



The ABCs of Literacy:

Creating Excitement About Learning Through Reading, Writing and Poetry in an Early Learning College Literacy Session

BY ANNE KATZ

Introduction

Early learning experiences serve as the building blocks for young children's scholastic success. Providing parents, grandparents, and caregivers with the necessary tools to establish this foundation is critical. This article describes two literacy workshops which were held as part of a local Early Learning College initiative. The goal of the program is to ensure that young children in the community are prepared for school and for early literacy learning experiences. The workshops aim to provide parents with strategies to create high-quality learning environments for their children. In turn, this will enhance their ability to effectively partner with teachers when their child enters a formal school setting.

The goals of the sessions are to promote continued literacy learning at home. As the workshop facilitator, I modeled instructional strategies and provided participants with literacy materials and books focusing on environmental print, poetry, shared book reading, comprehension skills, and early writing development. This project was facilitated by a grant from the Georgia Reading Association. I also outlined various approaches that can be used to enhance young children's enjoyment of reading and writing.

Project Overview

Early Learning College sessions are held at several times throughout the school year at a local elementary school that serves as a gathering place in the community. The average age of the children whose parents, grandparents, and caregivers are attending the session range from birth to five years of age. The project is in keeping with the Georgia Reading Association's goal of "promoting the full literacy development of Georgia's student and adult populations to ensure that each person becomes a full contributor to society."

According to Hart and Risley's landmark study on language development (1995), children's academic successes at ages nine and ten are attributable to the amount of language they hear from birth to age three. Providing parents with tools to create high-quality early learning experiences at home will prepare students to be active participants in language and literacy learning when they enter formal schooling. Mastering these skills will optimize children's academic and personal successes.

The objectives of the sessions were multifaceted. The primary goal of the workshop was to strengthen participants' abilities to excite their children about reading and writing. I hoped to provide parents with quality instructional activities to promote "concepts about print" and enable them to conduct an effective

read-aloud. In addition, I shared and modeled a variety of tools to facilitate early writing experiences. Lastly, the workshop aimed to enable parents to implement demonstrated strategies to support early language development.

Pre and Post Workshop Assessment

In order to gauge participants' comfort level and familiarity with the content of the workshop, a pre-assessment survey was administered before the workshop began (Appendix A). Questions on the survey addressed participants' familiarity with conducting a "picture walk" with their child, making predictions, visual literacy skills, comprehension development, discussion around text, illustrating text, and shared writing activities. Ten items appeared on the pre and post workshop assessment. Results of the participants' pre and post workshop assessment appear in Appendix B.

WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

Playing with Poetry and Language

The workshop began with a discussion about the importance of developing children's appreciation for language and word play. Rasinski, Rupley, and Nichols (2008) describe how poetry is a solid text choice for performance and practice, as most poems for young children are relatively short, lend themselves to repeated readings, and promote a sense of accomplishment while building fluency. The use of poetry on a regular basis, in school and at home, can have a significant and positive impact on students' word recognition and reading fluency (Padak & Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005). Furthermore, research describes how creating a welcoming environment for families and facilitating their participation in their children's education leads to future gains in "children's attendance, interest, motivation, general achievement, and reading achievement" (Padak & Rasinski, 2010, p. 294).

I explained that we would be practicing reading poems around fundamental concepts such as colors, shapes, and months of the year with a sense of expression. The purpose of my selection of these poems was two-fold—both to model reading with expression and fluency as well as to reinforce important early learning curriculum topics. Poems that were utilized in the workshop were from *Poetry Place Anthology* (Scholastic, 1999) and *A Poem a Day* (Scholastic, 1997). A sample of some of the poems utilized in the workshops appears in Appendix C.

After we read and reviewed the poem, I gave each table a large sheet of chart paper with segments of the text written in marker. Each group brainstormed how they could best illustrate the message contained

in their portion of the poem. This was followed by each group presenting their chart paper illustration to the workshop participants and explaining their rationale for drawing attention to other text features (such as placing a square around common sight words and drawing attention to certain key words in the poems). For example, when illustrating "The Shape of Things" by Meish Goldish, one group drew a circle, square, and triangle around each of these words when they appeared in the text for reinforcement. One participant stated, "I learned that poetry is very important." Another participant added, "I liked the interaction in the class. We got to do the activity just as the child would."

I also discussed the importance of "raising a reader" through drawing children's attention to the environmental print in the world around us and prompting questions to facilitate language development. Hart and Risley (1995) indicated that many economically disadvantaged preschoolers come to kindergarten with much smaller vocabularies than more advantaged children. This uneven start can make learning to read more difficult (McCardle, Chhabra, and Kapinus, 2008). My suggestions for "raising a reader" included labeling familiar items around the house (chair, table, bed) and discussing the sound the word begins with. In addition, recommendations included talking about objects that you see in the world around us (shape, color, texture, use) and extending children's conversations through prompting questions. While conducting art projects, such as illustrating poetry, discuss your choice for selecting a color or explain a rationale for your drawing for a segment of the text. Research shows that children learn vocabulary best when words are presented thematically or in a meaningful context (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011).

