subject to write about and share.

continued on page thirteen

group that calls her attention to the poem that one young girl has written about her mother's death. In that moment, Melanie understands that this young girl has not found a place to mourn her mother so she takes her into the hall and grieves with her.

What I believe Melanie communicated to her student in the hallway and to all of us in the audience is that the emotional needs of a student should be primary in the classroom. This is no small matter as I listen to the students read their pieces about fathers who leave, brothers who die, and mothers who lose their jobs. But there were also poems which spoke directly to the success that Melanie and Matt have in teaching literacy skills in their classrooms in a way that I believe the results of standardized tests can never hope to duplicate. One middle school student wrote, "The poem is

continued on page fourteen

It is this concept of listening carefully to students in order to design effective instruction that is a central tenet in the School Writing Project.



News from the Center

Video Projects Reflect Spirit and Positive Impact of the Center on Teachers and Children



Ron Stone of StoneFilms, Inc. talks to Professor Rich Smith, Director of the Center's Asia Outreach project, during filming for the video Stone is producing about the Center.

A video and a documentary, to be completed this spring, will showcase the work of the Center for Education and its teacher development programs. The promotional video is being produced by Ron Stone, well-known television journalist and former news anchor for Channel 2 in Houston, and his production company StoneFilms, Inc. The documentary is being created by award-winning documentary film maker, Brian Huberman.

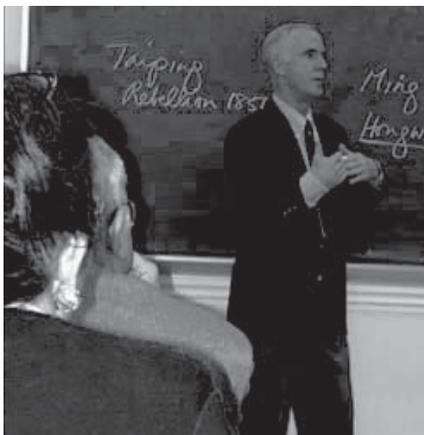
These two visual representations of the Center's work with teachers and children capture the commitment and success of the Center for Education in enhancing teacher professional development and improving the education of urban children both locally and nationally.



Brian Huberman, associate professor of art and art history at Rice University, and his sound assistant filmed at a School Literacy & Culture Project conference in February.

Teachers Learn to View the World from a Different Perspective in East Asia Institute

How is a "Chinese," "Japanese" or "Korean" cultural identity constructed? What are the basic perceptions, patterns of behavior, features of language, beliefs and values, systems of logic, symbolic structures, aesthetic preferences, material achievements, and institutions that seem most central to each culture's self-image? How are these elements expressed in visual culture? In what ways do Chinese, Japanese and Korean cultural identities differ by region, social class, gender and ethnicity? These were some of the issues addressed by the second Faculty Development Institute on East Asia offered by



Professor Rich Smith talks about East Asian culture during a session of the Faculty Development Institute offered this fall and spring.

Asia Outreach this fall and spring. Twenty-five high school teachers from Houston-area schools participated in the second 30-hour Institute cosponsored by Asia Outreach and the Texas Consortium on Teaching about Asia and funded by the Freeman Foundation. Taught by Richard Smith, Rupp Professor of

Humanities and Director of Asian and Transcultural Studies at Rice University, the Institute was based on the "East Asia in World History" website (<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/eacp/webcourse/index.html>) developed by Columbia University's National Consortium on Teaching about Asia. The distinctive features of the Institute were its emphasis on visual images, and on "world-making" – that is, the way different cultures arrange things, ideas and activities into coherent systems of meaning.

Materials for the teachers included texts and images from the following websites: "East Asia in World History" (Columbia University); "Internet East Asian History Sourcebook" (Brooklyn College) <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/images/sungfdr.jpg> [no user name or password necessary]; and "A Visual Sourcebook for Chinese Civilization" (University of Washington) <http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv> [no user name or password necessary].

Teachers from both Faculty Development Institutes will be selected to participate in an all-expenses-paid three-week field study to the People's Republic of China this June. They will study various intersections of tradition and modernity in China, visit cultural and historical sites, and also interact with Chinese citizens in public spaces and organizations, including schools, museums, parks, and work places.



