Planning Literacy Environments for Diverse Preschoolers

Alicia has been teaching preschool children with disabilities for a number of years and she always takes a special interest in promoting literacy for all of the children in her classroom. This requires a great deal of creativity to meet the diverse needs of the learners, but she is committed to making children’s literature accessible and meaningful for all children. Alicia knows that her students will gain an important foundation for literacy long before they are able to identify letters and letter sounds. Next year will be somewhat different as she will be teaming with Meghan, the pre-K teacher, in an inclusive preschool program. As she reflects on their classroom, Alicia begins thinking of all of the things that she and Meghan will need to consider in setting up their classroom learning environment so that all children can participate meaningfully.

Emergent literacy is defined as the developmental process beginning at birth in which children acquire the foundation for reading and writing (Sulzby, 1986; Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001), including language, listening comprehension, concepts of print, alphabetic knowledge, and phonological awareness. The environment within which emergent literacy skills develop is also an important consideration (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2001; Strickland & Shanahan, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). Children who are immersed in literacy-rich environments learn about language, reading, and writing by participating in meaningful activities such as handling books and listening to stories read aloud (Katims, 1994).

Teachers like Alicia and Meghan recognize the impact that books and book reading can have in the development of early literacy skills for young children. They also realize that teachers are responsible for ensuring that children are exposed to literacy and literacy-related concepts (Bingham & Pennington, 2007). Preparing the classroom, selecting appropriate books, and engaging the children during book reading sessions are all important aspects of good literacy practice. This article discusses these considerations for teachers of young children.

Preparing the Classroom

Literacy experiences for young children can be intentionally built into many of the commonly occurring routines of a preschool...
“Preschool teachers must create meaningful activities, experiences, and opportunities that promote the acquisition of emerging literacy skills important for all children, including children with developmental delays or disabilities.”

Classroom Library Center

Setting up a library center offers multiple opportunities to interact with books and stories. A well-lit area of the room with natural lighting is preferable as it helps children to clearly view the pictures and text. An exclusive area for the book center (Cunningham, 2010) positioned in a location that is away from distracting noises and active play can provide an interactive environment for language learning and early print experiences (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2009). However, books should be accessible in all centers within the classroom (Cunningham, 2010; Strickland & Schickedanz, 2009). For example, if the class is studying a particular style of art, such as watercolors, books that contain illustrations that utilize watercolors could be made available in the art center. In addition, books that include pictures of and descriptions about fruits and vegetables could be made available in the dramatic play center when studying healthy habits.

Make sure that the books are displayed so that the cover of each book is visible to the children. Audio books support children’s listening comprehension and promote an interest in reading (Jalongo, 2007). Teaching children to use the tape recorder or CD player to listen to books helps them become independent learners and allows them to practice reading as often as they desire (Grover & Hannegan, 2005). Alicia and Meghan may want to read the reviews on audio books before purchasing them for their center. Some print review sources include Audio Books on the Go, Words on Cassette, Audio File, Booklist, Library Journal Publishers Weekly and Bookpage (Jalongo, 2007). It is also important to provide book holders so that all children can manipulate and see pictures in the book regardless of their motor development level. Book holders are typically made from light plastic with adjustable clips designed to hold a book open. They can be purchased at most office supply stores. Big picture books on a tabletop easel help to display the pictures at the children’s eye level and magnifying sheets enhance the print in books, and are easy to use.

A comfortable, supported seating arrangement is important for all but particularly for children who have physical disabilities that affect posture and muscle tone. If children are sitting together in the book center, allow the child who uses a wheelchair to sit on the floor perhaps snuggled in the corner with several large pillows for stabilization (Watson & McCathren, 2009). Make sure the legs of children with physical impairments are protected by pillows to avoid injury in case...
other children trip and fall on them. Sitting at eye level with other students encourages conversations among children and the teacher.

