Creating a Framework for Literacy-Rich Environments

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Mrs. Bailey's kindergarten class was learning about workers in the community. The children decided during a discussion of news reporters that they would like to have a news office in the dramatic-play area where they could publish their own paper. Their teacher helped create the center where they placed writing paper, telephones, phone directories, a typewriter, and a computer. The corner's materials also included pamphlets, maps, and other appropriate reading material for the different sections of the newspaper, such as sports, travel, weather, and general daily news. When the class had completed their first newspaper, Jonathan was the class member in charge of delivering it. He had a newspaper delivery bag filled with papers, each with the name of a child on it. Jonathan had to match the names on the papers to the names on the children's cubbies. Later when the kindergartners read their newspapers, they shared them with great enthusiasm. Each child had contributed something to the paper, whether it was a drawing, a story, or a group poem.

This example illustrates children participating in functional literacy activities. The classroom environment was prepared with materials and space that stimulated reading and writing.

Although the learning environment often is viewed as background or scenery for teaching and learning, there is another way to discuss the physical setting and the teacher's role in creating it. This view recognizes that in arranging the environment purposefully, teachers acknowledge the physical setting as an important influence on their

Morrow, L.M., Strickland, D., & Woo, D. (1998). *Literacy instruction in half- and whole-day kindergarten: Research to practice* (pp. 98-111). Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Reprinted with permission.

activities, as well as those of the children. Appropriate physical arrangement of furniture, selection of materials, and the aesthetic quality of a room provide a space that contributes to learning and teaching.

In this chapter, we describe a physical environment that supports optimum literacy development in kindergarten classrooms. The discussion of spaces and materials will concentrate mostly on the development of reading, writing, and oral language. The overall concept is to promote literacy as an interdisciplinary pursuit integrated throughout the school day.

Perspectives Concerning Literacy-Rich Environments

Motivation theory suggests that access to and choice of materials that are challenging and offer opportunities for success will encourage students to engage in activities (in this case literacy activities) in a voluntary and sustained manner. Therefore the physical environment in a classroom can play a large role in motivating children to read and write. When designing classrooms teachers should consider many elements of motivation theory including the meaning and function of the materials for the students. Teachers also should think about conceptual orientation; that is, materials should be connected to content-area subjects or a theme to add interest. There should be many *choices* of materials and activities that provide a challenge but lead to success, and the materials must be accessible so that students can use them easily. The environment needs to be designed for social interaction among peers and adults.

As mentioned in Chapter 7, historically, philosophers who studied early childhood development described the importance of preparing the environment with manipulative materials to foster learning in real-life settings (Froebel, 1974; Rusk & Scotland, 1979). Montessori (1965) advocated carefully prepared classrooms with every material in the environment attached to a specific learning objective to promote independent learning.

Research studies also have demonstrated how the physical design of classrooms affects children's behavior. Rooms partitioned into small spaces facilitate verbal interaction and cooperative play among

peers more than rooms with large open spaces (Field, 1980). Children in carefully arranged rooms have shown more creative productivity and greater use of language-related activities than children in randomly arranged rooms (Moore, 1986). Literacy-enriched dramatic-play areas based on themes have stimulated literacy activities and enhanced literacy skills (Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1992). Dramatic play with story props has improved comprehension of stories including recall of details and the ability to sequence and interpret (Mandler & Johnson, 1977). Enhancing physical designs of literacy centers has increased children's use of materials in the centers and the children's literacy achievement as well (Morrow, 1992).

Arranging the Classroom to Motivate Reading and Writing

Although there is no single way to effectively arrange a classroom, the following plan is suggested as a guide. As mentioned in Chapter 7, a rich literacy environment should include a literacy center with a library corner and writing area abundant with materials to encourage literacy development. Literacy-rich classrooms also contain centers dedicated to content areas, such as social studies, science, math, art, music, dramatic play, block play, and literacy. The checklist in Figure 5 will help teachers determine if they have included all necessary elements.