What Mothers Really Know About Literacy Learning: The Myth of the 3,000 Books

By Patsy Cooper, Consulting Director, School Literacy & Culture Project

Patsy Cooper delivered the keynote address at the School Literacy & Culture Project conference, "Literacy that Matters in the Lives of Young Children," on February 2, 2002. Over 150 early childhood teachers attended the popular conference which one participant described "as a wonderful, affirming, thought-provoking and inspiring morning."

One prevailing truism in early literacy education is that mothers of ready-to-read beginning kindergartners have read approximately 3,000 books to their children somewhere between infancy and the first day of school. I realize this sounds like a lot on first blush, but in fact storybook readings add up fast. After all, if a child hears one bedtime story nightly between her birth and her 5th birthday, she's already heard 1,725 of them. By adding only one more after lunch or before nap or waiting in the doctor's office, you're well up to over 3,000. And what's a mere 3,000 anything in the life of a mother of a young child? By the most conservative estimates, my mother did no fewer than 3,450 washes between my birth and my 5th birthday. With a brother only 15 months older than I, and a sister and another brother born before I was five, it's probable that—in a pre-Pampers world—she washed no fewer than 6,000 diapers before I entered kindergarten. Undoubtedly, in a pre-Surgeon General's world, she also smoked no less than 17,000 cigarettes. And let's not even talk about potatoes peeled, beds made, or shoelaces tied.

So, when you think about it, what's a mere 3,000 books? The research on mothers reading to their young children and their children's later success at reading is incontrovertible. Children who have been regularly read to in early childhood enter kindergarten with more knowledge of print-related concepts than children who don't, a factor which is solidly tied to learning to read. Schickendanz writes that children

who have been read to indirectly, and even somewhat subconsciously, come to the understanding that

- books work from left to right
- print should make sense
- print and speech are related in a specific way
- book language differs from speech
- books are enjoyable.

In time, and with some explicit direction from their mothers, children develop a sense of letters and words. In addition, research on mother-child interactions during storytelling demonstrates that mothers draw children's attention to the sounds and syntax of language, as well as specific vocabulary knowledge. This prior knowledge around language and literacy events is extremely important to the beginning reader. Finally, interactions with children around books help teach children school dialogue patterns such as how to respond to who, what, why, when, and how questions. Children who are helped to retell stories they hear are also gaining important school skills.

It may sound counterintuitive, but I'd like to propose that the problem with what I'm calling this 3,000 book curriculum is that educators interpret it as a learning to read curriculum. I'm wondering when—or why—mothering became synonymous with academic outcomes. This is not to say that mothers, and fathers, should not be invested in their children's academic success. Of course, they should be. A short conversation with the parents of a child who is a struggling reader will convince you of the importance of this achievement.

At the same time, I want to challenge the myth that learning to read (let alone the idea that the earlier the better) is what matters most to mothers. Give or take different nuances in how to describe healthy development, what matters most to

mothers I know is that their children are essentially happy, confident children, pleased with themselves and the world, certain of their ideas and their problem-solving abilities. Above all, mothers desire that their children are safe, both physically and psychologically. By osmosis, these are the same things that seem to matter most to children. In turn, they should matter most to us, their teachers. Mothers who have time for and access to storybooks know that



Patsy Cooper, keynote speaker at the School Literacy & Culture Project's "Literacy that Matters" conference, talks with Sherri Dubin, also a presenter.

they are very useful in promoting such healthy development, as are other literacy learning activities in the home like functional writing and awareness of environmental print. For the moment, therefore, let's put aside school concerns like learning to read before five or six, evaluations, assessments, standards, as well as the plain old kindergarten readiness test, to consider what implications other than learning to read this different view of literacy activities might have for the early childhood classroom.

Let us begin with the connection between stories and happiness for no other reason than that it's so obvious. A child's happiness depends on many things, including his understanding of natural and

continued on page eleven



continued from page two, *Teaching in TEAMS*

My TEAMS observer identified this misconception from comments my students were making. After class we discussed the misconception and how it had occurred. Together we devised a plan to have the students design their own experiment to test their ideas about density. Had I taught the original lesson without a TEAMS observer, I may never have known that my students had developed a misconception in the first place!

