Lessons in Literacy:
What a Five-Year-Old Taught Her Teacher-Mom

by Eve Newsome

Eve Newsome taught elementary students who were labeled as learning disabled in the Prince William County, Virginia, public schools for 14 years and plans to return someday, but her most recent classroom has been her own home. She and her husband now have nine children: teenagers Samson and Saul, who attend public high school; Sarah (9), a fifth grader in public school; as well as Seth (8), Silas (6), Simon (5), Susanna (3), Shad (15 months), and Samuel (3 months), who are home-schooled students. Her study of Sarah's emerging literacy shows the combination of motherhood and teaching that Newsome has managed in the recent crowded years of her life. She continues to see the discoveries from her original study unfolding in her younger children.

—Marian Mohr and Marion MacLean authors of Teacher-Researchers at Work

On maternity leave one fall, I made some of my greatest strides since starting my teaching career thirteen years ago. The conditions under which I gained these insights were, for me, anything but normal. Following the birth of our sixth child earlier in the year, I was looking forward to having my “time off” with the kids. As four of the six were preschoolers and work was an hour away, life had become pretty hectic.

What I hadn’t been prepared for was the withdrawal I would experience from being out of the classroom. It truly caught me by surprise. But I knew my children needed me at home, and I needed a break, so I compromised with myself by taking a graduate course on teacher research offered through my school system. Though I loved my children and was grateful to be home, I reasoned that the adult conversation would be good for me. The only difficulty at that point was controlling the urges I had, during our research seminar dinner breaks, to wipe off the chins and hands of my classmates.

“Teaching” Sarah at Home

Assuming the role of the student and not the educator was a rather uneasy turn of events for a “seasoned veteran” such as myself. Back home, I found myself in the same unsettling position.

I had chosen as my research project to focus on the growing literacy of my five-year-old daughter, Sarah. The research would center mainly on her writing, but would not exclude speaking and reading.

It seemed like a perfectly natural project with easy access and textbook conditions. She was, after all, a special seed (from my own personal stock!) at the peak of planting time, and I was the wise and experienced gardener, ready to water her, to nurture her, and bend to her every little need, right?

Imagine my surprise as my 3-foot, 30-pound child demonstrated to me her incredible insight into the field of emerging literacy. Sarah, with her boundless energy, was educating me.

She had begun kindergarten in August, but she experienced extreme adjustment problems. She was a young five, having turned in mid-September, and though very bright, she needed more time with a full-time mommy than with a full-time teacher. After six weeks of grueling deliberation, my husband and I pulled our daughter out of school. Instead, I thought confidently, I’ll just “teach” her at home. What a great way to blend my new stay-at-home role and my research project. I had visions of all the hours I would spend teaching my daughter to read and write. Oh, the massive amounts of quality time we would share together!

Then came the glitch. September 16, four days after Sarah’s birthday, my husband, Sam, a police detective, was involved in a car accident at work. At first, his injuries didn’t appear to be too extensive, but complications set in and eventually put him on long-term leave from work. All the “quality time” I had dreamed of quickly dissipated in light of new circumstances.

I kept thinking, “I’ll sit down and start to teach her soon.” Everyone in my class was already collecting data, and I winced under the internal pressure of coming to class empty-handed. To appease myself, I began to collect little writings she would do during the day. “Better than nothing,” I thought, “and besides, just think how great she’ll look in comparison when we really get started?” But that fall we never did get started. Thankfully, life teaches us in unexpected ways. The more I collected data from Sarah, the closer I came to a startling revelation: Sarah did not need highly structured direct instruction in language to grow more literate.
She wrote a lot during the month of September, including the following:

- ABC's copied from a writing tablet.
- A get well card for Daddy. The outside of the card is shown in Figure 1. On the inside, Sarah had written more text, including "I SEE BUDDY [our puppy] LOOKING AT ME." This text was modeled after "Brown Bear, Brown Bear."
- Several independent writings (see one example in Figure 2). These writings show an understanding of left-right and top-to-bottom progression.

began thinking, "Hey! How is she learning this stuff?" I knew I didn't teach it to her, and she didn't learn it at school because she wasn't there. My research project had suddenly turned into just that, a research project.

