

Developing children's emergent literacy

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Introduction

This paper reviews recent research on oral language, reading aloud and print awareness in relation to children's foundational knowledge. The paper then argues that content within teaching and subject knowledge of teachers requires more attention in order to extend children's learning in early childhood settings. The literature is reviewed through two curriculum frameworks and two curriculum approaches. Implications for early childhood practice are then drawn.

The nature of children's foundational knowledge

The foundational knowledge and understanding of language for children is laid in the years before children come to pre-school (Bowman & Tremain, 2004). This knowledge begins in infancy and continues to grow along with the child. The sociocultural background is important, because for learning to take place within each individual child, it requires the learner to develop meaningful relationships and interactions with others. The findings of Pullen & Justice, (2003) and Speaker, Taylor, & Kamen, (2004) indicate that children acquire language skills in social contexts, through their interactions with others such as peers, teachers and parents. Consequently the sociocultural background of each child plays a major part in their approach to understanding literacy practices.

Te Whaariki reflects and supports these language and learning experiences, which are developed around the sociocultural framework, where literacy is both socially constructed and culturally specific (Ministry of Education, 1996). However, unlike the holistic approach of Te Whaariki, there is a striking disparity in the approach of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993). This disparity is based on a constructionist theory where the learner constructs knowledge from the world and their environment without necessarily acknowledging the social component.

Although this document ties language and literacy together, the approach is more “structured in its requirements” (Carpenter, 2001 p.114), marked with distinctive structures of assessment.

In view of the fact that important literacy skills begin in infancy, the language environment of the home makes an important contribution to children’s development. The amount of speech that children hear from their parents is particularly important (Wood, 1998 as cited in Johnson, 2003). Justice (2004) concurs, and suggests that a child’s potential for learning is realized in interaction with more knowledgeable others. This then increases their language skills, vocabulary and knowledge about the world.

However, it is well recognized that upon entering early childhood centres, the foundational knowledge of children varies dramatically. This highlights the need for strong connection and consistency in the partnership with families, to support a two-way sharing of knowledge and understanding.

Oral language

It is well documented that young children are active participants and naturally engage in their acquisition of oral language (Speaker, Taylor, & Kamen, 2004; Pullen & Justice, 2003; Justice, 2004; Hansen, 2004). An aspect of this is when children can understand and follow simple oral instructions. This oral language development begins in infancy when adults respond to infants babbling. In language rich environments children are subject to high quality oral input from their peers and others (Justice, 2004).

Studies carried out by Roth, Speece & Cooper (2002) and Gambrell (2004) indicate that there is a growing recognition of the significance of vocabulary knowledge and print awareness as important predictors of beginning reading. Pullen & Justice (2003) confirm these findings, and conclude that if any children entering early childhood environments are showing premature difficulties with the development of oral language, these children are then more likely to experience literacy problems.

A key feature of developing oral language in young children is storytelling, that is, children retelling tales which are personal stories constructed by the children from a direct experience that has occurred to them. It is recognized that most children love to share personal information about themselves. During this period, children can engage in conversations with adults and also have multiple exchanges with others. In a recent study Speaker et al. (2004) observed that the use of storytelling with young children enhanced children's oral language. Not only does this increase the children's oral language, but it is a bridge to emergent literacy, through improving listening skills and increasing the child's ability to organize thoughts. However, it is critical for a child's literacy development that teachers encourage children in acts of storytelling and relaying aspects of their lives.

Reading aloud

A further opportunity to develop oral language in children is the intimate time between an adult and a child through storybook reading. Furthermore, children's responses to books can be an emotional outlet when children can identify with the characters in the story.

Research shows that there is far more to just 'reading' a book. The quality of the book and time involved isn't as important as developing meaningful conversations (Hansen, 2004). Bowman and Tremain (2004) also point out that children actually need adult instruction in the form of support and guidance to become confident in literacy. When reading children initially point to and label pictures in a book and generally their questions tend to centre on the pictures in the book. Subsequently they read a story through the illustration, and then finally, children tell the story using the language of the book. Consequently if children are ever to make a connection between meaning and print, there needs to be a co-constructed time between the adult and child. This interactive process is where the adult attempts to involve the children in the story through questioning. This generally begins with starting with what the child knows.

Despite our new knowledge of the power of scaffolding (Pullen & Justice (2003), acquiring comprehension of the text continues to remain a challenge for children (Beck & McKeown (2001).