Centers contain general materials pertinent to each content area and materials specific to topics being studied. Literacy materials are included in all centers that are designed so children can use them independently or in small groups. Centers are accessible as are the materials in them that are stored on shelves or in boxes. The materials are labeled, and each piece has a designated spot so that teachers can direct children to specific items and so that children can find and return them easily. Early in a school year, centers hold a small number of items, with new materials added as the year progresses. When new items are placed in centers, teachers introduce their purpose, use, and placement (Montessori, 1965)

The room design supports whole-group, small-group, and individual instruction. A conference table provides space for small-group

Figure 5
Checklist for Evaluating the Literacy Environment

The Literacy Center

- ☐ Children participate in designing the center (develop rules, select a name for center, and develop materials.)
- ☐ Area placed in a quiet section of the room.
- ☐ Visually and physically accessible, yet partitioned from the rest of the room.
- ☐ Rug, throw pillows, rocking chair, bean bag chair, and stuffed animals.
- ☐ Private spot in the corner such as a box to crawl into and read.
- ☐ The center uses about 10% of the classroom space and fits five to six children.

The Library Corner

- ☐ Bookshelves for storing books with spines facing outward.
- ☐ Organizational system for shelving books.
- ☐ Open-faced bookshelves for featured books.
- ☐ Five to eight books per child.
- ☐ Books represent three to four grade levels of the following types: (a) picture books, (b) picture storybooks, (c) traditional literature, (d) poetry, (e) realistic literature, (f) informational books, (g) biographies, (h) chapter books, (i) easy to read books, (j) riddle and joke books, (k) participation books, (l) series books, (m) textless books, (n) television-related books, (o) brochures, (p) magazines, and (q) newspapers.
- ☐ Twenty new books circulated every 2 weeks.
- ☐ Check-out/check-in system for children to take out books daily.
- ☐ Head sets and taped stories.
- ☐ Felt board and story characters with related books.
- ☐ Materials for constructing felt stories.
- ☐ Other story manipulatives (roll movie or puppets with related books).
- ☐ System for recording books read (for example, 3 × 5 cards hooked onto a bulletin board).

The Writing Center (The Author's Spot)

- ☐ Tables and chairs.
- ☐ Writing posters and a bulletin board for children to display their writing themselves.
- ☐ Writing utensils (pens, pencils, crayons, felt-tipped markers, and colored pencils).
- ☐ Writing materials (many varieties of paper in all sizes, booklets, and pads).
- ☐ Typewriter or computer.

(continued)

Figure 5
Checklist for Evaluating the Literacy Environment (continued)

- ☐ Materials for writing stories and making them into books.
- ☐ A message board for children to post messages for the teacher and students.
- ☐ A place to store Very-own words.
- ☐ Folders for children to place samples of their writing.

Content-Area Learning Centers

- ☐ Environmental print, such as signs related to themes, directions, and rules.
- ☐ A calendar.
- ☐ A current-events board.
- ☐ Appropriate books, magazines, and newspapers in all centers.
- ☐ Writing utensils in all centers.
- ☐ Varied types of paper in all centers.
- ☐ A place for children to display their literacy work.

and individualized instruction for skill development. The conference table is placed in a quiet area of the room and is situated so the teacher also can see the children who are working independently at centers.

Centers are positioned so areas where quiet work is typical (literacy, math, social studies, and science) are away from more noisy, active environments (dramatic-play and blocks centers) (see Figure 6).

Visually Accessible Environmental Print

Content-area classrooms are filled with functional print such as labels on materials. Signs communicate information, for example, *Quiet Please* and *Please Put Materials Away After Using Them.* Charts labeled Helpers, Daily Routines, Attendance, and Calendar simplify classroom management (Morrow, 1997a; Schickedanz, 1993). A notice board is used to communicate in writing with the children. Experience charts display new words generated from themes, recipes, and science experiments. Environmental print must be *used* or it will go unnoticed. Children are encouraged to read it, copy it, and use the word labels in their writing.

