

Concepts about Print—Implications for Instruction:

Marie Clay calls concepts about print “the rules of the road,” and writes, “Teachers must teach so that all children become knowledgeable about these essential concepts so they open doors to literacy.” She explains that teachers who have an understanding of what aspects of print their students are attending to can introduce students early on to print conventions through experiences in both reading and writing—especially through focused instruction in the first six months of school (Clay, 2000, pp. 24-25).

Reading and writing are reciprocal literacy activities, especially in the early years; that is, they both promote student literacy learning and provide the experiences that children need to gain knowledge and use of ‘the rules of the road.’ Through explicit teacher modeling as well as lots of guided practice and experience, students take on the concepts, and use them until the concepts become more automatic.

Based on teacher assessment, this literacy learning should and could be part of whole group, small group and one-on-one (conferring) learning contexts—from reading the morning meeting chart to writing a morning message together as part of an interactive writing experience, from shared reading of a big book with a focus on pointing to each word as we read and moving across the page from left to right, to writers’ workshop mini-lessons where a teacher models where to start writing on the page or how to leave space between words so that readers can reread them.

Most importantly, because children have such varied and broad experiences with print when they first come to school, this assessment, together with ongoing running records and observation of students’ writing, will help teachers pull together small strategy groups for guided instruction and practice—whether it be a group of children who are ready to attend to punctuation in their own writing or a child who still needs support in pointing to words as s/he reads across a single line of print on a level A text.

Finally, while print layout, directionality, spacing and the stop and go marks of punctuation determine the “rules of the road,” the major entry into discovering how print works is building an understanding of how letters in print come together to represent sounds in words. Early letter and word study can begin with very important words, the children’s names: How many letters are in your name? What is the first letter? What sound does that letter make or what is the first sound you hear in your name? How many claps (syllables) are in your name? Is it a long name or a short name? As a strategy to building classroom community and literacy the children can have opportunities to play with their names, to sort names in their classroom by the number of letters, by the number of claps, by first letter, and to chant their names from a chart or word wall.

Children’s names go up on the word wall first. As the word wall expands to include little words the children see in books and want to write in their stories, the children learn about the concept of word—that words have first and last letters and sounds, that they are separated by spaces on the page and that the left to right directionality holds true in reading and writing words as it does in moving across a line of print: letters represent the sounds in words in left to right sequence. As young children chant words from the word wall, find them in a big book, or stretch them out to write during writer’s workshop and then edit for accuracy of word wall words, they also learn that no matter the font or page layout, the sequence of letters for each word will always be the same.