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# Inside the Literacy Environment

by  
Catherine E. Loughlin

It seemed a simple, straightforward task: to spend a few hours each week looking at elementary school learning environments, noting materials and arrangements which involved children in literacy, and observing how children used those materials. Seven years and three studies later, my colleagues and I marvel at the simplistic views we held as we started.

Our early work focused on the physical environment of the classroom and its stimuli for literacy activity (Sheehan & Cole, 1983); gradually we broadened to include children's use of the environment. We anticipated seeing a direct relationship between the quantity of literacy materials in the environment and children's literacy activity in direct response to those materials, but we had overlooked something. We needed to consider also how much access children had to the environment (Loughlin & Ivener, 1984). Still later we decided to look at children's literacy behaviors within all the activities of the school day (Loughlin, 1987). Now, as we reflect on the teachers we interviewed and the dozens of classrooms we visited over the years, housing children of diverse ages, cultures and economic levels, we find common patterns of arrangements and literacy activity in those environments. We perceive much more complexity now--seeing the ways that space, materials arrangement, time, and access to the environment all interact to create a functioning literacy environment. We also have a greater realization of the persistence of children's interest and participation in literacy.

The teachers who invited us into their classrooms represented a variety of views about the best way to help children become literate, from "Whole Language" views to commitment to basal textbook programs. However, they all shared the belief that it is important for children to enjoy literacy activity, seeing its value in their own lives, and to be involved in literacy activity throughout the day.

## Constraints Against Literacy

We were surprised to find how often both teachers and children were frustrated in attempts to use the literacy environment. Most of the teachers had to be very creative in organizing for children's access to literacy materials due

to the demands of schools. In turn, sometimes teachers created barriers to children's use of the environment for literacy.

Establishing an environment where children are involved with literacy through the entire day often meant working against the system; many school practices fought it. Demands of prescribed instructional programs sometimes left so little time for more direct individual involvement that in a few classrooms we saw more uses of literacy materials during transitions than during a morning's "reading" period. School-determined schedules (pull-out programs, library, P.E., computer lab, recess) often chopped the school day into short time blocks; where this happened most of children's classroom time was consumed by obligations for teacher directed activity, with little time for the environment.

The segmented schedules of some classrooms generated many formal transitions each day. As classes shifted from one activity or location to another, we often saw children become suddenly literacy-active, especially if little other time was available to respond to the environment's invitations. Two primary children ran back into their classroom during recess to get pencils and paper to take outside with them; they said they were going to make a list. A small boy pushed an adult chair over to a chalkboard, climbed up on it to write his name in large letters at the top of the chalkboard, climbed down and smiled up at it, then joined the line to walk to the computer room. Just before lunch someone rushed over to the paper and marker supply, hurriedly folded a piece of construction paper, drew on it, ran a finger down a word list, then turned to a friend saying, almost frantically, "I forget how to spell birthday...how does it go? I need it to make this card for my mother!"

Some of the constraints to children's literacy were shaped by environmental arrangements. If meeting areas were edged with racks or shelves displaying attractive books, children near the books picked them up or looked through them during large-group activities; they were often scolded. In rooms with little literacy activity during transitions, we noticed the literacy materials arranged on the opposite side of the environment. In other settings paper, writing tools, books, and messages were visible along the pathways, on the doors, above the coat hooks where children encountered them during transitions; there was much literacy activity when children were lining up, getting ready, or waiting a turn. They read displayed print aloud, discussed displayed information, wrote on sign-on charts.

Sometimes teacher management style created barriers to children's literacy. One substitute kindergarten teacher invited us to stay and observe in a room where the schedule usually provided large time blocks of self-selection and open-ended activities. The substitute had reorganized the day to meet her own teaching style, and actively prevented children from gaining access to the environment's provisions. Despite her efforts, the morning record showed seventy-two uses of the environment's literacy materials--a tribute to the persistence of the children in responding to literacy stimuli of the environment.

