

Learning About Environmental Print Through Picture Books

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Children construct knowledge about print from what they see in the environment. They also develop early literacy from good children's literature. There are now many books which incorporate environmental print, combining both ecological text and the printed page.

KEY WORDS: environmental print; early literacy; children's literature.

Children from all cultures, family backgrounds, and neighborhoods are actively involved with environmental print. Environmental print is defined as "print found in the natural environment of the child. This would include logos, labels, road signs, billboards, and other print found in the child's immediate ecology" (Kirkland, Aldridge, & Kuby, 1991, p. 219).

Clay (1993) revealed that many researchers, who have observed children's literacy development since 1975, have discovered that preschool children explore the details of print in their environment on signs, cereal packages, and television advertisements. A joint literacy statement was published by six professional national educational organizations (Schickedanz, 1986) such as National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and International Reading Association (IRA). There was agreement among those organizations that many children are reading environmental print, such as road signs, grocery labels, and fast food signs, before they go to school. Yetta Goodman (1986), who has spent years researching the development of literacy in children, stated that "...the develop-

ment of knowledge about print embedded in environmental settings in the beginning of reading development" (p. 7). Ken Goodman (1986) explained that students should learn through language while they learn language, that reading should be the communication of meaning, and that it should occur in social contexts. He said that students learn to read by reading signs, billboards, and logos. Reading of environmental print is an activity often engaged in before reading print in books (Aldridge & Rust, 1987; Clay, 1991; Goodman, 1980; Hall, 1985; Hiebert, 1983, 1986; Kontos, 1986; McGee, 1986; Schickedanz et al., 1993; Wepner, 1985).

Because of this knowledge, many early childhood educators have been using environmental print as part of their early literacy program (Kirkland, Aldridge, & Kuby, 1991; Cloer, Aldridge, & Dean, 1981/1982; Aldridge & Rust, 1987). When environmental print first became popular, teachers hurriedly gathered newspapers, labels, fast food wrappers, and road signs to use in their classrooms. While this took considerable time, teachers were amazed at the interest children took in print found in their natural environments (Aldridge, Kirkland, & Kuby, 1995; Cloer, Aldridge, & Dean, 1981/1982; Kuby, Aldridge, & Snyder, 1994). Over time, however, many teachers began to realize that they were doing all of the work in gathering environmental print. Soon, children were encouraged to find their own ecological print and bring it into the classroom to share with others (Kirkland, Aldridge, & Kuby, 1991).

While environmental print is currently an active part of many preschool and kindergarten classrooms, some teachers are concerned that children may be able to read logos and signs, but may have more difficulty

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with concepts about print related to books. However, using environmental print and the reading of books is not mutually exclusive. There are numerous books written for young children which incorporate environmental print (see list below). The purpose of this article is to describe six specific books which contain environmental print and how these can be used in the classroom, and to provide a bibliography of other books which also contain environmental print (see Figure 1).

ABC Drive! by Naomi Howland (1994) contains the whole alphabet of sights in the city from the “ambulance” to the “yield” sign. Several cultures are also represented throughout the text. This source can be used to encourage children to pay attention to signs and billboards in their community. Later, children can construct a model of their community with signs and billboards. Teachers can make photographs of places common to the community which the children see each day. If field trips are taken, children can be encouraged to identify billboards, road signs, and stores on the way. Parents can help their child make a list of signs they see on the way to school.

Another example of a book filled with environmental print is *The Signmaker's Assistant* by Tedd Arnold (1992). Norman is the main character who works as an assistant to the signmaker in the town. One day he gets the chance to make his own signs. The town is tied up in knots because Norman puts the signs in all the wrong places. For example, he places a “Detour” sign through someone’s house. After reading *The Signmaker's Assistant*, children can be encouraged to make their own billboards. Poster board is cut in a rectangular shape for the billboard. Toilet tissue rolls with slits are used for the base of the billboard. The m&m’s billboard displayed below is written in approximated spelling (see

Figure #2 below). It says, m&m’s melt in your mouth.” These billboards are then displayed around the room or shared during circle time.

A visual barrage of print is found on the vehicles in Donald Crews’ (1980) *Truck*. Children are encouraged to discuss trucks which they have seen with print on them. Then, children can make their own trucks by cutting from patterns or using shoe boxes. Cabs and wheels are then added. Children then brainstorm advertisements on trucks which they have seen in the community. Environmental print brought into the classroom can be used to label the trucks. They can either write the print on their trucks, or glue on the label. These trucks usually reflect vehicles the children have seen in their neighborhood or on the highway. They may be displayed on the bulletin board, on a mobile, or on the walls outside the classroom for other classes to enjoy.

