



Connect popular culture print to classroom instruction

by Debbie Vera and Nancy Compean-Garcia

“...and then he gave me this T-shirt,” says 4-year-old Ernesto, turning so that all the children can see it. “It says A&M. That’s where he goes to school, and I’m going there too.”

Looking into his shining eyes, you recognize this as a teachable moment, a perfect picture, a room filled with children who experience a connection between the outside world and the classroom experience.

“Amazing! How did this happen?” you think. “How can I keep this learning feeling from evaporating into thin air!”



Children’s experiences with popular culture items such as toys and T-shirts have a huge influence on their developing literacy. As a teacher, you may recognize this influence but wonder how to use it throughout your daily schedule.

In this article, we discuss how to help children make connections between their early literacy experiences at home and in the classroom. We provide a simple and practical step-by-step process of how children understand the meaning of literacy, and we offer a variety of activities that you can implement.

What we know about early literacy experiences

Children begin to learn the meaning of print at home. This occurs when young learners observe home environmental print logos such as Subway,[®] Cheerios,[®] and Chuck E Cheese.[®] These forms of print provide a window of opportunity for teachers to help children make connections to print and word recognition patterns.

Researchers agree on several points about emergent literacy:

- It begins during the period before children receive formal reading instruction (Stahl and Miller 1989; Sulzby and Teal 1986; Van Kleeck 1990).
- It encompasses learning about reading, writing, and print prior to schooling (Sulzby and Teal 1991).



- It is acquired through informal as well as adult-directed home and school activities (Sulzby and Teal 1991).
- It facilitates acquisition of specific knowledge of reading (Sulzby and Teal 1991).

CHILDREN BEGIN TO LEARN THE MEANING OF PRINT AT HOME.

Some studies have explored the impact of home-based emergent literacy experiences in the homes of language-minority children. For example, Stratton (2005) stated that literacy development begins in the very early stages of childhood, even though the activities of young children may not seem related to reading and writing. The researcher concluded that early behaviors such as “reading” from pictures and “writing” with scribbles are examples of emergent literacy and are an important part of children’s literacy development. In the same way, Burningham and Dever (2005) reported that reading achievement in young children is closely related to the children’s home literacy environments.

Building home and school connections is essential to the learners. These connections provide children with an opportunity to relate and understand meaningful information. In addition, using home environmental print in the classroom gives teachers

opportunities to support their students with scaffolding skills that will promote understanding and independence in their reading experience (Echeverria, Vogt, and Short 2000).

Studies such as Senechal and Lefevre (2001) examined the effect of home literacy experiences, language, and literacy development in a middle class population. Findings indicated that those children who were read to by their parents had advantages in spelling, decoding, and alphabet knowledge. The research continues to show a correlation between home literacy experiences and student reading achievement.

Furthermore, child interactions, daily routine experiences, family involvement, and home literacy resources have an impact on the literacy outcome of young children (Nord, Lennon, and Westat 1999). Studies have shown that the home is a powerful influence on reading achievement (Murphy 2004).

With the support of parents, caregivers, early childhood educators, and teachers, as well as exposure to a literacy-rich environment, children successfully progress from emergent to conventional reading (Stratton 2005). Cooper (2005) agrees with this progress of reading from one stage to another and explored the stages of literacy development in young children.

Teachers who help learners connect their personal home literacy experiences to daily classroom instruction will promote relevant teaching, meaningful learning, and a positive environment.



Connecting the two literacy environments

Educators and parents share the same goal of fostering children's learning and achievement in the classroom. Adams (1996) explained that when children attend to environmental print, a fundamental step toward reading has been achieved.

A fundamental question is whether print exists in the home and, if so, how children attend to it. Compean-Garcia (2007) examined the effect of home literacy experiences on the development of pre-reading skills of bilingual preschoolers in one South Texas city. In this study, 45 parents took part in a parent interview and a survey about their home literacy environment.

