Children prenatally exposed to crack or cocaine: Looking behind the label

This longitudinal study of the literacy development of three children challenges us to reconsider our assumptions about children who are prenatally exposed to crack or cocaine.

The “crack baby” has become a media star, with multiple misconceptions arising from journalistic sensationalism. (Neuspiel & Hamel, 1991, p. 61)

The “media star” or child who has been prenatally exposed to crack or cocaine has drawn the attention of educators. Many educators have accepted the dismal predictions offered by the media and have seen these pessimistic behavioral and educational forecasts as existing classroom realities (Bollinger & Pierson, 1990; Waller, 1993). Routinely, the media have built our negative expectations by highlighting individual children on the television screen. Viewers are shown a newborn who may be jittery or crying uncontrollably, and then a new image appears of a classroom, perhaps even with a child who seems to be out of control behaviorally. Although the images do not reflect the same child, we personalize the transition from hospital to school and collapse these two situations so that we are perceiving the transition of one individual from birth to school age.

Although these images are clear in our minds, the reality to date is that the majority of published research has focused only on these infants’ physical and emotional development. While physicians have detailed the difficult beginnings of life these children may experience (Brodkin & Zuckerman, 1992; Chasnoff, 1992; Freier, Griffith, & Chasnoff, 1991; Richardson, Day, & McGauhey, 1993; Schutter & Brinker, 1992), fewer researchers have undertaken to follow these children beyond infancy (Barone, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Chasnoff, Griffith, Freier, & Murray, 1992).

Teachers frequently believe that children who have been prenatally exposed to crack/cocaine will be difficult to teach, but they are not provided with any specific information on what to expect or on how to modify their teaching. Most teachers express fear at the thought of having a prenatally drug exposed child in their classroom. Because of these expressed fears and my concern for the academic future of these children, I initiated a longitudinal study focused narrowly on literacy development.

With the support of the state welfare department, I identified children who were prenatally exposed to crack or cocaine and lived in stable home situations. (The children in this study were all identified as prenatally exposed to crack or cocaine through a urine toxicolo-
gy test administered soon after birth [Barone, 1993a.]) What I discovered after 3 years of observation was that each child was very different from the others even though they were all labeled as drug exposed.

In this article I share the home and school experiences of three focus children. The three case study children represent various points along a continuum of literacy development from above grade-level expectations to slightly below grade-level expectations. The first child, Jennifer, lives with adoptive parents; her literacy development is beyond the typical development in kindergarten. The second child, Jamal, lives with a foster mother; he is experiencing difficulty both behaviorally and academically in kindergarten. The third child, Danny, lives with foster parents and is matching grade-level expectations in his second-grade classroom. I will share each child’s home and school situation over the 3 years of the study. The children’s, parents’, and teachers’ voices will be included in this discussion so that all viewpoints are represented.

Jennifer

Year 1. I first met Jennifer at her home when she was 4 years old. Her parents, both college graduates, decided not to have their own children but instead to adopt children with special needs. To date they have adopted seven children. With the exception of one daughter, all of the children are younger than Jennifer. Jennifer’s parents have adjusted their work schedules so that one of them is always home.

Their home was not particularly large, but the children had room to play and the responsibility for keeping the living area cleaned up. A television was not in evidence, but there were piles of books, crayons, and paper for the children to use along with a wide assortment of toys.

On this initial visit, Jennifer’s mom and dad said they had learned from the state welfare department that Jennifer’s birth mother had not received any prenatal care and that she lived in a crack house. Jennifer was a full-term baby who left the hospital with her parents. Within her first year, both parents were arrested for possession and use of drugs and Jennifer entered foster care. She came to live with her present family when she was 18 months old. Her dad said that she was an easy child at first, but they were a bit worried when the previous foster mother continuously called to ask, “How are things going?” After about 2 weeks of a “honeymoon” period, Jennifer frequently cried, sometimes for 2 or 3 hours. They found no way to console her except to put her in her bedroom. These tantrums continued for about 6 months; then they stopped as quickly as they had started. Jennifer also experienced difficulties with eating; she would starve herself and then gorge to the point of throwing up. Apart from these troubling behaviors, her parents described her as a healthy, social child who enjoyed learning.