The Literacy Center

The literacy center is composed of a library corner and author's spot (see Figure 7). The center should be visually attractive with children having easy access to books. Children read and write more in classrooms with literacy centers than children whose classrooms do

Figure 6
Early Childhood Classroom Floor Plan

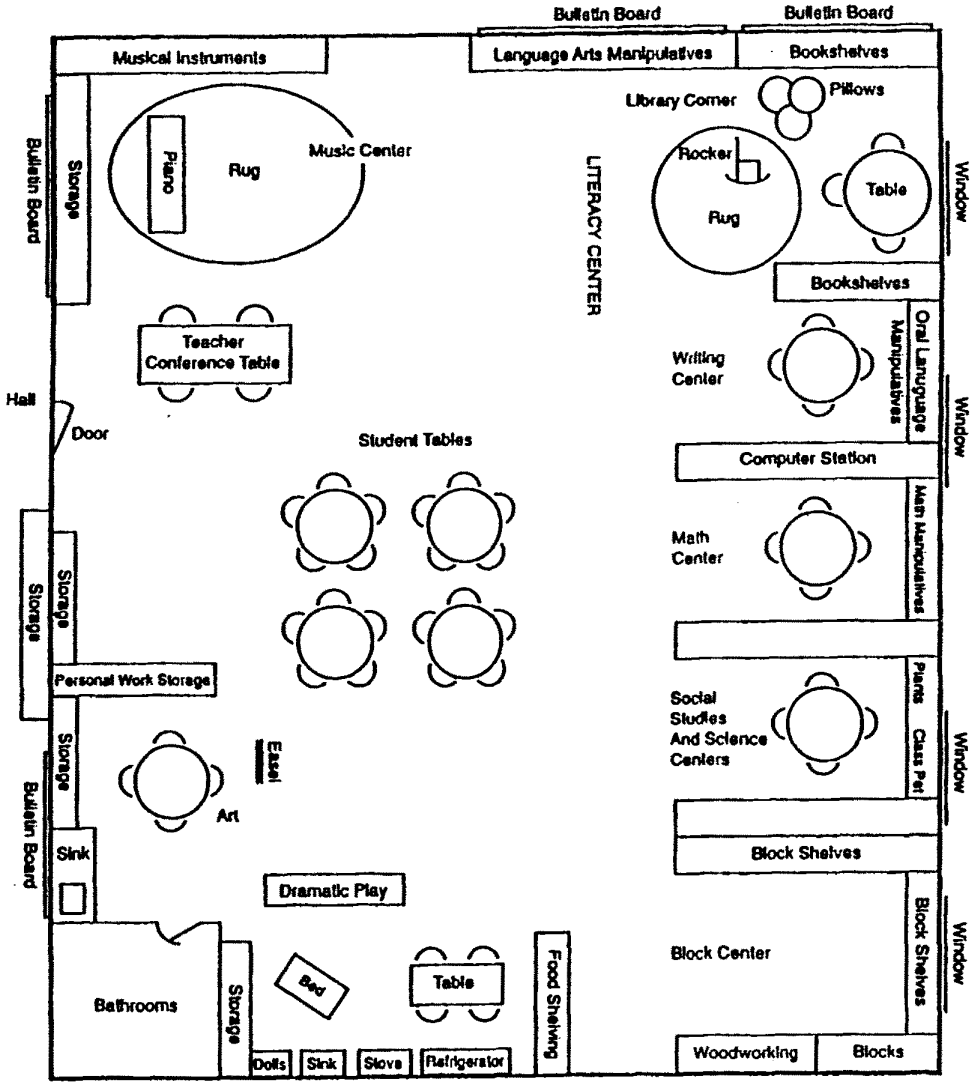

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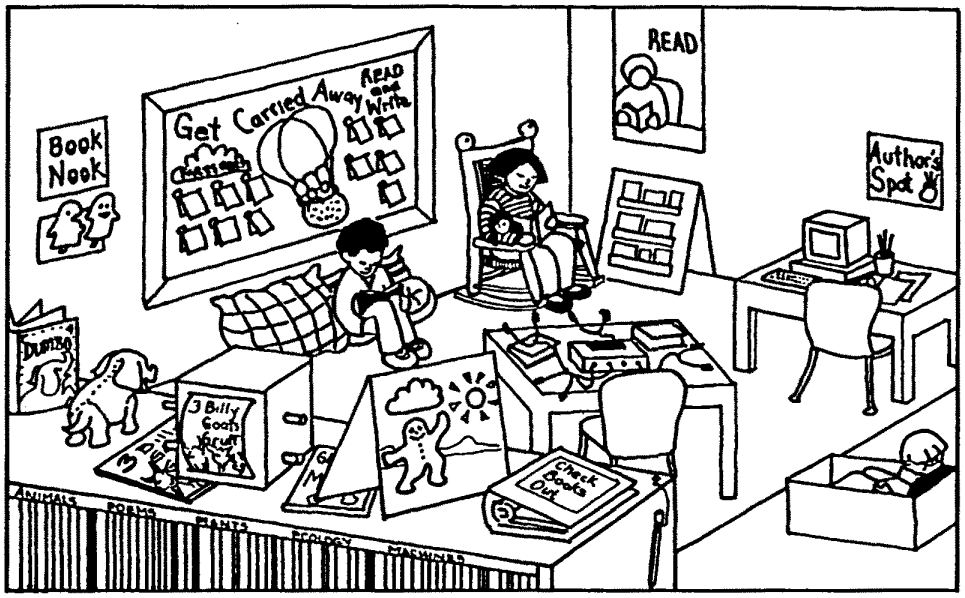
Figure 7
The Literacy Center



