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Using Authentic Literature to Enrich Young Children's Literacy Experiences

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Abstract

This article focuses on the five components (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) needed to effectively teach children to read. Early childhood educators can teach these five skills through the use of authentic literature. To be classified as authentic literature, books and texts need to utilize “real life” writing that is written to engage the reader. Authentic narrative texts generally appeal to the reader and offers a theme and a moral to the story. The article explains the five components needed to teach children to read and offers some authentic texts, synopses, and lesson ideas specifically for each of the components. Although children may not be able to read the texts, the texts selected are at the child’s listening comprehension level. In addition, the selected texts will aid early childhood educators and parents in infusing these skills for engaging implementation.

Keywords: authentic literature, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension

Literacy is an essential skill to development in the early years (Pittman, 2014). When preparing young children for educational success, one can use children’s literature to help promote the five components of effective reading instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). The National Reading Panel stated that phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension are needed to be able to successfully teach children to read. Most school agencies and districts build their literacy curricula around these five pillars. Prior to kindergarten, early childhood educators should use authentic children’s literature to cultivate these skills in young children.

Authentic literature is characterized by “real life” writing that is written for the sole purpose of emotionally engaging the reader. Authentic literature can be narrative or expository and include texts that are usually enjoyed outside of a classroom (Purcell-Gates & Duke, 2004). Authentic literature does not specifically seek to provide fundamental reading instruction and for this very reason, can be used as a powerful instructional tool (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006/2007). When parents read bedtime stories to their children, they tend to automati-

cally read authentic literature. These stories generally are fun for the child to listen to and allow them to use their imagination. This sort of engagement is the first step to molding the child into becoming an aesthetic reader. Aesthetic readers read for pleasure and, as noted by Applegate and Applegate (2004), “see reading as active immersion into a text and the opportunity to live vicariously through the situations and lives of its characters” (p. 554)

Furthermore, educators can continue to nurture children’s love for literature by intertwining the components of reading with authentic literature to achieve the main goal of creating strong, future readers. In order to understand how authentic literature can be used to incorporate the five pillars of reading, each pillar should be explained.

Phonemic awareness is a component of a larger umbrella term, phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is the ability to manipulate sounds in *spoken* language (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Phonological awareness skills from easiest to most difficult include: 1) hearing rhyming words (e.g., *cat, hat, mat, flat*) and alliteration (e.g., *The blue bike is broken.*), 2) segmenting sentences to hear that sentences are made up of individual words (e.g., *She is happy.* is comprised of three words), 3) onset and rime blending and segmenting (e.g., /d/ + og = dog), and phonemic awareness.

Phonemic awareness is the highest skill level on the phonological awareness continuum. Phonemic awareness is defined as the ability to notice, think about and manipulate individual sounds or phonemes in words (e.g., *Dog* has three phonemes or individual sounds, /d/ /o/ /g/ (Armbuster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2001). According to the National Reading Panel, a child’s ability to complete phonemic awareness tasks is the greatest predictor of success in reading during

the first two years of school. To enhance these skills, early childhood educators should select children’s books written using simple, rhyming words and/or words that focus on particular sounds and word play which can teach children how to manipulate sounds to form different words in engaging ways.

Secondly, the approach to *teaching* letter-sound correspondence is called *phonics*. During phonological awareness tasks, children would have been manipulating sounds in *spoken* language. Phonics combines written language with spoken language so that children will learn to decode words in print by mapping speech to print (Moats, 2010). Phonics instruction begins with letter recognition, letter-sound correspondence, and sight word activities. Phonics instruction advances to teach students how to read words with multiple syllables. Early childhood educators, however, should focus on the first three skills.

Moreover, fluency is the ability to read connected text accurately, quickly, expressively, with good phrasing and good comprehension (Rasinski & Nageldinger, 2015). When a fluent reader can accurately and quickly decode words with automaticity, the reader can, therefore, focus his efforts on comprehending what is being read. As with any skill, once a student’s literacy skills have evolved enough, they become almost automatic, to the point where the student no longer has to focus his attention on recognizing the fundamentals, but instead can see the whole “picture”. Fluency brings text to life and introduces students to the endless potential uses for literature. Authentic literature represents examples of each of these possibilities. Early childhood educators can help young children to understand fluency by

modeling reading at a conversational rate and using appropriate expression. Authentic literature that provides dialogue is an excellent way to practice these skills.

