

Designing Literacy

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I was an avid reader as a child and young student. My parents provided me with a variety of books that I re-read again and again. My introduction, in middle and high school, to “literature,” and the notion of “good” and “bad” writing, polarized what I *wanted* to read, and what it seemed I *should* read. In an effort to emulate this paradigm of well-read scholarship, I spent a year or two only reading “classic” texts—which, as it turned out, meant pre-twentieth century novels that I barely understood, and enjoyed even less. Knowing that I did not enjoy this literature, yet persisting in my “scholarly” endeavor, I read much less than I would have, had I read books I truly liked. We see this trend among “struggling readers,” who are put in poor remedial programs that actually reinforce their struggles. These students are given texts that, while at grade-level, are too difficult for them, or are not relevant to their lives, and which they read at below 100% accuracy. They end up participating in “too little high-success reading activity every day...[a] reason so few struggling readers ever become achieving readers” (Allington, 2013, p. 6). Some educators worry about giving children texts that are too easy. But if we consider that adults mostly avoid difficult texts—texts they read at 98% accuracy¹ or below—why do we hesitate in letting children develop their reading comfortably?

I’ve since become wary of such generally unhelpful hierarchies of reading and literature, and think that all reading—plentiful and varied reading—is good reading. Watching my younger brother, now 7, grow and graduate from preschool, to kindergarten, to first grade, has given me different perspectives on and greater interest in literacy development, and how we support reading as voluntary parts of children’s lives. My brother thrived in kindergarten but during the first half of his first grade year—where

¹ An adult reading a novel at 98% accuracy would, on each page, encounter six new words and have to work out the pronunciation and meaning (Allington, 2013, p. 6)

teachers accelerate reading, writing, and testing—he struggled to do well on spelling tests, and dreaded doing his nightly homework assignments. As someone who liked reading as a child, it is tough to see my brother cry through hours of homework, including half an hour (at least) of reading that he might not enjoy or, at times, fully comprehend. With such negative associations with reading and writing, it is no surprise he'd rather drive cars in a video game than read a book.

The goal of this project is twofold: to understand how adults can promote literacy and reading in meaningful ways for young readers, and to present best practices in literacy and reading promotion in a picture book—*My Stinky Little Brother Doesn't Like to Read*—that I write and illustrate myself. I support the picture book with research on literacy development in young, preoperational emergent readers, with a focus on the early elementary school age group (ages 4-8); it is during the transition from kindergarten play—meaningful activities in which students can replicate and consolidate what they know about their world—to first grade “work” that literacy and reading become problems. Where appropriate, I also address gender-based differences in development, as it is evident that more boys are doing poorly, and, on average, boys have always been doing poorly in school.² However school grades, especially grades from younger years, are not necessarily the best indication of literacy and, ultimately, I believe that teachers'

² In their meta-analysis, “Gender Differences in Scholastic Achievement,” Daniel Voyer and Susan Voyer from the University of New Brunswick, analyzed research on the subject from 30 different countries (with 70% of samples consisting of American students) between 1914 and 2011. They found that “although gender differences follow essentially stereotypical patterns on achievement tests in which boys typically score higher on math and science, females have the advantage on school grades regardless of the material” (“Girls Make Higher Grades,” 2014). Differences are smallest in math and science, where, on average, girls perform as well as boys, and largest in language and English classes.

best practices in literacy and reading development are necessary for all emergent readers, regardless of gender. Additionally, I support the picture book with observations of the kindergarten and prekindergarten—its students and teachers, and their use of pictures, texts, and picture books—at Calvin Hill Daycare | Kitty Lustman-Findling Kindergarten, a private New Haven preschool and kindergarten praised for its excellence in early child development. Finally, I align the book’s design with research on children’s picture books as multimodal works that integrate image and text to tell a story more fully than either component might on its own. With text and image I aim to show, in a simple way accessible to all ages, how young children can enjoy reading, and how caring adults can help them.

