



**Motheread Inc.®**



**Literacy Invites and Nurtures Kids' Success  
(L.I.N.K.S.)**

**Project Assessment**




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## Executive Summary

This report presents results of an assessment, conducted in seven child care centers located in Wake County that explored teachers' classroom practices following specialized LINKS training using the Motherhead approach. The training highlighted effective use of pedagogical practices known to enhance students' literacy development and increased engagement with books. The assessment focused on teachers' consistency and program fidelity in using sustained practices reflective of their training. Results revealed increased effectiveness among teachers' application of classroom practices supportive of student learning and literacy development. Teachers were knowledgeable about the approach and comfortable using the methods learned. Moreover, the learning environment for students' reading and meaningful engagement with books increased, with modest assistance still merited in teachers' *design* of learning spaces for reading engagement and *system support* from center directors for their efforts. 



**Figure 1.** A reading nook prepared by a teacher in one of the child care centers. Imagine props and greater accessibility for children's independent engagement with print material.

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## Assessment Purpose and Context

As Frederikson and Collins (1989, p.32) noted, the “goal of assessment has to be, above all, to support the improvement of learning and teaching.” This is precisely what we had in mind when developing the LINKS training using Motherhead’s innovative approach, which integrates pedagogical practices supportive of children’s literacy development and engagement with print material. Thus, the purpose of the assessment, documented herein, was to facilitate “improve[d] learning and teaching.” More specifically, our assessment goal was to have a better understanding of teachers’ application of Motherhead’s approach. Of particular interest were the consistency of their use of the approach and whether or not their application of the practices reflected the intention of the LINKS program. That is, did the implemented program meet the expectations of critical stakeholders in using Motherhead practices? Ultimately, what mattered most was whether or not the program resulted in salient change supportive of increased student learning and literacy engagement.

Seven child care centers in Wake County participated in the assessment and up to three classroom teachers from each facility participated in the assessment interview. (See Table 1, below, for total numbers.) Teachers were selected based on completion of the LINKS training and continued employment in the center where they received the training. 



**Figure 2.** A great place for reading material. Imagine numerous bins filled with an abundance of print material for a stronger presentation supportive of children’s learning and engagement.

**TABLE 1** Teachers interviewed by age group of children in their current classroom

Age group of children	Total
Ages 2-3	8
Ages 4-5	6
Infant-toddlers	2
N	16

### REFERENCE

Frederikson, J. R. & Collins, A. (1989). A systems approach to educational testing. *Educational Researcher*. pp. 27-32.

## Teachers' Classroom Practices

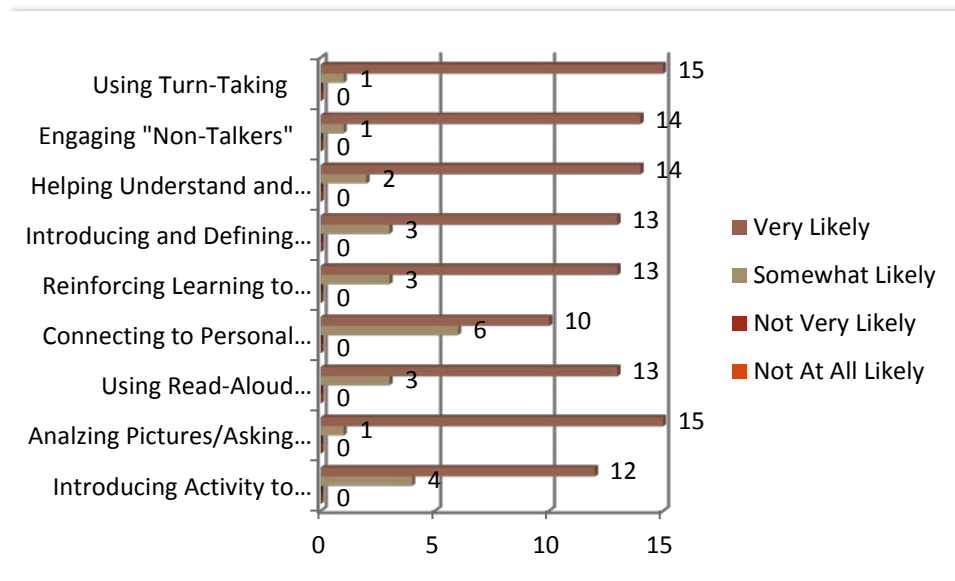
We are excited to report that teachers regularly implemented the Motherhead practices learned during their LINKS training program and that, during their interviews, they demonstrated a strong familiarity with the practices learned. Teachers unequivocally understood and valued the approach used during the LINKS training for its classroom utility and value to students' literacy development and increased engagement with books. Of particular relevance were teachers' improved storytelling and use of open-ended questions to enhance students' critical thinking skills. Center directors also reported greater awareness among teachers in the selection of developmentally appropriate material. Similarly, teachers particularly commented on the utility of props and book diversity for enhanced learning and student engagement. An overview of salient findings, including those mentioned, is provided below.