Print awareness

Through the interactions with the adults in their lives, young children begin to develop the concepts of print awareness. This begins at a very early age when adults read stories aloud to children. Infants as young as eight months old begin to handle books, turn pages and babble in a 'reading-like' manner (Pullen & Justice, 2003). As a result, it's in the preschool years that children discover print conveys meaning.

However the findings of Nel (2004) are of particular concern regarding parents' attitudes towards their children's literacy. She found that if children are pushed into formal reading instruction by the parents it can lead to emotional instabilities and put a child at risk of psychological damage. Seemingly the children are usually not interested and only perform to please the parents. Consequently, it is critical that children gain important prerequisites such as print awareness, and structure of oral and written language, through mostly participating in informal literacy events (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002, cited in Justice, 2004). As a result, this has subsequent implications for teaching practice.

A growing body of data suggests that children's literacy skills and understandings are greatly encouraged through dramatic play. Rich home and centre experiences for the children become the building blocks for dramatic play. In these socially constructed settings, children act out and repeat the words and actions of others, and by integrating literacy materials into the play environment, purposeful writing activities are encouraged (Vukelich, 1993; Pullen & Justice, 2003; Nel, 2000). Vukelich's (1993) study also discovered that through adding realistic props and tools to these contexts, many more children's experiences with writing were observed, such as children drawing, scribbling and 'reading' their marks by attributing meaning to them through their talk and action.

The professional knowledge teachers need

The role of the teacher in early literacy instruction is to teach basic skills, and to provide a rich, meaningful, engaging environment supported by appropriate teaching practices. The most important element in developing reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, is an adult who stimulates a child's interest, scaffolds experiences,

and responds to a child's earnest attempt to learn a skill. Therefore teachers must make choices about what content to teach and which dispositions to encourage.

In order to extend children's learning in the area of language, connection with the home is essential. Developing partnerships with parents supports a two-way sharing of knowledge and experiences from home, which then allows teachers to build on what is already known. Research supports Te Whaariki's Goal *Belonging*, which allows children to build on literacy practices already occurring in families (Ministry of Education, 1996). Teachers can then support children in their cultural and social home literacy experiences, through sharing their favourite stories, books, and songs within the centre. This is in direct contrast to the approach in the New Zealand curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993) where parents are only seen at assessment time and otherwise there is little encouragement to be involved in any learning.

One of the most effective methods to use when teaching young children, is to begin with what they know. Teachers who know their children well can enhance literacy learning opportunities, through supporting the child's strengths, needs and interests. This observation is supported by Nel (2000), who states that opportunities for child-initiated literacy events are maximised in a free-play setting, where children can begin to build on their known experiences. This view is further supported by Te Whaariki which states that during play, children are encouraged to use previous experience to build upon (Ministry of Education, 1996). Furthermore it is the teacher's role to provide scaffolding which extends and enriches children's play, yet at the same time teaching important literary skills.

However teacher's who only use language to direct, instruct and control will not help children develop complex emergent language skills such as oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. The findings of Pullen and Justice (2003) suggest that there is no evidence to show the benefit of language drills within this style of teaching.

Subject knowledge

Teacher's belief of the importance of subject knowledge has a direct impact on the curriculum that is offered to the children. There is no doubt that teachers need subject knowledge to extend children's learning. They need to have a thorough and deep understanding of the subject matter, for without this knowledge the teachers are not able to ask the right questions, anticipate pitfalls or develop a repertoire that will extend children's learning in the area of language.

Consequently for the child to be fully extended in this area of literature, it is critical that the teacher has a professional knowledge of their subject. Knowing that teachers need to know about language, demands that the issue of qualifications in early childhood be addressed. Currently this issue of teacher qualifications in early childhood is being addressed through the government's latest policies which require all teachers working in early childhood be fully qualified by 2012.

Reading aloud

This question of subject knowledge is particularly evident in the area of read-aloud experiences. Reading aloud has been practised for many years both at home and at school. Reading aloud permits the teacher the opportunity to create positive social interactions and demonstrate the joy of reading. Since we know that children are active participants in the acquisition of language, these experiences for both the adult and the child should have important and equal roles during the interaction. Although reading aloud is not a difficult task to perform, taking advantage of this experience to develop children's literacy is however complex and demanding.