In the end-of-workshop evaluation form, when asked to "provide at least one specific example of new information you learned in this workshop," one parent noted, "I will use paper to write out poems to hang on the wall and let the children illustrate." Another parent explained how she learned that "you can draw pictures to go with the words of a book or poem...to make reading more fun for children." A third workshop participant noted that he "enjoyed the word play and illustrations of the poem."

The workshop proceeded to some additional poetry and language development activities.

I introduced a Friendship Cinquain poem format, a simple five line poem that invites child and parent joint participation. We began by reviewing the format of a cinquain poem, as follows:

_____(person's name)

_____, _____
(two adjectives describing the person)

_____, _____,
_____(three action words)

_____(a four-phrase word about friendship)

_____(nickname or noun)

I modeled how I wrote a cinquain about my mom, and invited participants to discuss how they could participate in this language-building activity with their child.

The final poetry element of the literacy workshop focused on “I am From” poems, which were inspired by George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From” template (1993). I reviewed sample sentence starters around an “I am From” poem for the participants adapted by Levi Romero (http://www.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/t/Target_I_am_from%20poem.pdf). I continued by sharing a few lines of a sample “I am From” poem that I composed. I then invited participants to review the sentence starters and take a few moments to compose a couple of lines of their own “I am From” poem. Finally, we discussed how this activity could be a valuable language development tool as parent and child could wander around their home collecting ideas for composing their own original “I am From” poem. We concluded by discussing how this activity would facilitate children’s language development skills and instill pride in themselves and their backgrounds.

Read-Alouds, Early Writing, and Making Connections to Text

The remainder of the workshop focused on teaching parents how to maximize the benefits of conducting a read-aloud with their child in a meaningful way. Utilizing *A Letter to Amy* (Keats, 1968) as a framework, participants were taught book-handling knowledge guidelines, picture walk guidelines, and retelling evaluation guidelines from *Assessment for Reading Instruction* (McKenna & Stahl, 2003) in the context of the workshop. I began by asking participants to generate a prediction about what they thought the book might be about based upon the title and cover illustration. The workshop continued by modeling a picture walk and discussing the value it adds to the pre-reading process. We proceeded to take turns reading the pages of the book with expression.

Throughout the reading of the text, I paused to model how to pose predictions and adjust/revise prior predictions

based upon the events of the text. Additional discussion focused on ways to expand children’s oral language development though discussion about the text as well as ways to develop visual literacy skills. Picture books convey meaning through the use of two sign systems—written language and visual images (Serafini, 2010). The primary focus with picture books has been on cultivating skills and strategies that promote an understanding of written text. However, in our increasingly visual world, pedagogical strategies for understanding visual images merit consideration and have only recently begun to be explored in the literature (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Albers, 2008). Clearly, there is value in teaching skills and strategies to enable young children to interpret and analyze images. One parent noted that she will “spend more time discussing pictures and keeping the child’s attention” now as she reads.

Sample prompting questions to ask after the book reading included the following:

- How do you communicate with your friends?
- Do you write letters?
- Why is a letter a good way to communicate?

I continued to share a storyboard with parents to promote the development of sequencing skills. We discussed the importance of teaching young children how to summarize the main events in the story through both pictures and words (first, second, next, last). Illustrating the main events of the story can serve as a visual reinforcement of the main events in the text. I modeled how parents can scaffold their child’s oral language to compose a sentence to label the events shown in each picture. Research suggests that providing opportunities for children to talk and use language in meaningful contexts can promote vocabulary development in preschoolers (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010). In the evaluation form, one parent noted, “I liked the picture outline suggestion. I will do it as I read with my child.” When asked “what specific improvements will you make in your home environment because of this workshop?” the parent also noted, “I will read more and discuss the story with my child.”

The final element of the read-aloud activity for the workshop centered on early writing skills and the importance of writing to support the reading process. Young children’s first writing efforts look like scribbles, followed by pictures, single words, and then sentences. We discussed the importance of children learning to express his/her thoughts on paper to facilitate the process of self-expression. In the end-of-workshop assessment, a parent noted that “the picture outline was a great idea to help the child learn sequence and how to engage the child in learning.” Another workshop participant wrote “sequencing can

really help with writing...try using a picture outline to help with creative writing.”

Concluding Thoughts

“Very informative...we need more classes like this to help parents.” This written feedback from the Early Learning College Session illustrates the impact and importance of these workshops. The sessions incorporated a range of objectives—to provide parents with instructional activities to conduct an effective read-aloud; to provide parents with tools to excite their children about reading and writing; and to provide parents with strategies to facilitate early language development. A recent meta-analysis found a high correlation between preschool language skills and reading competence at the end of first and second grade (National Early Literacy Panel, 2009).

