

TEACHING READING

Working together: Schools, colleges, and foundations

Linda S. Boucher

In 1989, students at Dartmouth College began a volunteer literacy program to address local literacy needs. After 3 years, the College received a grant from the Hasboro Children's Foundation to hire a part-time coordinator, provide training support for their volunteers, buy books, and meet the transportation needs of the volunteers. The Hasboro Children's Foundation of New York was founded in 1985 to provide further funding for direct services to children, including the improvement of literacy skills.

The Book Buddy Program pairs student volunteers from Dartmouth College with children from area elementary schools in Grades K-2. The children are referred to the program by the school district. The program focuses on sharing enthusiasm for books in the home with children and their families. The main goals are to improve reading attitudes in young children and to develop an appreciation for books.

The Book Buddy Program promotes family-based literacy in the home. Volunteer students meet with their Book Buddies weekly to read and to share reading-related activities, such as trips to the local libraries, storytelling, drawing, puppetmaking, and writing stories. Volunteers are encouraged to involve as many family members in the reading process as possible.

At the end of 2 years, Dartmouth College will host a literacy conference for volunteer coordinators from other colleges to outline how the Book Buddy Program might be started at their institutions. If we hope to succeed in reversing the illiteracy cycle,

we must recognize the importance of including the whole family in the literacy experience.

We are very fortunate to have such dedicated volunteers working to promote literacy within our community and schools. Their efforts help to improve reading attitudes and develop reading appreciation.

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The Bag Game: An activity to heighten phonemic awareness

Nancy K. Lewkowicz

To succeed at beginning reading, children must be aware of the individual phonemes (sounds) within spoken words. Fortunately, phonemic awareness is not simply a function of genetics or maturation; rather, it can be developed and strengthened through instruction and practice (Adams, 1990). But keeping children interested and involved during literacy instruction is also critical to success, as whole language advocates point out.

The challenge, then, is how to reconcile these two necessary—but not necessarily compatible—tasks: keeping children actively engaged and providing sufficient focus on the sounds within words. How can the kind of enthusiasm generated by reading appealing and high quality literature be maintained in supplementary activities requiring attention to phonemes—those elusive elements rarely brought to consciousness during everyday use of language?

One activity that meets this challenge is writing: having children write their own original stories, deriving needed spellings partly by listening to the sounds of the words. But there are additional means available for arousing and sustaining interest in speech sounds. In particular, games can be designed that hold children spellbound while focusing attention squarely on the phonemic structure of words. And such games can be started at the very earliest stages of literacy instruction, well before children can be expected to deduce spellings or read connected text.

The Bag Game keeps a whole group of kindergartners or first graders absorbed and entertained while heightening their awareness of initial consonant phonemes in spoken words. In each round of the game, one child detects and produces the initial consonant sound of a spoken word, and a second child, on hearing that consonant sound, matches it to the original word. But all the children, even those who are currently onlookers, are gripped by the drama of the game and involve themselves in silently articulating and predicting the correct response. This is a game that children request over and over.

Equipment needed

1. Two large bags, boxes, or totes that can stand alone. The containers must not be transparent. Colorful and attractive ones are best.

2. Several pairs of familiar objects small enough so that four at a time can fit in one of the bags, but large enough to be seen clearly by the entire group. The names of these objects should begin with consonant sounds to which the children have recently been introduced. Examples: *mittens*, *shoes*, (bar of) *soap*, *feathers*, *pencils*, (toy) *turtles*. The members of each pair need

not be identical; they can have different colors or patterns—e.g., two unmatched mittens.

Procedures

1. Have the group name the four kinds of objects, as one member of each pair is put into each bag.

2. Select one child to be the Sounder and another to be the Matcher. (In demonstrating the game for the first time, the teacher should take the role of the Sounder.)

3. The Sounder and the Matcher each receive one of the bags, which can be placed on neighboring chairs or low tables. They should not be able to see into each other's bags.

4. The Sounder looks into his or her bag, reaches in, and grasps one of the four objects, keeping it hidden from view. He or she utters just the initial consonant sound of the object, loud and clear.