An Overview of Literacy and Reading development

I have been using “literacy” and “reading” as separate concepts because although they are related, it is important not to confound the two. It is helpful to think of literacy as multifaceted, with reading and being read to as facets of literacy, along with writing, and oral and aural language development. Generally, the goal of literacy is fluency and comprehension in reading and writing, but educators must engage in various activities with their children, in order to foster full literacy. In addition to reading and writing, children must develop speaking and listening skills in order to become truly literate members of their communities. All of these components, the “language arts,” are dependent on and reinforce each other (Teale & Sulzby, 1989, p. 3-4). To promote literacy, educators must support all components, with rich text for group and independent reading, relevant and developmentally appropriate conversations with children,

augmentation of background knowledge and vocabulary, targeted practice in phonics and phonology, and enriching inventive play.

For most of the 20th century, formal instruction in reading did not begin for children until the 1st grade. Kindergarten functioned as a priming period, during which children acquired “reading readiness,” either via natural maturation or focused activities meant to speed the process. In the 1980s, researchers and teachers began seriously to challenge ideas of “reading readiness,” heeding years of research that had refuted the idea. Instead of children needing to mature developmentally before learning to read, educators and researchers conceded that, similar to motor development, literacy develops continuously over a period of years. Children begin to develop the skills necessary for literacy long before 1st grade, even in infancy. Still, they acknowledged that children do not develop literacy skills completely unaided; support similar to simplified conversation, or aided toddling, is necessary. For young children, natural literacy development “hinges upon the experiences the child has in reading and writing activities which are mediated by literate adults, older siblings, or events in the child’s everyday life” (Schickedanz, 1999, p.5)

Emergent literacy—the tenets of which educators at Calvin Hill adhere to—emerged in the 1980s as a concept that rejected earlier theories on reading readiness. Supporters proposed that: literacy development involves reading, writing, and oral language development; children need active engagement with their world—often characterized by meaningful play, and certainly not workbook exercises—to develop literacy; and that development is not standard for all children. While it is important for young children to handle books often, storybooks alone are not enough to support

literacy. It is the teacher's role to support oral, visual, aural, and written language knowledge (Teale & Yokota, 2000, p. 9).

Oral language development

As they develop orally, children expand their background knowledge of a language and its words. This is necessary for later reading comprehension, when children see for the first time words they may have already spoken or heard. Teachers must speak constantly with children, about the things most meaningful to them, while building their vocabulary. They can do so by facilitating discussions or meetings, where the topics addressed are based in the children's own real-world interests. Additionally, teachers can seize on any and all interactions with children to verbally engage them, and share their own relevant knowledge about the immediate activity. Guided activities are a good opportunity to do so. During the Chinese New Year, a Kindergarten parent visited the Kitty Lustman-Findling classroom to talk about the tradition, and her own family's customs. Using a picture book as a visual aid, she had the children's riveted attention and fielded various questions ranging from topics such as the colors used in fireworks, to what it means to be an "evil spirit." It is in periods of meaningful play (which children often think of as enriching work) that children can best develop their oral language. Children are then at their most internally motivated and will draw upon their background knowledge to reenact the things they know, and to experiment with the things they have just learned. Here too, adults can help augment a child's background knowledge.

Phonics and phonology (aural language development)

As children develop their oral language, teachers help them to develop phonological awareness, the understanding that the words they hear are composed of different sounds—phonemes. Phonological awareness, an “ear skill,” is distinct from phonics, “which is the relation between letters and sounds in written words” (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000, p. 84), but the two are important for literacy. In the 1950s, researchers touted phonics as the best way to teach reading, emphasizing the decoding of words in workbook exercises, over comprehending the meaning of words. In the 1980s, the whole language approach contested “that reading and writing are learned best by actually engaging in reading and writing, that literacy instruction should be rich in content, and that children’s interests and purposes are paramount in learning to read and write,” (Teale & Yokota, p. 6). This approach gained much support through the mid nineties, particularly heralded in California where political leaders effectively dismissed phonics approaches as invalid. Then in 1994, results published from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed California’s students as second to last in the country. Educators again made serious inquiry into the benefits of systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness.