Pictures in the book center help to show a variety of images that foster children’s language and vocabulary development. Consider using a theme in the book center, such as insects. Then display various books on the topic and decorate the walls with photographs of insects. The pictures should be placed on the wall at eye level so they can be referred to when children peruse the books. Research has shown that thematic teaching is effective in promoting vocabulary and language development, which are foundational for literacy development (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). Teachers can rotate their centers every few weeks to provide opportunities for children to experience new concepts and books. However, if teachers prefer, they can organize their book centers without using a specific theme.

Having a writing center adjacent to the book center allows children to use the books as references and models for emergent writing. A wide variety of writing instruments and paper encourages writing for different purposes (Cunningham, 2010). Some examples might include colored pencils and fine line markers to encourage children to add detail to their drawings and print representations. Different textured materials, for example, templates or tools such as sandpaper letters and rubber stamps to form letters, also encourage the creation of various art elements. The key to a strong writing center is engaging children to talk while drawing and writing. Children often represent their ideas of movement or gesture using different marks or words describing actions (Wright, 2007). The more materials available, the more likely the child will create detailed drawings and stories that can be made into personalized texts or illustrated books. Supportive literacy environments integrate drawing, writing, and early literacy across the curriculum (Inan, 2009).

Book Reading

Many activities within preschool classrooms support early literacy development, but perhaps one of the most powerful is book reading. Reading books aloud to children was recognized by the National Early Literacy Panel (2009) as an effective practice for improving child outcomes in language and literacy. Furthermore, reading books to children (a) provides opportunities for multiple exposures to words and related concepts, (b) allows for connections between content-area knowledge and/or academic language, and (c) aids in the development of a strong oral language foundation (Pollard-Durodola et al., 2011). Books
provide a meaningful context for learning to read and can assist in the development of technical reading skills, even for prereaders (Mol & Bus, 2011). Through experiences with books, children develop an understanding about the forms and functions of print, for example, knowledge of the individual letters of the alphabet (alphabet knowledge) and the directionality of print in books (print-concept knowledge) (McGinty & Justice, 2009). Finally, access to books that children have heard before, either through group or individual readings, encourages children to want to pick up that book and “read” it on their own. Taken together, book reading creates the context for high-quality literacy experiences for all children.

Selecting Appropriate Books

As Alicia and Meghan select books for their library center, they want to ensure the books are appropriate and meaningful to all the children in their classroom. The children represent a range of backgrounds, including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse, those with identified disabilities as well as children who are typically developing. The following sections provide important considerations about multiculturalism, gender, and disability that Alicia and Meghan should make when choosing books.

Books Considering Multiculturalism

According to the National Center for Education Statistics Report on the Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), the diversity of the U.S. schoolchildren will increase in the coming years. This report estimates that by 2020, approximately 41% of school-age children will be minorities. With such a diverse group of schoolchildren, it is important for books in the classroom to reflect the diversity of the children. Regardless of whether the teacher will read the books to the children or whether the children will look at the books independently in the classroom library center, the characters and experiences in the books should be relevant and interesting.

There are a number of points for teachers such as Meghan and Alicia to keep in mind when selecting books that appeal to learners from diverse backgrounds. Topics and stories need to be familiar to the students or present a relevant knowledge base for young learners to build upon. It is often a challenge to find books that are culturally connected to the lives of students, and the presence of a few words in another language does not guarantee that the book is relevant to the children who will read it (Vardell, Hadaway, & Young, 2006). Harvey and Goudvis (2007) emphasized the importance of relevance to the lives of the children so that learners can make connections with text as they read. Teachers need to know their students and their backgrounds so that they can locate books to which the children can relate. Translating familiar children’s stories into Spanish does not necessarily mean that the children will be able to identify with the characters and
events in the story. The International Children’s Digital Library (http://en.childrenslibrary.org) is a great source to help teachers and parents select books that reflect a diversity of cultures and languages. In addition, selecting books that contain key words in the primary language of the child complements a child’s overall development of linguistic abilities (Minaya-Rowe, 2004).