The Innate Desire to Grow

Seeds are pretty amazing things. Even with all our wonderful scientific advancements, we cannot duplicate the innate power intrinsically contained in one of those tiny brown grains. We can land a man on the moon, but we can never ourselves create the beauty of one delicate blossom. We can create and manipulate within certain technological aspects of our environment, but there are some natural forces or properties that we can never create. Instead, we can merely interact with them.

This is the way with teaching and children. We can interact with an intrinsic system already in place in that child, but let us not be so bold as to believe that we put it there.

One of the things I have learned from my research, I believe, is that children have an innate desire to "grow" their knowledge. They want to learn, to communicate, to make a mark on a piece of paper that says, "Hey, everybody! Here I am!" It's not necessarily a desire we impart to them, but perhaps a desire they already possess.

There has been much research in recent years focusing on the innate predisposition for language in children. Janet Emig discusses this in *The Web of Meaning* (1983). She makes the point that as humans we seem to have a genetic predisposition to speak and write that can be helped along by an enabling environment as well as ample opportunities.

Much to my surprise, this is exactly what I discovered in my research with Sarah. I say surprise, because this is not at all what my research was originally focused on. I was following the question, "What features do I see emerging in Sarah's writing?" I figured my research would be more technical in nature, in that I would present Sarah with bits of information, analyze the literacy-related features that emerged, and document them. But in reality, the opposite happened. She presented me with bits of information, and I had to analyze how they got there. My focus had now shifted toward my follow-up question: "What factors have had an impact on the development of those features?"

Throughout the fall, Sarah's writing continued to develop. Figure 3 shows a passage she copied from a children's book, *The Polar Express*. Even though she was
obviously unfamiliar with writing lower case letters, and the typed letters presented a challenge, this did not deter her in the least!

The Paths to Literacy
As I went through my observational and reflective logbooks, I found massive quantities of data. To be sure, there was lots of technical stuff, such as left-to-right progression, letter writing, sound-symbol associations, and other assorted teacher jargon, but those were not what drew me. I kept thinking, “How did she learn all this stuff in the absence of teaching?” I listed the models she used for her writing, as well as the features I felt were really influencing her. I listed her writing utensils. I scoured my reflective log for thoughts or comments that seemed most relevant and listed them.

I also tried a technique we had learned about in class, where we were to “draw” what we felt our data was showing us. I drew four little “webs” that showed the data I collected from her in four areas: drawing, writing, talking, and television. I put “stars” next to the data where I had directly intervened or taught her something. I was sorely disappointed by the low star count.

As we shared our drawings in class, a new picture popped into my mind, and quickly I drew it: three paths merging together at the end, at the point of literacy. At the entrance to the road on the left stood Sarah and me. This was a fairly straight road, but blocked by many fences. Was too much formal intervention on my part going to block the natural flow of her learning? At the entrance to the road at the right, stood Sarah all alone. This road twisted and turned all over the place, finally reaching the end point. If I left her completely alone, would she wander all over the place, taking too much time to reach the road’s end? The middle road was like a tightwire with Sarah perched on top. She had a balancing stick in her hand. Is the balance some delicate place between the other two roads? I didn’t want to leave her in a precarious position while I experimented to find out.

What a relief to see my unconscious fears clearly pictured on that paper. I went back to analyzing my data with a new vigor. Even though her particular gains were many and impressive, I realized that my focus would center on how she went about acquiring her knowledge, and what my role was in her acquisition. What I found was that in so many ways, I had had an impact on her by having prepared the ground for her learning.

In all, I counted nineteen different “types” of writing or genres that Sarah had attempted in an approximate three-month span. They included:

- ABC’s/letter writing (manuscript)
- numbers
- cards
- attempted word spelling
- stories
- scrolls
- books
- illustrations with labels
- appointment reminder slip
- notes
- lists
- song lyrics
- newspapers
- poetry
- friendly letter
- cursive writing
- gift tags
- birthday card
- a list of rules

I was astounded. I would have never attempted to teach such a wide variety of genres in such a short time span. So how did she do it?

First, I examined the list I had compiled of sources she had drawn from:

- TV shows and commercials (primarily, but not limited to, educational TV)
- videos
- books
- songs
- newspapers
- Mother Goose poems
- parents
- written models
- a Talking Teacher electronic game
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• an instruction manual
• a video script
• an appointment reminder card
• being read to
• conversation
• ABC's (in song and written form)

The correlation between these sources and the pieces she produced was extremely close.