It has not been useful to categorize phonology and phonics, and whole-language learning as mutually exclusive, as occurred with the 20th century’s politically divided stances on the two approaches. It is true that the English language is too irregular to rely heavily or entirely on phonetic generalizations. Programs that emphasize meaning are “more effective than traditional parts-to-whole phonics,” but what is most useful is to teach phonics and phonology in the kind of content rich settings that the whole-language approach encourages: “children taught phonics in context are almost twice as successful

at sounding out unfamiliar words as children taught traditional phonics” (Moustafa, 2000, p. 122). In the Kitty Lustman-Findling kindergarten classroom, the children must complete a few worksheets in the morning, sometimes tracing letters, sometimes matching letter sounds to pictures of objects that begin with that letter. These worksheets are embedded in a morning of activities that range from clay molding to the children writing and illustrating their own inventive books.

One of the worst things that instructors can do is focus solely on decoding skills, decontextualized from actual reading. As Allington noted in *If They Don't Read Much, How They Ever Gonna Get Good*, when isolated skills instruction becomes the primary focus of a lesson, instructors marginalize actual reading. Urging all to see the obvious, he states, “it should seem clear to anyone who examines the issue that reading is not responding to flashcards, nor is it filling in blanks, marking vowel values, or responding to graphemes³ presented in isolation. Reading ability is not necessarily facilitated by nor does it necessarily require the ability to perform the above acts. To develop the ability to read fluently requires the opportunity to read—a simple rule of thumb” (Allington, 1977, p. 2).

Writing

While children learn to recognize phonemes in oral language, and to understand how to decode the written language that they read, they must reinforce this understanding with their own writing. As with all other aspects of their learning, children do best when they are internally motivated. They “most effectively learn about a form of writing when

³ As phonemes are, aurally, the parts of a word that we hear, graphemes are the visual equivalent, the parts of a word that we read.

they have a real purpose for using it” (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 75). At Calvin Hill, children write to create the documents and props that they need in play. They sign their drawings and paintings and sculptures, label their block structures, take orders for cakes and pastas in their pretend bakeries, and even pretend to type messages on old keyboards. For more organized activities, such as creating surveys to poll their friends on favorite animals or number of siblings, the children write up their own systems for polling and then organizing the information.

As children begin to write they experiment with inventive spelling, which often involves unconventional use of letters (e.g. using “K” rather than “C” in “CAT,” or spelling “VIEW” as “VYOU”) and leaving out letters that they may not hear, or may not yet know how to represent (this often means excluding vowels, as in spelling “DOCTOR” “DCDR”). At this point in their development, children are adjusting to writing and thinking of themselves as writers, “learning to enjoy writing and to feel they can do it on their own;” trying to correct a child’s inventive spelling “inhibits engagement...and active listening” (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 86). But if a child asks for the correct spelling of a word, it is okay to provide a conventional answer. Requests for correct spelling demonstrate an understanding that writing and language are fixed systems, and so educators should respond in kind.

Reading is partly about recognizing abstract symbols, and applying their appropriate phonemes. The alphabet, a system of fairly arbitrary symbols, will have more meaning for a child if she can associate them with things or people important to her:

Outside, a girl in the pre-K class makes a shape in white chalk, and tells me that it is a D. “D is for dada,” Josephine says. “And also for David, that’s my dad’s real name. And

my sister is Natalia, and my mom is Julia, and I'm Josephine. I'm going to write M for mama, N for Natalia and J for Josephine in different colors, and then I'm going to mix the colors all together."

Josephine, her mom, her dad, and her sister are all important to Josephine; motivated to experiment with color and material, and to represent these important figures, she recognizes and appropriately applies the otherwise arbitrary forms for "J," "M," "D," and "N."