The findings that emerged were all examples of *connecting letters to sounds*. Responses were different depending on the parents' knowledge and preparation. Nevertheless, 89 percent of parents reported that they helped their children connect letters to sounds by connecting letters to objects and pictures. Astoundingly, all 45 parents used environmental print (home items) to help their children connect symbols to letters. Compean-Garcia found that the letter recognition skills and alphabet knowledge skills in all 45 preschoolers increased in the pre-test given at the beginning of school. It is evident that print awareness begins at home, and teachers need to help carry this information into the classroom.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in popular culture cartoon characters on children's toys, books, clothing, food, and bedding (Marsh 1999b, 2004), which has amplified the forms of print found in the home. Vera (2007) categorized the print related to popular culture characters as Popular Culture Environmental Print (PCEP). Vera incorporated this print into literacy centers, small-group literacy instruction, and large-group literacy instruction. After an intervention that used PCEP in the classroom, Vera found that the print concepts skills and alphabet knowledge skills increased. It appeared that the increase in skills was due to using PCEP as a catalyst for creating a meaningful curriculum.

Using print that is relevant and meaningful to the children connects the home and school environments. To ensure the curriculum is meaningful, the print in the children's homes should be identified at the beginning of the year. One method for doing this has been to survey the children and their families about favorite restaurants, toys, cartoon characters, movies, and videos. A sample survey appears at the end of this article (Vera 2007).

Because parent surveys are not always returned, teachers have used other ways to understand the print of interest to the children. One method uses writing instruction. During writing workshop or writing centers (Vera 2007), the teacher has given the students the topic of writing about your favorite cartoon character, favorite restaurant, or favorite toy.



As the children are writing, the teacher identifies print of interest to the children and begins to understand the children better.

USING PRINT THAT IS RELEVANT AND MEANINGFUL TO THE CHILDREN CONNECTS THE HOME AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT.

Furthermore, children can provide examples of the print in their homes. To accomplish this task, teachers can send home a note asking for samples of print found in the home. It is important that the children see the logo with the print for all levels of readers to experience success. Reutzel, Fawson, Young, Morrison, and Wilcox (2003) determined that children focus on different aspects of environmental print when reading it. Children concentrate on the logo first and then the print. Therefore, children need to bring both the logo and print with their samples.

Another method is a show-and-tell activity. Children always enjoy bringing things from home and sharing them with their friends. Vera (2007) used this strategy during the PCEP intervention. As children share their objects and corresponding print,

the teacher can have them underline the word, identify the first letter, or demonstrate other literacy tasks.

Using these strategies assists the teacher in identifying the print found in the home. Integrating the child's prior knowledge, specifically PCEP found in the home, can become the springboard for expanding the curriculum (Pang 2001). Affirming an interest in the home experiences can authenticate the learning and thus become a vehicle for achieving early literacy skills.

Use a step-by-step process

Goodman (1986) first identified the significance of reading environmental print. She found that children had difficulty reading environmental print when it was separated from the logo. Reutzel et al (2003) studied children reading environmental print in four steps: the original format, the logo color changed, the logo separated from the print, and the font altered. This study found that children who were able to read the environmental print in all presentations possessed a greater knowledge of print concepts.

Additionally, Reutzel's group focused on understanding the print concepts that assisted reading environmental print in and out of context. Younger children were able to read environmental print using the color and logo visual cues. As these children progressed through the steps that relied less on



the original color and logo, they began to use other clues. Reutzel's group determined that understanding the concept of a *word*, a *letter*, and *punctuation* also assisted children in reading environmental print out of the original context. The study concluded that environmental print should be developed within the literacy curriculum to teach specific letter and word concepts.

Further, Vera (2007) used the Reutzel study format during a PCEP intervention. The prekindergarteners in this study were taught the concept of *first letter* and the basic print skills of pointing *left to right* using PCEP examples. At the end of the intervention, the children increased in both of these early literacy skills.

Therefore, when children begin reading environmental print, they first focus on the logo (Reutzel et al 2003; Goodman 1986). The next step is to read the environmental print without the original colors (Reutzel et al 2003; Goodman 1986). Then the logo should be separated from the word, and finally the word is written by the teacher or child (Reutzel et al 2003). Following these steps will assist the child to read with less reliance on the logo and more reliance on the actual print.

Demonstrating home environmental print in the classroom

As children bring examples of environmental print and PCEP from home, teachers need to display

them in the classroom. You can do this in a variety of ways.

