Dear C&C Families,

This is our latest edition of Currents, our newsletter that explores key City and Country practices and policies in depth and puts them in writing for our families. We’re continuing this practice with our Winter 2012 issue of Currents on the Literacy Program in the Lower School.

Reading is a complex, life-long process. Children learn to read and write at different rates and in various ways, so our approach to the development of literacy skills at City and Country is multifaceted and individualized. Reading and writing are integrated into all aspects of our curriculum, as well as taught separately in their own right. As children’s literacy skills grow, we adopt an increasingly formal approach that focuses on comprehension, while systematically teaching phonics, sight words and decoding strategies. Our focus in this issue of Currents is on describing our approach to literacy and the direct instruction methods used in the VIs and VIlS.

At C&C, our goal is for children to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences clearly and effectively, and we work to ensure that our students read with fluency, understanding and life-long pleasure.

If you have any comments about our Literacy Program or this issue of Currents, please feel free to speak with me.

Sincerely,

Kate Turley
Principal
I once asked one of our VIs what she wished to learn during the year. With no hesitation she responded, “I want to learn to read. Everyone in my family can and I’ve been waiting for that moment for a very long time.” It was so interesting to me that she viewed it as a “moment,” perhaps a magic moment.

In fact it was once thought that learning to read happened at around age 6 and as a child grew she simply became a better reader. Now we see the process of literacy as ongoing throughout life and that we are all becoming more literate—our thinking and understanding of our world is informed by our various reading practices, even if we already “know how to read.” This is a value we try to instill in our children wherever they are in the reading process. It is also why our program is designed to meet the needs of a wide range of readers, because simply knowing how to decode is only one piece of literacy.

Priscilla Vail, a talented teacher and learning specialist, wrote about the structure and texture of language. She talked about how the texture and structure work in a symbiotic, interdependent relationship. Each needs the other and together they work for a common purpose, an alliance for literacy.

Structure refers to the nuts and bolts used in assembling or decoding written language. Texture refers to the rich weave of experience that gives language its color, intensity, rhythm and beauty. In our program we provide texture throughout the day with a rich social studies program, discussions, reading stories to children, creating charts that are a part of the fabric of life in the classroom, trips, experiential writing and bookmaking, and joint problem solving. In addition, we provide structure, the nuts and bolts. This takes place in skills groups that focus on phonics, decoding, sight words and other important strategies, and meet four or five times per week in the VIIs. Structure alone would be limiting. Texture alone would be flimsy. In essence, we create an environment that fosters literacy.

—Nancy Vascellaro, Lower School Learning Specialist

The C&C Literacy Program Approach

- We teach children to read for meaning, not simply decoding. This is why we are careful to teach reading when children are both most ready to be successful at decoding, and when they are most ready to understand what they are reading.
- We use approaches to reading that research shows are most effective: strategies for decoding, reading for meaning (often in content-rich social studies contexts), ample discussion and reflection, and regular time set aside for reading for pleasure.
- Reading is not a natural skill, hardwired in the brain, like walking and talking. It is a skill that must be taught explicitly to many children. Just as every child acquires any new skill (knitting, riding a bike, learning multiplication tables) in his/her own style and pace, children learn to read at various ages and develop all of the elements of literacy in an individual fashion. At C&C, we make sure that individual path leads to full literacy—decoding, comprehension, and a lifelong passion for reading for inquiry and pleasure.

*See list of resources on page 10.
Lower School Literacy at C&C: Snapshot

Reading Foundations
In the earliest years, the Literacy Program focuses on the communication skills children need to express themselves. In the process of communicating with others, the children increase their vocabularies and their sentences become more complex. As their facility with language becomes more sophisticated, they are able to experience the satisfaction of the give-and-take of conversations. The need to communicate leads children to recognize that letters make up words and that words express ideas. From this recognition comes the eagerness to practice the decoding skills necessary for becoming an independent reader. As visual and sound-letter relationships develop, City and Country children are introduced to the written language through a mix of phonics instruction and experiential reading and writing inspired by trips, block work, and other everyday activities.

Beginning in the VIs, children are given formal direct instruction in reading, in both large- and small-group settings so that phonemic awareness, decoding, and comprehension skills may be individually developed. When the children reach the VIIIs, they begin to spend a half-hour each day reading for pleasure in the Library—a School tradition that continues through the XIIIs.