Next, vocabulary is understanding the meanings of words. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) state "...a large vocabulary repertoire facilitates becoming an educated person to the extent that vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading proficiency in particular and school achievement in general" (p. 1). Knowing the meaning of words is essential to listening and reading comprehension. Early childhood educators should choose books that include a wide range of vocabulary so children can be immersed in good vocabulary. Beck et al., provide an explanation for teaching vocabulary to children. The authors suggest by placing words in tiers (Tier, 1, 2, and 3), a teacher would know which words to teach students. Tier 1 words are basic, everyday words that children should know; therefore, the words do not have to be taught (e.g., baby, table, car). (Please note that these words may need to be taught for English Language Learners or students with limited vocabulary knowledge and experiences.) Tier 2 words are words frequently used in language, are central to comprehension, and are understood by most mature language users (e.g., *gigantic, sophisticated, ecstatic*) (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2008). Tier 3 words are those words that are generally used within the content of study (e.g., *altitude, longitude, peninsula*). Although young children may not be able to read, authentic literature provides students with ample opportunities to hear good Tier 2 words, which helps build their knowledge of words and aid in comprehension.

Reading comprehension is the ultimate goal of why we read. Without understanding what the author is telling the reader, the words

on the page are useless. The RAND Study Group defines reading comprehension as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (Kirby, 2002, p. 11). Authentic literature is the ultimate tool for enhancing reading comprehension because it encompasses such a large variety of writing styles and topics. Early childhood educators should use authentic literature because books with good storylines aid in the development of comprehension. These books tend to have great characters and a good plot with a problem, a solution, and a sequence of events.

All pillars of reading are necessary to ensure young children's success in learning to read. The following is a list of authentic texts that can be used with young children to help develop their literacy skills in each of the five pillars of reading.

Phonemic Awareness

Andreae, G., & Parker-Rees, G. (2001). *Giraffes can't dance*. New York: Orchard Books.

Synopsis of Literature:

Gerald is a clumsy giraffe. He wants to dance at the yearly jungle dance but is ashamed of his awkward dancing, and the other animals make fun of him. With the help from a friend, Gerald is able to overcome his fear and discovers that he truly can dance.

Lesson Idea:

Giraffes Can't Dance is a great book for developing phonemic awareness using rhyming words. When the teacher reads the book aloud to the class, the students will be-

come familiar with the rhythm and rhyme pattern of the text. During the next read, the teacher should have the class determine which words rhyme. Last, the students should toss a ball to each other, and once the ball is caught, they should say a word that rhymes with the previous student's word.

Seeger, L. V. (2005). *Walter was worried*. New Milford, CT: Roaring Brook Press.

Synopsis:

In this fun text, *Walter was worried...*, *Priscilla was puzzled...*, and *Shirley was shocked*, each character is in a mood that starts with the same sound (phoneme) as their first name.

Lesson Idea:

Teachers can use this book to teach phonemic awareness. One of the major skills that will be taught in kindergarten is the ability to isolate the initial or first sound in words, such as /v/ in van or /sh/ in ship. This is an excellent book to have young children develop a sentence based upon the initial sound of their name (e.g., *Holly was happy*). Next, the children can draw a picture similar to the cover page of *Walter Was Worried*. The picture should help illustrate their sentence.

Phonics

Shaw, N., & Apple, M. (1986). *Sheep in a jeep*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Synopsis:

In this story, a group of sheep run into some trouble while driving their jeep, and the further they go, they continue to run into more

and more trouble.

Lesson Idea:

Sheep in a Jeep can be used to focus on the long "E" sound. A major skill that students must learn is the common sounds that letters represent. After the reading, the teacher should help students identify words with the Long "E" sound, as some words were not spelled with the double "E." Next, the teacher should have the story written on chart paper. Then, she should ask the students to help her highlight all the long "E" words in the story. In this story, there are 32 total words with the long "E" sound!