### Consistency of Application

Teachers were asked how likely they were to use a series of Motherhead-related literacy practices each time they read a book to an individual child or to a group of children; responses were measured on a scale of 1 (Not At All Likely) to 4 (Very Likely). The preponderance of teachers interviewed responded that they were either "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to employ the following practices (TABLE 2) learned through their LINKS training program: (1) using an introductory activity to begin reading a book selection; (2) analyzing pictures and asking questions for greater understanding; and (3) using read-aloud techniques such as props,

**Table 2**

*Likelihood of Teachers' Use of Select Literacy Practices*



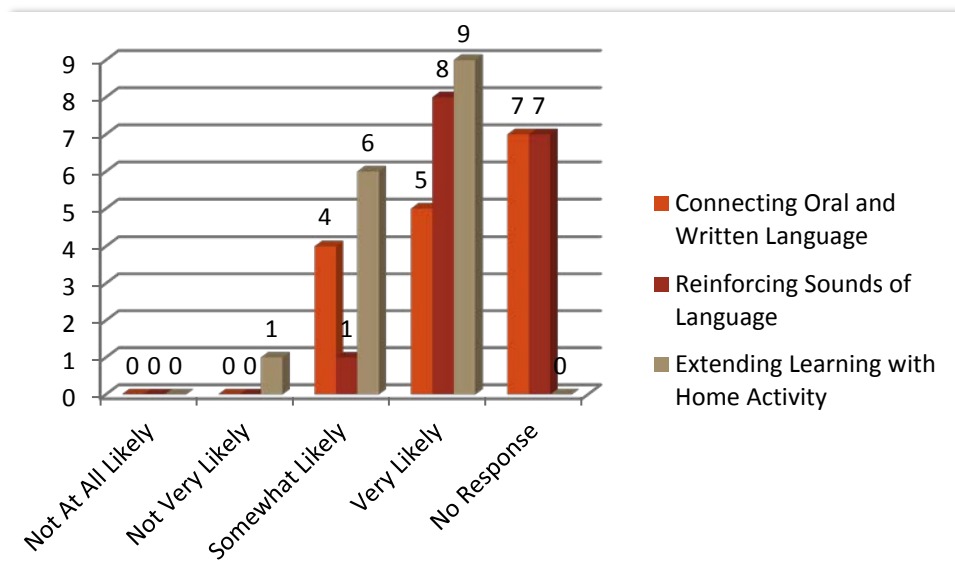
[puppets, music, drama, and voice to increase students' story engagement; (4) connecting the story with students' personal experiences to increase comprehension; (5) connecting new activities to the story theme to reinforce learning of key concepts and generalizations; (6)

introducing and defining new words and concepts; (7) helping children understand and use new vocabulary; (8) using tactics to engage “non-talkers” in conversation; and (9) using turn-taking in conversations to encourage language development and extend dialogue about the story. Greater variation in teacher response occurred for practices that focused on extending learning from the classroom to home (e.g., sending home a story summary, activity, or craft for parent interaction in the learning process); leading activities that made connections between spoken and printed words (e.g., demonstrate symmetry between oral and written language); and leading activities that reinforced the sounds of language.

Results clearly demonstrate teachers’ consistent use of key practices known to enhance student literacy development and print engagement. However, the response variation for questions posed related to print and spoken language, sounds, and home (child/parent) interactions (Table 3), especially as it relates to teachers who answered “No Response,” might reflect teachers’ hesitancy to admit that they are either reluctant to or unfamiliar with knowing how to pursue these activities. Thus, greater attentiveness in these areas, such as increased reinforcement/modeling by center directors or additional training, might be required. The variation in teacher responses also reflects (a) the age group of students in areas where activities are not-applicable to children under 36 months of age (e.g., oral and written language, sounds) or (b) interference from teachers’ personal beliefs and perceptions about the saliency of these practices. In either case, the majority of those responding reported that they were either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to use the practices, again supporting the saliency of the LINKS training program to their classroom practices.

**Table 3**

*Areas of Variation in Likelihood of Teachers’ Use of Select Literacy Practices*



### *Individual Literacy Skills Development*

Teachers were also asked what strategies they used to prioritize activities designed to develop students' individual literacy skills. Most responded that they used interactive individualized activities such as having children pick a favorite book or use puppets to dramatize a story. Teachers also engaged students in conversations, regardless of age, and regularly adapted lessons or activities to support children's personal development. Others used teaching aids illustrative of the stories read. For example, one teacher responded that she routinely "directe[d] questions to non-talkers" during story-time. Another noted that she "look[ed] for books that bring out sounds of letters" and "connect[ed] letters to sounds in preparation for kindergarten."