The next time I taught a class about density, I allowed for greater student initiative and exploration first, and then had the students design their own experiments to test various student-generated hypotheses about density. The students determined the amount and type of liquids that they were going to use and thus through observation, they determined that the amount of a liquid did not affect its density. It seems to me that teaching science with too much teacher guidance may actually increase the possibility of students developing conceptual misconceptions."

continued from page three, *Teachers Learn to Question in Ways that Stimulate Students' Thinking in the Model Science Lab*

What next? I challenged them. We had already eliminated several items on their lists of observations about the initial experiment. It couldn't be smoke, fire, gravity, color of the balloon; what else could we test? Some of the students agreed that it was too soon to give up on the original experiment. Something about that fire had to cause the balloon to go in the jar! One student said that perhaps it could be the heat. I wanted to scream, "YES!" but I didn't. I asked the child how he would test to see if the heat did it. We had already proven that it could be done without heat, but he was focused on the original experiment, and said we had to eliminate all possibilities dealing with this one experiment. "Okay," I said, "tell me what you know about heat in this experiment. What can you say about heat?"

Ms. Weigel's report continued with a description of student ideas of putting the system in a microwave, heating the flask with a hot plate instead of the flame, boiling water in the flask, and taking more detailed observations of the original experiment. Next she wrote:

As they were watching the experiment again someone shouted, "Hey, the fire went out, but the hot plate never cooled down!" I went over to the hot plate system and removed the flask and again put the balloon on top. All eyes were on the improved setup, and the whole class cheered when the balloon was pushed into the flask.

"Now what do you suppose caused this to happen?"

"Don't tell me . . . we have to explain it!"

I spent a few minutes in the following class period giving them some information about molecules that they may not have been exposed to before. We talked about the difference between solids, liquids, and gases being related to the amount of space between the

molecules, and the temperature of the substances. I explained that as you add heat to molecules they begin moving around at a faster pace and spreading apart from one another. We also discussed pressure and its increase or decrease depending upon the amount of molecules added to the system and the amount of space that they occupy.

The children then had the tools they needed to truly understand what was happening in the balloon in the jar. I illustrated the pressure being like an

overcrowded room. The more people in the room, the less space you have to move around in, and the greater pressure you experience as people crowd against you. When many people leave the room, you have more space to move around in and less pressure exerted upon you. The students acted it out.

Before long, the students put all the pieces together for themselves, and they didn't need anyone to give them the answers. I was particularly impressed when the students related their newfound knowledge to tornadoes that they had been studying in history. "It's air pressure!" they announced after learning about houses that explode as the windstorms travel by. But they didn't stop there; they explained it!

To achieve this degree of success with her class, Ms.

Weigel had developed a system of questioning and probing that led her students to develop their own comprehension of air pressure. By refining the skills learned in the Model Lab, she used leading questions and modifications based on the understanding achieved by her students. Her evidence was the students' explanation of the balloon in the bottle, and then the application to the tornado explosions. Along the way they also created a class culture of inquiry and exploration, skills in observation and experimental design, and practice in problem solving and synthesizing information—all in the first week of class!

(*Science Teaching/Science Learning*, pp. 118-121)



Two students from the Lanier Middle School Model Science Lab work together to complete their lab assignment.



continued from page four, 'The Storytelling Lady is Here.'

Story dictations were only the beginning. The Classroom Storytelling Project challenged me to think, to reflect and to do what was best for my students. The books and reading were my nutrition that was needed to have a healthy and productive classroom. Before the Classroom Storytelling Classroom, I am ashamed to say that I was not a reader. Now I look forward to reading professional literature and even go to the bookstores to choose what interests me.

I had the opportunity to teach second grade. I asked my principal if I could have a few of my students that I had had in prekindergarten. I was given eight. These eight students were my top students and were wonderful writers from the beginning. During book clubs their questions and conversations were well developed. The other students struggled at first. Then, I planted the seed. For two months, I modeled how to write a story

using chart paper and different colored markers. I also took story dictations, and they dramatized their stories. They loved it. My principal often walked by and saw my table cut down to size with shelves full of markers, crayons, glue, different kinds of paper, envelopes, students on the floor writing and drawing, sharing stories, writing on the chart paper with the colored markers. She told me that I was not in prekindergarten and that the students should be in their desks doing work. I walked around my classroom and stopped to explain what each student was doing. They were brainstorming ideas, editing a class story, illustrating their works, using the writing center, and discussing a book in their literature circle. My principal had teachers coming to my class to observe me. My second graders loved to read and write. When I asked them to write, they did not look at the ceiling to see if there

was a story to copy. My students left me literary experts.