Although direct reading instruction occurs each day in the VIs and VIIIs, the art of reading is woven throughout the day, as children review their daily schedules, follow recipes, and make signs for their block work. Teachers read aloud to their groups daily—fact, fiction, and poetry—selecting from the wide range of books for research and reading found on the classroom shelves. Long before the children are able to decode the complex symbols that make up words, they develop a rich appreciation for books and an enjoyment of literature.

Writing
As the children begin to express themselves on paper, their drawings become the basis for stories that are often recorded by teachers through dictation. Beginning in the Vs, children devote time each week to creative story writing and sharing. They also begin to label their block buildings with handwritten signs and are increasingly able on their own to read the research books they borrow from the Library.

Throughout their school experience, children are encouraged to perceive themselves as writers, as people who have something to say. We support them as they develop their personal voice, whether they are reflecting in a journal, constructing an argument for an essay, or crafting a poem. The older children are expected to write in many genres, in correct and complex sentences, and eventually prepare position papers, theses, and literary publications. Most of all, children at City and Country
School love to write because writing is about ideas—their ideas. Starting in the Vs, children practice their handwriting through the multi-sensory program, “Handwriting Without Tears.”

Teaching Practices
Teaching strategies are tailored to the children each year, and discussed and revisited by the teachers and specialists throughout the year. We draw on successful practices and utilize them to meet the needs of the specific children learning in small groups. At C&C, social studies is strongly emphasized as the ideal context for learning, and our schedule reflects this focus. Therefore, direct instruction in reading and writing is efficient and impactful. Four or five times weekly for 30 minutes, in the VIs and VIIIs, children are instructed in and practice phonics, sight words, and independent reading. The children read aloud to teachers who respond and guide them.

A list of resources on page 10 highlights some of the experts in literacy instruction who inform our practice.
Literacy at C&C: In Detail

IIs-IVs: Talking, Listening, Symbols, Stories, Songs

TEXTURE WITH INCREASING EXPOSURE TO STRUCTURE

In the IIs-IVs, the Literacy Program includes increasingly complex texture as well as familiarity with the basics of structure: alphabet, print conventions, small-motor development.

Young children use language for a wide variety of purposes—to ask questions, share information, make comments, express emotions and solve conflicts. Also, children at this age simply play with language and sounds. In the IIs, language is developed through the children’s daily engagement with the materials and their many interactions with each other and teachers, including songs, word play, and books read aloud.

IIs and IVs use their expanding language to communicate throughout the school day. In the daily social interactions of the classroom, children become increasingly aware of the need to express their needs and desires verbally, and to be understood by others. In the process of communicating with others, vocabulary increases and sentences become more complex. An exciting progression of language development occurs as children experience the satisfactions of the give-and-take of conversations, resolving conflicts and communicating their needs and having them met. The adults in the classroom consistently model the language associated with these exchanges. The IIs and IVs programs and materials offer multiple opportunities for strengthening and enriching verbal skills as children interact, engage in dramatic play, sing songs, listen to stories, interact with books, and relate experiences.

IVs’ language and literacy development is further supported through books. Children are read to daily from picture books and, during rest, chapter books are read aloud. Exposure to poetry, fiction, non-fiction and rhymes make for a balanced and varied literacy experience. When working with paper and crayons, some children begin to practice writing words and letters. Graphs, charts, trip books, inter-school mail, letter writing and lists in the classroom help children to see the practical purposes of print and many are inspired to make their own attempts at writing. Children at this age also begin to enjoy dictating stories to teachers; however, the range of skills and interests can vary widely. To facilitate this process, letter, sound and language games that are a part of the IVs program serve to expose children to letter-sound relationships and phonemic awareness.

STRUCTURE refers to the nuts and bolts used in assembling or decoding written language. TEXTURE refers to the rich weave of experience that gives language its color, intensity, rhythm and beauty.
Literacy experiences are woven throughout the Vs program over the course of the year. Children learn to use environmental print as a resource/model for writing signs for block buildings, making lists and creating their own story texts with words and drawn pictures. Because children’s skills develop at different rates, some children will work independently using sound spelling, others combine dictation to a teacher with some sound-spelled words. Vs are guided toward sound spelling over the course of the year to support independent work. A systematic study of the alphabet supports the children’s understanding of letters and the sounds they make. Children are read to daily from picture books and, during rest, chapter books are read aloud. Exposure to poetry, fiction and non-fiction offers a balanced and varied literacy experience. The development of literacy skills is supported in additional ways including language arts games, beginning reader books, creation of group books, and the children’s active participation in the creation and use of charts (for block work, recipes, jobs and the daily schedule). Children practice the recognition and formation of uppercase letters as well as the identification of initial consonant sounds and their corresponding letter. Our goal is to provide this age group with a challenging, yet not intimidating foundation in literacy.
VIs and VIs: Decoding, Comprehension, Reading for Pleasure

