

Early Literacy and Assessment for Learning (K–3) Series

# Print Literacy: A Teacher's Story



**Pacific Resources for Education and Learning**

*Building Capacity Through Education*

Written by the staff of the Pacific Communities with High-performance In Literacy Development (Pacific CHILD) project at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning.

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## Hannah's Story

*Hannah is a Pacific island grade 1 teacher in a local village school. She has been guided in her teaching practice by the values she learned growing up in an extended family. These values involved observing and listening to elders, and then practicing what she observed and participating in many conversations among family members.*

*Every day at school, Hannah observes the students in her class. She listens thoughtfully to the stories they share and in this way learns more about them. She wants to know each student's interests and what they would be able to accomplish in the various classroom activities she plans for them. Learning about her students is how Hannah knows what to plan for the next day's lessons.*

The supporting role of oral language in reading development is significant. The students of the Pacific arrive at schools with motivation and interest in learning based in their rich oral and cultural traditions. Students who come to school equipped with a strong personal sense of literacy (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) have a distinct advantage over those who come from an environment with little exposure to written language. Many students living in the Pacific region may have had little or no experience with books before coming to school. The experiences they have had regarding the creative aspects of language are likely to lead them to books and the joy that comes from being a reader.

In this booklet you will find out more about Hannah and her experiences learning how to create a rich learning environment that enhances literacy for young students. She strives to increase her range of skills and put into practice the strategies for helping her students learn how to learn. While reading, you may identify with many of Hannah's experiences. However, you will want to craft activities and learning experiences unique to your practice and the individual needs of your students.

## What Is Literacy?

Literacy is the ability to read and write. In a broader sense, literacy involves reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

To be print literate is to possess the ability to: (a) read printed material thoughtfully and critically for pleasure and for knowledge, and (b) write for a wide variety of purposes, both practical and creative. Literacy also encompasses the ability to be an active listener and to speak with purpose and clarity.

### Literacy in the Pacific

Children throughout the Pacific region share many universal experiences of life, such as the love and care of family, companionship of other children, and the gradual development of independence. But there are differences, too, between cultures and the lives of urban and rural children.

Young children gain most of their experiences from the world around them and the outdoor activities they are immersed in. These activities help children become innovative and creative in many unique ways. Playing outdoors with peers and using the resources at their disposal is part of daily life. Collecting fruit and plants in the forest, catching fish in the lagoon or on the reef, searching for mangrove crabs, or learning to read the signs in



nature, are all rich experiences. Listening to and retelling traditional stories of the culture, singing chants and songs of elders, and emulating the dances used in ceremonies and social gatherings, are also rich experiences.

Oral language is the foundation of the primary curriculum. Throughout the school day, students explore concepts and construct meaning by talking among themselves and with their teacher in a language-rich environment. Part of the teacher's role is to encourage students' oral language development through storytelling and shared reading.

Teachers must create the conditions for genuine and meaningful conversations with and by students. Teachers can expect that individual students will eventually succeed in learning the rules of language exemplified by adults in their language community without a need for explicit explanation. This process is evolving and therefore requires ongoing practice and teacher guidance.

## What Is Reading?

*Reading* is the quick, and mostly unconscious, processing of continuous print with understanding. The goal of all reading is comprehension; the degree to which readers understand what they read is the degree to which they profit from and enjoy it. Reading without understanding is not reading (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Reading is the interaction between sources of information in the text and readers' prior knowledge and context. Reading for meaning involves readers in working with information from a variety of sources.

### Activating Prior Knowledge

As skilled readers read, they bring their own experiences and prior knowledge to the text. They do this not only to determine the meaning of a word, but also to comprehend the text. The meaning readers gain may resemble what the author is trying to say. However, as readers interpret the author's meaning, they bring their own experiences and background knowledge to the text.

## Sources of Information

Readers make sense of print from *meaning*, *structural*, and *visual* sources of information (i.e., cues).

**Meaning cues.** When readers read, the meanings they make of the text (including pictures, diagrams, and graphics) are rooted in a background (schema) of their own particular cultural (language) experiences and world knowledge. The ways in which readers comprehend the text will vary depending on how similar their backgrounds are to the author's. Proficient readers ask, "Does what I'm reading make sense to me?"