After seven years of doing story dictations in my class, I was asked by the project to mentor other teachers in making classes come to life. They wanted me to plant the seed. Mentoring has brought a whole new level of reflection on my part. Instead of building a relationship with my four-year old students, it was with other educators. I love when I walk into a classroom and the Resident Teacher is anxious to get started and the students are telling the teacher, "The Storytelling Lady is here." I can now say that I am a Storyteller.

The Classroom Storytelling Project challenged me to think, to reflect and to do what was best for my students.

continued from page nine, *What Mothers Really Know About Literacy Learning*

physical phenomena, his belief that he is loved by the significant people in his life, his exploration of culture, gender roles, and feelings. There are literally thousands of stories, new and old, that make young children smile, laugh, ponder, wonder, and pause in the service of their positive view of self and the world. These are different from books that are designed to teach reading. Books designed to teach reading, of course, have always been with us. Beginning with the *New England Primer*, there is a long history of text and trade books for young children that teach reading skills, such as the sounds of phonemes, rhymes, the sounds of letters, and vocabulary words. The narrative can run from the nonsensical ("Id is it.") to the repetitive ("I like cereal. I like cats. I like cake. I like carrots. I like chocolate." Get it? All c's.) The Dick and Jane series is possibly the most famous ("See Spot run. Run, Spot, run."), but it has plenty of company. These books are designed to teach and teach they do, which is why they belong in a teacher's "For Reading Instruction" box. More recently trade storybooks have been co-opted for reading instruction, as teachers look for lessons that can be derived from stories. Referred to as teaching skills "in context" this process involves calling children's attention to certain information related to skills that are embedded in the storyline (e. g., how to form plurals, how to form the past tense, how to spell using association and not phonics rules). *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, a predictable book by Bill Martin, is perhaps the most oft-cited example of this.

Following the lead of mothers, however, teachers might look at children's books such as such as *A Child's Garden of Verses* and *Make Way for Ducklings* and *Mortimer and Tar Beach*— which also reach back more than 100 years and put them in the box marked "For Living." *Goodnight Moon*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *My Daddy's Roommate*, also fit the bill for stories that explain, celebrate, open, and confirm the young child's world. These stories should be read at least once a day, and hopefully more, not because young children are future readers, but because they are alive. They are relevant to living because they function (as these books can function) as essential guides or navigators to young children seeking social, emotional, and cognitive equilibrium in the world.

Long before young children discover the need to read and write, storybooks can also help young children feel confident as problem solvers. Old favorites like *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, and *The Three Little Pigs* suggest that children are not powerless in the face of evil and danger. Stories like *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* portray young children's contribution to community life, and *Amazing Grace* demonstrates that children, too, can fight prejudice and stereotypes. Writing is another literacy activity in the home that mothers help young children engage in regularly. The use of writing to understand and explore both inner and outer worlds of early childhood has

continued on page fifteen



continued from page six, *Cultural Conversations Project Transforms Teachers and Their Classrooms*

enhancing their budding understanding and empathy for others when books and stories that accurately and positively portray the backgrounds of the families in the school are shared. Past participants described a deeper understanding of their students because of their experiences in Cultural Conversations groups.

Cathy Morris, a pre-kindergarten teacher at Kennedy Elementary in Alief ISD, says that through her participation in Cultural Conversations she has become a more active listener of her ESL students' stories. Mrs. Morris has used multicultural children's literature in her classroom for years. She has quite a collection of books that are visually representative of her students. But as Barrera, Linguori, and Salas write in *Ideas a Literature Can Grow On*, multicultural children's literature "is only as culturally enlightened as the people who create it and use it." Mrs. Morris, through listening to her students, feels she knows more about what they care about and is thus enlightened.

It may seem a small thing that one might value another person's point of view, but to respect and accept the truth of their perspective is phenomenal and the foundation of all cross-cultural teaching and learning.

