

Teaching Literacy: More than the Printed Word



Michael Evans' teacher, Kristin McKeown, prompts him with illustrations from *The Hungry Caterpillar* during a literacy activity to promote communication skills. Assistant teacher Jonathan Esposito holds a caterpillar prop.

Students in Nancy Barrow's class check their schedule for the day's activities. Courtney Grimes programs *Deep Blue Sea* into her students' communication devices. As she rereads the book, the basis for a month-long classroom theme, they wait their turn, then "speak" the now familiar phrase. Emily Gureckis' class laugh at a large butterfly prop waving over their teacher's head as the letter "B" appears on a large TV screen.

These youngsters are all engaged in literacy-related activities, which, at HMS encompass language work in general, not just decoding the printed word. Most HMS students will not be functional readers. But expanding their exposure to and

experiences with language will increase their comprehension, communication skills and sense of the world.

Developing communication skills is a major goal for every student, and the richer their language experiences, the more they can draw from in communication exchanges. *Deep Blue Sea* is not an everyday phrase like "I want a drink" that Ms. Grimes reinforces continually with her students. But as youngsters explore the story through different activities, they derive pleasure from the new language, and the phrase takes on meaning in their lives. They associate *Deep Blue Sea* with story or book, "sea" with water, and they

make other connections that Ms. Grimes develops using a variety of techniques and props.

Working on recall skills and the ability to answer questions, Ms. Grimes asks, "Is this story about the sea or about a forest?" At home students can tell their parents, "book" and get across that they read a story.

Ms. Grimes, who is pursuing a graduate degree at Cabrini College with a reading specialist certification, says that the program has had a real impact on her classroom, enriching the types of activities she develops to challenge students.

For Kristin McKeown, literacy activities serve as a motivator in

Graduation 2009 Sets a Record



Natalie Clemens receives her high-school diploma from Becky Fogle, Supervisor of Special Education for Souderton School District.

HMS marked the graduation of its largest class. Six young adults, totaling 75 years at HMS, kept the tears and smiles flowing as they said good-bye to dear friends among students, staff and administration. And HMS celebrated their unique personalities and contributions.

"To see her is to love her," said Cheryl Leask, Natalie Clemens' teacher. Ms. Leask highlighted Natalie's beautiful smile, her exuberance, her enthusiasm, her love of theater arts and her quiet strength.

"When you put a challenge in front of Emily Herron, she transforms," said her teacher, Kevin Lowery. She focuses keenly, forgets her anxiety and experiences the joy of the moment. Emily is a good friend, loves music and the arts and has become more independent.

"Joy Levin—the diva, the coolest chick in our school," said Dee Avegnon, program operations manager. Joy's teacher, Kristin McKeown, credited Joy's determination to be at graduation despite a month of illness. When well, Joy's huge laugh is a delight to all, she

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Executive Director's Message

By Diane L. Gallagher, PhD

Harris Hall, our new state-of-the-art residence wing, can accommodate an increased number of residential students and enables HMS to care for them in a more conducive, user-friendly environment. It provides a dedicated space for residential life, wholly separate from the school program, with its own personality.

We are now positioned to aggressively market our residential program. Working with Kerri Hanlon, an experienced marketing consultant and an HMS parent, we are developing a strategic plan for expanding our resident population. As a professional and a parent intimately familiar with HMS's strengths, Ms. Hanlon is helping to craft and target our messages to diverse audiences throughout the Delaware Valley and beyond.

Our campaign for the coming school year will include additional open houses such as those we hosted in the spring, a broader ad campaign in varied publications, article placements where appropriate, exhibit tables at expos throughout the region and the state in addition to those we've traditionally participated in and outreach to targeted prospects.

The Marketing Committee of the Board, chaired by Natalie Bracaglia, is working actively with the administration and involving the entire board in aspects of the school's marketing effort. Board members want to be able to assist by attending open houses, joining visitors on school tours, approaching prospective donors and providing other supports.