### *Critical Thinking Skills*

When asked about ways teachers encouraged children's critical thinking skills, a response that repeatedly emerged was through the use of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were viewed as facilitating children's ability to think about the stories read and imagine logical next steps for greater understanding. Teachers were also flexible and allowed choices in how children engaged the stories; teachers perceived this as necessary in order to facilitate welcoming, inviting conversation. For example, one teacher noted that, for younger children who could not speak well, she would have them "interpret the story through dance" and, with older children, she asked "them about things they like and why."

*"I do a lot of one-on-one instruction and give individualized attention."*

*"Even with infants and toddlers, I talk and they babble back."*

*"When we do activities, I adapt the lesson to the child's ability, for example, choosing age appropriate books, allowing children to re-read sections they don't understand, include hands on activities to engage all children. It helps to take the perspective of the child."*


*"Some children may want to play with a puzzle or a game. I help children experience the book by using teaching aids that illustrate the theme of the story. For example, when we read the book **Tiger Can't Sleep**, I turned the lights on and off to show children what will help with sleeping."*

*"Ask children open-ended questions, for example, 'What do you think would happen next?' or 'What would you do in this situation?'; allow the child to describe [the story] in his own words."*

*"Ask why something happen[ed]; what do you think will happen next...help them use their imagination."*

*"For example, with the peek a boo book, I ask them what will happen next, before I turn the page."*

### Selectivity and Diversity of Books

Teachers reported that they select and use a wide spectrum of books, including those specifically related to a child's needs (e.g., "books on potty-training," "with few words, or lots of pictures and colors") and on a variety of topics they believed were of interest to children or useful to their understanding of the world around them (e.g., "we talk about ways to help the environment, save paper, where paper comes from, whatever topic the children want to discover"). Similarly, teachers selected books supportive of children's backgrounds or that helped them deal with personal experiences (e.g., "books on bullying" or "that relates to the children's needs or cultural backgrounds"). One noticed that children "love to be read to" and selected books in the native language of children or that met their particular abilities. Based on teachers' conversations, they were thinking about individual children's attention span, interests, and comprehension levels. 



*"Sometimes I pick books with Spanish words, so that children can learn other cultures. I use my smart phone to find the translation, if I don't know what it means. ..I help the children say the words and explain their meaning."*

*"We talk about problems children may be experiencing. For example, a child had a fever and was out one day. When she came back, we read a story about a bear that had a fever and we related the book to her experience."*

*"We use books that show different ethnicities, mostly books that kids seem to like."*

*"The children love the book called Many Shades of People."*





## Program Effectiveness

Beyond the frequency of comments and direct experiences supportive of teachers actual use of the classroom practices learned, what is the overall value added by Motherhead and the LINKS training program to child care centers in Wake County? In other words, how do we know if the training program is effective in actually shaping teachers' knowledge, skills, and professional orientation supportive of literacy development and children's print engagement? We know this not only by the quality (and frequency) of responses provided by teachers, but also by their respective center directors' assessment of the program's impact. We also know that teachers (and center directors) agree and value the training used by Motherhead.

When asked specifically about the impact of Motherhead's training/coaching for classroom interactions supportive of children's language development and maintenance of a literacy-rich classroom environment, teachers overwhelmingly responded that they were now more fluent in storytelling, understood the logic of stories, and valued the necessity for reading books in their entirety. In the words of one teacher, as a result of the program, "I see the relationship between the beginning and end of the story."

Teachers also reported having more "enthusiasm" when they read books with children and now "take greater care in asking children questions." Others reported greater use in "extending the story to different areas" and the importance of "making the story come alive." Teachers also reported that children were now finding "books to read" within the classroom and "selecting their own books." Teachers also learned to "reinforce learning" and how to use the book in its entirety as a teaching tool.

In short, as a result of the program, teachers in Wake County's child care centers (a) are more dramatic in their reading of books, (b) incorporate more books in their classes, and (c) relate the books to themes, not just in circle time. In other words, teachers now regularly make books accessible to children and reported leaving books out "throughout the day" so that "children can use [them] when they want to."