STRUCTURE WITHOUT SACRIFICING TEXTURE

**VIs**
The VIs literacy program focuses on strengthening alphabetic confidence and phonemic awareness in order to build a solid base of early reading and writing skills. In the VIs program, literacy is integrated throughout the curriculum using literature, charts, discussion, experiential writing and games. In addition, there are times each day devoted specifically to direct instruction in reading and writing.

In the VIs we plan a rich experiential program that builds on the children’s previous work in the Lower School. With the overarching goal of creating children who love reading and comprehend at a high level, we offer experiences and teach skills that support their emerging reading. Three strands of direct instruction in reading are added to our Literacy Program: formal and systematic introduction of phonics, word study, and independent reading of short books.

The Teachers and Learning Specialists spend the first weeks of school observing and informally assessing children so that they can carefully place them in groups for individualized instruction. These groups meet four times per week for 30 minutes. Small groups allow teachers to have more immediate contact with individuals and for children to feel comfortable practicing the skills they need to become capable readers. Teachers set realistic expectations for the children and help them move to their next level of competence.

**Phonics:** Each group starts at an appropriate point and continues systematically along the phonics sequence: initial consonants, short vowels, blends (fl, br, cr, st, etc.), digraphs (ch, sh, etc.), long vowels, syllabication.

**Word Study:** We systematically teach sight words, choosing words both from the children’s repeated errors and from basic lists of common words. Teachers introduce these words in the full group and reinforce in the small groups.

**Independent Reading:** Time is allotted throughout the week for children to read leveled books. We teach the many strategies needed to be an effective reader through independent reading and teacher feedback. Each classroom has a large selection of books organized by reading level. We level for them to read independently, and books are stored in children’s individual book bags. We carefully monitor each child’s reading. On a weekly basis, each child will choose a book to read aloud as the teacher keeps an ongoing record of progress in a notebook, noting miscues, error patterns and ability to comprehend. We provide verbal feedback and give the child a specific skill to focus on during the week. We design lessons to teach specific strategies based on the needs within the group.

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The VIIs literacy program focuses on strengthening reading, writing and communication skills so that children become confident independent readers, writers, speakers and listeners. The transition into the VIIs builds on the structure of the VIIs groups. We assess the VIIs carefully during the first two weeks of school. The learning specialist and classroom teachers read with each child before placing children into small groups. The small size of these groups allows us to regularly assess the children’s needs and provide instruction based on individual learning styles. The major components of the reading groups are: comprehension through discussion, reading strategies, the mastery of phonics skills, and book selection.

Greater attention is given to comprehension and practicing strategies such as stopping if a word or story line doesn’t make sense, reading ahead, rereading and looking at pictures. These skills are taught in all of the reading groups. VIIs use book bags to store their independent reading books, allowing them to focus on a book for an extended period of time. While children read independently, the teacher conferences with individuals to assess their reading and to provide individual instruction. At the end of each conference, teachers make a note of one concept they have discussed. The child is expected to read this note as a reminder before beginning to read in the following days.

Starting in January, all VIIs have the opportunity to go to the Library on a regular basis. While in the Library, children learn to select books that are both interesting to them and at an appropriate reading level. They select a book, check it out and read quietly. The Librarian reads with each child, conferences and keeps detailed notes of progress. The Librarian carefully monitors comprehension as he discusses the book with a child.

Teachers meet weekly with the learning specialists to review the progress of the children, consider any possible shifts of children between groups, share teaching strategies and plan for next steps.
Writing in the VIs and VIIIs

In both the VIs and the VIIIs, we have a structured Writer’s Workshop twice weekly. Each session includes:

- A short lesson where a teacher models a specific skill.
- Time for children to write independently.
- Time for teachers to meet briefly with individual children.
- Time for the sharing of work.

Our initial focus is on story. We want children to tell a sequential story or event and begin to document it in writing. Initially, our feedback is directed at the content of their story. We are as accepting of picture stories as we are of written words. We then begin to incorporate mechanics of writing and move each child forward based on his or her level of ability.