We also anticipate that our new and expanded website, which will become operational this fall, will reflect a more positive and complete picture of HMS's services to parents of prospective students and to professional groups—school district representatives, special education staff, therapists, social service agencies, medical personnel and others.

In addition to our marketing plan, we should remember that each of us—administration and staff members, board members, parents, friends—is a powerful ambassador for HMS. Please take the opportunity to talk about the school with others. We look forward to conversations with wider audiences as we build connections for HMS.

Student Artists Honored

Fresh Artists, an organization that promotes the arts by making funds available for the arts in public schools, honored HMS student work at a May reception in the Comcast Center. Barbara Allen, Fresh Artists' Director, who served as a guest judge of HMS's annual Art Show, selected two pieces for display at the reception, one by Amanda Long and "Sunflower," a group painting effort. Corporations have the opportunity to make donations in order to acquire the works for their company offices. Attending the reception were HMS executive director Diane Gallagher, some of the artists and their families, several staff and resident students and Anthony Casillas, Student Government president.

The Philadelphia School District's 2009 *We All Belong* Arts and Literature Contest recognized artwork by HMS students Michael Evans and Shanea Howell. The works are on display in the District's Administration Building.



The Southern Lehigh Middle School Jazz Band performed at HMS in May, as they have for several years. Band member Alex Long (standing), poses with high-school siblings and triplets Amanda, an HMS student (seated), and Allison and Aaron who made a special appearance with the band.



Ashley Overton goes nose to nose with a clown during a recent circus performance for HMS students. Assistant teacher Elisha Reid enjoys their communication.



Cheryl Leask, teacher, helps Taneisha Woodley get a good view of herself in a tiara at HMS's annual June Carnival.

SAVE THE DATE!
March 11, 2010
"Collaboration: Building Bridges to the Community"
A symposium for special education professionals
hosted by HMS School

Graduation 2009 Sets a Record

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loves music and dance and has a definite sense of fashion.

Tom Porreca is an entertainer par excellence, loves to play jokes. "He is amazing," says his teacher, Cheryl Leask. "He loves his communication device, determined to communicate his likes and dislikes. He likes routine, but then surprises us with trying something new."

Melea Wise's sunshine smile lights up the room. Her final year prepared Melea for transition to the Margaret Moul home. Given wings by her team to choose her own schedule, Melea became increasingly independent. "She was glowing," said teacher Kevin Lowery.

Andrew Wyatt—so focused on his goals post-HMS—to become more efficient with his communication device and his power chair, to be able to fix problems and take care of himself. Andrew is a leader, a highly social being devoted to his family—an all-around great guy.



Clockwise from top:

Many HMS alumni return for Spring Dance on graduation night. Leah Zatuchni, a 2006 graduate, takes a spin on the dance floor with her father, Steve.

Emily Herron

Andrew Wyatt makes a proud entrance in the graduation procession, accompanied by his teacher, Kevin Rafferty (right) and previous teacher, Nancy Barrow.

Joy Levin with her teacher, Kristen McKeown and Diane Gallagher, HMS executive director after receiving her diploma from Abington School District.

Melea Wise flashes a smile as Faye Benshelter, Special Education Supervisor for North Penn School District, presents Melea's diploma.

Tom Porreca



Parents Corner

By Beth and John Bailey

We have all had those nightmares...where you try to scream and can't make any noise. You wake up and the dream is over, no worse for wear. But imagine that it isn't a dream; you are unable to talk or make sounds that people understand. This is reality for many special-needs children or it was until they were introduced to augmentative communication.

Our son John was raised in rural Pennsylvania, went to a small-town school where dedicated speech therapists tried many avenues to help him communicate—communication books, flash cards and yes-no signs. They borrowed communication devices for trial periods but none seemed to be a fit. When John was 12, his speech therapist frankly told us that she no longer knew what to do and suggested that we look elsewhere.

