

Occasional Paper on Literacy in the Early Years

Literacy learning is a lifelong, complex and multi-layered mixture of experiences shaped by specific cultural practices. Young children's literacy learning is set within the context of meaningful experiences involving high quality interactions with their peers, parents and carers and other adults from birth. They need a broad literacy curriculum which meshes with their home experiences and builds upon these to enable them to feel free to take risks, gain confidence in their achievements and be treated as individuals in their journey to becoming literate.

This paper addresses young children's understanding and competence in communication, language and literacy. With the publication of the government's Early Years Foundation Stage document, this is an opportune time to examine the development of literacy from birth to five and to determine how communication and language are inextricably linked with literacy practices for carers and early years practitioners. To understand the holistic nature of young children's literacy learning, reference needs to be made to children's experiences at home and within their communities, prior to any pre-school provision. Home literacy practices are embedded in social interactions, which are shaped by the communities within which the children grow and develop. This is becoming an increasingly complex issue. Twenty-first century children's experiences of literacy are influenced by the changing digital communication landscape and these need to be taken into consideration. In terms of pedagogy, the publication of the Independent Review of Early Reading (generally known as the Rose Report) has significant implications for practitioners engaged in supporting young children's literacy development. This paper will review these issues and outline ways in which early years educators can support children's literacy development from their earliest years.

What communication, language and literacy means for children

It is through communication that children express their strengths and interests, and experiment with different ways of representing their understandings.

Babies know important things about language literally from the time they are born, and they learn a great deal about language before they ever say a word.

(Gopnik *et al.*, 1999:3)

There is now a considerable body of evidence that young babies are innate communicators, preferring to respond to their carers' faces, voices and touch rather than objects. Babies respond differently to some sounds and from an early age are able to distinguish sound patterns. They demonstrate preferences for their mother's voice and although not vocalized, have prototype 'conversations' and demonstrate turn-taking in terms of gaze and interaction with their carers. The social interactive nature of children's learning is present from the earliest stages of a child's development. Babies use their voices to make contact and to let people know what they need and how they feel, establishing their own identities and personalities through a range of sounds and non-verbal communication, such as body movements, facial expression, eye contact and hand gesture. When interacting with others, infants practise turn-taking through play and imitations and as language develops, young children learn about conversation, although non-verbal messages remain an important form of communication throughout life.

Communication is a key area of children's holistic development, enabling children to gain a sense of self by making sense of and participating in the different social and cultural worlds they encounter in their lives. To become skilful communicators, infants, toddlers and young children need to be with people who have meaning for them and with whom they have warm and loving relationships, such as their family or carers and, in a group situation, a key person they know and trust. Parents and immediate family members most easily understand their young children's communications and can often interpret for others. Communicating and being with others helps children to build social

Occasional Paper on Literacy in the Early Years

relationships, including friendship, empathy and sharing emotions. The ability to communicate helps children to participate more fully in society.

The development and use of communication, language and literacy are at the heart of young children's learning. All children learn best through activities and experiences that engage all the senses. For example, music, dance, rhymes and songs play a key role in language development and are important and enjoyable throughout the early years. Becoming a skilful communicator helps children to become competent learners, to grow in confidence, to exchange ideas with others and to begin to take responsibility for their own learning. As children develop speaking and listening skills, they build the foundations for literacy, for making sense of visual and verbal signs and ultimately for reading and writing. Children need lots of opportunities to interact with others as they develop these skills, and to use a wide variety of resources for expressing their understandings, including mark making, drawing, modelling, writing and reading. Learning to communicate is not just about learning language - it is about interacting effectively in the different social and cultural worlds children find themselves in. Mastering this art and becoming a skilful communicator develops both social and intellectual competence, helps children in all aspects of learning and helps them to become strong, happy and healthy.

Communication, language and literacy learning from 0 - 5: a complex tapestry of meaning-making?