There were other times when we saw children required not to engage in literacy. Observation records show long series of "no literacy activity" entries when a principal interrupted with announcements on a public address system; while children waited for a turn to speak to the teacher; when a teacher gave directions



unaccompanied by print; while everybody in a reading group waited silently as one person found the page, when a special teacher came in and "lectured" to the class.

### Children's Uses of Literacy

When we looked for some specific behaviors (recording/writing, reading, manipulating, observing, discussing, and scanning) occurring while children were in contact with literacy materials we became aware of how often children chose to use literacy in self-initiated activity, and how deeply they became involved with literacy within assignments offering choices. We also observed an unexpected amount of furtive literacy behavior.

#### Chosen Literacy Behaviors

In our most recent study of classrooms with high levels of literacy stimuli (Loughlin & Ivener, 1988) we made a distinction between literacy behaviors assigned by teachers and "optional" behaviors, which children chose. In many rooms regular periods of self-selection were scheduled. Then children worked freely within the environment, generating their own activities; they often incorporated literacy behaviors into those activities. Many teacher-assigned activities were open-ended, leaving children to decide which literacy behaviors to include as they carried out the general assignment. For instance, one group was asked to record daily observations of food samples left in open dishes; but *how* to record was left to them. We watched two children record with print; they consulted dictionaries, scanned displayed print for information, and manipulated recording materials as they prepared. Another child observed their literacy activity before deciding how she would record. A few talked together about their plans to record with illustrations, then consulted during the process. Those reading, scanning, manipulating, observing, and discussing behaviors were optional; but recording was assigned.

Children used writing during self-selection when recording tools and materials were near them. They wrote names in an "appointment book" in a dramatic play area, made "grocery" lists, wrote stories like a friend's, responded in writing on sign-on charts, and co-authored stories. Sometimes they made their own sign-ons to start a club, they collected lists of favorite books or favorite people, and they wrote notes to teachers and to each other.

Children chose to read within assigned as well as self-initiated activities. During a social studies current events activity assigned by the teacher, we saw children in a multi-age classroom solve a dispute about Guatemala by finding and reading a passage in a book. Three children using a graphics computer program read the teacher-written one-page manual aloud to each other to find out how to save their design. Children read schedules, menus, group lists, and instructions for using equipment to find out something they needed to know. They read trade books, parts of textbooks, other children's writings, and they read letters from classroom mailboxes. We noticed that displayed child-initiated print was read more than displays of children's assigned writing or teacher written materials.

Children manipulated literacy materials within self-initiated activity and also within assigned activities, when they could choose the form or materials for required products. They made books, folded paper, cut special shapes to

write upon, changed recording tools to write in different colors or with different intensities within a piece of writing.

When they chose to observe literacy activity, children usually watched each other. They looked closely at the words forming on a page, or at a captioned illustration being created. They observed other children's literacy activity to look for ideas, express interest in what was being done, or find out procedures for their work or activities; they observed and listened to other children read aloud. Sometimes they observed adults; we watched one child hover over the shoulder of a parent helper reading stories aloud. For about twenty minutes the kindergartner looked carefully at the pages as the adult read them, then asked earnestly, "Hey, how do you *do* that?"

While doing assignments, and in their own activities as well, children chose to read and discuss each others' work, consult about conventions of print, and discuss books. As we saw children choosing to scan the environment for literacy materials, it was clear that even the youngest understood there were print conventions, and they tried to use them whenever possible. They used *any* displayed print, whatever its original purpose or source, to find information about conventions.

### Furtive Literacy

We often saw children use books, recording tools, and recording materials in furtive ways, especially in environments with limited time for self-selection; however, in every setting there was at least some literacy activity that children tried to keep to themselves. During one observation all the children from a primary classroom went to the library where they browsed through an array of colorful new books. Each child was invited to choose one book to take home "to keep forever," as one child put it. They hugged their treasures close as they walked back to the classroom. Then the itinerant art teacher arrived (not knowing about the books) and began a long set of complex directions. We could see children reach into their desks to stroke their books, pull them onto their laps, try to turn the pages, show illustrations to one another. Despite frequent calls to attention, the books were used, hidden from the teacher, throughout the lesson.