By chance, we saw an advertisement for HMS in *Exceptional Parent* magazine. We called the school and after a week of evaluation and assessments, decided to enroll John at HMS. That is when he began to awaken from his communication nightmare. It has been a long, arduous process. His therapist, Marianne Gellert-Jones, and his teachers tried many different devices, finally settling on a Mighty Mo which was purchased for him last year.

John finally found his voice and what a difference it has made! For the first time he can talk about his feelings, he tells everyone about his family and what he did over the weekend. John can socialize with friends and staff. The pride he feels emanates from within when he talks about his accomplishments. When we visit family or friends John has the ability to interact instead of sitting on the sidelines. This year, he asked a special friend to the spring dance just like any other 18-year-old. Most people have no conception of what the gift of communication is really worth. But when your teenage child is able to tell you he loves you for the first time, you realize it is priceless.

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her communication-based sensory class. Enthusiasm for a favorite story reinforced with multifaceted activities motivates students to use their communication devices, her ultimate goal. While hers is an early-communication class, Ms. Gureckis and Ms. Barrow teach groups that focus on functional academics. For their students, exposure to *printed* words expands their ability to grasp the words' meaning.

Ms. Gureckis uses a weekly literacy-based theme toward the common goal of increasing communication skills for her 9-year-olds. After looking at illustrations and reading the story, succeeding days involve different activities with the story on vocabulary, comprehension and decoding, all individualized to students' skills.

"I try to provide a print-rich environment," says Ms. Gureckis. "Each student has different abilities and needs. I want to expose them to as much as possible."

Ms. Barrow uses an early-reader sight-word vocabulary to help students recognize words that they see in books and in other contexts. Browsing the newspaper is a favorite activity. With Ms. Barrow's help, students identify front-page stories and photos or news sections they want to explore. She reads to them, and they may match the photo of a favorite athlete with his name and identify a few sight words on the page.

Her class uses their vocabulary in many ways—composing emails, cards and thank you letters by providing the basic words of their message. "If students can't form a full sentence," says Ms. Barrow, "we fill in the blanks." A Dr. Seuss rhyming activity prompts them to write their own silly rhymes. Students help plan field trips by looking at brochures and Internet images of what's available. When Ms. Barrow puts a word together with the image, they begin to associate the two.

Work with word recognition



also includes survival words—stop signs, rest rooms, office and other places and concepts they need to know about. Like one's daily schedule, literacy involves being able to find your way in the world.

Wendy Lewis, speech/language therapist and her student intern, both Penn State graduates, recently introduced HMS staff to a new literacy-instruction program for students who cannot respond verbally—Accessible Literacy Learning (ALL)—developed by Penn State faculty. ALL enables a child who cannot vocalize letter sounds or words to demonstrate literacy skills by pointing to or looking at pictures.

Despite her enthusiasm, Ms. Lewis says, "The program may not be appropriate for all students. Factors such as vision and cognitive ability have to be taken into consideration."

HMS staff are open to new techniques that best meet the needs of individual students, and as a therapist, Ms. Lewis is committed to supporting their efforts. She and Judy Lynch, an occupational therapy colleague, are reinforcing Kevin Rafferty's literacy goals for teenage students in his functional life-skills class where literacy revolves around practical activities. As in other areas of the program, cross-disciplinary support for literacy goals impacts students' success.

Skyler Granville (left) and Christian Matcovich choose sections of the paper to look at with their teacher, Nancy Barrow, who points out photos or a headline that might interest them.

HMS School News

Summer 2009

A publication of HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy, dedicated to reporting about student life, school programs and important events.

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HMS School is nonsectarian, admitting children from any locality without regard to race, religion, gender or country of origin. The Mission of HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy is to educate, nurture, and care for children and youth with motor impairments who may also have other disabilities resulting from brain injury with the goal of assisting each individual in achieving his or her maximum potential. HMS School aims to facilitate independence and improve the quality of life for its students in a safe and secure environment so they can lead fulfilling, stimulating lives in their present and future environments.