A major task for children in the early years is developing their understanding and competence in communication, language and literacy. Children learn to communicate meaning in many ways, not just through words, but also through the different 'languages' of drawing, dancing, rhythm, drama images, body movement, facial expression and gaze direction. Practitioners must support children's learning and competence in non-verbal and verbal communication in contexts that are meaningful to children, and where there is a genuine reason to communicate. For example, practitioners should help children to develop their symbolic representation and creative thinking, their speaking and listening skills, share stories, songs and rhymes,

all of which help to lay the foundations for beginning to read and write. Practitioners must give children the confidence, opportunity, encouragement support and disposition to use and express their developing skills in a range of verbal and non-verbal 'languages', in a range of situations and for a range of purposes.

In order to develop good communication skills, it is important that there are firm foundations of active listening and the ability to speak clearly. As suggested by Harrett:

Effective oral communication is at the basis of our society and without this skill children are at a disadvantage. (Harrett, 2004:2)

Young children need time for shared, sustained talk, interactive conversations with parents, carers, other adults and peers and opportunities to develop active listening skills. In order to listen and attend rather than merely hear, young children need the opportunity to engage in authentic experiences situated within a supportive social context. Developing an environment created to nurture talk which supports children's ability to make choices in a wide variety of contexts is essential for practitioners. With reference to reading, children need to be able to talk about and respond to texts orally, expressing preferences and enjoying the tunes of narrative in order to enable them to develop phonological awareness and auditory discrimination within a supportive relationship with an adult. As Bayley and Featherstone (2003) illustrate, beat competency is an important factor in early stages of this development.

Children who speak English as an Additional Language need extensive opportunities for immersion in a rich linguistic and literacy environment in their first stages of acquisition of English. There are a number of principles that should underpin provision for bilingual children. The curriculum needs to offer extensive experiences to engage in hands-on activities which provide children with appropriate linguistic scaffolding. New concepts and targeted words need to be introduced in a range of ways, and, where possible, in their first language, enabling children to locate new understanding within previous knowledge (Issa & Öztürk, 2008). Children should be able to use their preferred language when engaging in activities with

Occasional Paper on Literacy in the Early Years

other speakers of their first language. Early years settings need to demonstrate that the linguistic heritages of children are valued through the provision of resources such as audio-stories, dual text books and through the use of bilingual wall displays. Links with the community need to be strong and the involvement of families in early years setting is central to the development of shared understandings between teacher and parents and carers (Kenner, 2000).

The importance of working in partnership with parents and carers

Children are competent learners and communicators from birth. Literacy learning in the early years is a collaborative process involving carers, practitioners and the child in a developmental continuum. Supportive, caring relationships are central to the child's life. To support the social and emotional aspects of learning, secure interpersonal relationships between children and adults are essential for the development of confident literacy skills, enabling children develop positive dispositions to use these as they experience their day-to-day lives. Parents have an important role as their child's first educators and practitioners should value and respect the knowledge and understanding they have of their child's literacy development. Parents need to be reassured that making time for speaking and listening and conversations with children form the basis for their children's literacy development. Telling, reading and responding to stories through play enable children to become familiar with the tunes of written language and support literacy development, as does the experience of a wide range of songs, nursery rhymes and action rhymes. Everyday literacy practices in the home also provide positive role models where reading and writing are demonstrated within real contexts for real purposes. Children's meaning-making in the home in the form of drawings, painting, playing with objects and mark making are all valid demonstrations of their developing ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings through a range of media.

The centrality of play in children's communication, language and literacy development

Recent government initiatives contain welcome messages with regard to the importance of play and children's learning. Play is the process by which children learn and make sense of their world and research indicates that it is through play that children demonstrate what they know and understand. Due to its fluid, ephemeral nature and lack of a fixed outcome, play can be problematic to research and define. However, there is evidence that babies have an innate need to communicate and be social beings (Trevarthen, 1992; Gopnik *et al.*, 1999). Babies and their carers engage in forms of reciprocal play. Playful communicative interactions are instigated by the infant in the form of gaze, gesture and language, and are scaffolded by parents and carers. Through play children learn about symbolic representation and this forms the foundation for learning the symbolic nature of language and later the written word. In role-play, children are able to engage in verbal and non-verbal communication as they incorporate into their play the literacy practices that they have experienced within their cultures. Within the context of play, children are free to take risks, and consider other possibilities of action. In play, children can construct their own creative challenges, which can enhance motivation and develop positive dispositions to learn. Literacy experiences embedded in play enable children to invent their own rules and weave their own developing understandings of the concepts and purposes of literacy within their cultures, including the interrelated strands of speaking and listening, reading and writing, which have meaning and are relevant to them .