Mechanics that are reinforced in the VIs are: appropriate use of upper and lower case, spacing, punctuation at the end of a sentence, left to right progression and use of the margin. VIIIs begin to incorporate paragraphs and a greater use of punctuation including commas and quotation marks. The editing process begins in the VIs and continues on a more regular basis in the VIIIs.

The VIIIs will have many opportunities to select a piece of writing, edit for spelling, capitalization and punctuation errors and “publish” a final draft. Each writing session ends with a time to share and receive constructive feedback from Group members.

Writing is also developed through poetry, journals, structured writing topics, and is an integral part of other curriculum areas such as social studies, science and math. This multi-faceted approach enables children to use their developing skills throughout the day.
At City and Country, we anticipate and appreciate our students’ wide range of language abilities. Our teachers and learning specialists get to know each child’s learning style and needs through assessment and observation methods such as:

- **School Reports** are sent home to parents three times a year (IVs and older), detailing the School’s expectations for their child, and their child’s progress to date
- **Parent-Teacher Conferences** give teachers and parents a chance to discuss their children’s progress and set goals for their children going forward
- **In-Class Observation** is frequently recorded in a notebook on the progress of each individual child by their teacher, as well as in their smaller reading groups

- **Screening**: Mid-year in the Vs, the learning specialist administers a screening test to each child individually, and then reports the results to the child’s teacher and parents. The screening usually serves to confirm what we already know about the children as learners, and it is an important tool for ensuring that children are where they need to be academically. In the VIs and VIIIs, teachers and learning specialists informally assess children throughout the year to tailor instruction.
- **Small group work**: In the VIs and VIIIs teachers and learning specialists work closely with students in small groups, giving the teachers the opportunity to know each reader and writer intimately and carefully monitor their progress.

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**What is a Learning Specialist?**

A learning specialist is a trained professional in special education and literacy. The learning specialists at City and Country are available to:

- conduct classroom observations and student screenings
- report and discuss students’ individual needs with teachers and parents
- provide small group remediation
- provide reading resources for teachers and parents
- suggest outside referrals for extra student support

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At City and Country, we anticipate and appreciate our students’ wide range of language abilities.
As young children explore their print-rich environment, they build the foundations for learning to read and write. Their language is developing rapidly in these early years. Literacy is a language-based process. It is dependent on children’s ability to express themselves verbally and to listen to others.

Parents, family members and caregivers can support their preschooler’s literacy development in many ways.
- Talk with your children, engage them in conversation, show interest in what they are saying.
- Encourage children to recount experiences and describe ideas and events that are important to them.
- Sing songs together.

In children’s literature, children experience the formal, elaborated syntax of written language that sets a model for their own speech. The pleasure they derive from stories read aloud fosters a love of reading. We are fortunate to have a wealth of children’s literature available. Regular family trips to the library become important rituals.
- Read and tell stories to your child from a very young age.
- Well-timed questions that do not distract from the rhythm of a good tale can also enhance the exchange and build thinking skills along the way: “I wonder what will happen next?” “Do you really think he could do that?” and “What do you see in this picture?” are some genuine questions that can enhance the experience of reading together.
- Model writing for pleasure.

The world children live in is print rich. We can alert children to the print that relates to them.
- Point out signs on the street, in stores and on buses, T-shirts, etc.
- Involve children in activities that include print: shopping lists, letter writing, card making.
- Provide an alphabet poster, magnet letters and an assortment of alphabet books.

As children get older and show more interest and mastery of the reading process, it is, of course, important to encourage and provide time to share in their growing skill. Yet it is crucial that the daily reading aloud of high quality literature be a mainstay of family life. Children need to know that as much as you celebrate and support their reading independence, they will not lose the precious moments of being read to by their parents.

**Resources**
The following books have informed our practice throughout the years:
- *... And With A Light Touch* by Carol Avery
- *Reading Begins at Home and Writing Begins at Home* by Marie Clay
- *Words Their Way* by Patricia Cunningham
- *Guided Reading* by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell
- *Overcoming Dyslexia* by Sally Shaywitz
- *Reading Without Nonsense and To Think* by Frank Smith
- *On Solid Ground and Comprehension from the Ground Up* by Sharon Taberski
- *Recipe for Reading* by Nina Traub