When her parents described her literacy development, they commented on her interest in books and how much she enjoyed being read to. Although they did not feel she had a favorite book, she loved to pretend to read books to herself. They would listen in as she read to herself before going to bed. They commented on her voice animation as she read: “It sounded like she was really reading.” Typically they read to her about two times a week. They were also proud that she knew the alphabet and was trying to make the letters herself in her attempts at writing.

After our initial meeting, Jennifer and I explored books and writing together. I was surprised at how quickly she was able to memorize predictable text. When I read Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? (Martin, 1967) to her, she was immediately able to read it back to me. She was interested in letters, but she confused the names of some letters. She knew the beginning letter of everyone’s name in her family. After she shared several books and her knowledge of letters, Jennifer drew a “funny face” for me. As she drew, she kept asking me if I knew what she was making. She giggled when I never guessed correctly.

Jennifer was not enrolled in school during this first year of observations. I interacted with her and her brothers and sisters during each monthly observation. At each visit we would share the books that I brought and her own books, we would draw or write, and I would ask her to read to me. Jennifer loved sorting through the books that I brought. She would place them in order from the ones that she really wanted me to read to the ones that we could save until another visit. As we read, she frequently made connections between events.
in the books and her own experiences. Toward the end of this first year, she refused to read to me. She clearly realized that her memorized reading was not the same as what she considered to be "real" reading; this realization was a sign of her development as a reader (Sulzby, 1985).

Year 2. During the second year of the study, Jennifer attended a private, religious preschool for three mornings each week. The teacher organized the classroom around free-choice centers. The classroom included a large library at child height so that children were invited in; student work hung throughout the room. The teacher's literacy philosophy blended traditional instruction, like letter of the week, with shared book activities. Although she supported the children in interacting with text, they never engaged in writing activities except for handwriting practice of letters and their names.

Jennifer's teacher was pleased with her progress. She commented that "Jennifer is doing very well in school. She likes to do things her way but she is doing fine with the curriculum." Jennifer's teacher was indirectly referring to Jennifer's creativity with the letter activities. If asked to make a neat letter F, for instance, she would often embellish it with decorative shapes. When I asked Jennifer about school, she emphatically stated, "I like it!"

Her parents were pleased with her adjustment to formal schooling. They were a bit nervous about her creativity and wondered what would happen when she was enrolled in public school. They felt that teachers in public schools would not appreciate Jennifer's creativity or the way she redefined the mundane school activities to make them exciting, like turning letters into creatures from other planets on her handwriting sheets.

During a home visit, Jennifer made connections with the books that I brought and books that she heard in school. She would inform me of the books that her teacher had read and expressed surprise that I had copies. She also shared her writing abilities with me. She began by writing the alphabet. She then moved to her name and to the names of other members in her family. I asked her to write bed, ship, and drive to see how she would represent words. She wrote a BD for bed, giggled on ship, and wrote JR for drive. After these attempts, she wrote DIID for did. Her spellings indicate that she was aware of some initial and final consonants and that she remembered the spellings of whole words that were important to her. See Figure 1 for an example of her writing.

Clearly, at the end of her first year at school, she had met the expectations of the preschool curriculum. She was certainly excited about reading, was making connections between text and her personal experiences, and was aware of several sound/symbol correspondences. Her parents were pleased because she had successfully bridged her classroom and home environments. And Jennifer was pleased with herself and how she was developing as a reader and writer.