Play within a rich, well-organised and resourced environment is a valuable aspect of the early years literacy curriculum. However, play alone will not be sufficient to develop progression and development in children's literacy learning. The role of adults in supporting, modelling and extending children's experiences is also important. This is not to suggest that adults should take over or direct children's play, but rather that through observation and professional expertise, they should seek to provide an environment that will support and extend development. For example,

Occasional Paper on Literacy in the Early Years

purposeful writing environments and 'events' provide dynamic play opportunities for encouraging literacy (Hall & Robinson, 1995).

The Rose Review of the Teaching of Early Reading - Challenge or opportunity?

The Rose Report offers the opportunity to focus on the importance of all aspects of speaking and listening and ensure that reading is part of "a broad and language rich curriculum" (Rose, 2006). This is an area that could easily be neglected as the focus moves to the specific area of phonics. What is crucial is that teachers and others working in early years settings have the knowledge to move from pedagogy into practice in the area of speaking and listening. Edgington discusses the use of phonics in teaching young children to read. She argues that:

No quick fix or single approach can work. We must continue listening to individual children and talking with them. (Edgington, 2006: 61)

Young children learn to be literate within meaningful social contexts. Formal decontextualised whole class teaching for young children is unlikely to be effective unless explicit links are made to the children's experiences with the big pictures of literacy rather than the isolated minutiae of formal word level learning.

Whilst young children need to have knowledge and understanding of the alphabetic principle of our writing system, the Rose Report appears to be unbalanced in favour of synthetic phonics and this might not be appropriate for all young children. Young children learn to read and write in many different ways, some with apparent ease and others needing substantial support. However, not all children learn to read through phonic instruction; there is a continuum in acquisition from those children who appear to make sense of reading very early on, almost independently, and those who need a great deal of support. Most importantly, we need to be clear about whether we are addressing *learning* to read with some agency on the child's part or being *taught* to read. It is possible that children may develop the skills of reading but lack the disposition to use them unless their reading experiences encourage autonomy, enthusiasm, achievement and a sense of enjoyment.

Implications for pedagogy into practice

The crucial role of the practitioner is to build upon children's prior learning within an environment which supports literacy. Providing an environment is not sufficient however, as the role of the practitioner also extends to supporting and scaffolding children's learning through sensitive intervention based on observations of their behaviour and play. Effective literacy learning is supported by modelling the processes of reading and writing in a reciprocal manner, which draws upon and extends the ways in which young children learn within their families and communities from birth. The introduction of prescriptive guidelines for practitioners on the teaching of reading runs contrary to the notion that speaking and listening, reading and writing are mutually supportive activities. The introduction of an exclusively top-down model of reading such as purely phonics-based instruction compartmentalises and decontextualises the children's learning. Rather than viewing reading as an orchestration of all available cues to establish meaning, a phonics only approach emphasises decoding skills, whilst failing to acknowledge the children's agency and their ability to build upon what they already know.

To give all children the best opportunities for effective development and learning in communication language and literacy, practitioners should give particular attention to:

- Planning an environment that is rich in signs, symbols, notices, numbers, words, rhymes, pictures, music and songs that take into account children's different interests, understandings and cultures.
- Providing opportunities for children to have easy access to resources and to initiate activities that enable them to develop their understandings of literacy and creative thinking. These resources include games that use numbers, counting, sounds and letters, poetry, fiction and non-fiction books, art materials and musical instruments, digital equipment, appropriate computer games, resources to stimulate imaginative play, equipment that enables children to express themselves creatively and to explore shape, colour, smell, patterns and quantities.