Research indicates that development of the home language establishes a foundation for other languages (Cummins, 1979; Nixon & McCardle, 2007; Uccelli & Páez, 2007). In addition, the language in the books should be simple and direct, particularly for English Language Learners (ELLs) (Piker & Rex, 2011). To increase understanding and relevance to the children, it is important for books to have illustrations that support the content (Silverman, 2007). This is especially important for nonfiction and poetry as they are not presented in a predictable story format. Table 1 provides questions that Alicia and Meghan should ask themselves when selecting multicultural literature.

### Table 1
**Considerations for Selecting Multicultural Literature**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to Ask</th>
<th>Example for Evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How are characters outside the mainstream culture represented?</td>
<td>Children are portrayed having individual personalities, likes and dislikes, and/or temperaments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Does the story depict significant and specific cultural information? Is it accurate?</td>
<td>Families are represented in multiple forms such as single parent, two same-sex parents, and/or the traditional structure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Which characters in the story hold the power? How is that power used?</td>
<td>Power or influence is shared among the characters (adults learn from children as well as children learning from adults).</td>
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<td>4. How is language used to represent people of a particular group?</td>
<td>Different dialects and/or languages are presented among people of various groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. How does the illustrator use artistic elements to create images of characters or events?</td>
<td>The illustrator uses art elements such as lines, shapes, colors, textures, and composition to enhance multiple perspectives of the events, settings, or plot of the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Whose voices are heard? Whose voices are missing?</td>
<td>The first narrator is not the only voice in the story that is heard. Thoughts and ideas and personalities of subordinate characters should also be heard.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. What are the consequences of certain behaviors? What behaviors are rewarded or punished?</td>
<td>Actions or nonactions of characters are not simply right or wrong. There exist shades of meaning and different values within the story.</td>
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**Books Considering Gender**

Another consideration related to diversity is the potentially sexist content found in many children’s books. Sexism may be blatant in older books such as *I’m Glad I’m a Boy! I’m Glad I’m a Girl* (Darrow, 1970), which presents phrases such as, “Boys are doctors–girls are nurses” and “Boys fix things–girls need things fixed.” Modern examples of sexism are often subtle, such as illustrations where the male is the driver and the female the passenger, or where the male is leaving the house and the female waving at the doorway (Care, Deans, & Brown, 2007).

There are a number of children’s books with strong, authentic, and
unbiased portrayals of characters with diverse backgrounds. Books such as *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) take contemporary issues like family diversity and present it in a readable and authentic prose. Other children’s books like *Nappy Hair* (Herron, 1997) embrace diversity. In Herron’s book, she conveys the message in a familiar call and response narration that engages young listeners throughout the book. *Fiesta Babies* (Tafolla & Cordova, 2010) merges multiculturalism with phonemic awareness skills through rhymes and colorful illustrations. Because preschoolers’ interpretation of race, gender, and ethnicity mediates the meanings they construct from books and illustrations (Chick, Heilman-Houser, & Hunter, 2002; Mendoza & Reese, 2001), teachers can consider selecting books such as these to promote children’s understanding of diversity.

Meghan and Alicia will need to examine their books for possible stereotypes of characters and themes by gender traits. Taylor (2003) analyzed the characters and themes in children’s books according to traditional gender roles. Feminine traits in this analysis were “submissive,” “dependent,” “emotional,” “receptive,” “intuitive,” “weak,” “unintelligent,” “passive,” “content,” “cooperative,” and “sensitive.” In contrast, the masculine stereotypes were characterized by other traits: “dominant,” “independent,” “intelligent,” “rational,” “assertive,” “analytical,” “strong,” “brave,” “ambitious,” “active,” “competitive,” “insensitive,” and “aggressive.” While some teachers may view the analysis of books for sexist content as simply a reflection of the cultural reality of society and the prevalence of sexism in children’s literature (Tsao, 2008; Worland, 2008), it is critical to recognize that young children are in their formative stages of acquiring their gender concepts, and teachers need to purposefully evaluate the messages that they may be sending in the books that they offer them (Taylor, 2003). Therefore, teachers need to ask critical questions about the texts they select for the classroom (Mendoza & Reese, 2001).