Reading

As stated previously, the components of literacy all support and reinforce each other. To become fluent readers, children must get solid, concurrent guidance in oral language (to develop the background knowledge and word awareness necessary to comprehend the content of books), aural language (to develop an understanding of the phonology of words), and writing (to further develop their understanding of word construction, which aids in fluency and decoding when reading). All the while, to fully develop their literacy and to practice its different components, it is important that emergent readers have frequent contact with books, including time spent individually with text, and read-aloud sessions with teachers. The texts should also be varied: as children read a variety of texts, they build "text structure knowledge," which "aids comprehension because the listener/reader has an organizational scheme with which to think about what is being read" (Schickedanz, 1999, p. 60). Books should include "real children's literature"—rich and detailed stories—non-fiction, and simple readers with decodable, phonetically regular words that stimulate phonological awareness and conventional reading. The *Primary Phonics* readers in the Kitty Lustman-Findling

kindergarten room are such books. *Al* is about a big alligator that runs, and likes to eat hot dogs. In *Ben Bug*, a small insect finds shelter in a hat, a pod, and a nut. Neither book contains a word more than three letters long, and both make good use of the similar onsets or rimes in words such as “Ben” and “bug,” or “mad” and “bad.” Many more similar books exist in the classroom, all of them well used.

Teachers should create inviting and well-organized libraries from which their children can comfortably and confidently pull texts. Calvin Hill’s books are arranged close to the ground with their covers on view, for easy choice and easy access. The preschoolers’ reading loft, with its closed-off, cushioned space, offers a particularly comfortable reading area. Teachers also consider where to put books of different subjects. In the block area, for example, are books that illustrate different structures. The children use these as references, as when a few kindergarteners used the books and posters to design an entire cityscape. The teachers place similarly useful texts throughout the classroom: a book about island poems with “coconut” in the title, where the children have planted a coconut to see if it will grow; references to snow where children have drawn snowflakes; books about feathers where there is a collection of feathers. The classroom does not lack for books, and the children can access them as they please.

There are different kinds of books to choose from, for different levels of emergent readers. Wordless books allow children unfamiliar with text to draw a story from the illustrations. Folk tales “continue to enchant youngsters” and encourage a love of stories and the books associated with them (Cullinan, 1989, p. 48). As children begin to understand and conventionally read text, there are benefits both to simple books and books that tell more complex stories. Predictable books don’t over elaborate, and allow

children to learn text quickly. More complex books allow children to increase vocabulary and their knowledge of the world. In general, there are a few key criteria when choosing good books for young children. Good books have interesting language that sounds natural; they present experiences with connections to children's lives (which does not mean stories should only relate familiar experiences); in the case of very young children they should be especially sturdy; and, finally, the educators should themselves like the books (Cullinan, 1989, p. 37). Various publications, such as *Horn Book* and *The Reading Teacher*, offer reviews of children's books. Educators can refer to these sources when selecting effective books for their classrooms.

Time set aside for read-alouds is invaluable, and in no short supply at Calvin Hill. Children's associations with books become highly positive when their experiences are enjoyable and occur "under especially nurturant [sic] conditions" (Schickedanz, 1999, p.86). The way a teacher conducts read-alouds can affect children's literacy learning. Short, enjoyable reading sessions are better than long sessions that, more often than not, become a struggle for children's attention. For young children, it is not even particularly important that a story be read to completion. Much more important is enthusiasm when telling the story out loud. When reading picture books, teachers can use the illustrations to facilitate children's understanding of the story. Pointing to pictures while reading is a silent, undistruptive way to elaborate on unfamiliar words. Before beginning a story, after finishing it, or when pausing on wordless spreads, are good moments for a teacher to further elaborate on a story, and to include the children's own thoughts. And in all books, a teacher can convey the meaning of a word in the way she or he reads it. A convincing "pop!" sound is sure to help children understand its meaning (Schickedanz, 1999, p. 51-

53). Importantly, read-alouds also demonstrate fluent reading behavior, and encourage children to strive for their own fluency.

Read-aloud routines, like bedtime stories at home, give reading an important place in children's lives, and are highly motivational for children to engage in their own independent reading. The more stories a child hears, the more models of the world he will have to explore in his own play. Reading aloud introduces children to more vocabulary, writing styles, and forms of language, which support their language development and strongly influences later literacy.