**Structural cues.** Knowing the syntax and grammatical structures of language enables readers to predict on the basis of what sounds or feels right in a given language structure. For proficient readers, this is an intuitive process. Being able to predict depends on knowing aspects of language such as: (a) parts of speech, (b) verb tenses, (c) word order, and (d) subject/verb agreement. Competent readers ask, "Does what I'm reading sound right?"

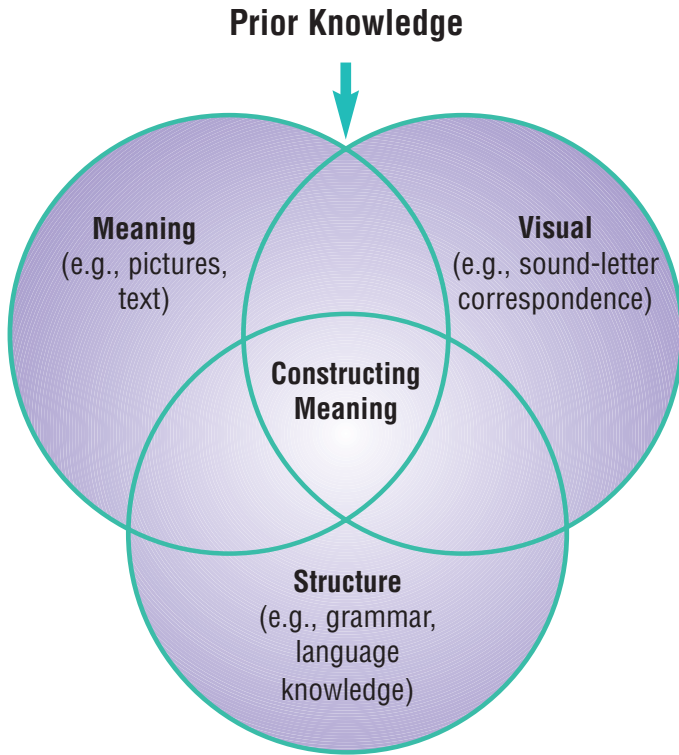
**Visual cues.** The visual cueing system represents spoken language through written symbols. Letters and clusters of letters, which are conventions of print, represent sounds of speech. For example, knowing an initial letter and its corresponding sound enables readers to predict a word. Proficient readers ask, "Does the word I'm reading look right?"

Figure 1 is a simplification of what happens in the reading process. The integration of prior knowledge with the simultaneous use of cues allows readers to construct meaning from text.

Hannah continues to learn about her students by observing their learning behavior as they complete assignments. During periods of group reading, Hannah's observations lead her to ask questions about why some students find it very easy to problem solve while reading and other students, having received the same instruction, struggle from word to word.



Figure 1. Cueing Systems



Concerned, Hannah records her observations, including students' attempts and approximations, and creates a reading folder for each student. For example, if the printed word is *home* but the student reads *house*, Hannah notes this in the student's folder. Hannah begins to discover a full range of reading behaviors and various levels of understanding among her students. She notices that several students have difficulty with one-to-one matching (one word displayed for every word read). For example, the text is *I love my home*, which has four words. The student reads *I really love my home*, which has five words. Hannah discovers that some students are attempting to memorize rather than read each word, other students are relying on the pictures and appear to be neglecting the print, and another student is confused about the direction of print.

Hannah also collects evidence that several students tend to make word substitutions that match the pictures in a storybook but do not resemble the word in print. For example, students might read *ocean* when the word in print is *reef*. Hannah realizes that she has groups of students who need explicit teaching to help them clear up their various misunderstandings.

Hannah knows her students are drawing on personal oral language experiences and values the rich oral vocabulary her students bring to the reading experience. She knows their experiences can help them learn the necessary strategies to accept or reject word choices while reading. Hannah rethinks how to manage her literacy block to meet the needs of her individual students in an ongoing but practical way. Helping the students develop new routines and personal discipline for learning is going to require skillful planning on her part. Everything she is learning about her students inspires and empowers her to help them achieve their potential.

