

## Early Literacy Initiatives

Since its inception in 1987, Motherhead, Inc., has developed programs to encourage and support the literacy development of young children and the adults who interact with them. Our interest in early childhood education has produced two primary initiatives: Teacheread<sup>®</sup> and Literacy Invites and Nurtures Kids' Success (L.I.N.K.S.). Through these efforts, we have changed the literacy practices and skill levels of early childhood educators and their young students.

From 1999 through 2005, over 1,766 child care teachers and 10,777 children participated in the L.I.N.K.S training and mentoring initiative. This research-based, intensive literacy program focused on assessing and improving classroom practices and environments. Through the initial L.I.N.K.S program, Motherhead<sup>®</sup> staff provided services for child care providers on-site for four-to-six months. The program included: group training in Story Exploring<sup>®</sup> methods and techniques; one-on-one mentoring with child care teachers; modeling of Story Exploring methods and techniques; classroom observations; environmental assessments; and pre- and post-assessments of teachers' use of Story Exploring. Participating early childhood educators completed a post-intervention survey, which captured these outcomes:

- 97% served reported an increase in knowledge of emergent literacy for the ages of children for whom they provide care.
- 97% served reported that they have applied new knowledge and skills based on information provided by the program.

Additionally, analysis of pre- and post-scores as measured by a standardized tool, the Teacher Literacy Behaviors Observation Checklist (TLBOC), demonstrated that 97% of participating child care providers improved their classroom literacy environments and practices as a result of L.I.N.K.S. activities.

The TLBOC is a 22-item observational tool designed to measure literacy practices of teachers engaged in reading a storybook to preschool children. The TLBOC measures five dimensions of literacy practice: (1) getting started (seating arrangements, eye contact, handling the book); (2) connecting the story to children's prior knowledge; (3) performance-oriented reading (which involves reading the book with little interruption, then retelling through illustrations); (4) book discussion (open-ended inferential and

prediction questions); (5) extension of learning beyond the reading session (creating a story favor, connecting to writing, dramatization, etc.).

In the L.I.N.K.S. initiative, an observer/trainer used the TLBOC to score literacy practices observed in teachers before and after they received training in the Motherhead Story Exploring method. In most instances, follow-up mentoring and re-training occurred over several months, and a second or third TLBOC was administered beyond the first follow-up observation. A follow-up study of this process conducted by evaluator Dr. Bertha M. Gorham, former director of the Early Childhood and Family Support program at RTI International, indicated that regardless of race, previous education, or years of experience, teachers who received Motherhead training made improvements in literacy practices when engaged in reading a storybook to preschool children.

Not only have early childhood educators benefited from this initiative, so have the children in their classrooms. A second study, "Training and Mentoring Child Care Providers in Story Sharing: Effects on Vocabulary and Story Retelling for Four-Year-Olds, and Story Sharing Behaviors of Childcare Providers," was conducted by Dr. Jody L. Cleven at North Carolina State University. This research examined the effects of Story Exploring training and mentoring on receptive and expressive vocabulary and story retelling of 121 four-year-old children, as well as the effects of a six-week intervention on literacy behaviors of 18 child care providers. Cleven examined several dependent variables, including: (a) receptive vocabulary test scores of children, as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test Revised (PPVTR, Dunn & Dunn, 1981); (b) expressive vocabulary test scores of children, as measured by the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT, Gardner, 1990); (c) story retelling scores of children, as measured by a retelling rubric; and (d) story reading behaviors of childcare providers, as measured by the Teacher Literacy Behavior Observational Checklist (TLBOC, Motherhead, Inc., 2003).

The independent variable was the training and mentoring intervention for child care provider participants. Data were analyzed to examine differences between the performance of teachers who received training and mentoring and teachers who received no intervention for each outcome measure. Analysis showed that on expressive vocabulary, children taught by teachers who received training and mentoring

significantly outperformed children whose teachers did not receive training and mentoring. Data also showed a highly significant difference among gain scores for children in the two groups on the retelling rubric. Further analysis revealed a highly significant difference between the groups on the post-test measure for story reading behaviors of child care providers.

Early childhood educators have also improved their literacy practices and skills through participation in Teacheread classes, which help child care professionals learn new ways to use stories to teach children language skills, thinking skills, and valuable life lessons. Teachers enrolled in multi-week classes develop skills from a socio-contextual vantage point, as well as learn new strategies for using their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills to teach young children. Because of its orientation toward literacy as a meaning-making activity, Motherread programming features close examination and analysis of narratives. These texts provide a structure for the development of skills and knowledge and promote an experiential, constructionist pedagogy. Using the Motherread curriculum, Teacheread classes include the reading and discussion of carefully selected children's books, as well as the examination of adult short narratives and poems and a wide variety of writing activities. Literature taught in the classes represents a wide variety of cultural perspectives that help teachers and children understand and appreciate stories, people, and traditions from other backgrounds. At the same time, this variety enables children see people like themselves in stories.

Teachers also learn and practice Story Exploring techniques, such as the use of props, discussion questions, and story-related songs and games. Additionally, participants make props or story favors to use in their classrooms, and develop their own pieces of writing. Other key elements are the opportunity to practice what is learned and to share successes and challenges with fellow classmates.

Classes are based on learner-centered, participatory philosophy. Teacheread instructors elicit concerns and issues from participants, and throughout the class cycle, this process continues, as instructors select and individualize curriculum lessons that connect with the students' lives and classroom settings. This meaning-based, diagnostic-prescriptive approach to teaching leads to reading comprehension achievement. The approach has several important characteristics: formal and informal assessments to

identify learners' strengths, needs, and interests in reading; use of these assessment results to develop individualized teaching strategies, methods, and materials; and language-experience and literature-based instruction emphasizing regular student-teacher interaction, real-life reading material, and reading as a meaning-making activity. Since 1999, 52 child care professionals have benefited from Teacheread classes offered by the Motherhead, Inc. National Office in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Teacheread participants were included in a 2001 study measuring gains of student reading levels. The study used the reading subscale of the Test of Adult Basic Education (T.A.B.E.) at the beginning and end of each class cycle, usually on the first and last day of classes. Each cycle of classes was 16 hours and enrolled an average of eight-to-ten participants. An analysis of pre- and post-group T.A.B.E. grade equivalent scores for the classes studied reveals an increase in average grade equivalent scores of 4.3 grade levels for the Teacheread participants. While these results are encouraging, they should be viewed as preliminary findings that are subject to further analysis, as more groups are included in the database. Nevertheless, the documented improvements in skill level and practice demonstrated by these two initiatives are powerful indicators of the changes possible when using the Motherhead approach to early reading instruction.