Next, I looked at the features I felt had the most impact upon her development in the past three months:

• multiple language sources (listed above, which she used as models)
• questions I asked Sarah about her work
• television
• Sarah's requests for information
• her use of a "listener" to process and screen her work
• oral language
• mini-lessons
• her listening to the conversations of others
• singing
• drawing
• the availability of books, writing utensils, support, and positive feedback

Language, Language, Language

As I looked over this list, certain words jumped off the page: asking, listening, requesting, oral language, conversation. Language. Language. Language. Maybe, all this time, it was language producing all this language! For a moment I felt as if I were in a Susan Powter infomercial, where she's sharing her revelation about obesity with all the women in the audience. "I eat fat, I get fat. Hey! It's all that fat that's making me fat!"

Of course, I had been taught about immersing students in language and had made genuine attempts to incorporate this approach into my teaching plan. But now I believed it, because I had seen the results at a very personal level. I knew my approach would be much different when I returned to my class. No longer would I attempt to immerse my students in language; I would immerse them in language, because now there was conviction behind the cause.

Finally, I looked over the list of writing utensils Sarah had used: lined paper, unlined paper, construction paper, pencils, colored pencils, pens, markers, crayons, paint, stencils, Magna Doodle, and Talking Teacher. For the most part, she had free access to these materials whenever she wished, along with access to a box full of books in her room. She took advantage of these on a daily basis.

During December Sarah made real progress. About two weeks before Christmas, she planned a party for the family, complete with homemade gifts and tags. On a tag she wrote for Simon's gift, she made an attempt to sound out his name (SVOB). She had made a sound-symbol connection with the letter S.

She continued experimenting with sound-symbol relationships. One day, as she was attempting to write ballerina, she wrote the BL on her own, then got somewhat stuck, so I slowly sounded it out for her. She made the sound connections for RN after that for herself.

But her December progress was not limited to developing an understanding of phonics. She also showed an awareness of cursive as a form of writing by writing a "letter" to Santa in a continuous squiggly line.

Another letter to Santa demonstrated her understanding of the form of a friendly letter (see Figure 4). She wanted it to be "just right," so she asked for help with spelling. I was amazed that without direct instruction she had learned that there was a "correct" spelling for each word, and that friendly letters took a particular form. Simply by hearing letters at home, she had learned the correct way to write one.

As I mull over all this information, I gradually began to sort it into three general principles that had helped my daughter on her journey toward literacy.

Exposure

The first principle is exposure. Sarah had been exposed to language in many forms since the womb. (My husband used to put headphones on my tummy and play Southern gospel music to her.) We started reading Pat the Bunny at four months. She
was constantly talked to by parents, brothers, and relatives. She was allowed to write (in reasonable locations) as soon as she could hold a crayon. Most recently, she had been exposed to educational TV and videos (such as Disney) that provided a wide diversity of language and writing models. Television appeared to play an important role in her development. She constantly asked questions about the meaning of words she had heard on her videos or on television commercials. She would subsequently incorporate them into her own writing or playing. In a like manner, she made full use of the range of writing genres she was exposed to at home, incorporating them into her own writings.

I was continually surprised by her ability to match vocabulary and reading style to the type of writing she was producing. Her newspaper stories were succinct and to the point, read with a no-nonsense voice, in contrast to her Aladdin story, which was flowery and flowy and utilized a great deal of dramatic intonation. In exposing Sarah to all of this, I had been preparing the soil for her seeds of literacy.

**Availability**

The second principle my data revealed is availability. Not only was Sarah exposed to language in its various forms, but she had a wide range of books, tapes (audio and video), models of real writing, writing materials (such as paper and pencils), and very importantly, available people to utilize, as her situation dictated.

When I read my data log, I noticed a phrase that I had constantly repeated. “I asked Sarah” showed up directly at least sixteen times and was implied several times beyond that. I realized that when I had felt saddened at the “low star count” indicating my lack of direct intervention, I had, in fact, been judging this against an incomplete concept of intervention. I had been intervening and teaching her all along, in subtle ways that had helped redirect her thinking toward the answer she sought, allowing her to discover the answers for herself.