She recently read two books by Natasha Tarpley to her class. For her boys she read *Bippity Bop Barbershop* and for her girls she read *I Love My Hair!* Mrs. Morris heard her boys when they talked about Saturday trips to the barbershop. She recalled that, "We talked a lot about hair in our Cultural Conversations group." She used this information to plan a literacy lesson. *Bippity Bop Barbershop* is about a little African American boy going to the barbershop with his

dad for the first time. First Mrs. Morris read the book to a small group of boys. They discussed who cut their hair and when or if they went to the barbershop. They retold the story in their own words while Morris acted as the scribe. The next day she asked them to illustrate the story. The boys drew pictures of themselves and made attempts at labeling their pictures with hair cut names: fades, tapers, etc. Morris followed their lead and again acted as scribe to make a list of haircut names the boys received. She posted the list just outside of their room for all the parents and school to see. Her boys care about their hair and the world of barber shop. They know that Mrs. Morris cares enough about them to ask questions, remember what they tell her, and make it a part of not just their lives outside of school but their classroom life as well. She, of course, followed suit with her girls the next day, reading, scribing, and then having them illustrate *I Love My Hair*.

Sarah Doty, in her new role as Creative Expression teacher at the School at Post Oak in HISD, described a seed from Cultural Conversations taking root in her classroom. "I received the book, *The Other Side* by

Jacqueline Woodson, as a gift. I decided to read it to one of my classes, the fourth graders. From our readings in Cultural Conversations I recalled that this is an age when the sometimes negative factors related to race are surfacing especially for children of color. I felt comfortable doing this because of our many conversations on race in the Cultural Conversations groups. Briefly the story is about two little girls, one Black and one White maintaining a friendship in the segregated South. After we read the story and talked some about the tension between Whites and Blacks in the past, one of the students, an African American boy, shared that prejudice still exists between some Blacks and Whites. He told the class about a Boy Scout trip he attended with his all Black troop. He said that some of the mostly White troops had treated them badly. It gave us an opportunity to situate prejudice in our time, to talk about unfairness, and to frame our stance on differences. I felt very honored that the student felt comfortable enough in my classroom to share his story. I felt proud of myself for not minimizing the incident or making excuses for someone else's behavior. It does not really matter if they were treated badly because of other circumstances. What matters is that he believed it to be based on racial differences and that he found a person and a place in our day to share that information at school."

Barbara Christopher at Eisenhower High School in Aldine ISD also spoke to this need to believe students' personal stories and not minimize them. "I now take particular care that my students know that I respect them personally, even when their actions might upset me. I believe from our discussions (in Cultural Conversations) that students who have faced disrespect or those who have seen their parents disrespected are especially sensitive to it. I think that if they think you don't believe them, then you don't respect them, so then they shut down and no learning takes place."

Florence Coleman, a sixth grade social studies teacher at Johnston Middle School in HISD and facilitator of the Cultural Conversations Project book club, asks her students to read and report on forty books as a project. Mrs. Coleman uses mostly picture books for the project. She looks for authors that are clear and give the reader an honest view of the culture. She believes that frequently history is shown in quick encapsulated segments. With the addition of literature, however, students have the opportunity to read about some of the concepts that frame an understanding of the time, such as family importance, economics, and lifestyle. A long-time believer in the use of multicultural literature as a source of information for both student and teacher, Mrs. Coleman says that participation in Cultural Conversations gives her the opportunity to share her thoughts and pick up new dimensions and perspectives on stories from her colleagues.

The use of multicultural children's and young adult literature and personal story are not new ideas in these

continued on following page



continued from previous page, Cultural Conversations Project Transforms Teachers and Their Classrooms

classrooms. Certainly the teachers include titles they might not have used before attending Cultural Conversations. They may pay attention to a personal story in a way they might not have in the past. What seems to be a new idea is the way they accept and respect a different response to a shared story. It may seem a small thing that one might value another person's point of view, but to respect and accept the truth of their perspective is phenomenal and the foundation of all cross-cultural teaching and learning.

“Cultural Conversations strengthened my ability to be honest, and I continue my involvement because I need the support of people who hear my story and accept me as I am.”

Teachers and others in the school community have not always had opportunities to explore their own race and culture or that of others as it relates to teaching and learning. What we hear from teachers and others who have participated in Cultural Conversations is that some of the stories shared and the discussions that followed in their seminar groups were life-informing. And because of our efforts to make these stories relevant to their lives in schools, some aspect of their practice has been transformed.