It is the teacher's responsibility to encourage the child to take a collaborative approach and an active role in shared reading. In a recent survey (Huffman, Roser, & Battle, 1993 as cited in Hansen, 2004) found that while teachers planned for read aloud time, the frequency and quality time of reading aloud, varied. Hansen (2004) drew on Rosemary and Roskos (2002) to suggest that, even when reading aloud was scheduled for a regular time and quality literature was selected, it was the meaningful conversation following the story which encouraged and promoted literacy development.

Research has shown that background knowledge is critical when understanding text. However, supporting children's comprehension is more difficult than first thought (Beck & Keown, 2001). Children tend to ignore the text information and respond to the pictures to explore the meaning. The challenge then for teachers is to follow up on children's initial responses through creating thoughtful open-ended questions to support their construction of meaning. Therefore the effectiveness of the read aloud time and children's literacy development, to some extent depends on the professional knowledge of the teacher.

Group size is another factor that influences children's comprehension of text, as shown in a study by (Hansen, 2004). Children, who were the quietest in large group discussions, were most often the most vocal in small group dialogue which gave more opportunity for their voices to be heard.

Children's awareness of phonology and print

It is critical for teachers to have professional knowledge concerning phonological awareness as a further emergent language skill. Research has shown that phonology plays a critical role in the acquisition of reading. Given what is known about the importance of phonological awareness Pullen & Justice (2003); Hansen (2004); Bowman & Treiman, (2004); Gambrell (2004); it would appear that everyday activities play an important role in acquiring these skills. Through the teachers having some understanding of these concepts, the children are then encouraged to play with and explore the sounds of language and of spoken words through, action rhymes, poetry, songs, and finger plays.

The two main ways to support the development of print awareness in young children are reading aloud to children and print enriched play. Even in the first few years of life, children come into contact with print in the form of signs, labels, and television. It is recognised that the display of print in the context of which it occurs, plays an important role in developing young children's awareness of print e.g. 'M' in McDonalds.

On the other hand, children's acquisition of an understanding of the more functional and mechanical aspects of texts, such as, holding a book, comes through adults modelling. It is Vygotsky who suggests that this learning occurs under adult guidance or in collaboration with peers, where the adult scaffolds the child to the next level of learning (Vukelich, 1993).

Furthermore, play exposes children to valuable print experiences which also provide an essential environment for literacy. Research has shown that if both props and adults are introduced into dramatic play then the level of print awareness increases (Pullen & Justice, 2003). Cruikshank's, (2001) case study demonstrates this key concept that children can actually write sooner than previously thought. She has documented that children who are motivated and who are exposed to rich literacy environments, can develop the ability and mechanics of personal storytelling. However the challenge for teachers is to find activities to extend the children's imagination and then leave the control with the learner.

Therefore, ongoing learning through professional development and continual reflection on belief and practice are critical ingredients for providing quality teaching and learning experiences for children in language.

Assessment, planning, and evaluation

Language can be made more meaningful when it is integrated purposefully into the every day life of the early childhood environment. Nel, (2000) draws on the findings of Schickedanz, Chay, Gopin, Sheng, Song, & Wild, (1990), to suggest that when literacy events are meaningful, child-initiated and child-directed, there is a partnership quality to the child-adult relationship.

Child-initiated verses teacher-directed

These child-initiated literacy approaches begin with children's strengths and interests portraying what is observed and expressed, not what adults think it should be. This then enables children to build on their prior knowledge and extends them onto new concepts. This is in direct contrast to the less favourable environment of the structured, goal orientated, and teacher-directed nature of the school setting. The latter approach is limiting in the sense that children are only offered that which is deemed to

be appropriate by the teacher. Further research (Elkind, 1986 & Miller, 1994 cited in Nel 2000; Pullen & Justice, 2003) suggests that structured lessons are inappropriate for preschoolers and instead advocates that young children learn best when they can choose their own activities. Through its holistic approach to language, Te Whaariki has a similar philosophy and stays away from the constricted 'drill' approach to literacy (Ministry of Education, 1996) whereas learning is more prescriptive in Ministry of Education (1993), and is followed through principles and objectives.

Hence child-initiated, rather than teacher-directed play, provides for an informal opportunity intended for supporting children's literacy learning, through children engaging at their own level in ways that are meaningful to them. This allows for the differing levels of literacy development that children come with, through its open ended nature of such areas as exploring, negotiating, and manipulating without the risk of failure.