not have them (Morrow, 1992). Involve children in designing and managing the literacy center, letting them help develop rules for its use and keeping it neat and orderly (Morrow, 1997b).

LIBRARY CORNER. A classroom library corner gives children immediate access to books (Morrow & Weinstein, 1986). The library corner should be inviting but should afford privacy and be clearly defined as a discrete area. House most books on shelves with only their spines showing, but include an open-faced bookshelf to feature special books. Use a coding system to help children learn that books in regular libraries are organized systematically for easy access.

Include five to eight books per child at three or four different grade levels and include picture storybooks, fables, fairy tales, informational books, magazines, poetry, and novels. Stock multiple copies of popular books and replace about 25 books every 2 weeks, either with new books or with books used earlier. Devise an easy check-out system so that books can be taken home from the classroom library.

Make the library corner comfortable with pillows, a rocking chair, a rug, a table, and chairs at which children can use headsets to listen to taped stories. Provide a private spot such as an oversized carton for children to crawl inside and read. Include story props, such as a felt board and story characters, and stuffed animals that relate to book titles—a rabbit, for instance, next to a copy of *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present* (Zolotow, 1962).

WRITING CENTER. The writing center is usually next to the library corner. It requires a table and chairs, plus colored felt markers, crayons, pencils, and unlined paper in a variety of sizes and colors. Let children collect the work they do here in their own writing folders that can be stored in the writing center. A computer is important and a tape recorder is invaluable for story dictation when the teacher is not available (Morrow, 1997b).

Materials for making books are essential, including paper, hole punch, stapler, and construction paper. Blank books keyed to themes prepared by the teacher invite children to write. A bulletin board for children to display selected pieces of their writing is important, as well as a message board used to exchange notes among members of the class and the teacher. Mailboxes, stationery, envelopes, and stamps for children's incoming and outgoing mail may be placed in the writing center.

Integrating Literacy Materials Into the Content Areas

The teacher who is dedicated to the development of literacy throughout the curriculum is like a classroom architect, designing a learning environment that supports specific instructional strategies. Preparing a classroom for optimum literacy development includes not only instructional strategies, but also environmental planning, through the design of space and the selection and placement of materials in all content areas. As described in Chapter 7, programs that motivate early literacy development include an integrated approach to literacy learning. Books to read, materials to write with, things to listen to, and activities to talk about are incorporated into subject-area teaching. Literacy activities have more meaning when integrated into

content areas (Dewey, 1966). Content themes encourage use of new vocabulary and ideas and provide a reason for reading and writing. With each theme studied, new books, posters, music, art projects, dramatic-play materials, and scientific objects are added.

When materials and activities for reading, writing, and oral language are incorporated into subject-area teaching, those content areas become a source for literacy development. Each thematic unit of study brings new opportunities to enhance literacy. Centers must have materials appropriate for their content, but one can always add materials that will encourage reading and writing. The following are examples of centers of learning and appropriate materials for kindergarten. In addition during a unit on animals, Ms. Roberts, one of the kindergarten teachers in our staff-development group, added additional materials that would stimulate reading and writing.

Art Center

GENERAL CENTER MATERIALS. The materials usually found in the art center were easels, watercolors, brushes, colored pencils, crayons, felt-tipped markers, various kinds of paper, scissors, paste, pipe cleaners, scraps of fabric, wool, string, clay, play dough, food and detergent boxes for sculptures, books about artists, and books with directions for crafts.