Supporting Struggling Readers

Education's ultimate reading goal for all students is fluency and comprehension. States benchmark intermediate literacy goals for each grade level, and school districts strategize curriculum to best meet these standards. My brother's New York City public school adheres to the state's adopted Common Core standards. The New York State Education Department details these standards on its P-12 (prekindergarten through twelfth grade) education website. Among prekindergarteners, emphasis is on observational learning with much support and prompting from teachers. Teachers introduce literacy and its components at a reasonable pace that aligns with how emergent readers develop. As examples, prekindergarteners are expected to "retell familiar stories," "ask questions about unfamiliar vocabulary," and "actively engage in group reading activities"—expectations that are all grounded in developmentally appropriate practices for supporting children's background knowledge and oral language development, and appreciation for reading (New York State Education Department, 2010, p. 9). In kindergarten, the standards continue this steady introduction to reading and its

conventions. The language on the website continues the emphasis on “prompting and support.” Kindergarteners should also be able to “retell familiar stories, with key details,” “ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text,” and continue to engage in group reading activities (NYSESED, 2010, p. 17). From prekindergarten to kindergarten the rigor of reading standards increases slightly. Increased rigor is key to a child’s learning, so another level of rigor between kindergarten and first grade is expected, but in some areas the increase is a jump. Whereas kindergarteners focus on learning sight-words (their names, oft-used words such as prepositions and conjunctions, etc.) in first grade there is an emphasis on decoding entirely new words (NYSESED, 2010, p. 23). Such a jump is likely a factor behind assigning more worksheets, as happened during my brother’s graduation from kindergarten to first grade. While kindergarteners are expected to show some purpose and understanding when reading emergent-reader texts, first graders should read “grade-level texts” with “sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.” Most conspicuous is that, for first graders, there is no emphasis in the common core reading standards on prompting and support.

New York State’s additions to the common core, meant to better align the standards with the state’s own standards, reintroduce the importance of context, and the emphasis on the child’s world and the child himself when teaching literacy. Still, the language of the standards makes a too sharp distinction between kindergarteners as emergent readers, and first graders as newly literate. Few, if any children are “standard,” and none are identical in their development. This important fact should not preclude rigor as students graduate from grade to grade, but should definitely include continued and focused prompting and support. Ideally, all children would be taught according to their

individual developmental needs. Many students who were reading emergent texts in kindergarten, might end first grade still not reading at “grade-level,” but reading emergent texts with first grade accuracy. This is development. The American public education system, which aims to efficiently educate children en masse, is not currently equipped to give such individualized support. Calvin Hill’s methods of teaching do bring its students to common core standards of kindergarten literacy. But as a small, well-funded private school, it is able to do so with uncommon amounts of support for and attention to each child.

Struggling readers—those students who don’t make it to grade-level on time—come in all forms, with the most difficult cases often being students with learning disabilities. Struggling readers also often lack the motivation to read but we cannot, in the case of very young readers, place the blame on them. Socioeconomic class can indicate a child’s literacy development and reading levels. A child in a working class family, where parents might not be able to devote much time to reading or having meaningful conversations with him might hear, on average, 1250 words per hour. A child whose family receives welfare could hear just half as many words, many of them directional rather than conversational. In stark contrast, a child from a professional family might hear 2150 words an hour—more than three times as many as his poorest counterpart (Talbot, 2015). Culture or family tradition, rather than socioeconomic class, can also mediate how much a family interacts and speaks meaningfully with its children. Ultimately, the more words a child hears, the greater his variance of vocabulary, and the greater his background knowledge of his world and its language which, as explained, is crucial to literacy and to reading.