Year 3. I visited Jennifer in her kindergarten class. Her class was large, about 35
children, and met for 2½ hours each day. Her teacher organized the classroom into whole-class instruction for the majority of each day. Occasionally, she would work with small groups or individual children for assessment purposes. Miss Albert’s literacy curriculum matched Jennifer’s preschool curriculum. The children had lessons each week that focused on a letter and its corresponding sound, and the teacher provided shared book experiences on a daily basis. As in preschool, the children only wrote on handwriting sheets or worksheets provided by a basal company.

After watching Jennifer on my first visit, I talked to the teacher about how she felt Jennifer was fitting in. Miss Albert said, “Jennifer is a sweetie. She interacts in class very well.” I asked about creativity on projects or worksheets, but her teacher had not noticed these behaviors.

As I observed Jennifer through this kindergarten year, I was pleasantly surprised at her literacy development. In October, she was reading and writing consonant-vowel-consonant words easily. She brought the poem “Lamplighter Barn,” by Myra Cohn Livingston, to me and read it fluently. Following are a few lines from the poem:

Lamplighter Barn
I can play
in the prickly hay
and I can find
where the chickens lay…


Her reading of this poem indicated that she had moved beyond the safety of predictable text and was able to read less supportive material.

I also overheard her talking as she wrote some words on a paper. She continuously erased because, as she explained, “I did not leave space between words.” Her knowledge about spaces between words indicated that she was aware of concept-of-word in print, considered to be an important benchmark for beginning independent reading (Morris, 1983).

As I interacted with her in reading, she would often ask questions beyond the literal facts stated in the text. For instance, she wanted to know why the sand was speckled and why there were stars on the lizard in the book Over in the Meadow (Keats, 1973). She asked these questions on her first reading of a story, indicating that she could process text and consider its implications or observe the illustrations simultaneously. She would often slow down and think through what she was reading or reconsider a word that was causing difficulty, and then she would reread at a rapid rate and continue on. It was clear that she was monitoring her comprehension as she read (Glazer & Brown, 1993).

On a visit to her home she read to me for about an hour. I asked Jennifer if she could tell me how she became such a good reader. She thought about this question for a while and then stated, “I look at the words and sound them out. I read lots of easy books, and then I started reading.” I was interested to hear her talk about learning to sound out words but more importantly, she realized that reading a lot, especially easy books, was very important to becoming a reader. On this occasion, I also asked her to spell some words. She was able to represent initial consonants, final consonants, and vowels although the vowels were often confused. She also chose to write the, yes, and two because she knew how to spell them. See Figure 2 for her spelling of these words.

Jennifer’s mom and dad continued to be pleased at how bright their daughter was. They told me that “She is incredibly smart. She does everyone’s homework. She helps her older sis-

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ter with her work, and it is always right.” Although they were clearly pleased with Jennifer’s success in school, they still worried about first grade. What would happen when she had to sit still for a whole day? Jennifer’s parents knew that she was free to move in kindergarten as she had been in preschool, and they wondered what would happen when this freedom was limited. They were sure that the first-grade teacher would expect children to sit all day, and they were not sure Jennifer could comply. Jennifer’s parents were enjoying her success to a point, but the worries about what might be were clearly haunting them.

Summary. After 3 years of observing and interacting with Jennifer, I concluded that she is a reader; perhaps with classroom support she may also develop into a writer. She loves to read and has found ways to engage in books and not behave inappropriately in class. Her independent reading and writing development clearly make her a beginning reader, an accomplishment that does not always occur in kindergarten. Her love of reading encouraged her to nudge her parents so that they would visit the library weekly.

Although Jennifer had some difficulties as an infant, she moved beyond these behavioral problems primarily because of the consistent support of her parents. Her preschool teacher accepted Jennifer’s creativity, and Jennifer enjoyed this freedom of expression. She accommodated the changes in kindergarten, where the boundaries were narrowed.

Jennifer certainly does not match many of our previous expectations about children prenatally exposed to crack or cocaine. Her literacy development lets us see how a supportive, consistent environment at home and at school is critical in nurturing physical, academic, and social growth.

