Language, literature and literacy: Authentic engagement in the early years
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Teachers, whether working in prior-to-school contexts, guided by the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), or in the Foundation Year (first year of school), with the Australian Curriculum: English Foundation to Year 10 (ACARA, 2011), recognise that communication and literacy are vital for successful learning across the curriculum. As well, effective teachers adopt a balanced approach to literacy teaching and learning and utilise intentional teaching. In our education courses preparing pre-service teachers at the Sydney campus of the University of Notre Dame Australia we require our students to become increasingly familiar with the new curriculum frameworks and to link contemporary theory with practical applications for prior-to-school and school settings. In assessment tasks and during practicum placements we encourage them to investigate effective literacy teaching that is meaningful, holistic, and responds to children’s diverse levels of understandings and needs.

There is a considerable body of research revealing positive effects of early education and the impact it can have on literacy learning and development (Neuman & Dickinson, 2011; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Rowe et al., 2005). However, benefits ultimately depend on the quality of instruction. All aspects of literacy development are closely intertwined – optimal environments support all relevant abilities rather than focusing on a single skill area. Effective teaching avoids a narrow image of early literacy as the acquisition of a set of discrete skills. Performance on isolated skills does not necessarily result in ability or the disposition to use reading and writing in meaningful ways in the real world. When literacy is viewed through a sociocultural lens, teaching approaches emphasise the construction of meaning through active participation and incorporation of the funds of knowledge children bring to the learning situation. The following examples, from practising teachers, are ones that can promote continuity across the early years, value what children can contribute and allow for different levels of participation.

Language – Sound and letter knowledge
I The experience: Provide opportunity for children to sign-in or select their name and place it in a pocket-chart as they arrive. Names are of vital significance to young children, so it is a powerful place to start exploring letter names, sounds and letter formation – the first word they want to write is often their own name.

II Potential for teaching and learning: This is an informal learning experience where children are in control and active learners. They receive positive messages that let them know you see them as readers and writers. This is an example of Vygotsky’s theory (Bodrova & Leong, 2007) in action. Children construct their knowledge through real-life and meaningful interactions with more able others, their peers or adults. They are often motivated by seeing other children ‘have a go’. As well, there are opportunities for impromptu instruction and support for individual children at their point of need – for example: naming letters, modelling print direction, modelling how to write particular letters, discussing use of upper and lower-case letters, talking about long names (words) and short names.

The children:
- establish their identity as competent, active learners;
- practise naming and forming letters and refining fine motor control;
- can sometimes sound out their name/friend’s name and see what letters represent the sounds;
- are developing their metalinguistic vocabulary (words to talk about language and how it is used).
Language – Expressing and developing ideas

I The experience: Children writing about their play – In the kindergarten classes (Foundation Year) at Good Shepherd Catholic Primary School, children play each morning for 10 minutes, and then they have 10 minutes writing about what they have been doing. Although 10 minutes sounds a very limited time for both playing and writing, when children know the routine, they can achieve quite a lot. They often put their work aside safely and carry on a project over several days. At this early stage, the focus is on making meaning and young children draw on personal experiences, environmental print and help from peers, as they begin to compose texts independently. It connects with their worlds and allows them to actively contribute and feel their identity is affirmed and respected.

II Potential for teaching and learning:

Right from the start teachers in this context have high expectations for all learners and they encourage children to see themselves as writers and readers. All attempts (e.g. drawing, scribbling and writing) are accepted. When children are actively involved in experiences that they enjoy and have meaning to them they are much more likely to be motivated and to persevere. Writing about something they have just done is far more relevant than writing about ‘news’ which can become a repetitive chore. As well, teachers take opportunities for one-on-one teaching, e.g. to talk about their play prior to writing; to help a child provide more detail; to make use of environmental print.

The children:
- are learning to write about topics that are personally significant;
- have frequent opportunities to write in a sustained way as opposed to decontextualised worksheet activities.

Literacy and Language – Texts in context, creating texts and using language for interaction

I The experience: Sociodramatic play – fast-food takeaways, restaurants or other shops are familiar places that children like to re-create.