*"The training helps me think of things in a different way and keeps me on track with what I should be doing for the children. I let the children touch the book."*

*"Every time I meet with Motherhead, I learn things that I didn't know."*

*"Before Motherhead, I wasn't using props or using open-ended questions. Now I use more enthusiasm when I read. I also re-read the book with children in a group or individually. We take the full value of the book and extend it to songs and beyond the one time setting."*

*"Motherhead has been helpful to open up language. The training helps me think of things in a different way and keeps me on track with what I should be doing for the children. I let the children touch the book."*

*"I have learned to make the story my own story, by tailoring the story to fit the child's attention level."*

*"I learned to focus on making the story come alive. Lot of activities; children go get books to read; select their own books."*

*"I never thought the author or illustrator was important. [Now] I use it all... the front of book, back, spine and its function."*

However, while there is clearly greater attentiveness to maintaining a literacy-rich classroom environment, using props, and incorporating playfulness during story-telling, still more is needed to support a fully functioning literacy-rich learning environment. For example, teachers can increase the level of activities by moving beyond the “reading nook” to infuse books in other classroom centers (e.g., placing animal books in the science center and books in dramatic play area).

### **Center Director Views**

When center directors were asked about observable changes they saw in the literacy practices of staff since the LINKS program was implemented using the Motherhead approach, many noted that they saw richer reading experiences among co-teachers in their work with children, more use of open-ended questions, better use of vocabulary lists, and increased attentiveness among children. Overall, center directors saw more story-time reading in the classes and “greater use of reading to children where the teacher lets child[ren] participate in story.” As one center director noted, “Thank you. Thank you Motherhead!” Another commented that “one child left the program reading and [is] able to read to others.”

When asked about the materials and books directors make available to teachers, most commented that books are on “display in classroom” and that the “office rotates the books.” Other comments included that “teachers have books, cds, videos, and toys available to them in the center” and that “everyone gets extra materials.” However, while center directors appear to understand the need to have even more books and resources accessible for teachers’ use, most expressed limited interaction with teachers to support their effective implementation of the training content and use of the curriculum and materials provided through the LINKS project. Most commented that they “don’t have to encourage [teachers]” given that they are “motivated to implement [the program] themselves.” Still, our experience (and the literature) supports using effective modeling of the practices during implementation in order to achieve results and maintain program fidelity. The involvement of center directors also reinforces the relevance of using the practices and value of doing so for student learning. Further, modeling and more focused support also help sustain the use of the practices and avoid older, non-supportive habits from re-emerging when working with children.

Center directors reported that it was difficult to find time to monitor classrooms; they were nonetheless encouraged that teachers were largely self-sufficient when “incorporating literacy into the curriculum.” Other than scheduling the initial training, which directors reported successfully accomplishing, most did not perceive any challenges to implementing the



*“We have the books around in a reading area where children can pick them up and sit in a quiet area to read a story with the teacher or alone. Children have the choice of books and they pick the same ones over and over.”*

*“We now have books and cds that we can use with the children.”*



*“Teachers are better able to hold kids’ attention.”*


*“Co-teachers...now...share books and lessons. Teachers do more reading to children.”*

*We have a library set up with the additional set of books, which the teachers can use”*

*“No strategies necessary. Trained teachers jump right in to help new teachers that are not trained. [I] try to send messages over the intercom system reminding teachers about themes and books.”*

*“When we were going through it, we had to work out a schedule for the teachers and trainer. We worked it out...Kids love to read the books. Kids want to read [them] over and over. We worked out the schedule.”*



project and reported only minor concerns with distractive behavior during story-time. In this case, directors wanted teachers to respond effectively to distractions so that they could “share the story” in a meaningful way. Overall, center directors did not believe any strategies were necessary to address challenges given that these were viewed as virtually non-existent. 

## Summary

The assessment of teachers’ classroom practices using the Motherhead applications learned during their LINKS training program revealed salient understanding and use of literacy practices known to be effective in creating a literacy-rich environment. Further, the analysis of teachers’ conversations and interactions with students, coupled with the observable changes noted by center directors, revealed worthwhile, meaningful results and productive classroom performance among teachers supportive of students’ literacy development and engagement with print material. The preponderance of teachers voiced consistency in the application of key concepts and practices experienced during the program each time they engaged children during story-time; this was further supported by center directors. Of particular saliency were teachers’ use of open-ended questions, props, and other practices known to be successful in creating a warm, inviting classroom conducive to learning.

We conclude that the impact of the LINKS program on classroom teachers’ literacy practices was constructive, positive, and useful for students regardless of background and previous literacy exposure. Nonetheless, greater attentiveness might be required to reinforce more complex practices, such as children’s literacy engagement in home environments. Further training in this area might be useful to increase teachers’ comfort levels in pursuing these practices. Additional support, such as monitoring, modeling, and reinforcing concepts among center directors might be helpful, along with assistance provided in the design of children’s literacy and learning spaces. Although diversity and selectivity were well attended to by teachers, additional assistance might be required to facilitate teachers’ design of spaces beyond traditional reading nooks; for example, versatility in the use of books in learning centers. Overall, however, the project was highly successful in meeting its goal supportive of children’s learning and literacy. 