

Feature Article

FINDING A BALANCE FOR THE YEAR 2000 AND BEYOND

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The history of teaching literacy tells us that over the last fifty years there has been a continual search for the 'right' methodology. Looking back over what we have learned from this extensively researched area, it appears that we are unlikely to find a 'right' methodology or even to be able to define 'good practice'. Instead it appears that teaching literacy requires highly skilled teachers who have the knowledge, sensitivity and capacity to adapt their teaching methodologies to the differing contexts and conditions in which children grow up. What is more, teachers need to be able to help children participate in learning to be literate in ways that are joyous, significant and engaging for all children - not just those children who already receive a great deal of support at home. This needs to be done in such a way that children are not 'turned off', so that those tenuous early steps towards literacy do not become the focus of competing interests or tedious and repetitious activities.

In discussing how we might find an appropriate balance for teaching literacy over the next decade, I wish to focus on what we have learned about literacy development in the last 100 years. Despite the ongoing debate about the teaching of literacy, there has been a convergence of research, upon which we can draw. Before looking at what this research is telling us, it is important to focus on current understandings of literacy. These understandings go far beyond the narrow view of literacy provided by the National Benchmarks - rather they focus on a literacy that will open up possibilities for children who will grow up in a multi-modal world. Here I refer to a literacy which will provide children with the resources or a 'toolkit' to break the code of written, visual or multi-modal texts, which focuses on the meanings of these texts and which will provide children with the social understandings and critical awareness to make use of these texts within appropriate contexts.

What does the research tell us?

Over the last thirty years, a strong and consistent body of knowledge (Heath, 1983; Wells, 1983; Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn, 1995; Cairney et al., 1995; Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998; Stanovich, 1998; Luke, 1998; and Hill et al., 1998) has been established. This research leads to the following conclusions:

1. Children who become literate with ease have had a great deal of experience with numerous written texts from the time that they are very young. They have been read to frequently, have been given the opportunity to examine the nature of a range of texts and have been able to explore the meanings of those texts with a supportive mentor.
 2. Children's literacy development is strongly linked to knowledge of how words are made up of different sounds and of how these sounds can be mapped onto written symbols. That is, successful literacy learners have phonological awareness, as well as code breaking skills, and they can use the alphabetic principle (the idea that written spellings systematically represent the sounds of spoken words) in reading and writing.
 3. Children's literacy development is dependent on their ability to fluently use comprehension and composing strategies to get meanings from texts and to compose their own texts. Without fluency children cannot cope with the cognitive demands of complex texts.
 4. Children's literacy practices are shaped by the social interactions of those around them, and the different ways children are able to take what is available to them when they go to school, is strongly mediated by the literacy and social experiences they have from the time they are born.
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5. Reading and writing of texts involves understanding linguistic and symbolic codes specific to the technology of written language. Texts have specific attributes that learners must consciously understand if they are to become effective literacy learners. Unlike talking, which most children will learn to do so long as they are provided with human interaction, effective literacy learning requires the conscious awareness of sounds, letters, the ways in which texts provide meaning and knowledge about forms of text.

6. Learning about the technology of literacy also includes the capacity to recognise the ways in which texts shape particular values about topics. This is necessary because we want our children to grow up learning how to resist exploitation by commercial and political interests and to accept differences in race, language, ethnicity, gender, age and political views.

The research suggests that in order to survive in an ever increasingly complex world, where literacy not only focuses on written texts, but also visual, computer and internet texts, students will need to develop a 'literacy toolkit' which enables them to:

- Make meanings of and compose a range of different forms and modes of texts, including multi-modal texts;
- Decode and encode effectively, including the icons and symbols of technology;
- Read and write fluently;
- Critically analyse texts to recognise whose views are being presented in texts; and
- Adapt reading and writing processes to the many different text forms used by different subject areas and the differing modes of texts, such as, written, visual, computer, and internet texts.

What do we need to teach?

What children need to be able to do to become effective literacy learners can provide a guide for what it is we need to consider when planning for a balanced literacy program. Planning should provide opportunities for children to systematically participate in activities which will engage their interest whilst ensuring:

- Teacher talk which is clear and precise enough to focus children on what is being learned;
 - Oral language activities which develop awareness of sounds, listening, speaking, complex oral language structures, vocabulary and knowledge about the world;
 - Comprehension and composition of a range of text forms through teacher instruction, modelling, scaffolding and metacognitive instruction;
 - Systematic practice through engagement with a variety of oral, written and multi-modal texts using a range of effective instructional strategies;
 - Explicit instruction in code-breaking techniques, which include phonological awareness, letter recognition, letter-sound correspondences and sight word recognition;
 - Frequent practice, in reading aloud to develop fluency and in writing to develop automaticity;
 - Encouragement of invented spelling to help children develop understanding of phonemes, phonemic segmentation and spelling relationships, with strategies to support the move to transitional and conventional spelling;
 - Games and computer activities which will provide practice to support the development of children's 'literacy toolkit';
 - Regular analysis of a range of texts to help support children's understanding of how texts are written;
 - Critical analysis of texts to look at whose interests are being served by those texts;
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- Regular assessment, to monitor the progress of children, and to help make decisions about ongoing teaching; and
- Regular sustained time for literacy learning. (Rohl et al 2000)

How will we teach?

How we go about planning for and teaching literacy will be likely to change according to the needs of the children we teach and the literacy experiences they bring to school with them. We know that almost all children participate in meaningful oral and written language interactions in their homes. However, we also know that these home literacy practices are likely to privilege some children over others when they begin participating in the ways of talking and thinking required by school contexts (Gee, 1990). This is not because particular home practices are better than others and we must be very watchful not to interpret this information in such a way. Rather, it signals that we need to be alert to giving all children access to the literacy practices and ways of talking which allow them to participate successfully in school learning. At the same time we must be careful not to devalue the different ways of talking which some children bring to school with them. Helping children learn how to move between the different ways of talking and doing literacy required by different contexts, is critical, if we are serious about providing any sort of equity in the opportunities children have to access literacy and power in the world outside.

Most importantly we will need to know as much as possible about the children we teach. If they come to us without a great deal of experience of written texts, much of our time will be spent in providing such children with the experiences, texts, analysis, practice and discussions which may occur in the homes of other children. It means, that teachers must use what the students know and engage with, in order to move them to reading, writing and critically evaluating the variety of texts that will give them access to a range of opportunities. It does not mean that we ignore all of the cultural texts of the past, but that we need to plan for them from a different perspective. We need to help children read and write about a range of texts using the social knowledge they have. Television texts, such as *Alienation*, allow students to challenge some of the issues about race and gender because the text facilitates the discussion of these issues without confronting any particular individuals or groups in Australian society. From such an analysis, teachers can plan to move to a similar discussion of some of the cultural texts that are part of our heritage. Similarly, we would also want to see students going to the internet to access a range of views about social issues of concern; views which may differ from the ones which get represented by the popular press.

Essential Ingredients

It is relatively easy to describe the 'toolkit' that students need to develop in order to become literate. It is much more difficult to describe exactly how teachers might enact this balanced literacy curriculum in their different classroom contexts. What we do know, is that unless students are engaged in cognitively demanding activities (Vygotsky, 1978), it will be likely that some students, for a range of reasons, will not successfully develop these literacy resources. The challenge for us as teachers, is to plan ways of implementing a balanced literacy program which both engages the children and cognitively challenges them, while at the same time providing them with sufficient practice to facilitate the fluency and automaticity achieved by effective literacy learners.

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