**Books Considering Disability**

Young children, including those with developmental disabilities, often have short attention spans (Akshoomoff, 2002). Therefore, it is important for teachers to select books with an amount of text on each page that is consistent with their children’s ability to attend. In addition, books with clear realistic pictures that are related to the children’s experiences help to aid in comprehension. Because language development is an important issue, the teacher needs to select books that are developmentally appropriate in relation to children’s language comprehension abilities. They should select books that are at
their children’s language level, or just above it, with sentence length, vocabulary, and language complexity that are consistent with the developmental level of the children in the class (Blok, 1999; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2011).

For children with visual impairments, there are books with Braille overlays so that the child can feel the Braille while the nondisabled peers look at the pictures. Children with low vision who will read print need high contrast print, bold font, adequate spacing between lines, and plenty of white space on the page (Heward, 2009). They also benefit from clear, realistic pictures on a light background.

Abstract language use can be difficult for children who are deaf or have hearing impairments (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2011); therefore, teachers need to be intentional in providing synonyms, giving explanations, and making references to pictures in the book as they read. Teachers can use these same techniques for words with multiple meanings and figurative language which can be difficult for deaf children (Heward, 2009). In addition, books that include sign language can also be used so that teachers and children can become familiar with and incorporate common signs into their everyday routines.

Children with and without disabilities respond to books that are familiar to them as well as books that are predictable. Zipprich, Grace, and Grote-Garcia (2009) found that books that had been read during story time were independently chosen by the children with disabilities during free time more often than unfamiliar books. The same study also found that books classified as familiar and predictable were chosen more often by children with disabilities as compared with books that were familiar, yet not predictable. Books that are “predictable” are those containing rhythmic, repetitive patterns and/or have authentic dependable story structures or plots (Katims, 1994). Examples of these types of books include Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See by Bill Martin (1967) and A Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle (1969), which contain features of repetitive words and/or phrases and the predictable characteristic of the sequence of numbers and days of the week.

Engaging Children During Book Reading

Reading books to children is just one of many activities that preschool teachers can employ within their classrooms to facilitate early literacy skill development for young children. However, reading books does not have to be a passive activity where children are quiet listeners and teachers do all the talking. Alicia and Meghan are interested in making their book reading sessions more interactive and ultimately more beneficial for all their children. The following sections provide strategies for how they can enhance book reading sessions through active engagement of the children. Alicia and Meghan can certainly utilize these strategies during large group reading sessions, or they may consider implementing them during small group or one-on-one book reading with children as well.
Strategies for Using Books and/or Props

Often young children, particularly those with language delays, have better language comprehension than language expression. They may not be able to formulate an answer to a question about a story, but they often can complete sentences to respond, fill in last word of the text read orally, or select pictures to respond to the story. Teachers can bring objects associated with the books to the book reading session to help the children better relate to the story. For example, when reading the story *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (Numeroff, 1985), you could bring in little stuffed mice and plastic cookies. In addition, some books come with stuffed animals that represent the characters in the text. Books also can include a “story box” with real objects placed in a box, basket, or ziplock bag (Day, McDonnell, & Heathfield, 2010). Children with visual impairments can feel and manipulate these objects while the story is read. This helps to develop their fine motor and object manipulation skills. Books that contain different textures can be used with hand-over-hand support to assist the child in exploring the book. Large print and Braille materials should also be available for the young child with visual impairments (McKenzie, 2009). Alicia and Meghan will want to remember to label items within the child’s reach using large print or Braille. Moreover, it is especially important for teachers to employ the use of learning media assessments for students with visual and multiple impairments. Learning media assessments are designed to assess the best reading format for a student such as Braille, large print, audio, or a combination of media. This allows assessment-based decisions to be made regarding literacy programs for this student population (McKenzie, 2007).

