Reading in the Green Room: Literacy Observations in a Preschool Classroom

1. What is the teacher doing?

It is circle time and the whole class is gathered on the rug in the block area. Nanu is the head teacher in the Green Room, the older morning preschool at the Mills College Children's Laboratory School. She is sitting on a low chair reading Big Blue Whales. We have been studying ocean animals and "whales" is the topic for this week. At the beginning of the unit, the children generated a list of questions they had about whales:

What do they eat? How do they eat? How do they breathe? Why do they jump in the air? Etc. These interests were written on a large sheet of paper and posted in the circle area. Nanu went to the library with these questions and gathered picture books that answer some of their questions. In this preschool classroom, Nanu wants to teach children that books can answer your questions. She wants to model that when you want to learn more about something, books are a place you can go to to gather that information. So, when she turns a page that talks about blue whales taking big gulps of water and krill and using its tongue to push out the water and then swallow the krill whole, she stops at the end. "Hey, look, this book answered Caitlyn's question about what do whales eat. Caitlyn, do you remember on Monday you were wondering about what these giant creates eat. Well, this page tells us they eat krill. It even answers Angelo's questions about how they eat. Angelo, how does this blue whale eat? What is krill?" Nanu stops reading the book to explicitly show the children how this book holds the answers to their questions. She
engages them with questions and invites them to create their own meaning from the text. According to Holdaway's *Literacy Set*, Nanu is teaching to enhance children's *Motivational Factors*. She is sharing the joys of reading with them. They brainstormed these questions; she is tapping into the students' curiosity about whales to teach an appreciation for literature. In these situations, Nanu is also helping her students with *Linguistic Factors*. Through read-a-loud stories at circle time, she models the different *Intonation Patterns* in the English language. The end of a question is emphasized. Words like "big" have emphasis to illustrate the meaning. When studying a topic in depth, children's interest spur them to naturally assimilate new words like "krill" into their growing vocabulary. When Nanu reads-a-loud to her class, she is teaching *Orthographic Factors*. Children are learning how to hold a book, when to turn the pages, which direction the story goes in; these *Directional Conventions* contribute to their *Literacy Set*. These sets of factors contribute to the pre-reading skills that build a foundation for future literacy. Nanu is aware of them and designs the reading experience in her classroom to allow for children to develop these.

2. **What are the children doing?**

The children sit in a circle on the rug. During this time, they are actively practicing their listening skills. At three, four and five, learning to listen is challenging for some children. However, this is a necessary pre-reading skill they must develop. However, the material is not "going one ear and out the other." As Nanu stops and asks questions, children both shout out answers and raise their hands. They are trying to make sense of what this new text is teaching. This type of group reading is an integral aspect to
school culture. In order to succeed in the classroom, children need to understand that there are different ways of behaving. Even in reading there are different ways of being. For example, during circle reading, they are learning it is their time to be quiet and listen, to speak only when asked a question pertaining to the text at hand. However, when reading on the big purple couch as part of your good bye transition, it is okay to turn the page, point to pictures in the text, wonder about certain characters or events and even interrupt to ask questions. At this point in their literacy journey, these preschoolers are learning the culture of school and the culture of reading. They are building their literacy sets.

3. How are the children grouped? Are there different groupings for different reading activities?

In the Green Room there are many ways to "read" and be read to. However, there is no formal grouping. The Reading Corner is a soft and inviting corner of our classroom. The books on the bookshelf are rotated regularly to adjust to students' interest and topics being studied. There are many ways to read in this corner. Some children say goodbye to their mom or dad with a good book. This type of one-on-one reading is replicated throughout the day. If someone is feeling sad or missing their mom or just needing one-on-one time with a teacher, children can ask to be read to. Also, since this area is always open, children can go and "read (look at pictures)" by themselves. This is a very calming reading activity for them. Often we will direct a child to that area if they need some alone time. I observed children going in pairs or small groups to the purple couch and reading together. These moments were very sweet and
full of both quiet and excited reading experiences. Like I mentioned above, circle time is also an activity that includes a reading ritual. We have two circles a day and at least once, we will read a book that is related to a topic we are studying. Books will be used to introduce, explore and conclude topics we study. Often children will bring books from home to share.