Planning-environment

The key to planning and implementing a language rich environment is to permeate the room with rich child-adult interactions. However, it is recognised that this depends on the physical environment, which then reflects the richness and diversity of the language that teachers and children use. The function of the physical environment in a free play setting, plays a major role in supporting the literacy development of the child's literacy experience. The physical environment has the power to influence the quality and quantity of the child's oral and written language experiences. The room should be organized to include open space and also specific areas. Justice, (2004) suggests that these specific areas should be clearly identified throughout the room (e.g. library area, writing centre, and dramatic play area). What's more these boundaries must be evident to children.

Materials and props

All children benefit when the environment is set up in such a way that it encourages literacy and supports practices. Within the physical environment there should be a variety of materials and props provided, (Johnson, 2003; Pullen & Justice, 2003). A literacy enriched play environment also exposes children to valuable print experiences

and lets them practice narrative skills. Vukilech, (1993) indicates that when literacy materials such as environmental print and props are included in the play environment, the amount of literacy activity children engaged in during play increases significantly. An example of this is where oral, reading and writing behaviours became more purposeful (e.g., in a restaurant setting, a menu, a reservation book, play money). Such experiences should aim to empower children through building on their past knowledge, to then learn, use, and develop their literary skills.

Read aloud

Planning should also include a daily reading aloud experience. This presents children opportunities to interact with such texts as fiction, and non-fiction. The most valuable part of the read aloud may be that children are given the opportunity to talk through ideas, emotions, concerns and reactions beyond their immediate experiences. Repeated reading of favourite books and playing with literary language builds familiarity, increasing the likelihood that the children will attempt to read these books alone. Hansen, (2004), draws on Wells (1986) to suggest that such activities provide the foundation for the rhythm and structure of written language. Moreover the availability of reading electronic storybooks, in which print is made prominent, appears to help children internalize understanding of print concepts and features (deJong & Bus, 2002 as cited in Pullen & Justice 2003).

The computer is also an effective tool in literacy. The computer can be used for the development of various literacy skills including rhymes, sound letter association and letter knowledge. It can also be used to develop comprehension through children becoming involved in literal, interpretive, and critical thinking skills activities.

Assessment

Assessment should be an integral part of the early childhood planning processes. Ministry of Education's (1996) goal is that "the purpose of assessment is to give useful information about children's learning and development, to the adults providing the programme and to the children and families", (p.29). While the New Zealand Curriculum Framework recognises that assessment is to give useful information to the children, teachers and parents, their primary goal is focused on preparing learners for "effective participation in society" (Ministry of Education, 1993, p.5).

Assessment is the collecting of data on a child's development and learning, incorporating it into planning, and in addition communicating it to other parties involved. In child-centred assessment there should be a sense of partnership between the child, teacher and parents. Children are encouraged to assess their own learning, through setting and achieving their own goals. An ongoing challenge for teachers is to accurately and appropriately assess through observations, the progress of young children's literacy development (Ratcliff, 2002).

Once it is clarified what is to be assessed, teachers can then use a range of techniques and methods. For example Ratcliff, (2001/2002) suggests anecdotal notes/observations, checklists, video tape, work samples and digital cameras to record the skills being demonstrated by the children. Nevertheless, one concern raised by Ratcliff was the checklist method. He noted that this only documents the absence or presence of the skill at the time of observation; therefore it is only to be used as a guideline. Consequently teachers must use a multiple of techniques and methods which can yield the depth and breadth of information required to effectively plan quality learning and teaching experiences to extend children's literacy. This regular observation of language and literacy growth should become embedded in daily activities which reflect intended knowledge, skill, and disposition learning outcomes.

Finally, it is important to note that assessing literacy is also about assessing the quality of literacy learning contexts, such as the environment and the teacher's practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this review upholds the beliefs that the foremost way for language to be acquired, comes through a child-initiated approach supported by a holistic environment. It is evident from the review that teacher's professional knowledge has a critical impact on the learning and development of the young child. Given that children acquire language best in meaningful contexts, through conversational interactions, and through encounters with written language, there must be a focus on instruction for teachers.

The most significant barrier to ensuring that early childhood teachers have a broad and deep knowledge of language is the lack of trained teachers within the sector. This review therefore, supports the government policy direction which states that all early childhood teachers will be qualified by the year 2012.

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