Gay Gustafson, a teacher at Poe Elementary in HISD, sums it up in her statement: “As a teacher and a learner, I am most interested in how information relates to me. I look for

connections to what I have already experienced and understand so I can integrate the new into what I am and what I do. I came to my Cultural Conversations group with considerable experience with diverse adults and children. I did not feel that I needed to learn that much more about ‘them.’ I needed to learn about me (in relation to them). Each year I grow a little more in my ability to look honestly at the power I have in the classroom and my need to build empowering relationships with students. Cultural Conversations strengthened my ability to be honest, and I continue my involvement because I need the support of people who hear my story and accept me as I am.”

Working on relationships, gaining new perspectives, understanding another's point of view, not questioning or minimizing the truth of someone's story, and building lessons on information learned about the students lives outside of school - these are the ways these teachers took the work of Cultural Conversations back to their classrooms.

Recommended Reading

Bigelow, Bill, Brenda Harvey, Stan Karp, and Larry Miller, Editors. (2001). Rethinking Our Classrooms, Volume 2: Teaching for Equity and Justice. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.

Berlak, Ann and Sekani Movenda. (2001). Taking it Personally: Racism in the Classroom from Kindergarten to College. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Harris, Violet, Editor. (1997). Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers.

Michie, Gregory. (1999).. Holler If You Hear Me: The education of a teacher and his students. New York: Teachers College Press.

Obidah, Jennifer and Karen Manheim Teel. (2001). Because of the Kids: Facing racial and cultural differences in schools. . New York: Teachers College Press.

continued from page seven, An Important But Difficult Role

I asked her to step outside the classroom into the hall. Ms. Fortinberry, the history teacher across the hall, was firmly correcting a discipline problem child. Marie and I looked their way, and I escorted her gently down to the other end so she could talk in private. I began to ask her questions about the poem and her mother. I learned from our conversation, through her tears and sobs, that her mother was killed two years ago during spring break by an eighteen wheeler near Bush Intercontinental Airport. She said she was in California at the time visiting her father.

I asked her whom she lived with and she said her mother's sisters, her aunts. I asked her how often she talked about her mother with her aunts, and she mumbled ‘very little.’ For many reasons she felt the need to cry and talk. I held her and stroked her hair. She sobbed, hiccuping in between, saying she missed her. The more she cried, the more I cried. I think she was moved even more to see how her sadness affected me. I asked her if she wanted to go to the counselor, but she shook her head no.

At that point when I was breaking, I felt totally helpless. I decided to regain my composure and try and get her to speak more of her mother. We talked about religion and her beliefs of the afterlife. She said she was Buddhist and their belief was that the dead would stay in Purgatory until judgment was complete. Then that person's soul would go to heaven or hell. I asked her what kind of woman her mother was. She sobbed as she said, ‘She was a good person.’ I comforted her with her own beliefs and said how calming it is that her mother is in heaven. She nodded and I mentioned that Buddha was a kind God and he would not keep her mother from visiting and watching her daughter.

I smiled and said, “See, she is so proud of you right now because you have her religious views and miss her so much.” She cried louder and I told her it was good to cry. It was good to relieve the stress of missing her so much with crying. Thinking about her was good, but writing about her and the pain of missing her is even better.

For a seemingly long while, we stood there in a nook of the hall crying as I held her tightly. Her tight grip around me felt that maybe she hadn't had affection in a long time. After our embrace and soggy tissues, the realization overcame me that my second period [class] was probably hanging from the ceiling tiles. But I feel I did my best showing a young girl that it is good and important to grieve.



continued from page seven, *Teachers Learn to Listen in the School Writing Project*

calling/It calls in your heart/It calls when you talk/It calls to your brain/ If only we could follow the lead of poetry it would be a whole new world." Another young girl wrote about the "Joy of Reading." "At first it was all just a bunch of squiggly lines and dots./Later they formed themselves into a letter...." She goes on not only to describe in verse the reading process, but the sheer pleasure she experiences when she reads. On that Saturday afternoon we were an adult audience that let these young writers know that what they had to say was important.