Most of the furtive literacy we saw appeared to be social; it was directed toward or carried out with peers. Children wrote and sent notes, planned surprises, collected names, wrote messages to take home. It seemed that teachers would have been delighted to see some of that literacy activity, but apparently children judged that the teacher wouldn't approve, or that the timing was unacceptable. In one classroom a child confided to an observer, "We're collecting names for a gang. But our teacher doesn't like gangs." In another, a child leafed through his arithmetic book, held beneath the table, rather than working on the writing assigned for that time block. "I can't wait until we get to the times part," he whispered to his classmate. "I can show you where times is in the book. There's one, see? God! How many pages before we get to times?"

### Social Literacy Activity

During the years we observed in literacy environments, we saw again and again how important social interactions were to children's literacy. Although traditional views of literacy activity imply that it is private, solitary, and quiet, children in every classroom showed us quite a different picture.



"Sustained Silent Reading" was rarely silent in the primary grades; where teachers insisted on silence children's interactions with the books seemed to be cursory. In one classroom an embarrassed teacher apologized for the sound level from a corner of a room filled with a heap of children. We saw excited children involved in some new library books; as they discovered an illustration, or familiar words, or a page that was readable, children called out to each other urgently. They pointed and exclaimed ("Hey, lookit!"), they laughed, they read aloud words they knew ("Mother! This says Mother!"), they asked for turns ("You through? Gimme that one with the horse!")

Self-initiated writing was often social in content (personal messages, announcements, surveys of classmates) and as often as children could manage it the process was also social. Writing was done in collaboration or in companionship with others, as children consulted and read passages to each other. During a self-selection period, we observed a group of boys crowded together on the carpet in a small area. They had gathered to write some stories. Each one talked out his story to the others bit by bit as the composing process moved along ("Hey, look at this! This is you in my story!"); one acted everything out ("Then he came out of the cave like this"). It seemed important for the writers to try out the ideas and the language, although others were not necessarily listening. Some illustrated as they composed, writing the words later, and others wrote, talked, wrote, talked, and wrote some more. They helped each other with spelling and other conventions ("You've got motorcycle? Good. I need it.") and then shared the stories after they were through.

Whenever they could, children brought the same social qualities to assigned literacy activities. Some teachers appreciated and encouraged this, providing group work spaces which also offered separation from other groups; on occasion we observed that the social behavior wasn't acceptable within the house rules for a particular activity, and children were redirected.

### **Teachers' Uses of Literacy**

The teachers' strong interest in keeping children involved in literacy activity was evident in all the environments. There are qualitative differences between those seen early in our work and those observed much later (after information about the literacy environment had been widely disseminated); however, from the beginning we saw teachers consciously arrange print and materials for literacy in ways they believed would encourage children to read, to record, and to act upon print information without teacher direction. The teachers were also very creative about assigned learning activities, incorporating different forms of literacy in all subject areas. They became increasingly skilled at designing open-ended assignments offering elements of choice within literacy.

Our understanding of a Functioning Literacy Environment grew as the teachers' understanding grew, and the developing information and ideas were disseminated through the inservice education work that accompanied our earliest studies (Ivener, 1983). In time we became aware of two strands of development. As a group, the teachers gradually constructed a working concept of environments arranged for literacy; and individual teachers seemed to move through a similar sequence as they first established uses for literacy in the environment, and then steadily expanded their practices as their understanding grew.

## Literacy and the Environment

Our interest in the literacy environment began with the study of spatial organization, yet we hadn't anticipated how extensively furniture arrangement influenced the potential for literacy activity in each classroom. The teachers in our studies began with an understanding that the physical environment of the classroom could be used to support and extend instruction; before focusing on a literacy environment they had already begun to try out patterns of space, provisioning, and materials organization that were not the ordinary elementary classroom arrangement (Loughlin & Suina, 1982). All the environments were subdivided into several smaller areas by furniture arrangement; the number ranged from six to fifteen. Shelf-units, display boards, book racks, and large pieces of furniture were placed to define smaller spaces and to organize and display provisions for use.