So teaching then was not indelibly welded to the concept of direct intervention or control. It could just as easily be a subtle pass of the baton. Self-discovery seemed to be an important process for Sarah to go through in order for her to grasp and internalize information, thus making it her own.

This is not to say that there is not time or place for teachers to directly instruct students by actually showing them what to do. Take the lesson from the tub, for example. Early one morning, I had locked myself into the sole bathroom of our home to take a bath all by myself. In a house with six kids, this is a pretty hot commodity. Somehow, much to my chagrin, Sarah got the door open and tramped in with all her writing paraphernalia in tow. She was obviously not a happy camper. She was having a tough “K” day, and just couldn’t seem to get those little rascals under control. So I quickly extended a drippy hand, and gave her a speedy lesson on how the little bird beak touched the belly button of the straight line. Truthfully, I had just wanted to appease her, so I could get my bath. But the look in her eyes when she got that sudden burst of revelation, and that little giggle that accompanied her, “Oh, yeah, I get it!” will forever be one of those small treasures I hold dear. In my log I wrote:

Right after this quick “K” lesson, Sarah ran out to practice her K’s. She returned a few minutes later with a banner about four feet long. The top was strewn with a long string of K’s, and across the bottom were all eight members of our family, holding hands, in addition to the two dogs, who were also very happy. I feel the lesson was definitely a success.

**Opportunity**

The final principle I found was opportunity: time to make use of the people and materials available to her and make them her own. This was growing time.

At some point during the collection phase of my research, I began to count how many times Sarah was asking to write (which meant getting out all of her “stuff”), and I was answering, “Not right now, I’m busy.” Finally, I started saying, “Okay,” and letting her know when I couldn’t sit with her but would try to be available for occasional questions or as a listener. The point is that she needed to write. She needed to pick up books and “read.” She needed to put on her dress-ups and act out *Aladdin* and *Charlotte’s Web.* This was where she processed the information and made it her own. It was obvious that she did not need my intervention, but merely my presence as an audience so that she could read aloud. In reality, she unconsciously used herself as an audience in those sessions and was then able to tell herself what didn’t sound right or what she needed to change.
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But without opportunity, there is no product. Sometimes we are so busy teaching that we don't allow ample opportunity for our children to utilize, internalize, and assimilate information. Our schools are filled with over-tended plants that are dying simply because they never had time to grow. By “teaching” less, perhaps we will be producing more.

My research showed me that direct instruction, mini-lessons, formalized lessons and self discovery all have their place in teaching. We simply need to be sensitive to when it is necessary to step in, and when we need to back out. It occurred to me that, like Sarah, most children, before we get our “educational” hands on them, have the internal drive to mark up the paper and say, “I can!” The problem is too often, I think, we “teach” the urge right out of them, such as when we nitpick and edit their writing attempts to death.

**Being a Teacher and a Mom**

I feel that this article would not be complete if I did not address the complicated issue of my dual roles in this research. Simply put, it was not always easy being a mom and a teacher at the same time. Some philosophies of mother and teacher walked hand in hand. Others do not.

When I started to collect data, a conflict arose. Do I intervene in her creative process? Do I structure, influence, teach or point out errors? Do I answer all her questions, particularly in mid-project? If I did, would I be altering the data in an unethical way? Would I be influencing conclusions drawn, making them impure by my so-called interventions?

In the end, I decided, unconsciously I suppose, to take a more parental role. I was simply there for her in the natural course of events, answering questions as they came along, with very little deliberate or structured teaching imposed — for example, the decisions whether or not to show her that her J’s were backwards, or that P and Q were separate letters, for somehow she had joined them into one.

After much deliberation, my maternal side won out. Misty-eyed, I thought, “Forget changing it. Soon enough, she’ll obviously figure all this out for herself.” But for now, I felt that these are the precious gifts that warm a mother’s heart, and the stuff that scrapbooks are made of.

By March, Sarah was writing her first original compositions. Figure 5 shows her first real story, which reads, “I see Godzilla. Buddy and Sarah see Godzilla.” The picture was a joint effort. I had helped her to sound out the words more slowly, but she made all the letter connections.

And the letter in Figure 6 was written almost entirely independently. It reads, “Dear Baby, My mama had a baby. Love, Sarah.”

Sarah is now using writing as a communication tool. And yes, the last letter is to the new baby — number seven. Obviously, Sam has had too much time off of work.

**References**


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