It is this concept of listening carefully to students in order to design effective instruction that is a central tenet in the School Writing Project. Yet, it is something that happens less often in most classrooms today. Rigidly prescribed curriculum and lock-step instruction dictate what is valued in the classroom. There is little room for the knowledge and insights of teachers and students. As a result, there is little time to develop the necessary trust and practice needed for students and teachers to examine their reading and writing habits. This is a profound loss. If it had happened in my classroom this year, I would not have discovered what senior David Ello had to teach me about

how he moved from an undisciplined expository writer early in the semester to one who can clearly grasp and transfer his skill to others in peer-response settings.

This is what David wrote in his end-of-semester portfolio: "The thing that really brings me to effective writing is knowing what you expect of us and transferring that from academic knowledge to writer's knowledge. What do I mean by writer's knowledge? Basically, I may read something on an assignment sheet or grading rubric; my awareness on that level is important, but if it doesn't transfer from awareness to personal understanding, I'm stuck in a stagnant realm. I can't go anywhere worthwhile, even if I start walking and try to kid myself. Does that make sense? Conferences with you are good. [Using] overheads [in] class discussions are helpful as well. They are somewhat interactive, and you give us tangible material to learn from. Your written comments are beneficial as well, because there's actually writing there with which you can explain your point...at least to a degree. I'd say that a combination of these three things is the best possible way to

The Poem Is Calling

The poem is calling.
It calls in your heart.
It calls when you talk.
It calls to your brain.

The poem lies
In the hands of people.
It seeps through
Like water in a paper towel
Or like water easily flowing through dirt.

Only people know what they feel like.
People see the sights.
Feel the words.
They know the meaning
And they feel the love.

If only we could follow
The lead of poetry.
It would be
A whole new world.

Jazmon Authorlee
Lanier Middle School Student

bring students to a level of understanding...at least it is for me."

School Writing Project teachers design classroom instruction so that it places students at the center of learning. When we listen carefully to our students, we come to understand how easy it is to be silenced like this high school student: "When does a teacher become more than a teacher? Is it when she loves her students? ...Coming from India, there were so many restrictions for me. I could never write what I wanted. But here [in this classroom] I was free, free to explore and enjoy everything. One of the most important things this class has taught me is to speak out. In fifth grade, I asked one of my teachers a question because she had miscalculated a math problem. She got angry....After that incident, I've never had the guts to speak out. But this year little by little, through class and group projects and through my writings, I'm finally getting the guts to speak out."

What School Writing Project teachers understand is that learning should never feel like dying.

The Joy of Reading

At first it was all just a bunch of squiggly lines and dots.
Later they formed themselves into a letter.
As the letters grew they became words.
More and more words made a sentence.
First we all thought if any of this was going to ever help us.
Then we're just thinking if we did o.k. on Monday night's reading homework.
Then all we ever cared about was if we had enough reading points to get candy
But as we learned more about the letters
We started to like them and enjoy reading them
Next we would have to read for homework
Next we would think about writing a book
But we would never come around to doing it
Because . . .
We would be reading . . .

Eva Agoulnik
Lanier Middle School Student



continued from page eleven, *What Mothers Really Know About Literacy Learning*

powerful connotations for development. The other attractive element of writing in the home is that while the average child may not read before school, every child can write from a very early age.

My young niece has always been a writer to watch. Early scribbles by a two-year-old quickly took letter-like shapes by three. I recall being out to dinner with Kate and her family, when she was four-and-a-half-years-old. To keep her busy while waiting for her meal, her mother offered her a pen and a large paper napkin. Kate took them, and immediately began to tell herself aloud a story about a girl named Wendy who had run away (I think she had recently seen *Peter Pan*). As she talked, she wrote line after line of letters on the napkin, as if taking dictation from her self. By the time, Kate entered kindergarten at four years and 11 months, she had solid control over the pen, letters, and the concept of words. "Mom, how do you spell..." was heard often in her house.

One evening in early November of that same year, I was visiting and noticed Kate writing in a marble notebook with fierce concentration. I asked her if I could see, and she giggled nervously. She pulled the notebook to her chest and shook her head no. Finally, my sister cajoled her into showing me a list of neatly printed words and sentences that read

—NOVEMBER
—STOP
—GO
—ON
—I LIKE HAPPY HALLOWEEN
—I AM IN KINDERGARTEN

I was immediately reminded of Marie Clay's thoughts on children's "writing inventory," where children engage in writing words they know, much like they might skip rocks or hop in place, just to see what they can do.