## Early Reader Strategies

Early readers learn strategies that use cues primarily, but not exclusively, for constructing meaning from words and sentences. Marie Clay (1991) describes strategies as cognitive and perceptual activities initiated by children to make meaning of text. As children become more fluent readers, they do not rely only on the cues for meaning, but instead engage in text comprehension strategies that are more complex and involve longer stretches of text.

Below are some strategies used by early readers during the initial stages of reading. The items do not reflect a specific order.

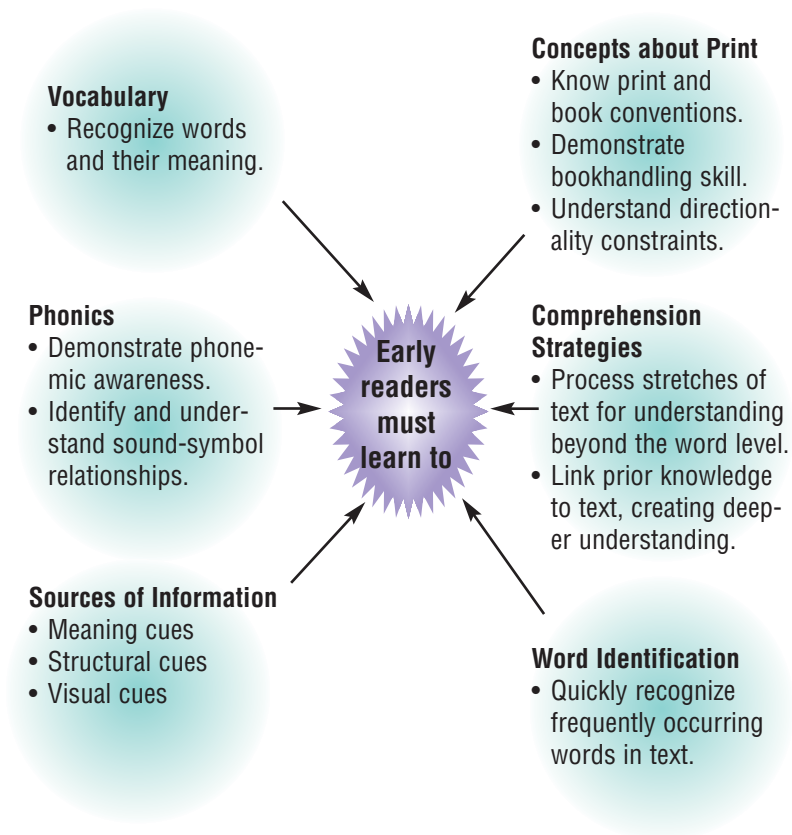
- *Attend and search*—The student focuses on the text and looks for specific information.
- *Anticipate*—The student forms expectations about the print based on prior knowledge and information from the text.
- *Check*—The student checks that the word makes sense and matches information already processed.
- *Confirm*—The student accepts the response.

These strategies may result in self-correction, which signals that the reader notices a mismatch, tries again, and produces an accurate response fitting all three cues.

### The Early Reader

Figure 2 identifies the concepts early readers must learn and use in order to engage in the process of reading. While it is important to teach each area separately, it is not enough. These aspects of early reading are interrelated. Readers must learn how to work with all aspects of reading simultaneously as they interact with printed material.