Some arrangements for literacy seem to be more obvious than others, and they appeared early in our observations. Almost everywhere we saw displayed teacher-written functional print (labels, schedules, groupings, assignments, directions) and visible collections of recording tools and materials, in all areas. The more areas that were defined in an environment, the more recording tools and materials were visible, so children experienced repeated suggestions as they passed through the environment.

We saw our first sign-on chart on an easel in a primary classroom; the teacher had written, "We will have music after recess this morning," with the instruction, "Sign here after you've read this." There was a marker on a string beside the chart; children alerted each other and, before long, most had signed it. As the use of sign-ons spread we saw them used to check out materials, to vote, to hypothesize, to gather information, to organize turns, to make lunch counts (Loughlin & Martin, 1987).

Later, teachers began to encourage more extensive display of children's print. This was connected to spatial organization, since the backs and sides of space-dividing furniture created display spaces. Children's written communication was prompted by creative provisioning close to display spaces. In our early records, child-initiated print was one of the least represented literacy stimulus in the environments; in our most recent study it was the second-highest stimulus across environments, and was more widely distributed within the rooms.

In time teachers began to involve children in the production of functional print. When seating furniture was dispersed rather than clustered in a single large area, activities and groups were also dispersed, demanding considerably more functional print so everyone could be kept informed. Children also began to participate in the maintenance of literacy provisions in all areas, and in organizing the use of display space. As children became more productive, display space was at a premium; dating displayed print increased children's reading since they needed to know which materials could be removed in order to release space for their own.

Attention to variety in books, recording tools and materials, and references grew as teachers sought ways to maintain children's initial interest in using literacy. Variety within these provisions seemed to attract children to an area. When materials were selected and grouped for variety in all the areas, there was also widespread distribution of books and other materials through the whole



environment, so children encountered different kinds of literacy suggestions as they moved from place to place.

Arrangements to suggest new content and new possibilities for literacy products was emphasized with combinations of books or print displayed with high interest non-print information sources (living things, natural specimens, models, pictures, artifacts). Where material-storage furniture was used to define spaces, the content-related arrangements displayed on them were incorporated into all areas.

### Literacy Assignments

We first focused entirely on the physical environment of the classroom and its arrangements for children's self-initiated uses of literacy. In time it became clear that other literacy activity, which was not necessarily child-initiated, was also influenced as it drew on the resources of the environment. Assignments designed this way provided some access to the environment; as a result we saw assigned literacy behaviors intermixed with chosen literacy behaviors in these activities.

Children were asked to write in journals, report findings, keep records, write up plans. By assignment they read task cards prior to writing, read recipes, trade books, morning messages, and they read for information connected to group planning. Assigned manipulating included turning pages, preparing booklets for writing, cutting sentence strips or shapes they had written upon, locating something in a pile of labeled folders. Children handled paint, markers, crayons, paste, scissors as they completed assignments to illustrate and prepare writings for display.

### **Complexity of Literacy Environments**

Environments which function on behalf of children's literacy are extremely complex. They are established through spatial organization, teachers' provisioning with print and symbolic materials, with interesting content, and with tools and materials for literacy. The distribution and arrangements of literacy materials and display facilities for children's use affects the extent to which children respond and contribute to the literacy stimuli of the environment.

Teachers provide access to displayed literacy throughout the day in some settings; children gain access on their own in others. Children are attracted to literacy, and are persistent in gaining access. Perhaps their persistence compensates when formal access is not provided, and that enables children to become involved in literacy behavior despite unintended barriers to the environment.

We have seen children deeply involved in literacy in environments arranged to support it, and have noted the persistence with which they pursue this interest. We have also seen that literacy is an intensely social activity, which is accompanied by peer collaboration, commentary, observation, and appreciation.

The complexity of the Functioning Literacy Environment is only in part situated in the arrangements of space and materials which attract children to literacy. The social and intellectual activity children bring to literacy



interacts in complex ways with the contents of the environment. It seems clear that, to function effectively, environments arranged for literacy must also provide choices within contexts of meaning and purpose while supporting the social qualities of children's active involvement with literacy.

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