
Reading the World: Supporting the Functional Literacy Abilities of Urban Learners

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As a college professor of elementary education with a focus on literacy development, I was always interested in language acquisition and how young children begin to decode print. While on sabbatical as a literacy coach in an urban elementary school, I noticed that many of the primary grades (K-3) students lacked concepts of print skills such as letter identification, letter-sound relationships, and phonemic awareness. As a primary literacy coach, my role was to model literacy best practices in teachers' classrooms. Chomsky's studies on early childhood language development stated that children are programmed to learn language and that the environment serves as a catalyst for language development (25). As I attempted to engage the primary students in guided reading practices, I observed that the students' prerequisite language development was limited; therefore, I created various functional literacy activities that focused on environmental and contextualized experiences (Irvine & Armento 19). Many of these activities were augmented by the use of a digital camera that I purchased from grant funds I received from the Minnesota Council for Teachers of English.

According to Harris and Hodges, environmental print is defined as "print and other graphic symbols, in addition to books, that are found in the physical environment, as street

signs, billboards, television commercials, building signs [and so on] . . . Environmental print affords opportunities for learners in early phases of emerging literacy to discover and explore the nature of graphic symbols as conveyors of meaning, even when they are not able to read in the formal sense" (73). Environmental print that is specifically intended to convey reading is functional print, such as words on a cereal box, menus, and game directions. The reading of environmental and functional print enables a student to become functionally literate. A person who is function-



ally literate possesses the reading and writing knowledge and skills which enable him or her to navigate the print of his or her physical world (Heffernan & Lewison 437). Showcased in this article are two activities that were used in a second grade classroom to enhance the learner's functional literacy skills.

Concepts of Print

As primary students learn to decode words through phonemic and phonological awareness activities, they must also be exposed to authentic literature and taught explicitly concepts of print such as directionality, return sweep, use of punctuation, and the differentiation between letters, words, and sentences. According to Clay, "it is not self-evident to a child that left to right along a line, through a book, and across a word are related" (143). These primary students need ongoing practice with these print concepts. They need to not only use the print concepts when reading books and classroom materials, but also to transfer these concepts when

navigating their world and reading for functional purposes. To get students to make this transfer, I generated two opportunities for active engagement with print media beyond textbooks.

Environmental Walks

The school in which I did my sabbatical work was positioned in an ethnically- diverse commercial and residential neighborhood. I wanted my primary students to explore this set-



ting, so we took a walking field trip of the neighborhood similar to the walk outlined by Orellana and Hernandez (613). Before the field trip began, digital pictures were taken of various signs,



billboards, store windows, street posts, and other environmental print postings. These pictures were developed into a slide show and presented to the students as examples of functional reading. Students were asked to read the slides and describe where they might find such print and what was the purpose of the postings. For example, one picture was simply of the word “open” in neon. I asked students where this word would be posted and why it would be in bright lights called neon. The students responded and gave several examples of other neon signs they

had seen. They noted that neon was probably used to bring attention to or to emphasize the importance of a word or phrase.

The next day, the class was divided into groups and given specific scavenger hunt questions. As we walked through the neighborhood, they were asked to identify various environmental postings and to answer their scavenger hunt questions. One such scavenger hunt sheet consisted of the following questions:

- Can you find a dumpster with a caution sign on it? Why should you be cautious? What is the phone number written on it?



- Can you find a blue sign with the number “34” on it? What other words are on this sign? What is the meaning of this sign?
- Can you find a sign with red letters in the window of someone’s house? What does this sign say and mean?
- Can you find a sign that says *Fahima Psychic Visions*? What are the business hours of this shop?



- Can you find a small blue box by someone's step that says *St. Paul* on it? What other words are on the box?

The students were excited about this opportunity to use their reading knowledge and apply it to real world settings. The slide show preview enabled them to readily identify the signs on their scavenger hunt sheets, and they were eager to use their pencils and clipboards like field researchers collecting data. The students were able to successfully complete the environmental print task and shared their discoveries with the rest of the class on our return to the classroom. Because many of the students lived in the neighborhood and walked to school, copies of the digital slides were sent home with a parent letter encouraging parents to walk with their children in the neighborhood and have their children identify and discuss some of the print media. The following is an excerpt from the letter that was sent to parents:

Today, your child took part in a functional reading activity – a scavenger hunt. The purpose of this activity was to increase your child's awareness of reading environmental print. Environmental print

is the reading of information from signs, billboards, shop windows, and street signs. With adult chaperones, we walked through the school's neighborhood and observed various reading-related print.