Lonigan and Shanahan (2010) implore teachers to go beyond ‘nebulous recommendations to create language-rich environments’ (p. 344). Teachers who are conscious of this take a proactive role extending children’s play and engaging in intentional teaching, explicit modelling, scaffolding, and transfer of responsibility. They might ask/make suggestions about literacy-based props; point out, name, show how to form individual letters embedded within print children are using; demonstrate how to find information; take on a role in the play to introduce new vocabulary and more complex language structures. In this way children are enabled to master skills that are beyond their current unassisted efforts.

As children engage in sociodramatic play they can learn about and use a range of text types – they see how texts are composed for different authentic purposes. In a fast food shop literacy props might include items such as: menus, shelf signs, recognisable logos, EFTPOS machines, cash register dockets, advertising flyers, signs displaying daily specials, order pads, and recipes.

The children:
- can bring their cultural resources to the teaching-learning process;
- see that different tasks require different texts (written and spoken);
- begin to integrate both visual/contextual cues and letter-sound cues as they decode and encode;
- experiment with sounds and letters as they compose texts to make their play more realistic.

**Literature – Responding to literature**

I  **The experience:** Read aloud – Monks (2004) *Aaaargghh, Spider!* This is an interesting story, because it’s written from the perspective of a spider, who would dearly love to ‘belong’ and be someone’s pet. She is very clever, but despite her adaptability and many skills, the family is scared of her.

II  **Potential for teaching and learning**

Reading and writing are intimately connected, interdependent processes. Frequent sharing of quality literature not only builds positive dispositions, oral language skills and print knowledge which are at the heart of early reading, but also builds on prior knowledge and resources that children can use in writing. A number of researchers, including Ezell and Justice (2005) have identified the power of interactive book reading. As teachers and children discuss texts they read, it supports their understanding about writers and how they use different functions of language – to entertain, to inform, to persuade.

From the very early years, children can learn to think critically about the way characters and events are represented in the texts they encounter: authors and illustrators construct characters and provide one version of reality; they can shape readers’ responses through language choices and point of view. Intentional teachers analyse the book and generate questions ahead of time. Thoughtful questioning can help children problem solve and understand what is not explicitly said. ‘Who is telling this story?’ ‘What do you think the spider wants us to think?’ What makes you think that?’ How to reason and make inferences by thinking-aloud can be modelled. Text-to-life and text-to-text connections also enrich understanding and encourage further investigation and representation. One group of children, with assistance from the teacher librarian, constructed dioramas, photographed them with a digital camera and produced their own version of *Eency Weensy.*

**Balancing and integrating: Language, literature and literacy**

I  **The experience:** Project/Investigation – Books like *Meerkat Mail*, by award winning author Emily Gravett (2007) can lead to in-depth investigations by small groups or the whole class into worthwhile topics. Provocation to investigate may arise from children’s interests or be initiated by the teacher. Sunny, a meerkat, living with his large extended family in the Kalahari Desert, finds life too claustrophobic and sets out to find the perfect place to live. He sends postcards from the various destinations he visits, but finally decides there’s no place like home. Sharing this book could plant the seed for some very different inquiries: from comparing and contrasting different modes of communication to exploring animal habitats.
II Potential for teaching and learning

Investigations not only allow children to acquire new interests, but to also strengthen their motivation to master a range of literacy-related skills. They are based on the strong conviction that learning by doing is of great importance and that to discuss in group and revisit ideas and experiences is the premier way of gaining better understanding and learning’ (Gandini, cited Helm & Katz, 2011, p. 7).

Children can:
- link home, school and popular culture experiences;
- integrate knowledge and skills from different subject areas in meaningful ways;
- practise and apply spoken and written (traditional and electronic) language skills with genuine purpose as they participate in and contribute to projects;
- record their learning and show what they know by representing knowledge and communicating ideas in a range of different mediums (e.g., 3-D constructions, painting, observational drawing, drama)
- strengthen intellectual dispositions with opportunities to take initiative, pose questions, think creatively, solve problems, reflect, encounter new ideas and seek deeper understanding.

When teachers provide authentic experiences like these there are opportunities for intentional teaching, opportunities to notice, recognise and respond to particular children and the group, and to extend learning and make useful judgments against curriculum outcomes. They have the potential to encourage positive dispositions towards language and literacy, as well as build foundational knowledge for successful reading and writing. In the course of worthwhile experiences, skills are not seen as an end in themselves.

References


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