Kellogg, S. (1987). *Aster Aardvark's Alphabet Adventures*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company.

Synopsis:

This fun book progresses through each letter of the alphabet with different animals doing different activities that involve the letter that is shown on each page (e.g., *Kenilworth, the kind kangaroo, kissed his kin Katherine Koala, who had kept his kite and his kitchen key in her kayak*.) This book is excellent for teaching alliteration, as well.

Lesson Idea:

After the teacher has read the book to the young children, the teacher can assign a letter to each student so that a class alphabet book can be created. The students will use magazine pictures to create pictures based upon their letter. Parents can help the children develop a sentence based upon the pictures used for their alphabet book page (e.g., *Buddy the beaver baked a beef berry soup for the big bear ball in Batesville*.)

Roberts, D. (2003). *Dirty Bertie*. London: Little Tiger.

Synopsis:

Dirty Bertie is a dirty little boy. He does all sorts of nasty things that are frowned upon. He finally changes and cleans up his act with the exception of one gross habit.

Lesson Idea:

This lesson focuses on r-controlled vowels. “In r-controlled vowels the letter R affects the sound of the vowel(s) that precedes it” (Honig, Diamond, Gutlohn 2008). After reading the text, the teacher will underline the -er and -ir spelling patterns for the /er/ sound. The teacher should write both spelling patterns on a piece of chart paper and write the words Bertie and Dirty. The students will then go through the book to find words that fit into each column. Although they may not yet be able to read, the students can still find and differentiate words that have the r-controlled spelling pattern. -ir (dirty, first, bird, girl, skirt, shirt, circle, thirty, birthday)
-er (Bertie, her, serve, person, every, perfect, expert, water, germ)

Fluency

Pulver, R., & Reed, L. R. (2003). *Punctuation takes a vacation*. New York: Holiday House.

Synopsis:

Mr. Wright’s class is suffering through a lesson on commas when they decide to give punctuation a vacation and go to recess. The only problem is that punctuation actually does leave and all of a sudden nothing makes sense.

Lesson Idea:

As the teacher reads this text, the teacher should focus on expression. Punctuation use is critically important in modeling good reading. The ability to model good reading keeps young children from reading monotone once they learn to read. While reading this text, the teacher should draw students’ attention to how the sentences do not sound like normal or conversational speaking when the punctuation is missing.

Schachner, J. B. (2003). *Skippyjon Jones*. New York: Dutton Children's Books/Penguin Young Readers Group.

Synopsis:

Skippyjon Jones is like most young children with an imagination filled with lots of excitement. He is always getting into some sort of trouble, and this time he is spending time in his room thinking about what it means to be a Siamese cat. As he is bouncing around and playing his imagination takes hold, and he is suddenly on an adventure in old Mexico.

Lesson Idea:

Skippyjon Jones is a great book for teaching fluency because the author uses multiple techniques to express emotion in the story. The important thing to note is that there are several changes of pace, some made up vocabulary, some language crossover, and some poetry in this text. As the teacher reads the story, he should make sure to emphasize the words with the way they are written on the page and do the clapping and singing that goes along with the text. This will emphasize to the students that the way print is portrayed, lets the reader know that the author wanted

the literature to be enjoyed a certain way.

Vocabulary

Fox, M., & Denton, T. (1989). *Night noises*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Synopsis of Literature:

Lilly is a little old lady who lives with her dog Butch Aggie. One night while they are sleeping, Butch Aggie is alarmed by some strange and interesting noises outside. He wakes Lilly up only to find out the sounds are her family planning a surprise birthday party for her.

Lesson Ideas:

Night Noises uses a variety of onomatopoeias to help describe the noises that are heard by Butch Aggie. While reading the text, use expression to show how important the sound words are to the story. After reading the text, give students pictures of different items and animals that make noises. The teacher will verbally make the noise, and the students will hold up the picture that fits the noise's description.