Because children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing also need mediated literacy experiences, DesJardin and Ambrose (2010) recommended that adults label items in the book, discuss events and characters, use open-ended questioning techniques before and after reading, and link concepts in the book with the child’s life experiences. They also stress the importance of teaching new vocabulary within the context of shared story reading because this group of children benefit from instruction within a meaningful context. As Alicia and Megan read stories in their classrooms, they can name objects shown on each page after reading the text and relate these items to common classroom or home experiences. For example, in reading *Seed, Sprout, Pumpkin Pie* (Esbaum, 2009), Alicia and Megan can name the pictures of seeds, plants or sprouts, stems, and roots. After providing the children with a brief description of the picture, they can talk about seeds that they have planted in the classroom, at home, or other similar experiences common to their children. After reading the book, they can ask the children to tell about pumpkins that they have seen. Table 2 provides readers with book suggestions across a variety of genres as well as accommodations and modifications to be considered for children with diverse learning needs. Alicia and Meghan will be able to use these adaptations as they plan their...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Book</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Adaptations and Considerations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Lion and The Mouse by Jerry Pinkney (2009)</td>
<td>Fable</td>
<td>Picture Book</td>
<td>Great picture book that keeps attention of young readers. Beautiful illustrations that allow children to make connections in the story through the sequence of pictures.</td>
<td>For children with visual impairments, pair this book with the original story on tape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First the Egg by Laura Seeger (2007)</td>
<td>Nonfiction</td>
<td>Predictable book</td>
<td>The cutouts in this book help children make the connection between egg and chicken and several other creatures. Great for building prediction skills.</td>
<td>For children with fine motor difficulties add sturdy sticky tabs to the pages and have the child pull on the tab to turn each page. This will help to protect the cutouts in the book as children turn the pages. For children with visual impairments, order the compact disc sound recording of the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet Time With Cassat by Julie Merberg and Suzanne Bober (2006)</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>Rhyming</td>
<td>Sturdy construction and the rhyming lyrics keep children engaged.</td>
<td>Use these books as a transition to quiet time in the preschool. For children who are learning to regulate their behavior, provide a comfort item for the child as you read the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Quiet Book by Deborah Underwood (2010)</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Picture book</td>
<td>Minimal text that describes many types of quiet time.</td>
<td>Enlarge the pictures and place on a poster board for easier viewing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When My Worries Get Too Big! A Relaxation Book for Children Who Live with Anxiety by Kari Buron (2006)</td>
<td>Nonfiction</td>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>This book contains wonderful strategies to help children deal with their emotions.</td>
<td>Make a large reproduction of the thermometer and laminate it. Allow children to draw their level of distress when they are anxious or angry. The board can be reused for different children at different times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Banana and Me by Lenore Blegvad and Erik Blegvad (1985)</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Picture books</td>
<td>This story breaks the gender roles and stereotypes.</td>
<td>Make sure that you read the story at eye level and face-to-face with children who have hearing impairments so they can see your lips. Also use exaggerated facial expressions and hand gestures as your read. A book holder helps to free your hands as your read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Neighborhood Mother Goose by Nina Crews (2003)</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Rhymes and poetry</td>
<td>Represents diversity in multiple ways. The illustrations are large and easy to see.</td>
<td>As the children become familiar with the rhymes, let them read along with you. For children with hearing impairments, use an amplification device when reading aloud. Ask open-ended questions to engage all children as you read aloud. This book is also available in Braille.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen for the Bus: David's Story by Patricia McMahon and John Godt (1995)</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Picture book</td>
<td>Depicts the daily events of a child who is visually impaired.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
lessons and prepare their classroom environment.

**Getting Organized**

Selecting books for group reading sessions does not have to be only the teacher’s job. Alicia and Meghan can prompt and encourage children to select a favorite book from the classroom library center to be shared with the class as a whole. In this way, children are becoming more familiar with the books as they are not only being read aloud to them, but the books are also available in the library center for independent investigation. Also consider reading the same story more than once. Repetition helps children to develop their memory, sequencing, communication, and social skills, while broadening their knowledge base and helping them predict events. Furthermore, rereading books provides opportunities for repeated exposure to the same new words, which in turn promotes word learning (Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Sénéchal, 1997). Children may also begin to understand sentence structure and vocabulary, and perhaps even incorporate these into their own conversations (Lewman, 1999; Shedd & Duke, 2008). Brett, Rothlein, and Hurley (1996) found that children do not necessarily pick up new vocabulary just by listening to stories. Children are more likely to learn new vocabulary if the words are explained and synonyms offered. The teacher might read, “The boy walked home feeling unhappy,” followed by an example using a synonym, “The boy walked home feeling sad.” The combination of an explanation of the word and a synonym helps to clarify meaning for the children. Teachers should also purposely use key words throughout the day and intentionally weave these words into multiple events and activities (Penno et al., 2002).

