During the years before school, children learn a lot about literacy. Young children learn about literacy through all the different ways of making sense of the print world that surrounds us, and by engaging with others who use literacy for many different purposes. Young children’s first encounters with literacy are their observations of ‘more knowledgeable others’ in their immediate world, their home. They see others reading and writing for a wide variety of purposes, looking up TV programs, sending text messages, reading instructions and making notes during a telephone call, for instance. In this respect, literacy is seen as a social-cultural practice. It is a part of everyday life which families engage in more or less frequently.

These literacy events happen in authentic contexts for real purposes and as young children observe and take part in these events they become enculturated into the literacy practices of those around them. Indeed, children’s earliest attempts at reading and writing are often in response to the environmental print that surrounds them. From very early on in their lives, young children want to have a go at reading and writing for themselves, and when given the opportunities to engage in literacy activities they do so eagerly while being supported and guided by others around them.

As a result of these various experiences of literacy in their everyday lives, young children develop hypotheses about how the activity works and these hypotheses are revealed through their experiments with literacy. This is frequently seen in their writing attempts. For instance, scribble writing represents what was thought as the marks were made and can provide challenges when we are asked to read what it says:

However, this text demonstrates a good deal of knowledge of literacy with the lines of text presented in an orderly manner. Another hypothesis young children generate has to do with the length of the written strings and how a word is in proportion to the size of the object it represents. This idea works quite well for *ant*, *bee*, *elephant* and *airplane*, but falls apart with words like *strawberry* and *man*. Further ideas about text see the word being the actual object, with one child wheeling a card around the floor with the word *pram* written on it. Rikki was quite clear that the word for her name was her:

A further hypothesis sees young children realising that if they want a word to say something different, it must look different, even if they only know the letters of their name. For instance Erin writes this letter, using her limited letter knowledge to convey a variety of meanings:

Other observers of young children have found that some can consider a word readable only if it has at least three letters and they must all be different. For instance, *look, I, me, am, see, too, so, my, if and oh* are not words and cannot, therefore, be read at all. Other young children see each letter as standing for a single word or syllable, writing *T M s I c g f a w* for ‘This man said I could go for a walk’. Indeed, when I asked some six-year-olds ‘What is a sentence?’ They pointed to the space
between a full stop and a capital letter! In another activity, we were making new words, using at as a base word to make new words. However, one child found it impossible to change c-at to m-at. From her perspective, she could not see how a cat could turn into a mat. Her hypothesis about reading words was still at the point where the word was the object it stood for.

Jessica found writing the e in her name quite tricky to write. She practised it on her own for some considerable time one day:

At the end of the day, she asked to take home her story of e (as shown above). The next day she went straight over to the painting easel and produced perfect ‘e’ s. She had discovered the eness of ‘e’ for herself!

We know that understanding precedes learning rather than the reverse. We learn well when we understand what is to be learned. In the case of literacy, this will involve understanding its function and purpose, its value in the lives of others and its potential for our own lives. This view of learning embraces the role and significance of prior knowledge and sees the learner as actively searching for successful and supportive interactions between what is known and what is unknown. In this way there is a ‘play’ between cognitive, social and emotional structures that will enable the child to be creative and imaginative in moving, with support, towards new knowledge.

In applying this view of learning to literacy development, it becomes clear that any reading and writing activities encountered in the preschool will look more like those encountered with family members in a literate home environment. However, for those young children who have limited experiences to develop hypotheses concerning how literacy works, when they enter school they will need particular support and encouragement before they can take advantage of a more formal literacy teaching program.

What is interesting, though, is that these understandings and practices which children exhibit during their early literacy experiences give us clues to the ideas they have concerning how reading and writing works for them. Because of the very different experiences and opportunities children have to engage with literacy in the years before school, they will arrive in classrooms with a wide range of literate behaviours. Some students may have a very different idea of reading and writing letters and words than others, and it pays to take time understanding what their conceptions are about literacy. By constantly modelling and showing them what you do when you read and write, by embedding literacy in recognisable contexts and purposes, and giving opportunity and audience for their literate engagements, their understandings of the process will become more sophisticated and appropriate over time. The notice below shows children how literacy is embedded in our everyday lives!

Discovering the range of hypotheses that young children potentially exhibit on entering school has been one of the purposes of the Young Learners’ Project1. This project has been following some 350 young children from preschool into their first year of school. One of the assessments that has been developed is the Early Literacy Knowledge and Strategies tool. This tool has been designed to reveal the different strategies young children use to solve print literacy ‘problems’ and will provide a valuable starting point for planning an early literacy program when children start school and also provide useful information for placing children in groups of mixed and similar understandings.

Note
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