Byrne, R. (2014). *This book just ate my dog!* New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Synopsis:

Bella is taking her dog for a walk when the book all of a sudden eats her dog, her friend, and the ambulance. It is quiet odd that the book is eating everything, so she goes to investigate. She, then, gets eaten by the book. Eventually the problem is solved by turning the book and emptying everyone out on the other side.

Lesson Idea:

After the teacher reads the book, the teacher can complete an example/non example

activity. Examples of the activity are provided in *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction* (Beck, McKeown, Kucan 2013).

Tier 2 Words (e.g., *stroll*, *ridiculous*)

Example of *Example/Nonexample*:

Variation 1: "*If what I am describing sounds like a stroll, say stroll...*"

-jogging

-a walk through the park

-running

-taking your dog for a walk

Variation 2: *Which of these sound ridiculous?*

-Eating an enchilada at a restaurant or eating an enchilada on the moon.

-Scoring a thousand points in a football game or scoring a touchdown.

-Dancing with your mom or dancing with Justin Beiber.

Comprehension

Soman, D., & Davis, J. (2011). *Ladybug Girl and the Bug Squad*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Synopsis:

Lulu is super excited about a playdate she has planned for her and the bug squad. During the bug squads play date, Lulu learns a lesson about friendship. At the end of the story, the bug squad heads off on a new adventure.

Lesson Idea:

With the use of transition words, the comprehension skills addressed in this text are sequencing and prediction. There are op-

opportunities during the story to stop and assist the students in making predictions as to what will happen next. The end of the book is a cliff hanger where the author leaves the readers wondering what will happen next as the bug squad heads out on their final adventure. At the end of the book the teachers should have the students to draw and share what they predict will happen on the bug squad's next adventure.

Young, E. (1992). *Seven blind mice*. New York: Philomel Books.

Synopsis:

Seven blind mice find a strange new thing by their pond. Each mouse investigates and comes back to the group with their prediction of what the item may be. Each mouse is only observing a part of the whole item but the final mouse investigates the whole object along with what each of the other mice observed, and he makes a conclusion.

Lesson Idea:

Teachers can use story retelling. As the teacher is reading the book, she will place pictures of the main events and characters on the board, which will aid the students in retelling the story from beginning to end.

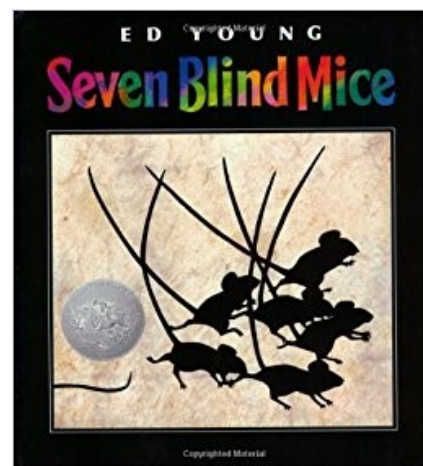
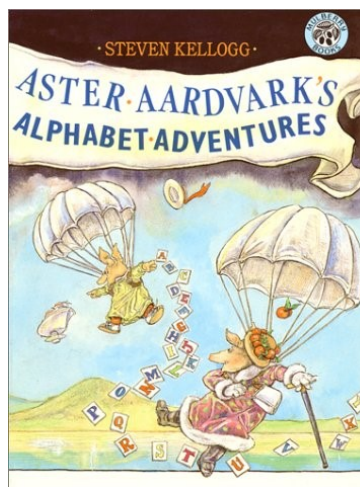
Authentic literature provides engaging and educational opportunities that teachers can use to their advantage in the classroom especially when they are paired with a lesson focused on one of the five pillars of reading. The students find that authentic literature usually is fun to listen to and therefore, it keeps their attention longer than the classic textbook or decodable text. In addition, this type of literature is similar to what children are encouraged to listen to at home. For this reason, reading may seem less

rote and more engaging. Bridging the gap between children who enter kindergarten with no exposure to authentic literature versus children who have had immense exposure is greatly needed. The National Reading Panel (2000) stated that five components are needed to effectively teach children to read. Because of the age of early learners, we argue that these components can be infused in authentic literature and with those opportunities when early childhood teachers are reading aloud to students.

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