MATERIALS FOR THE ANIMAL UNIT. Directions for making play dough were written on a chart for the art center. After following these directions, children created real or imaginary animals for a pretend zoo they designed in the block area. As they entered the zoo the animals were given names that were written on index cards.

Music Center

GENERAL CENTER MATERIALS. Permanent materials included a piano, a tape recorder with musical tapes, rhythm instruments, songbooks, and photocopies of sheet music for songs sung in class.

MATERIALS FOR THE ANIMAL UNIT. Songs were sung about animals, and to promote literacy the words to new songs were written on chart paper and displayed in the area. Children were encouraged to read or copy the charts.

Math Center

GENERAL CENTER MATERIALS. Math center materials included scales, rulers, measuring cups, movable clocks, a stopwatch, a calendar, play money, a cash register, a calculator, dominoes, an abacus, a number-line, a height chart, an hourglass, numbers (felt, wood, and magnetic), fraction puzzles, geometric shapes, math workbooks, children's literature about numbers and mathematics, writing material for creating stories, and books related to math.

MATERIALS FOR THE ANIMAL UNIT. Counting books that feature animals such as *One, Two, Three: An Animal Counting Book* (Brown, 1976) or *One, Two, Three to the Zoo* (Carle, 1968) were placed in the math center.

Science Center

GENERAL CENTER MATERIALS. Materials typically found in the science center included an aquarium, a terrarium, plants, a magnifying glass, a class pet, magnets, a thermometer, a compass, a prism, shells, rock collections, a stethoscope, a kaleidoscope, a microscope, informational books and children's literature reflecting topics being studied, and blank journals for recording observations of experiments and scientific projects.

MATERIALS FOR THE ANIMAL UNIT. Ms. Roberts borrowed a setting hen whose eggs were ready to hatch and the class discussed the care of the hen. The students started an experience chart when the hen arrived and added to it daily, recording the hen's behavior and the hatching of the eggs. They listed new vocabulary words on a wall chart and placed books about hens in the science area. Children kept journals of events concerning the hen. There were index cards in the center for children to record new Very-own words relating to the hen.

Social Studies Center

GENERAL CENTER MATERIALS. The social studies center was filled with maps, a globe, flags, pictures of community figures, traffic signs, articles and pictures about current events, artifacts from other countries, informational books and children's literature reflecting topics

being studied, and writing materials to make class books or individual books about topics being studied.

MATERIALS FOR THE ANIMAL UNIT. Pictures of animals from different countries were placed in the social studies area along with a map highlighting animal origins. Children could match the animals to the appropriate place on the map. They also made their own books about animals around the world.

Dramatic Play

GENERAL CENTER MATERIALS. This center included dolls; a telephone; stuffed animals; a mirror; food cartons; plates; silverware; newspapers; magazines; books; a telephone book; a cookbook; note pads; cameras and a photo album; table and chairs; a broom; a dustpan; and child-size kitchen furniture such as a refrigerator, sink, ironing board, and storage shelves.

MATERIALS FOR THE ANIMAL UNIT. This area was designed as a pet store for the animal theme. Books and magazines about pets, as well as pamphlets about pet care were placed in the center and pet posters labeled with animals' names were hung on the walls. Other materials included an inventory sheet of the things in the pet store, a cash register, and bill forms and receipts. There were stuffed animals in boxes that were supposed to be cages for dogs, cats, or other animals; they were labeled with the type of animal in the box and its name.

Block-Play Center

GENERAL CENTER MATERIALS. The block-play center contained blocks of many different sizes and shapes, figures of people and animals, toy cars and trucks, items related to themes being studied, paper and pencils to prepare signs and notes, and reading materials related to themes.

MATERIALS FOR THE ANIMAL UNIT. The block-play area became a zoo, housing animal figures, stuffed animals, and play-dough animals created by the children in the art center. Children used the blocks to create cages and made labels for each animal and section of the zoo such as *Petting Zoo*, *Bird House*, *Pony Rides*, *Don't Feed the Animals*, and

Don't Touch Us, We Bite. There were admission tickets and play money to purchase tickets and souvenirs.

Observations in a Literacy-Rich Classroom

Activities in the Literacy Center

When observing children engaged in activities during time in the literacy center, in a room prepared with a rich literacy environment as just described, the following was recorded.