Figure 2. Early Reader Concepts



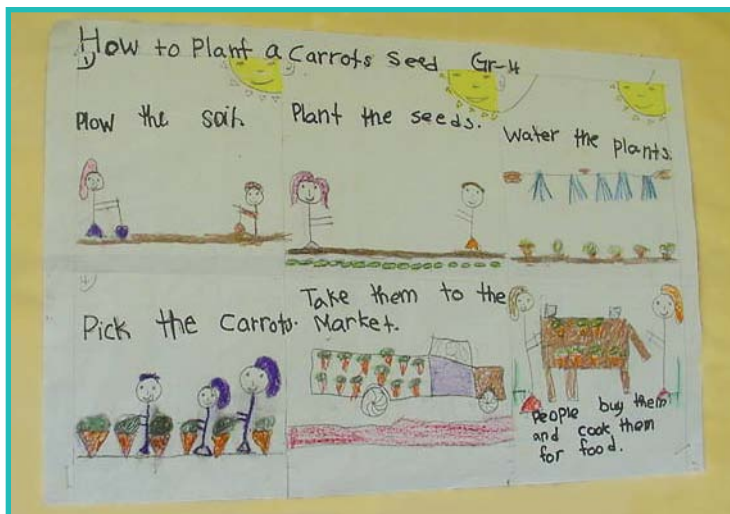
Hannah begins working with smaller groups of students and establishes new groups to maximize student learning. Sometimes she works with a group for several days or a few weeks. Individual students move in and out of groups depending on their specific needs. Grouping the students based on needs provides the optimum opportunity to address issues specific to student learning.

As Hannah works with her students, she recognizes opportunities for working with the entire class on the early reader strategies. She finds shared reading and interactive writing to be valuable processes that allow all students to become engaged in reading and writing in a supportive, non-threatening way. For example, Hannah wants to help a student develop flexibility with some of the frequently occurring words (sight vocabulary) that he is struggling with. During a shared reading experience, Hannah makes it possible for him to locate one of the words he knows but is a little unsure of, thus helping him to build his confidence, ability, and acceptance from classmates. Later, during an interactive writing experience, Hannah is delighted to see the same sight vocabulary appear and naturally asks the student to help write the word when appropriate. This level of student awareness is important to Hannah and is leading to significant changes in her classroom practice.

## What Is Writing?

Reading and writing, like speaking and listening, are interrelated and hard to separate. Teachers need to understand the interrelationship of these processes and teach in support of this integration. In both reading and writing, a processing system is built up and broken down.

The breaking down process is more prevalent in writing until the writer reads what has been written. During early writing experiences, children quite naturally attend to the details of print. This typically involves visual learning of letter features, patterns of letters in words, and the ability to recognize the printer's code. Writing involves expressing one's language



in print. Writing is complex, though simply stated: *if you can read it, you can write it and if you can write it, you can read it.*

Students come to school with a range of abilities. On one hand, students in a village school may not know much about writing because it has not been an essential part of their daily lives. On the other hand, students in urban areas may have more experience with print through signs, newspapers, and advertisements; nonetheless, they, too, may still have had limited experience with books and writing.

Although few books may be available in the local language, students may be surrounded by examples of written language. Students listen to the teacher read a story and know that stories can be written down and shared. Their own writing becomes part of the literacy display. Many teachers recognize that working with students early in the school program provides students with a stronger foundation in developing good writing habits.

A daily writing program may involve several approaches that provide students with language opportunities to respond meaningfully and thoughtfully to the written work being produced. Writing approaches used in classrooms are often intertwined and may overlap in a number of ways.

As Hannah shares her personal stories and encourages her students to do the same, she writes their stories on chart paper, yielding many benefits. The students' stories and oral language are being accepted, valued, and honored. The students learn that their spoken words can be recorded in print and their contributions can be used in meaningful ways as they learn to read and write.

Realizing the value of using students' words to teach reading and writing, Hannah encourages her students to record the classroom news and highlights on a daily basis. Not only does this practice become an integral part of the daily routine contributing to a purposeful environment, but Hannah discovers that the parents look forward to stopping by to read the daily news with their children as well. The effects of this activity reach beyond the classroom to students and their parents as they hold conversations about the experiences throughout the school day, bringing us back to the oral language roots of all learning.

## Lessons Learned

Hannah has shared many important lessons about print literacy:

- Students enter the school program with many language skills and strengths for learning, which provide opportunities for teachers as they learn about each child.
- Teachers should know that learning to read is a complex process. Understanding more of the process empowers teachers to find ways to help students who struggle with learning to read and write.
- No one has all the answers. Teachers can refer to resource books, professional journals, and colleagues for support, problem solving, and collegial conversations.

Like Hannah, you may want to try out strategies that are new to you. Be inquisitive and experimental. Risk working in new and innovative

ways. Do not limit yourself by a single example. You may have many great ideas and strategies that are not included in Hannah's story.

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