Jamal

Year 1. I visited Jamal for the first time with a case worker from the welfare department who had helped identify the children. Jamal lived with a foster mother, who was quite elderly, and three other foster children. Two of these children were older than Jamal and one was the same age, 3 years old. Jamal’s home was in a tough neighborhood. Several of the homes nearby had shot-out windows, and a few had been burned. As a result of the dangers in the neighborhood, Jamal was not allowed to play outside, and the windows to the street were always covered. I discovered on other visits that Jamal was aware of the neighborhood activity. He would talk about events he had heard about or seen, and he even asked me if I carried a gun in my car. He was incredulous when I told him that I did not have a gun. He asked why I would come to visit without one.

I talked to Jamal’s foster mother about his early development. She told me that Jamal had been in her house since he was 1 year old. She originally had his older brother too, but the two boys proved to be too much for her to handle. His older brother was placed with another family; she commented that Jamal still talked about this brother and wanted to visit him. She knew that Jamal was a full-term baby although she was not aware of his birthday. She stated, “He is strong. Disciplining him is hard. It doesn’t matter. He will do it over again. He’s good when he’s good.” As I talked to his mom, Jamal ran around the house and fought with his sister, ignoring his mother’s comments to behave. I was not sure if this performance was standard, or if he chose this behavior because I was taking his mother’s attention. After several visits I found that this was generally Jamal’s behavior when his mother was present. He followed the directions of his older sisters much more consistently than he did his mother’s.

When I asked his mother about reading and writing, she was a bit surprised. She told me that he was not in school yet. I asked her if she read to him or if he played with books. She noted that he looked at books, although he would not listen to anyone read. She also said that because he could only scribble, she did not ask him to write; however, she was teaching him to color in the lines in a coloring book. She said that he rarely watched television.

Next I asked Jamal to show me some of his books. He produced a small pile of toys; the only book that he could find was a coloring book. This happened each time I visited his home. When I brought out my books, Jamal was able to label several of the pictures in a book. I attempted to read Brown Bear (Martin, 1967) to him, but he was unable to listen to the text all the way through. He did not leave my lap while I was reading, but he would close
the book so that I could no longer read. Jamal was willing to draw for me. It was clear from his drawing of his mother and his signature (see Figure 3) that he was in a scribbling stage. His drawing indicated that he had distinguished the differences between drawing and writing (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Throughout my observations and interactions with Jamal during this first year, he would never let me read a whole story to him. When I used a storytelling mode for reading, he was much more willing to listen. He even joined in on the refrains in books like Brown Bear. During this year, his drawing moved from scribbling to recognizable self-portraits, and his writing remained a tight scribble.

Jamal’s home situation changed somewhat when his mother hurt her back and was placed in bed for extended periods of time. As might be imagined, Jamal found it difficult to be on his own for such long time periods. During my visits at these times, Jamal begged to be taken to his real mother. So although Jamal’s home was stable, it would probably not be considered an ideal place to raise such a young child who clearly missed his older brother and natural mother. Realistically, Jamal had few opportunities to engage in literacy events, especially when his mother was confined to bed. Jamal was expected to entertain himself and stay away from his ill mother through most of this year.

Year 2. Jamal’s mother enrolled him in a Head Start program near his home. He attended this preschool program from 9:00 until 1:00 each day. He was placed in one classroom, but the children were allowed to move within three rooms during the majority of the day. Each teacher set up one center, and children could choose among them. They could also elect to play in one of the stationary settings like housekeeping or blocks. At the conclusion of this play time, the children met with the teacher to reflect on what they accomplished. Although there was much choice for the children, they had little literacy instruction. Each room had a small library with about 10 books, but few children ever entered this area. In addition, the teachers infrequently read to the children. On most occasions, no paper or writing instruments were available. When they were present, the children were expected only to draw, not write. The teachers described the goal of their program as primarily the children’s social development. They wanted children to learn to behave in school, which they believed would translate to success in public school kindergarten.