5. The Matcher, having heard this initial sound, grasps the object in his or her own bag that begins with the sound and lifts it into full view.

6. The Sounder then raises into view the object he or she was holding, for the dramatic test: Do the initial consonant sounds of the two objects match? (If they do—and they almost always do—the group is likely to cheer spontaneously.)

7. Choose two other children and repeat steps 2 through 7. At some point, or on other occasions, substitute different pairs of objects.

Note: Before playing this game, the children should have some experience focusing on initial consonant sounds (with or without the associated printed letters). Stretching (prolonging) the initial sound is useful, for consonants that permit it: “fffffeather.” Initial sounds that cannot be stretched (*p*, *t*, etc.) can be repeated: “p-p-p-pencil.” (It is important that the children perform these preliminary vocal activities themselves, rather than just hearing the teacher perform them. This will familiarize them with the oral feel of the sounds, which can then serve as a valuable auxiliary clue in recognizing the sound within a word and in mastering sound-letter correspondences.) In the unlikely event that either the

Sounder or the Matcher does not correctly associate object and initial sound, the teacher should carefully lead the child through one of these familiar preliminary activities to help the child make the correct association.

Recognition of the importance of phonemic awareness has been described as “the single most powerful advance in the science and pedagogy of reading this century” (Adams, 1991, p. 392). The evidence is in that “games and activities designed to enhance phonemic awareness are shown to accelerate reading and spelling acquisition among beginners and to result in significant recovery among children with reading difficulties” (Adams, 1991, p. 393). The challenge for teachers is to win over the children by making phonemic awareness training interesting. Activities like the Bag Game, in which children find enjoyment in recognizing sounds in their natural setting within meaningful words, can make an important contribution.

Lewkowicz, a retired college professor, resides in Yellow Springs, Ohio, USA.

References

- Adams, M.J. (1990). *Beginning to read*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Adams, M.J. (1991). Response portions of “Beginning to read: A critique by literacy professionals and a response.” *The Reading Teacher*, 44, 370-395.

Nancie, you lied! With special thanks to Nancie Atwell

Dianne Dodsworth

I read your book from cover to cover. I put bookmarks in all the special places until *In the Middle* (Atwell, 1987) resembled a well-worn and revered Bible. I underlined and highlighted. I was ready to face 24 fresh-faced, eager Grade 4s. I opened the

book to Chapter 4, “Getting Started,” and pushed the “on” button. It was going to be a great year. After all, wasn't it clear—a minilesson here, a status of the class conference there. All I'd have to do is flip to the minilesson marker and follow the directions—like following a cookbook, only, in this case, I “feed the mind”!

But, Nancie, you lied! You gave me very explicit directions about getting started. You told me that “On the first day, I lay the foundation of this structure.” I believed you. I thought that if I echoed your words that my kids would do as yours did. But they didn't. I put my head down and started to write. I didn't look up. I didn't watch to see who was writing and who wasn't. I was busy; I did mean business and my posture demonstrated that. I was expecting everyone else to become a writer and to join me.

I looked up. Some little heads were bent over but most were sitting there staring at me. Hadn't these children ever seen a teacher writing before? From the looks on their faces I could see that this was all new to them. Now what? Quick, check the marker for Topic Conferences. “Tell me about your neighborhood...” Finally, a few more heads went down until, in one way or another, there was a symbolic representation of what I imagined your classroom, Nancie, might look like.

So we limped and worked our way through the days and weeks. We were doing it! The Writing Workshop was underway! I still marvelled at your athletic ability and stamina. Anyone who could manage a 5-minute minilesson, a quick, 5-minute status of the class check, writing workshop and 5–10 minute class conference must be in top physical and mental condition, honed to split second precision. At this rate, we'll be so efficient that the program will have no choice but to succeed.

But Nancie, you lied! We weren't able to keep up. Our minilessons often split over into recess. On some days we didn't even get to write! The status of the class check seemed to go on forever. I just couldn't bear to cut off Sarah when she begged to tell me about her new puppy. As for the 5–10 minute class conference, forget it. We got so wrapped up in all our stories

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