Surveys were distributed before and after each session to assess each participant’s feelings about integrating the literacy strategies into their home life with their child. In addition, written feedback from workshop participants assessed the project’s impact. Samples of workshop participants’ quotes affirm the literacy workshop project’s positive impact, as follows: “I will question my son more about all the books he reads for more information.”

“To have more excitement when I read to my child...I will color more and draw more with my child.”

“To be more descriptive when reading.”

“Interact with child during and after reading the material...sequence and ask questions after reading with the child.”

“How I can keep my child focused/engaged to reading stories”

“Making words into pictures (poetry)...letting pictures tell the story”

The following quote from a workshop participant resonated with me. She wrote the following: “Reading a book is a form of art when read deeply.” Parents who are dedicated to ensuring that their children fulfill their potential as readers, writers, and learners should be equipped with a repertoire of strategies in order to empower them. Workshops such as “The ABC’s of Literacy: Creating Excitement about Learning through Reading, Writing, and Poetry” serve as powerful supporters of parents as they strive to facilitate their children’s personal and academic success.

Note: The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to the Georgia Reading Association for the mini-grant funds which provided materials and resources for the literacy workshops detailed in the article.

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Appendix A- Pre and Post Survey

1. I look through the pictures with my child before reading a book and we discuss them together (conduct a "picture walk").

True False

2. I ask my child to tell me what they think is going to happen next in the story as I read (make a prediction).

True False

3. I encourage my child to talk about and describe the pictures that they see in the story.

True False

4. I talk about the events in the story with my child.

True False

5. I talk about the story with my child and make connections between the story and their own lives.

True False

6. My child and I discuss what we liked about the story after we read it.

True False

7. I complete drawing and writing activities with my child about the main events of the story when we have finished reading.

True False

8. I read my child poems and he/she illustrates them to show their understanding.

True False

9. I talk to my child about shapes, colors, and months of the year.

True False

10. My child and I participate in writing activities together.

True False

Appendix B- Pre and Post Survey Results

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	ID	Pre	Post	Improved
1	1257	0	0	0
2	7606	2	0	2
3	5421	1	0	1
4	G	3	0	3
5	3171	1	1	0
6	542	2	0	2
7	4987	0	0	0
8	3514	0	0	0
9	303	1	0	1
10	2	3	3	0
11	9905	1	0	1
12	2150	0	0	0
13	1659	0	0	0
14	999	2	0	2
15	8730	2	0	2
16	1811	3	0	3
17	9240	4	0	4
18	6161	1	0	1
19	3537	4	0	4
20	6607	6	0	6
21	8362	0	0	0
22	4453	0	7	-7
23	1847	0	0	0
24	9830	1	1	0
25	5119	3	0	3

Appendix C- Poems Utilized in the Workshops

"Wonderful World"

A Poem by Eva Grant

I can see
Trees and grass
The sun and sky;

I can taste
Chocolate ice cream,
Apple pie,

I can hear
Music, laughter,
Words you said;

I can touch
Silk and velvet,
A baby's skin;

What a wonderful
World I'm in!

"Colors and Colors"

A Poem by Vivian Gouled

Sometimes I think of colors
one by one by one...
pink for puffy evening clouds
yellow for the sun.
I think of watermelon

for something that is green,
or an orange jack-o'-lantern
on the night of Halloween.

I think of purple eggplant,
and sky that's bright and blue,
or white for sneaker laces,
especially when they're new.

Sometimes I think of traffic lights
when they just turn to red,
or else I think how black it is
at night when I'm in bed.

I might think of an elephant
for something that is gray.
I like to think of colors
and have some fun that way.

"The Shape of Things"

By Meish Goldish

What is a circle? What is round?
A quarter rolling on the ground.

A wheel is a circle, so is the moon,
A bottle cap, or a big balloon.

What is a square, with sides the same?
The wooden board for a checker game.
A slice of cheese, a TV screen,
A table napkin to keep you clean.

What is a rectangle, straight or tall?
The door that stands within your wall.
A dollar bill, a loaf of bread,
The mattress lying on your bed.

What is a triangle, with sides of three?
A piece of pie for you and me.
A musical triangle, ding, ding, ding,
A slice of pizza with everything!

These are the shapes seen everywhere:
A triangle, rectangle, circle, square.
If you look closely where you've been,
You'll surely see the shapes you're in!

FOCUS NEWSLETTER

News from members of the GRA

Focus is a format that shares information from and about members and councils across Georgia. This can be reviews of upcoming new books, dates of upcoming meetings, news or exciting happenings about a local council member. What a wonderful way to support the active people in our organization. This is a spot to publish interesting stories or poetry that a talented member or student has written. **Deadlines for *Focus* are September 30, December 15, March 15 and June 15.**

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