4. How does the teacher talk to the children? What language does she use? What specific phrases or ways of talking?

During circle read-a-louds, Nanu uses standard read aloud mannerisms. She incorporates appropriate literary intonations and then switches to conversational modes when asking questions or disciplining children. She will "do the voices" of different characters to identify who is speaking in a dialogue. Since she is not teaching reading but the conventions of reading, her teaching is very natural and smoothly incorporated into the activity. The children love being read to.

Another activity that incorporates reading is Story Plays. The children have become very interested in writing their own stories and then acting them out in groups. This is a developmentally appropriate way to incorporate reading into a pre-literate classroom. Children are learning about the flow of a story and plot development. They are learning a great deal about characters and what words mean. When a teacher reads out, "She went into the forest to find the monster." The children are making sense of what that means and then acting out that meaning. For children who learn through doing, this becomes a powerful technique to teach about reading.
5. What books are preschool children interested in?

Since there is such an array of books you can introduce into a preschool classroom, I wanted to observe which ones were the children reading over and over again. *Look A Likes Jr.* was by far the most popular with children. In this book, the illustrations are photographs. Objects are used in unusual ways to create different scenes; a fig Newton is positioned as a book, M & M's are made into stars, and CD hangs above a mantel as a is a mirror. The story is a great group read and children love to find the different objects. They think it is very silly and get a great laugh out of eating the pretzel windows off the "house." This book is great for teaching the joy of reading good books. Because it is very interactive, it is appropriate for this group of young children.

The *Big Book of Animals* is another favorite among many children. Again, this is a photography book that shows different animals in their habitats. Under each photo is one or two sentences about the animal. Because of attention level, usually a child will ask to read about two or three different animals on each page. They love to go back and read this book with their friends, telling them about the different animals. "That's a duckbilled plataplush, it swims and digs," They proclaim with great pride. This book is useful because it can be adjusted to the reader; they can read about one animal or all. It allows for children to gain mastery over a subject. Terrance can tell you about all the great cats in the book and point out each one. Sometimes he quotes verbatim the different facts. This book also fosters a love of books.

*Chick Chicka Boom Boom* is an alphabet book whose illustrations are different letters of the alphabet. It is a very simple text that talks about upper case and lower case letters. During home visits, Nanu observed several children had this book in their
personal libraries. Through providing this text in our class library, she enabled several children to be experts on it. One child, Gabe, went so far as to call it *his* book. This is perfect for preschoolers because it introduces the alphabet in a simple and humorous manner. It allows for multiple entry points; some children can recognize all the letters, while some children are recognizing the letters in their name. Nanu has kept this one in the library, even when many of the other books are rotated out.

6. How does the teacher organize for instruction including grouping, kinds of literacy lessons and amount of time spent on reading instruction?

Because this is a preschool classroom, and it is not developmentally appropriate to explicitly teach reading, Nanu takes a different approach. Nanu wants to introduce her students to a variety of text and opportunities to engage in reading. The day is started with sign-in. Everyday there is a question. The parents will read the question and then their child will put her name on the appropriate response. First thing in the morning, Nanu is setting up the preschool environment to include text and reading. There is also a whiteboard where Nanu has written the choices for the day. Many parents take the time to read to their child what will be happening later that day. Like I described above, circle time includes stories to expose the entire class to particular books. The Reading Corner allows for individual or small groups of children to have a quiet moment with a wide variety of books. The writing and performing of story plays teaches a variety of story conventions along with opportunities to be involved with many different aspects of reading. One of Nanu's most important goals is to model for children that knowledge is
found in books (I described this in question one). Reading in the Green Room is always happening in a variety of ways.

7. **What materials does the teacher use or have available to use?**

The most important and copious reading material is picture books in this preschool classroom. Picture books are always available for the children to read.

Recently, Nanu has created a binder that has all the story plays in it. This has been a way for children to read over with an adult and revisit their work. The children do a lot of work with their names and name recognition. We have started playing a bingo name game and also, Nanu uses name recognition cards to excuse the children from circle. There are a number of different alphabet manipulatives that provide opportunities to work with letters; plastic sand molds, large cardboard cut outs, stencils, Lego letters, magnetic letters, etc. This exposure allows for children to see that letters are everywhere in their classroom.