Some children, then, spend much of their time catching up to their worldly peers once in school. A struggling reader who constantly feels behind in school quickly loses motivation to read at all. With less and less meaningful play during the school day, children lose out on opportunities to comfortably explore reading and other aspects of literacy in self-motivated activities. What they often get, instead, are homework assignments (that have no meaning for them personally) that turn reading and other literacy-based tasks into chores, rather than activities they want to complete. In the absence of real self-motivation, “children who read only when they have no choice will not become good readers” (Cunningham, 2005, p. 88). Taking recommendations from a young boy who, throughout elementary school was a struggling reader, Jenkins suggests providing students with regular opportunities to choose books and activities, and to provide “enabling texts” that move “beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual and economic focus” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 161). He suggests this specifically for young African American males, but the goal for struggling readers in general is to provide them with more reading that they’ll find less boring.

Researchers responding to older, middle or high school aged boys’ poor performance in school seek best practices that might support struggling male readers specifically. The idea of self-motivated reading remains salient for all such research, encouraging educators to have boys choose the texts—which need not be conventional books—most interesting to them. Beyond this similarity, variation in researchers’

recommendations result from differences in how they interpret the “boys crisis.”⁴ In his book *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader*, William G. Brozo is concerned with getting adolescent boys to be readers, and to be real men (Blackburn, 2003, p. 10). As such he recommends that teachers read and provide books with one of ten male archetypes, which he details throughout his work.

In great contrast to this suggestion, researchers who criticize essential notions of masculinity and what it means to be a boy, recommend diversity in classroom texts and media, and the way they are used. In *Boys, Literacies and Schooling*, Leonie Rowan, Michele Knobel, Chris Bigum and Colin Lankshear argue mightily against gender norms, which they call a “set of more or less powerful fictions,” (as cited in Blackburn, 2003, p. 8) that entrap young readers—particularly those who are not typically “masculine” or “feminine”—in specific, at times harmful ways of thinking. Some struggling male readers choose not to read because they consider it “feminine” (Warner, 2013) or equate apathy toward school performance with a harmful and outdated notion of masculinity. While there can be great discrepancies between what boys want to read and what is available in a classroom (e.g. a dearth of informational texts among many descriptive, feelings-based fictions), essentialized notions of masculinity complicate the reasons *why*

⁴ Judith Warner, who wrote about the fallacy of the “boys crisis,” rightfully notes that a boy’s underperformance is tied to his family’s class and income—which, in the US, are closely tied to race and education completion. Explaining that these differences mostly account for education gaps, she writes that boys, “as long as they’re white and from educated families, do just as well as girls” (Warner, 2013). Considering, however, that such boys probably aren’t the majority in the US—or at least that boys who aren’t white and aren’t from educated families do poorly enough to bring down the nation’s averages—the numbers still indicate that, on average, girls consistently have better grades than boys throughout school.

boys choose some texts over others. Rowan et al. advocate for student and teacher critique of gender dynamics that would free students to read without shame or fear.

While these socio-critical questions of gender and its role in schooling are interesting and important, they may not be appropriate for young readers: Brozo, and Rowan et al., observed middle and high school students for their studies. Kindergarten and first graders fall into Piaget's Preoperational Stage of cognitive development. Their understandings of the world are still largely based on perception. So while they recognize physical differences in sex by age 3, and conserve gender (understand it as permanent) by age 7, they cannot think abstractly about gender, and what it means socially. This is not to suggest that adults should avoid talking with younger children about gender equity, and even gender diversity; this develops background knowledge, and can combat early intolerance. Rather, it seems that the most relevant practices suggested by these researchers—diversity of literature for children, with an emphasis on self-selection and motivation—reflect the key tenets, as I've addressed them, in child-based (i.e. individual-focused) models of literacy education for all children, regardless of gender.

Reading my Picture Book

Picture books can be a highly useful tool for introducing young, emergent readers to print, and supporting proper literacy development. Humans learn from social encounters, which is why language development is so dependent on actual interactions with other people. A major challenge of literacy, then, is developing a “communicative relationship with a material and semiotic object rather than with a...human being” (Painter, Martin, & Unsworth, 2013, p. 15). Through the mediation of a speaking adult, children become acquainted with the verbal voice of a picture book but “it is probably the

visual images that are the most significant means for setting up an affective relationship between child and book, an important step in coming to terms with the print medium” (Painter et al., 2013, 15). I decided to depict literacy in picture book form, because of this accessibility.