Surprisingly, Jamal was able to conform to the school’s behavioral expectations. His teacher told me that “He had calmed down after the first few weeks. He follows directions, and he can play with other children without bothering them.” When I watched Jamal at school, he most often chose the block or play dough center. He loved talking to the nearby children as he played. One time he engaged the children in cockroach stories. They all embellished his story until the cockroach was as big as the school. Another time the children had a serious discussion about crybabies. Jamal let everyone know that “big boys don’t cry.” Perhaps because I always brought paper and books to Jamal’s home, he would bring a book to me at school. One of his favorites was Blueberries for Sal (McCloskey, 1948); he liked to show me the bear and then he would quickly put the book back.

During a visit to his home, his mom explained to Jamal that I was part of the family and that I would visit often. This news seemed...
to please Jamal and he was happy to show me his baby chickens and some of his toys. He also focused more on the books that I brought. Jamal would scan the books and then let me read in storytelling fashion. I was still not able to read an entire book to Jamal, even if it was a predictable book with very little text. When I read My Home (Melser, 1981) to him, he wanted to know if I lived in a barn because when I read the page about the horse I said it was my home. I was pleased to see how well Jamal was listening to the story and making connections to the text. He retold The Napping House (Wood & Wood, 1984) during this visit. He labeled most of the pictures, but he also began to make connections from page to page. He also showed off by singing part of the alphabet song, although he quickly told me that “I don’t know the alphabet.”

Year 3. Jamal entered a neighborhood public school kindergarten during this year. He attended class with about 29 other children each morning for 2 1/2 hours. The teacher organized her class around whole-class instruction; the children always participated together. The classroom did not have a library, and the teacher infrequently displayed children’s work.

The teacher told me that it was her first year in kindergarten and her first year in a school labeled at risk. She was concerned about the children’s behavior and believed that most of them had difficulty conforming to her expectations. She wanted the children to sit and listen, and she expected they would raise their hands and talk only when called on. Her literacy instruction focused on the letter of the week and daily book sharing. Worksheets focused on letters and letter sounds were children’s only written work. The children were never given the opportunity to look at books or to write freely in journals.

The teacher, Mrs. Bell, was quite open about her feelings about Jamal. She described him as a “fighter.” She said that he was better behaved “until he visited his natural mother.” By October, she had referred him to a multi-disciplinary team because she was sure that he was learning disabled. On my first visit to this class, it was clear that Jamal was out of control. When the teacher read a book to the class, he played with a neighbor and then chased a child around the room. He was placed in “time out” for this behavior. After time out, he was asked to write his name on a worksheet and produce a page of the letter C. He immediately whined that he was unable to do this. The teacher sat with him, and they wrote his name and made the letters together. Jamal complied with the teacher, but when she left his side he reverted to scribbling.

On another visit, Jamal was busy working on his name. I asked the teacher if I might work with him for a bit. Jamal and I looked through a book about spiders, and he seemed excited about the various spiders in the book. Following this informal scanning of a nonfiction text, I chose The Very Busy Spider (Carle, 1984) to read to him. This was the first occasion when Jamal allowed me to read a whole book to him. He was also able to predict what might happen as I was reading. After reading with me, he returned to the reading time in the class. As he entered the group the teacher threatened to call his mother if he did not behave. (The teacher arranged with Jamal’s mother to pick him up from school whenever he was disruptive.) The teacher was talking about Kwanzaa, and Jamal seemed to be truly interested in the discussion. The teacher then read some poems from the book Honey I Love (Greenfield, 1978). Jamal moved to the front of the group and commented after one poem that “I love myself.” It appeared that when the teacher read books more closely aligned with Jamal’s culture, he became more focused and more willing to participate in classroom-appropriate ways.