Care should be taken when setting up the environment for story reading time. Children need to have visual cues as to their space for sitting and listening. This can be done by providing carpet squares for children to sit on in front of the teacher or story reader. Some children will be more comfortable using a chair to sit on as the physical boundaries are often more concrete. In this case, the chair should be behind the other children so as not to block anyone’s view. Children who are very active may have difficulty attending to the story and a bungee cord placed on the front legs of the chair allows the child to bounce his feet quietly in his or her chair without disturbing others.

Finally, it is important to consider the teacher’s comfort when reading aloud. Often it is necessary for the teacher to move toward children during story time to redirect or engage the child using physical prompts. If the teacher reads from a chair and needs to move toward a child, it can disrupt the flow of the story, not to mention the physical strain that can occur from getting up and down. A wheeled stool like that used by medical professionals offers a smooth and comfortable way for the teacher to move back and forth from child to book easel.

**Paying Attention to Print**

Storybooks become more interesting to children when there
are concepts about the book that draw their attention, including the print. When children are frequently attending to the print in a book, they are noticing and learning about print more quickly (Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009). Moreover, children will realize that it is not only the pictures that tell the story, but there are letters, words, and sentences that also make a story come to life. Teachers can help facilitate children’s attention to print through use of strategies called print referencing. Teachers will need to keep in mind that some books either do not have print at all or have very minimal print, making print referencing strategies difficult to implement. Three specific components to print referencing include (a) questions about print, (b) comments about print, and (c) tracking your finger along print while you read (Justice & Ezell, 2004).

Questions and comments about print (i.e., verbal techniques) allow the teacher to highlight print that is written in a different way or placed in an unusual place on the page. Children may not notice these unique features unless it is specifically pointed out to them. Alicia and Meghan can incorporate questions about print by asking, “What do you notice about the way the words big and tiny are written on this page?” or “What do you think this letter is above the sleeping girl?” Comments about print that Alicia and Meghan can make include, “Look, the arrow on the elevator is pointing to the number 4,” or “Notice the dinosaur’s name, stegosaurus, is written on the picture hanging on the wall.” In addition, tracking words on a page with your finger (i.e., nonverbal technique) also encourages children to connect with specific letters and/or words as they are being read. As mentioned previously, books that are familiar and predictable are great to use here because children can more easily understand the flow and sequence of the book and can begin to anticipate what is coming next.

**Asking Questions**

Asking questions during story time may be a strategy teachers already use; however, it is important to consider the types and frequency of questions that are being asked. Let’s begin with frequency of questions. During the first reading of a story, children are usually not yet familiar with the content, so it may be best to keep it simple. Alicia and Meghan may want to select a few unfamiliar words to target and use those words as the basis for asking questions. Then as children become more familiar with the story through multiple readings, the teachers increase their use of questions as a means to encourage discussion. Questions can move from basic, surface level to more complex, deeper questions each time the same story is read. Take Rosie’s
Walk (Hutchins, 1971) as an example. Questions such as “Who is the fox chasing?” can be used the first time or two the story is read, whereas questions like “Why do you think this is happening?” or “How could the story have ended differently?” can be used with subsequent readings. The idea is that children are active participants in the story because Alicia and Meghan are encouraging them to participate through question prompts.

Alicia and Meghan should also take care to ensure that the book does not become all about question asking as this can take away from the enjoyment of reading. Marking pages on a book with a sticky note and question, or placing familiar question prompts at their eye level on the back wall of the classroom are both great ways to help remember the questions to ask.