While the pages of a picture book can be rich, they should not be overwhelming to a child who is navigating both its visual and textual components. For the most part, my images are simple. Generic (rather than minimalist or naturalistic) depictions of human characters allow me to exaggerate expressions and moods, and encourage the reader to relate to the images (Painter et al., 2013, 32-33). For the most part, my backgrounds are flat washes of color. Where this changes—on two double page spreads where the younger brother plays in his backyard, and a single page where the family moves through a grocery store—is intentional. Children’s “responsiveness to mood and to a great diversity of graphic styles is remarkably broad and spontaneous,” and their attention to textures, color hues, tints, and shades, is greater than we credit (and probably greater than most adults’ own perceptions) (MacCann & Richard, 1973, p. 2-3, 34). On those pages, I depict the younger brother’s moments of pleasure—associated with internally motivated engagement in literacy—with more color variance, and more texture. Overall, the book’s first pages—wherein the younger brother’s displeasure is associated with forced, uninteresting assignments—are less saturated and vibrant than the later, happier pages. With visual cues, I try to differentiate between poor and meaningful literacy engagement.

My Stinky Little Brother Doesn’t Like to Read has a simple plot, narrated by the older brother of the titular character. The younger brother has trouble completing reading and writing assignments that he finds boring, and so insists that he does not like reading

or writing at all. In actuality, the younger brother enjoys creating signs for the plants in his backyard, and writing grocery lists for his family when they go shopping. His acquisition of a gardening magazine—an unconventional text for a young reader—is the turning point in his appreciation for reading. The magazine’s content aligns with his interests in his own backyard; he enjoys reading through the magazine, and applying what he has learned. After sharing this text with his teacher, his teacher has a better understanding of his interests, and is able to send him home with more meaningful assignments. With a newfound appreciation for reading and writing as fun activities, the younger brother has better, voluntary engagement with the components of literacy.

It is a simple book that greatly simplifies the concept and diversity of struggling readers. I’ve written and illustrated *My Stinky Little Brother Doesn’t Like to Read* as an informational tool, meant to remind young readers that literacy can be fun, and to remind older readers of literacy’s components, and what they can do to support literacy development in young children. As examples:

- To demonstrate the importance of background knowledge and oral language development, I liken the younger brother to a walking encyclopedia, and highlight the conversations he has about the garden, with his older brother
- To demonstrate aural language development, I depict the two brothers playing a rhyming game
- To highlight the importance of meaningful writing, I show the brother creating signs for the backyard plants and, at the end, creating his own “Backyard Magazine.” I also include multiple examples of inventive spelling
- The magazine’s centrality to the plot highlights the diversity of texts that children can find meaningful

- To highlight the importance of reading, I depict the younger brother engaged in independent reading and partner reading with his parents, who are implicitly supportive of his literacy throughout the book

Somewhat implicit in the plot, is the need for teachers and schools to have sustained relationships with children's parents that focus on the children's development. Had the younger brother not shared his magazine with his teacher—as encouraged or allowed by his parents—he would have reached his turning point later. Actual school-home relationships must be even more purposeful.

Finally, my decision to depict the characters as non-white is, of course, intentional. It stems partly from the US's reality—the majority of struggling readers are non-white (Gabriel, 2010)—and mostly from my personal reality. My family and I identify as black and, ultimately, my motivations for researching early childhood literacy and creating a picture book, are personal and simple. I want to understand my brother's struggles, and my picture book is meant to help kids like him succeed (as he is now doing, with additional literacy tutoring that focuses on him as an individual, developing child). Each parent, sibling, good teacher, or otherwise caring adult with a stake in a child's education, has similar motivations. American public education has a basic responsibility to educate children, and teach them literacy. Parents and other family, with a better understanding of literacy, can personally maximize their children's success.

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