When asked about Jamal’s progress, the teacher commented that “he was doing better. He can write his name. He is bright.” These comments followed his testing by the school psychologist, who found that Jamal tested in the above-average range of intelligence. She also discovered that when Jamal seemed out of control, puzzles calmed him. He was able to do puzzles with over 25 pieces easily, although he had never played with a puzzle at home.

Jamal’s mother had strong feelings about this school. She did not feel that the school and especially the teacher were adequately taking care of her son. She stated that “I will not send him back to school. They are not doing anything for him.” She arranged for Jamal to attend a new school where he would be in a special education kindergarten with lower enrollment. Jamal qualified for this placement because of
his high intelligence score and his below-grade-level progress in kindergarten. When I asked Jamal about his new school, he said, "I don’t think the new school will be any better."

During May, I visited Jamal at his new school. He was in a classroom with nine other children. I was surprised to see that Jamal was conforming to the expectations of the new teacher. The classroom was organized around centers that contained activities related to books being shared with the class. During the week that I visited, the children were exploring insects. I watched Jamal listen to the teacher read and politely ask her questions about some of the insects illustrated in the book. He also showed me the book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) that I had read to him at home. Later during the visit, he looked through a book about fish. He talked about the book to another child, and then he asked the teacher to tell him the names of some of the stranger fish. The teacher told me that he was "doing a beautiful job" in school. She was pleased with his adjustment to this new classroom environment.

Before I left the class, Jamal decided to draw a picture for me. He quickly drew a self-portrait and then just as quickly, wrote his name. The change in Jamal’s feelings about himself and school show in this drawing (see Figure 4).

*Summary.* Jamal was an interesting child to observe over 3 years. He was the only child in the study who would not listen to a story read in a conventional way. He was in kindergarten before he would listen to a book all the way through. His writing abilities were not being nurtured either at home or in school. Until late in his kindergarten year, he never had the opportunity to freely explore with paper and pencil. Jamal’s difficulty in listening to stories and his preference for scribbling indicated that he was still trying to make sense of reading and writing.

Jamal is certainly a resilient child. He coped with an elderly foster mother who was often confined to bed. He was not free to play outside and had few toys, books, or writing materials to entertain him indoors. Although he had more freedom at school, he was not well supported in his literacy development. His Head Start preschool nurtured his social and behavioral development as did his first kindergarten, with the additional limitation of the structure. Finally, his second kindergarten truly supported children in literacy. I was surprised at Jamal’s determination to learn in school. I believed that his first-grade placement would be critical to his continuing literacy development and his willingness to comply to school expectations.

**Danny**

*Year 1.* Danny lived with his parents in a trailer. His parents had been foster parents for several years and had taken care of many special-needs foster children. Danny lived with
one other foster child, a boy who was a year younger, one older adopted child with multiple handicaps, and one adult natural child. Danny moved into this foster home when he was 2 years old. He was now 6 and attending kindergarten. Each person in the household was responsible for daily tasks like straightening a room or doing dishes. Beyond the household chores, his parents had a special bookcase full of children’s books that they frequently read. Danny also had many toys, some in his backyard where he had a lot of space for playing.

His mother immediately told me that “Danny was trouble.” She frequently compared him unfavorably to his current foster brother. Physically, she described him as asthmatic and anemic. He needed medicine on a daily basis for his asthma. She also kept him on a special diet to alleviate some of his food allergies. In addition to the medical screening that she had arranged, she had him tested by a psychologist. Danny tested within the high range for intelligence, but the psychologist found his speech to be delayed and he qualified for special education services.

Danny’s mother appeared positive about his literacy development. She said that he was familiar with the letters and could say the alphabet. She described him as a “child who understood about books and carefully turned the pages.” He also liked watching television and playing video games. When I asked how he was learning to read, she stated that “school was teaching him to read.”

I visited Danny for the first time in his kindergarten. He spent most of his 21/2-hour morning session in a regular kindergarten class, but he also went to a special education class for language development. The overall literacy philosophy shared by his teachers was a blend between traditional and literature-based orientations. Many books were available in his classrooms, and children frequently interacted with books. The teachers combined whole-class and small-group instruction. Danny’s special education teacher often worked with small groups within the kindergarten room.