What types of questions can our two teachers use? Previous studies have identified the benefits of asking questions during book reading (Whitehurst et al., 1994), particularly in terms of children’s language and vocabulary development. Dialogic reading, as outlined by Whitehurst and colleagues (1994), includes specific prompts teachers can use during book reading sessions as a means to encourage dialogue between teacher and child as well as child to child. It has been suggested that dialogic reading strategies may contribute to the development of social-emotional skills, or emotion vocabulary, and as a potential remedy to poor oral language skills and concurrent or later poor behavior (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Morgan & Meier, 2008). In addition, Alicia and Meghan could encourage parents to utilize dialogic reading strategies at home with their children to support first language development as it has demonstrated effectiveness on language and literacy skills not only in English but also in Chinese, Korean, and Turkish (Chow, McBride-Chang, Cheung, & Chow, 2008; Fung, Chow, & McBride-Chang, 2005; Hargrave & Sénechal, 2000; Kotaman, 2007; Lim, 1999).

Dialogic reading prompts include open-ended, recall, and “wh” (e.g., who, what, when, where, and why) questions. Teacher questions that challenge children to use more advanced and abstract cognitive processes can be especially beneficial (Reese & Cox, 1999; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Open-ended questions are therefore appropriate because they allow children to critically think and formulate responses that reach beyond just a simple yes or no response. In fact, consider limiting the use of questions that require only a yes/no response or a simple one-word answer. For example, in place of the question, “Did you like the story?” Alicia and Meghan could ask the children, “What was your favorite part of the story?” or “Tell me about what is happening on this page.”

Some children may not have the oral language skills to respond to questions or may have difficulty comprehending the questions. Therefore, it may be helpful to have pictures or objects available that a child can use to help them communicate with you. An array of pictures from the book can be presented to the child and they select their favorite by pointing to or holding up the picture. For example, using the book Rosie’s Walk (Hutchins, 1971), a child could be
given pictures of a pond, flour mill, fence, and chicken coop to select their favorite place that Rosie walked.

Conclusion

Early literacy skill development is critical, particularly in the preschool years. Teachers like Alicia and Meghan who are charged with supporting learners of all backgrounds and developmental levels have much to consider in terms of how to develop those early skills. Keeping these early literacy suggestions and ideas in mind can make literacy an exciting and natural everyday experience.

Fortunately, both Alicia and Meghan bring strengths in the area of literacy to the classroom—Alicia from the perspective of a special educator and Meghan from the viewpoint of a general educator. Together they recognize the need to set up a classroom to promote literacy for all children, both those with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. When they learn that Hannah, a child with visual impairment, will be joining their class, they select books that include both Braille and print, and they plan to develop story boxes to accompany their books. In addition, they will record several stories on CDs so that Hannah can listen independently after they show her how to use the CD player.

They also will develop a number of centers to promote learning across individual needs and abilities of the children. They plan a science center to feature seasonal themes such as fall, with books, CDs, and various objects for the children to investigate. As Hannah is visually impaired, they include a stationary magnifying glass to enable her and the other children to investigate various objects at closer range: leaves, pumpkin seeds, and turkey feathers. They also include books about fall in this center and encourage the children to “read” the book as they tell about the pictures. In the block center, Alicia and Megan place blocks that have varied textures so that children can feel and manipulate them, as well as match by texture. In their block center they use books that talk about building a house and a city. For the transportation center, Alicia and Megan add texture to the roads on the vinyl road map using school glue. After the glue dries, it provides a tactile road map that Hannah can use as she drives the cars on and off the road. Books that they include in this area center on vehicles, taking a trip, and road construction. As the children work in the varied centers in the classroom, the teachers can encourage the children to tell about what they are doing and what they plan to do next. The teachers also engage in dialogic reading as they read the books in the centers, describe the pictures, and ask open-ended questions. By doing these things, and carefully selecting books that match the developmental needs of their children, Alicia and Megan know that they can lay the foundation for valuable literacy skills for all of the learners in their classroom, including those from diverse backgrounds and those with disabilities such as Hannah.
Authors’ Note

You may reach Lindsay R. Dennis by e-mail at lrdennis@fsu.edu.

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doi:10.1177/1053451208330896