We would like to encourage you to continue your child's reading and learning of environmental print. You can do this by asking your child to read and answer questions pertaining to environmental print in your neighborhood. I have enclosed a sample packet of some of the print your child encountered while on the scavenger hunt. You can enhance your child's reading skills by having him or her observe and read similar environmental print in your neighborhood.

This activity was effective because it underscored the importance of linking a school literacy instructional activity with out-of-school influences of urban commercial and residential environments. The effects of this activity were similar to those identified in Neuman and Roskos' article that showed an increase in children's ability to handle environmental and functional print tasks after being exposed to an environmental print-rich play setting (116). When given recipes, students were able to choose appropriate items for cooking play by reading labels, and they could follow directions of make-shift road signs when playing with cars and trucks. After reading this article, I wondered if my students could actually read product labels; therefore, I engaged them in another functional reading activity entitled grocery shopping.

Grocery Shopping

To set up this activity, I went to the store and purchased multiple sets of grocery items that I thought could be packed in a second grader's lunch bag such as juice boxes, pudding packs,

lunch packs (lunchables), string cheese singlets, and snack crackers. After purchasing the items, I brought them to class and presented my students with a real world problem or task. According to Jalongo and Miller, primary students need to apply their budding literacy skills to authentic tasks in order to fully comprehend the utility of their emerging literacy abilities (225, 11). The students' task was to pack an affordable and nutritious bag lunch. The students were to work in teams, read the labels to determine nutritional content, and then select items for their lunch that would have a total cost of no more than \$3.00. The purpose of such an activity was to enhance students' functional reading skills by deciphering product labels and to encourage students' addition abilities by generating the sum value of the lunch. Because these items were not individually priced, this task was more difficult. In order to determine prices students had to divide the number of items in a package by the total cost of the package.

Students were given calculators and shown how to divide the bulk prices to determine individual item prices. They could not use the calculators to add the individual items. They had to create addition operations to generate the total price of the bag lunch. For instance, one group packed a lunch of two lunch packets, three puddings, and one juice box. When they added the amount, it was more than \$3.00. They also realized they were choosing their lunch according to what they liked and not based on the established affordability and nutritional value criteria. Another group of students realized, when reading the nutritional content on the product labels, that the fruit and vegetable portion of a balanced diet was not available and suggested that the pudding packs be substituted with fruit cups. This activity enabled the students to make many critical discoveries about nutrition and the value of an affordable lunch. The students also learned functional literacy and mathematical skills which will enable them to better navigate their physical world.

After completing this in-class grocery shopping simulation, I scheduled a field trip to the grocery store. I wanted the students to experience the reality of shopping for a specific

purpose with a limited budget. The real-life, authentic task was to shop for a class party on a \$50.00 budget. The students' first task was to generate a shopping list. The writing of the shopping list was a functional literacy skill. The students worked in small groups to list items and quantities. The groups shared their items and a composite list was created. The list was then subdivided, and each group of students was responsible for gathering the group's listed items during the grocery shopping trip.

The students went shopping in their groups with an adult chaperone. The students were told that they had a specific total price for their items and they had to stay within their groups' budget or the total party budget of \$50.00 would be jeopardized. The grocery trip was a wonderful success. The students were very cognizant of their budgets and all items on the list were purchased for \$47.93.

The students learned to shop for on-sale items and generic products as opposed to brand name products. They discovered that juices and sodas in volume sizes were less expensive than individually packaged products, but they had to factor into their budget cups and ice if they wanted the drinks cold. The students learned to compromise and negotiate as they decided on what type of cookies to buy and whether to sacrifice taste for affordability. As a teacher, I realized that these discoveries were priceless and the skills that were utilized could not be replicated as authentically in the classroom.

Conclusion

The urban learners in this second grade classroom were vibrant and engaged by the activities. They had energy, ideas, questions, and observations. Sometimes their energy was a distraction as I tried to teach them to read and write using traditional techniques. But as I discovered, this same distracting energy could be used as an asset if channeled in productive ways. These active, urban learners needed learning opportunities that were grounded in the reality of their experiences. The environmental print walk and the grocery shopping field trip were two such opportunities; with these experi-

ences, the students are now better able to navigate their world.

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