Danny’s teachers were very pleased with his progress. They felt that he “was well on his way to becoming a reader.” They also indicated that he had no trouble working with the other children in his classrooms. During one visit, I saw Danny writing weather words to match pictures on a worksheet. He read words like cloudy, windy, and rainy. Later in small group instruction, he read the book I Want an Ice Cream (Cowley, 1981). He was able to predict and discuss what the book might be about from the illustration. Later, when he was asked to take a turn reading, he was able to read as he pointed to the words and to identify words in isolation, indicating that he had developed concept-of-word in print and could be considered a beginning reader.

During his summer vacation, I interacted with Danny at his home. When I arrived his mother told me that he “had been misbehaving since he had been out of school.” She said that she had warned him that if he continued to misbehave she would send him to another home. Someone issued this warning to Danny on every visit I had at their home over the 3 years of observation.

Danny and I read many books during my summer visit. He let me know which stories he had heard in school. He quickly memorized any of the predictable books, and he joined in on the refrains of books that were not so structured. He willingly wrote some words for me. His spelling of bed, bump, drive, and when (see Figure 5) illustrate that he recognized the connections between letters and sounds. At the end of his kindergarten year, Danny was well on his way to developing as a reader and a writer.

Year 2. Danny entered a new multiage, multigrade school during his first-grade year. His class contained about 17 first and second graders. The teacher taught to the children’s development rather than their age or grade. Danny’s teacher had been teaching first grade for many years, and she was experimenting with whole language strategies for the first time in her career. She commented that her previous teaching had been traditional, but she was now convinced that children needed time and choice with reading and writing, and that her students should be free to move and talk as they worked. The students and teacher worked to find a balance between total freedom and academic and behavioral expectations.

On my first visit to this class, I discovered that Danny had qualified to be removed from special education. The special education teacher planned to check on his progress occasionally. Mrs. Campbell, his classroom
teacher, commented on “his excellent reading, memory, and his work.” During a small-group reading lesson, I overheard Danny explain that Johnnie in The Biggest Bear (Ward, 1952) had a good reason to shoot the bear because he had messed up the place. As an extension activity, Danny wrote some words from this book. He carefully read each word as he wrote it. Later, Danny shared his journal with me. He had written about making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Danny’s knowledge about words was developing quickly (see Figure 6). He could conventionally write some frequent words, like you, and, and on, and he included vowels in most of his words, some of which were confused like POT for put.

As I watched Danny over this year, I noticed his love of books and how detail-oriented he became when reading or when another child was sharing a story. For example during a sharing time, Chris shared a nonfiction book about frogs and toads. He said that toads could not jump. Danny responded that when he was in the desert he saw “a tiny toad jump really high.” This led the two boys to explore other books to see if they could find a resolution to this dilemma.

His writing abilities also developed during this year. In addition to his ability to represent words, his ideas about writing stories were expanding. He easily drafted a story about a spaceship. He wrote:

Last night, I saw a spaceship [copied from a book] in my back yard. A alien came out. He asked me “you want to go exploring”.

Danny wrote a short text, spelled most of the words correctly, and included punctuation in a first-draft effort.

On my next visit to Danny’s home, his mother, father, and Danny were very upset because Danny’s foster brother had been adopted. The family was grieving the loss of this child. The adoption had happened quickly and Danny’s mom felt that they had not had enough time to prepare. She also believed that Danny would soon be adopted too and was concerned about handling this additional loss. Danny spent most of this visit clinging to his mother.