In *The Tale of Thomas Mead* by Pat Hutchins (1980), Thomas does not see a need to read. He encounters all types of problems because he cannot read signs such as “Enter” and “Exit” or “Women” and “Men.” After he ends up in jail, he finally realizes how important literacy can be and he learns to read.

This book is good for the beginning of the year. Children can take clipboards around the school and write the signs and labels which they see in and around the school. Then these are brought back to the classroom and a discussion of the function and purpose of these signs follows. A “Signs in Our School” list can be made. Children can also make a personal list of “I Can Read Signs.” Examples of Common signs purchased at a school supply can be available to children.

I Read Signs by Tana Hoban (1983) is a photographic collection of important signs children see every



Fig 1. Many activities can be enjoyed with these six books.

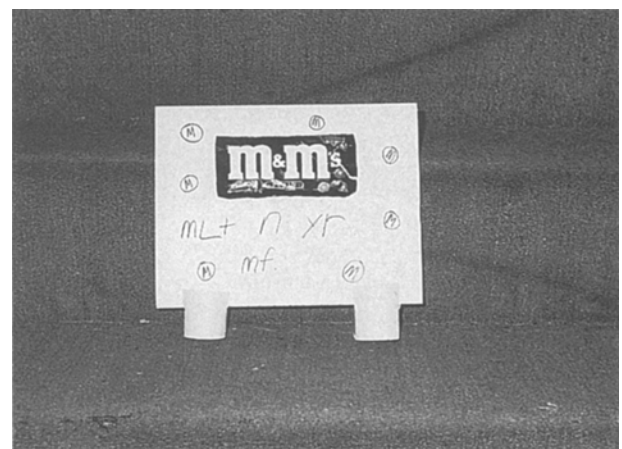


Fig 2. Preschool children enjoy making their own billboards.

day. These include "Playground," "Detour," "Railroad crossing," and "Don't walk."

Students can make signs for classroom centers based on this book. For example, if a center is closed for the day, students make the sign, "Sorry, we're closed." Children make "Exit" signs and "No smoking" signs for the classroom. Children also make posters announcing upcoming events in the classroom or grade level. For example, a visiting author, community helper, circus parade, scavenger hunt, delivery service, or anything else on which the students decide.

Children will see the importance of reading labels in *The Little Old Man Who Could Not Read* by Irma Simonton Black (1965). A little old man's wife goes out of town and he has to take care of himself. When he goes to the grocery store he gets wax paper instead of spaghetti which he had wanted.

Just as students make trucks for Donald Crews' *Trucks*, they can make their own shopping carts and place in them labels which they can read. Other ideas include brainstorming snacks to cook in the classroom. Make a grocery list together of ingredients needed. Arrange a field trip to the grocery to purchase supplies or give each child a few items to bring into the classroom. Notify parents so they will include children in the process. Children then participate in the cooking. Displayed recipes used in the classroom can incorporate grocery labels of ingredients (see Figure 3).

The combined use of environmental print and literature makes literacy have more meaning and relevance for children. They see its vital functions and purposes. Emergent readers and writers relate what they already know about print to unfamiliar print. Both environmental print and literature facilitate inner construction of the

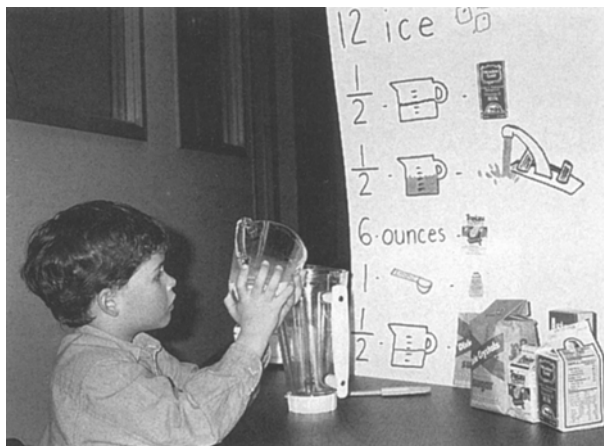


Fig 3. Young children can read recipes when food labels are used.

child's reality. Books have been used in early childhood for centuries and environmental print for decades, but as we have pointed out, they are not mutually exclusive. Why not use both together?