I then asked Kate if I might borrow her paper to show the students in my class "who were learning to be teachers." I said I thought they would like to see what five-year-old

writing looks like. She nodded okay, slowly, but okay. She ripped the paper from her notebook, but before giving it to me, she pulled me down to her level, and whispered in my ear, "You need to tell your class that you should write in the lines." I quickly glanced at my sister, who rolled her eyes and mouthed silently, "I could kill her teacher."

Now, my sister is not against neat handwriting. She teaches first grade in one of the poorest school districts in New York City, and is well acquainted with what happens to children who aren't schooled in the conventions of schooling. She knows that poor handwriting might even affect her students' score on the state writing assessment, even though it's not supposed to be a factor. What my sister was objecting to as a mother, however, was Kate's teacher's priorities for kindergartners, which she had clearly transmitted to Kate. Here was a child who had been five-years-old for less than six weeks, but who had already learned that the important thing about writing was not ideas and stories or even words, but appearance. Her teacher had taught her this.

It might feel like a stretch to think of children's physical and psychological safety as relevant to literacy activities, but I would argue that nothing could be more relevant, and mothers know this. First of all, all mothers are concerned with children's physical development, not just their safety from harm, but more subtle aspects of physical development such as whether the weather is too hot or cold for outside play, whether the window is too high, or the stick too sharp. Mothers also know that young children need to move, to exercise, to touch, to feel, to let off steam, to play. And literacy activities at home do not interfere with this. In the name of learning to read at school, however, much of free play in the kindergarten, if not all of it in the first grade, has been traded for academic table time. In addition, outdoor time has been reduced and, in some school districts, has been eliminated

altogether. So-called literacy lessons have even replaced foundational reading activities such as drama, art, and singing in schools.

Ask any mother and she will tell you that this restriction on children's movement and expression will not only compromise young children's physical needs, they will actually decrease the possible benefits of literacy lessons as children become less alert and interested in academics.

As for young children's psychological safety, we might assume that there is nothing safer for them in this regard than children's books. Wasn't this addressed in connecting children's books to their happiness? I would like to think so, though it forces me to look the other way at popular books like *No, David*, which, as I read it, suggest that school is an uncompromising, somewhat cruel place, to which children simply have no choice but to adjust. Some would say that in rejecting *No, David*, I'm revealing my own missing sense of humor. I disagree, but would not deny that others, mothers and teachers, might have a different, more light-hearted view of things.

If there is anything to be learned from the role of mothering in literacy learning, it is that the 3,000 book curriculum is far more complex than merely learning to read. It is a role that requires mothers, as well as teachers, to take the long view of learning to read and write. Reading and writing serve all of development for as long a person lives. Let us not use it for short term gains.

What children are reading is important. In our next issue, Dr. Cooper will address the issue of what children are reading and how to evaluate the ways books can enhance or harm a child's psychological needs and development.



•Upcoming Events•

- April 12, 2002** 4:30 p.m. **School Writing Project Elementary and Middle School Student Readings,** Farnsworth Pavilion, Student Center, Rice University
- April 19, 2002** 4:30 p.m. **School Writing Project High School Student Readings,** Farnsworth Pavilion, Student Center, Rice University
- April 22, 2002** 4:30 p.m. **Hazel G. Creekmore Symposium -*Our Children: Are the Public Schools Giving them a Fair Shake?*** Keynote Presenters **Angela Valenzuela, Linda McNeil and Elnora Harcombe,** Grand Hall, Student Center, Rice University
- May 7, 2002** 4:30 p.m. **Classroom Storytelling Project Celebration -** Grand Hall, Student Center, Rice University
- June 10-28, 2002** **Summer Creative Writing Program for Young People,** River Oaks Elementary School and Lanier Middle School
- July 8-12 & July 15-19, 2002** **Reading, Writing and Cultural Connections Summer Institutes,** Rice University

To learn more about the Center's teacher development programs, its publications and its research activities, see our website at <http://www.rice.edu/education>

To learn how to participate in one of the Center's teacher development programs, contact the Center for Education at (713) 348-5145.



CENTER FOR EDUCATION
RICE UNIVERSITY
P.O. Box 1892
HOUSTON, TX 77251-1892