Director’s Corner: Exploring Books

Why should we encourage children to explore literature, beginning with books? Inquiry with books helps children notice the key features of stories that matter to those who love them, as well as to begin linking cause and effect within the social contexts represented in both fiction and non-fiction narratives. With young children, the primary goal is NOT to teach reading directly, but rather to foster a love of literature that motivates a lifetime of engagement with text. Most children who have many opportunities to explore books with capable readers who encourage their inquiries and applaud their efforts will naturally develop strong reading skills.

I have begun this process anew with my granddaughter, Lucia, who just celebrated her 1st birthday. We spend most of our time with small “board books” or books made of cloth, both of which encourage her to independently manipulate the texts so that she can explore them with her hands and mouth while learning to physically orient the book correctly and manage the page turning. She already delights in choosing a book herself and then initiating an interaction with her parents or grandparents by handing one of us the book and raising her arms. Of course, our reading is teaching her many new words, but our cooperative exchanges related to the story and illustrations promote many aspects of communication. The book topics help teach Lucia about science, math, social studies, etc., and our reading sessions involve exploration of varying voice to represent different characters and emotions, as well as to distinguish narratives that are serious vs. silly. Reading stories again and again helps Lucia identify their rhythms and patterns, as well as experience a variety of ways to creatively tell the same story, particularly when we are exploring the same topics in the real world, such as reading about the animals she sees near her home.

As with all explorations, Children’s School educators extend what families have begun by utilizing varied strategies on the teaching continuum to engage preschoolers and kindergartners with books in ever deepening ways. While reading books related to our themes, we explicitly teach the meaning of author, illustrator, fiction, non-fiction, etc., and we engage children in discussions of each story’s characters, setting, and plot (starting with simple statements of the beginning, middle, and end). Families can often see how we model story reading because the children typically imitate it when they “play school” at home. All of our classrooms have “library corners” where children can independently choose books to “read” by themselves and where adults will read books that the children choose from our rotating collection. We have a wide range of titles available so that the children can explore books related to their unique interests and so that teachers can select ones that will help the group consider issues that are arising in the classroom or in their lives.

During December, we will be extending our literature explorations through our themes. Our preschoolers will be studying Theatre, which gives them opportunities to experiment with stories in a variety of forms, beginning with books but progressing to songs, puppet plays, dramatic retellings, etc. Our kindergartners will be delving into the world of African Tales, many of which are folktales or fables that teach a lesson rather than ending with “happily ever after”. This season is also the time when many of our families are celebrating religious holidays that involve sharing traditional stories that shape our sense of self and community across generations. What a wonderful opportunity for families to take extra time to read together, to explore different authors’ and illustrators’ versions of the stories, and to discuss the meaning of stories in our lives. We look forward to the children sharing their learning with us so that we might explore all kinds of stories together.