BOOKS TO USE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT ACTIVITIES

There are numerous children's books which include print from the environment in some form. We have divided these into six categories which include (1) "Books About Learning to Read," (2) "Books About Travel, Streets, Signs and Billboards," (3) "Books About Recipes and Cooking," (4) Books About Shopping, Lists, and Stores," (5) "Books About Letters and Notes," (6) "Books About Restaurants and Menus."

Books About Learning to Read

- Black, I. S. (1965). *The little old man who could not read*. Chicago: Whitman.
- Brady, M. (1995). *More than anything else*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Fradsen, K. G. (1984). *I started school today*. Chicago: Children's Press.
- Grainger, J. (1983). *Matthew likes to read*. Wellington, New Zealand: School Branch.
- Stanek, M. (1986). *My mom can't read*. Chicago: Whitman

Books About Travel, Streets, Signs and Billboards

- Arnold, T. (1992). *The signmaker's assistant*. New York: Dial Books.
- Arthur, M. (1993). *Arthur's family vacation*. Boston: Little, Brown
- Crews, D. (1978). *Freight train*. New York: Scholastic.
- Crews, D. (1980). *Truck*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Crews, D. (1981). *Light*. New York: Greenwillow
- Crews, D. (1983). *Parade*. New York: Greenwillow
- Crews, D. (1984). *School bus*. New York: Greenwillow
- Davis, J. (1978) *Garfield and the haunted diner*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
- Hoban, T. (1983). *I can read signs*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Hoban, T. (1983). *I can read symbols*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Howland, N. (1994). *ABC drive!* New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hutchins, P. (1980). *The tale of Thomas Mead*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Keats, E. J. (1972). *Pet Show*. New York: Macmillan.
- Khalsa, D. K. (1988). *My family vacation*. New York: Potter.
- Lobel, A. (1981). *On market street*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Maestro, B., & Maestro, G. (1981). *Harriet reads signs and more signs*. New York: Crown.
- Maestro, B., & Maestro, G. (1989). *Taxi*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Mendoza, G. (1990). *Traffic jam*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang
- Rockwell, A., & Rockwell, H. (1972). *Thruway*. New York: Macmillan.
- Thomas, I. (1976). *My street's a morning cool street*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Van Laan, N. (1992). *People, people, everywhere!* New York: Knopf.
- Zion, G. (1957). *Dear garbage man*. New York: Harper & Row.

Books About Recipes and Cooking

- dePaola, T. (1978). *Pancakes for breakfast*. New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich.
- Kasza, K. (1987). *The wolf's chicken stew*. New York: Putnam.
- Low, A. (1993). *The popcorn shop*. New York: Scholastic.
- McGrath, B. B. (1994). *The m&m's counting book*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.
- Sendak, M. (1970). *In the night kitchen*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Westcott, N. B. (1987). *Peanut butter and jelly*. New York: Penguin.
- Wright Group (1988). *Reading is everywhere*. San Diego: Author.

Books About Shopping, Lists, and Stores

- Berenstain, S., & Berenstain, J. (1985). *The Berenstain bears and too much junk food*. New York: Random House.
- Berenstain, S., & Berenstain, J. (1988). *The Berenstain bears get the gimmies*. New York: Random House.
- Field, R. (1988). *General store*. New York: Scholastic.
- Gretz, S. (1982). *Teddy bears go shopping*. New York: Four Winds.
- Hutchins, P. (1976). *Don't forget the bacon*. New York: Greenwillow.
- McPhail, D. (1974). *The cereal box*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Munsch, R. (1990). *Something good*. Toronto: Annick.
- Shelby, A. (1990). *We keep a store*. New York: Orchard.

Books About Letters and Notes

- Ahlberg, J., & Ahlberg, A. (1986). *The jolly postman*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Ahlberg, J., & Ahlberg, A. (1991). *The jolly Christmas postman*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Keats, E. J. (1968). *A letter to Amy*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Mayer, M. (1987). *There's an alligator under my bed*. New York: Dial.
- Sherman, A. (1964). *Hello mudduh, hello fadduh!* New York: Harper & Row.
- Shulevitz, U. (1990). *Toddlecreek post office*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Van Rynbach, I. (1991). *Everything from a nail to a coffin*. New York: Orchard.

Books About Restaurants and Menus

- Axelrod, A. (1994). *Pigs will be pigs*. New York: Four Winds Press.
- Davis, J. (1978). *Garfield and the haunted diner*. New York: Grossett & Dunlap.
- Kovalski, M. (1990). *Pizza for breakfast*. New York: Morrow.

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