Year 3. Contrary to his family’s fears, Danny remained in this family for another year. Danny continued in his multiage, multigrade school for second grade. Danny’s teacher retired.
at the end of the year, so Danny was moved to another primary classroom. His new teacher, who had been out of college for just a few years, believed in holistic instruction in reading and writing. Each day began with a writing workshop, which then moved to a session of silent, sustained reading. The children had many opportunities for reading and writing but never received teacher-directed reading instruction as a whole class or in small groups. The classroom was filled with books and students’ art and writing products. Behaviorally, the children were allowed to move around the room and work with other students; however, they were not to interrupt the learning of others.

When I visited Danny in this classroom, I saw him spend a lot of time rereading books. He would bring his books over and have me make sure that he was reading all of the words correctly. His teacher had noticed this behavior too and said that he was doing very well in reading. When I asked Danny how he had learned to read so well, he said that he “learned by reading a lot.” Danny is one of the few children in the study who did not mention sounding out words as the primary method of learning to read.

Danny continued to write in his journal and then to read his teacher’s responses to him. He also seemed pleased to be able to share so many of his published stories with his peers. He was so confident in his writing abilities that he wrote a letter of praise to the principal (see Figure 7).

His mother refused to let me visit Danny at home again. She said that after each visit, Danny misbehaved. Additionally, she had discovered that Danny had fetal alcohol effects and she was sure he would turn into a sociopath. She had requested that he be moved to another home immediately, so there was no reason for me to visit.

Summary. Like Jamal, Danny was resilient. He appeared to thrive in school. He was always smiling and trying to meet the expectations of the teacher. Unlike Jamal, Danny was a beginning reader and writer. Additionally, through rereading of favorite stories, Danny was building his knowledge of words and becoming more fluent. His classrooms were much freer in organization than those of the other two children. Danny was always free to move and to interact with the other students as he engaged in learning.

In contrast to Danny’s school experiences, his home experiences were filled with uncertainty. His mother constantly threatened Danny with removal from the home. When she learned about the fetal alcohol effects, she became more determined than ever to get him out of her home. Danny’s classroom stability and support seemed to compensate for some of the stressful nature of his home situation.

Final thoughts

When I started this study I was not sure what to expect. I am still learning from these children, but it is clear that they are not the “media stars” that were forecast. The stories of Jennifer, Jamal, and Danny demonstrate that these children are like all others. They respond to supportive school and home environments. And they seem to do best when both the home and school environment support them as worthy individuals who are trying to learn.

For educators, the story is more complex and positive than was first envisioned. Each story clearly demonstrates the power of the teacher in establishing a classroom that supports or limits each child’s literacy development. These children’s knowledge of literacy evolved in all classrooms; however, classrooms where children were allowed to read, write, and talk were the most effective. Astute teachers will also know that the label of drug exposure does not lead to appropriate instruction or to effective ways to organize classrooms for the children’s benefit. Each child, regardless of drug exposure, will need to be evaluated individually. Importantly, none of these children’s teachers made accommoda-
tions in their classrooms. Two of them, Danny and Jennifer, were able to adapt to the context of the class, no matter how complex.

Children as fortunate as Jennifer will probably never be identified within the school as being drug exposed. Most likely, she will be evaluated for a gifted program in the near future. Unfortunately many children find themselves in situations like Jamal. Jamal’s prenatal drug exposure becomes a secondary issue when considering his home and school environments. Jamal seems to have the inner determination to do well in school. The question becomes how will this desire be nourished in such impoverished home and classroom climates? What is positive for teachers to see in this situation is that when the curriculum was supportive of Jamal’s culture and allowed more experimentation with reading and writing, he was a more successful learner. The final child, Danny, is even more complex. He is doing well in school without much emotional support at home. I am personally astounded at how this child holds such a positive image of himself in the face of such negativity at home. For Danny, the school is an important source of support.

My hope is that these three portraits of children who were prenatally exposed to crack or cocaine nudge educators’ perceptions. Certainly some prenatally exposed children will pose difficulties within the classroom and will require accommodations. Equally important to remember is that others will be successful learners within classroom contexts without special accommodations.

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References


Children’s books cited