In the library corner, Tim, Patty, and Donald were looking at books as they relaxed on soft pillows, all of them clutching stuffed animals under their arms. Ilene read to Todd in the box called the "private spot." Tasha and Allison used a felt board to tell the story of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Tasha manipulated the characters and Allison told the story.

A group of children listened to a taped story of *The Little Red Hen* on headsets, tracking the print in the book as they listened. Each time they came to certain parts of the story they would chant aloud, saying, for example, "Not I," said the dog, "Not I," said the cat, "Not I," said the goat.

In the social studies center, John and Mark were making a book of animals from other countries, and in the science center Jan and Joanna were discussing how the new baby chicks looked and acted.

Content-Oriented Dramatic Play

The following observation from Ms. Roberts's kindergarten class illustrates how activities modeled by the teacher motivate reading and writing, when children use materials in social settings that have meaning, a function, and concept orientation.

In the dramatic-play area, which was designed as a veterinarian's office, children were reading to their pets in the waiting room while waiting for their turn with the doctor. The nurse was taking appointments on the telephone, and the doctor was examining a toy dog. After examining the dog, Preston, who was acting as the doctor, scribbled on the patient information form, and showed it to Geremy, the pet's owner, and said, "This says that you give your dog 10 pills with

his dinner. He will feel better tomorrow. Keep him in bed with you, and be sure to give him lots of hugs."

With each thematic unit, Ms. Roberts helped her children design the dramatic-play center to reflect the topic being studied (see Figure 8 for additional ideas). When learning about animals, the students in her room decided to create this veterinarian's office. The class visited a veterinarian to help with their planning. They created the waiting room with chairs and a table filled with magazines and books in the dramatic-play center. Ms. Roberts suggested having pamphlets about good health practices for pets, which she had obtained from the veterinarian. The children made posters that listed the doctors' hours and said *No Smoking* and *Check in With the Nurse When You Arrive.* The nurse's table contained forms for patients to fill out, a telephone, telephone books, appointment cards, and a calendar. There were

Figure 8
Additional Ideas for Literacy-Enriched Thematic Play

In this chapter is a description of a veterinarian's office created to match the animal theme studied by the class. The area had been enriched by the addition of literacy materials to motivate reading and writing. Following are additional suggestions for the creation of areas for dramatic play to match other themes.

Theme: Nutrition—Create a restaurant, ice cream store, or bakery; include menus, order pads, cash registers, specials of the day, recipes, and lists of flavors or products.

Theme: Transportation—Create an airport with signs posting arrivals and departures, tickets, boarding passes, luggage tags, magazines and books for waiting areas, safety messages on the plane, and name tags for flight attendants.

Theme: Community Workers—Create a gas station and car repair shop. Toy cars and trucks can be used for props. There can be receipts for sales, road maps to help with directions to different destinations, repair manuals for fixing cars and trucks, posters that advertise automobile equipment, and empty cans of different products that are sold in stations (Morrow & Rand, 1991).

patient folders, prescription pads, white coats, masks, gloves, cotton swabs, a toy doctor's kit, and stuffed animals. Blank paper, a stapler, pencils, markers, colored pencils, and crayons were placed in the area as well. The classroom computer was relocated in the dramatic-play area for keeping patient records and other files. The center design was a collaborative effort by the teacher and children.

After preparing the environment with her students, Ms. Roberts modeled the use of the materials. She suggested, "While waiting for your turn to see the doctor, you can read to your pet and the nurse can ask you to fill out forms. The receptionist can talk to patients on the phone about problems with their pets, schedule appointments, and write out appointment cards. He or she can write bills, accept payments, and give receipts. The doctor can write prescriptions and patient reports." Later, Ms. Roberts joined the children in the dramatic-play area, pretending first to be the nurse, then the doctor, so that she could model the types of literacy behavior she hoped the children would try. Ms. Roberts was aware of the importance of the physical environment and social learning to help develop literacy skills by motivating children to communicate in varied ways.

Room designs like that in Ms. Roberts's classroom, which are filled with interesting, accessible materials and activities that are guided by the teacher, should develop literacy through positive and successful experiences. The social context allows for practicing skills, selecting activities, and taking responsibility for learning. These are all motivating elements that will help to ensure the development of lifelong voluntary readers who choose to read for pleasure and for information.