Occasional Paper on Literacy in the Early Years

- Activities which place an emphasis on child-initiated participation help children to build interpersonal and communicative skills and social responsibility.
- Giving opportunities for linking language with physical movement in action songs and rhymes, role play and practical experiences such as cooking and gardening.
- Showing sensitivity to the many ways that children express themselves non-verbally to encourage children to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings through a range of expressive forms, such as body movement, art, dance and songs.
- Awareness of children's different approaches to learning and different rates of development helps to provide more well-tuned opportunities for communication.
- Providing time and relaxed opportunities for children to develop spoken language through sustained conversations between children and adults, both one-to-one and in small groups. Adults should allow children time to initiate conversations, should respect their thinking time and silences and should help them develop the interaction. They should show particular awareness of, and sensitivity to, the needs of children learning English as an additional language, using their home language when appropriate and ensuring close teamwork between bilingual workers so that the children's development use of English and other languages support each other.
- Having realistic expectations of children's developing uses of language and responding to children sensitively, using rich language to help children develop vocabulary and linguistic structures whilst respecting that children learn in different ways and at different rates and that they may use home languages, local dialects and other forms of communication.
- Providing opportunities for children to see adults writing and for children to experiment with writing for themselves through making marks, personal writing symbols and conventional scripts from the children's home languages.
- Making it possible for children to build up relationships with a range of different adults and with children their own age, younger and older children, and children with special educational needs.
- Identifying as early as possible, and responding to, any signs of language delay or apparent communication difficulty, including seeking parental and professional support, ensuring children's hearing is monitored regularly, and providing information and support for parents; ensuring close teamwork with speech therapists and practitioners, where appropriate.
- Planning opportunities for all children to become aware of languages and writing systems other than English and communication systems such as signing and Braille and for children who use alternative communication systems to develop ways of recording and accessing texts to develop their skills in these methods.
- Providing time and opportunities for children to develop their phonological awareness through games, rhymes and language play in small group and individual teaching, when appropriate.

Digital literacies

From their earliest years children are surrounded by texts that combine images and words - on screen and on paper, in the home, in the street and in school. (QCA/UKLA, 2005)

Twenty-first century children are born into a digital communication landscape where a number of media forms increasingly compete with traditional print and picture-based texts for children's attention. In addition to enjoying traditional print-based texts and story activities through reading and imaginative play, very young children can use mobile phones to communicate, can access their favourite children's websites via the internet, and are able to log on to school websites to share their work and engage with school-sanctioned games along with their family at home. These new technologies and the information that they provide are now so pervasive that they can be viewed as embedded into children's everyday lives and

Occasional Paper on Literacy in the Early Years

experiences (Carrington, 2006). This technological revolution is changing the way that very young children play, engage with texts, and communicate with their family, friends and educators, at home and in educational settings. It has been noted that through this process, children are developing increased agency as communicators who can use a wide range of modes and media (Bearne, 2005; Carrington, 2005; Marsh *et al.*, 2005).

In addition, definitions of what counts as 'text' continue to expand, as accessible digital technologies promote children's production of multimodal and image-driven texts at home and in educational settings. The QCA and UKLA have recently published guidance on teaching and assessing multimodal texts created on paper and screen (2004; 2005b). In addition, the recent QCA (2005a) English 21 recommendations recognize the proliferation of screen and print-based texts in children's experiences. These documents aim to raise the profile of children's multimodal communication and give value to texts that may be dominated by image, or composed on screen. It is essential that teachers and others working in early years settings are aware of children's immersion in new literacies and communication technologies, and value their contribution to very young children's development as readers, writers and communicators in a range of contexts.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that young children's engagement in literacy as a social practice begins from birth and that the first few years of development are crucial in forming the building blocks which will lead to competence and confidence in communicative practices throughout their lives. It is important for early years educators to form strong partnerships with parents, carers and other professionals in order to develop collaborative strategies for supporting and extending children's literacy development. In addition, emphasis needs to be placed on offering children a rich and varied curriculum that helps them to make meaning using a wide range of modes and media, with opportunities to engage in individual and group activities as appropriate. In this way, the earliest years of literacy learning can be relevant, enjoyable and exciting for children and can provide a solid foundation for future development.

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Occasional Paper on Literacy in the Early Years

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