Word walls can assist young readers with words they recognize (Green 1993). To make a word wall developmentally appropriate for young children, attach the word to the walls using adhesive hook-and-loop fasteners or magnets. Either of these materials allows young children to take the words they recognize off the wall and copy or trace them at their tables. The print should be written clearly and in a large font.

Further, you can include examples of the different types of environmental print, including the PCEP, in the learning centers. In the home center, for example, you can stock the shelves with empty food cartons and household supplies. In the social studies center, you can post names of amusement attractions, restaurants, and grocery stores on a word wall. Vera (2007) developed a cartoon word wall for children to use while at the writing center. Children either copied the entire word from the PCEP example during a journal writing activity or traced the word or first letter from word cards.

Incorporate explicit instruction

In addition to displaying print on the walls and adding it to centers for use, the Reutzel researchers determined that explicit instruction using the environmental print should occur to teach letter-sound correspondences. Vera (2007) confirmed this

Popular Culture Environmental Print Survey

Gender of pre-kindergarten child: **Male** **Female**

List the children in the home by age and gender: (for example: boy, 6; girl, 3)

Boys

Girls

Language used in the home (check ALL that apply): **English** **Spanish** **Other**

Number of adults living in the home (check one): **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6 or more**

Number of children living in the home (check one): **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6 or more**

What TV programs/cartoons does your child spend time watching consistently? (write the names of the programs)

1. _____	4. _____
2. _____	5. _____
3. _____	6. _____

What videos/movies does your child enjoy watching? (write the names of the favorite videos/movies)

1. _____	4. _____
2. _____	5. _____
3. _____	6. _____

Which of the following items does your child have that are related to his or her favorite TV/video characters? (check ALL that apply)

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dolls | <input type="checkbox"/> Comics/magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> Puppets |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Board/ Card Games | <input type="checkbox"/> Dress-up clothes | <input type="checkbox"/> Computer Games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Books | <input type="checkbox"/> Clothes | <input type="checkbox"/> Furniture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Caps | <input type="checkbox"/> Food | <input type="checkbox"/> Shoes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stickers | <input type="checkbox"/> Candy | <input type="checkbox"/> Music tapes/CD's |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Posters | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please list) | |

1. _____	4. _____
2. _____	5. _____
3. _____	6. _____

What computer programs, video games, or Web site games does your child enjoy playing? (write the names of the computer programs, games, or Web sites)

1. _____	4. _____
2. _____	5. _____
3. _____	6. _____

Language of electronic programs: (check ALL that apply) **English** **Spanish** **Other**



research with teachers scaffolding the learning in small-group instruction or one-on-one instruction with the PCEP. Prekindergarten teachers and their instructional aides used the examples of PCEP to expressly teach alphabet letters and beginning print concepts.

TEACHERS MUST DISCOVER THE PRINT
THAT IS OF INTEREST
 TO THE CHILDREN.

Specifically, Vera used examples of PCEP and had the children separate the print from the logo. Then the children identified where to begin reading the name of a PCEP character. After the first letter was located, children were taught to underline from left to right when reading. This process of pointing left to right and reading their example expanded the children’s knowledge of reading clues. Further, the print that was read was meaningful to the children.

Another strategy that helps the children focus on left-to-right directionality and where to read the print, rather than using the picture, is masking (Holdaway 1979). This technique “highlights a word or letter that we want to talk about.” In addition, masking is used to teach letters of the alphabet. In this strategy, letters are covered, allowing children

to focus on a single letter. For example, the children separate the picture of Nemo from the word *Nemo* and the teacher reveals only the first letter. This helps children connect learning alphabet letters to the picture of a familiar popular culture character.

The most important thing

Margret Wise Brown’s book (1990), *The Important Book*, identified the most important things to remember about familiar objects such as the sun, rain, and wind. In this article, the important thing to remember is that beginning readers have been exposed to print through the Popular Culture Environmental Print (Vera 2007) found on their toys and environmental print found in their home and community.

First, teachers must discover the print that is of interest to the children. Then teachers introduce the print gradually separating the logo from the word (Reutzel 2003). During this process, this print that is most familiar to the children is displayed and available for exploration and discovery in learning centers. Further, the teacher scaffolds the learning by specific use of environmental print and PCEP to teach alphabet knowledge and print concepts.

If a teacher uses the print most familiar to the children, learning to read would become meaningful. Rosemary Althouse recommends that teachers “include children’s thinking in planning the curriculum” (Adams and Kostell 1998). When reading

becomes meaningful, teachers develop more than just readers for a particular year of school. Rather, teachers develop learners for life.

References

- Adams, M. 1996. *Beginning to Read*. Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Adams, L. and P. Kostell (Eds.). 1998. *Quotations for Early Childhood Educators*. Olney, Md.: Association for Childhood Education International.
- Brown, M. W. 1990. *The Important Book*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Burningham, L. M., and M.T. Dever. 2005. An interactive model for fostering family literacy. *Young Children*, 26(3), 87-93.
- Compean-Garcia, N. 2007. *The Effect of Home Literacy Experiences on the Development of Pre-Reading Skills of Bilingual Preschoolers in One South Texas City*. ProQuest Dissertations AS36.T3COMPE.
- Cooper, D.H. 2005. Growth of early reading skills from kindergarten to third grade. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 29(3), 312-333.
- Echeverria, J.; M.E. Vogt; and D. Short. 2000. *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model, 3rd Ed*. Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon.
- Goodman, Y. 1986. Children coming to know literacy. In W.H. Teale and E. Sulzby (Eds.), *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* (pp. 1-14). Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corp.
- Green, J. 1993. *The Word Wall: Teaching Vocabulary Through Immersion*. Ontario, Canada: Pippin Publishing.
- Holdaway, D. 1979. *The Foundations of Literacy*. Gosford, New South Wales: Ashton Scholastic.
- Marsh, J. 1999b. Teletubby tales: Popular culture and media education. In J. Marsh (Ed.), *Desirable Literacies*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.
- Marsh, J. 2004. Techno-literacy practices of young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 2(1), 51-66.
- Murphy, J. 2004. *Leadership for Literacy* (Research-Based Practice, PreK-3). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press.
- Nord, C.W.; J. Lennon; and B.L. Westat. 1999. *Home Literacy Activities and Signs of Children's Emerging Literacy, 1993 and 1999*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Pang, V. 2001. *Multicultural Education: A Caring-centered Reflective Approach*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Reutzel, D.R.; P. Fawson; J. Young; T. Morrison; and B. Wilcox. 2003. Reading environmental print: What is the role of concepts about print in discriminating young readers' responses? *Reading Psychology*, 24, 123-162.
- Senechal, M., and J. LeFevre. Summer 2001. Storybook reading and parent teaching: Links to language and literacy development. The role of the family literacy environments in promoting young children's emergent literacy skills. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development Journal*, 92, 39-52.
- Stahl, S. A. and P.D. Miller. 1989. Whole language and language experience approaches for beginning reading. *Review of Educational Research*, 60(1), 133-140.
- Stratton, J.M. 2005. *Emergent Literacy: A New Perspective*. Louisville, Ky.: American Printing House for the Blind.
- Sulzby, S. A. and W.H. Teal. 1986. The importance of reading aloud: Encouraging literacy development from an early age. *Journal of Early Childhood Development*, 4(3), 45-47.
- Sulzby, S. A. and W.H. Teal. 1991. Literacy development of linguistically diverse first graders in a mainstream English classroom: Connecting speaking and writing. *Journal of Early Childhood Development*, 6(2), 163-189.
- Van Kleeck, S. 1990. Emergent literacy: Learning about print before learning to read. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 10(2), 25-45.
- Vera, D. 2007. *The Use of Popular Culture Environmental Print to Increase the Emergent Literacy Skills of Prekindergarten Children in One High-Poverty School District*. ProQuest Dissertations AAT 3270408.

About the authors

Debbie Vera, Ed.D. is an assistant professor in Early Childhood Education at the Texas A&M University-Kingsville System Center-San Antonio. Her research interests include popular culture and teacher education.

Nancy Compean-Garcia, Ed.D. is an assistant professor in Curriculum and Instruction at the same institution. Her work focuses on bilingualism, early literacy, and teacher education.