

READING AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS (0-6 YEARS): THE ROLE OF THE ADULT

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The role of the adult as a support for children's literacy development is of considerable importance. Recently Frank Smith (1992) indicated that '[m]ethods can never ensure that children learn to read. Children must learn from people.' That quote encapsulated, very neatly, the key role of adults. Those adults, often parents at home and teachers at school, will provide and then support children in a variety of literacy activities which serves to facilitate the children in their literacy development (Campbell 1990).

What are some of those literacy activities - especially in the early years? And how do the adults at home, in pre-school playgroups, in nursery classrooms and infant school classrooms use the literacy activities to support the children's learning? There are, of course, many different opportunities for children to engage with literacy. However, six particular activities will be emphasised in this article. They are story reading, using environmental print, momentary engagements with print, shared book experience, shared reading and opportunities for writing.

Story reading

The importance of story reading is recognized widely. For instance, the research project on children's literacy development conducted by Gordon Wells (1986) indicated the important contribution provided by regular story readings to the children's subsequent ability with reading and writing. During such story readings children learn new words, sentence patterns and arrangements of discourse. The implicit learning of story structure helps them with their own reading and their attempts at story writing. They also learn about ways of behaving and social relationships as well as disappointments which might be best met first in the safety of books before being encountered in real life.

Of course the story readings by the parents at home and the teachers in school require careful thought. The books to be read have to be selected with care and read skilfully. It is not a ritualised end of day activity but an important feature of the child's day. And we recognize that when young children hear a story reading they will want to participate in that reading by asking questions and making comments. The role of the adult is then to respond to such questions and comments as well as trying to get the reading back to the story line. A teacher with a reception class (Campbell 1990) demonstrated those moves from the story to the children's queries and back to the story:

Teacher: Shall we have the story of **Bertie at the Dentist's**?

Children: [Laughter]

Teacher: Who do you think Bertie is?
Sonny?

Sonny: Hippopotamus.

Teacher: He's a hippopotamus.
Do you think he's a real one?

Children: No.
A toy one.

Teacher: Richard, what do you think?

Richard: A toy one.

Teacher: A toy one.

That brief discussion of the story centred on the illustration of the front cover and enabled the teacher to introduce one of the main characters. Although the children recognized that the hippo was a toy one that would not hinder their subsequent acceptance of the various antics that Bertie was to get up to while Thomas, the boy in the story, was in the dentist's chair. Following that brief introduction, which the teacher might extend on other occasions, the teacher began to read the story:

- Teacher: Shall we see what happens to **Bertie at the Dentist's**?
Bertie was Thomas' toy hippo. They went everywhere together. On the day that Thomas had to go to the dentist's for a check up, he took Bertie along. There he is taking Bertie.
- Michael: Bertie can't walk.
- Teacher: No, Bertie can't walk, can he?
'Hop up here, Thomas', said the dentist.
'Let's take a look'.
Thomas climbed on to the dentist's chair.
- Richard: It goes up.
- Teacher: It does go up, doesn't it, Richard, yes.
Bertie sat on his tummy and watched. The chair sank back. Then it shot up into the air.
- Children: [Laughter]
- Teacher: *Bertie nearly fell off.*
- Katrina: He didn't, though.
- Teacher: No, he didn't.
Why do you think he nearly fell off?
- Katrina: Because he's on the edge of the arm.
- Teacher: He nearly fell over the edge of the arm, yes.

So the teacher provided a model of reading as the story was read and moved from the story to the children's queries and back to the story. Those responses to the children's queries would support the children's moves towards literacy. The teacher also asked 'Why?' questions so that the children would be guided towards their own construction of the story. Although an initial perusal of such transcripts might suggest that the story reading is somewhat disjointed, in reality such interactions flow, and they provide support for younger children to a greater extent than might a straight uninterrupted reading of the book (Dickinson & Smith 1994).

Environmental print

Children, in our society, are surrounded by environmental print which they see adults using on a day-to-day basis. And if, in addition, the adults talk about that print with the child, or children, then the children are supported in their endeavours to understand that aspect of their world. A number of writers, frequently mothers or fathers of young children, have detailed the way in which those children learn something about print (eg Baghban 1984, Laminack 1991). Of course, we know that it can be the key features of colour, size, logo, additional pictures and context rather than the letters and words, which initially enable the child to recognize environmental print. Nevertheless, children can learn about literacy if the significant adults point to and talk about the print in the environment.

In school the teacher can use that knowledge about, and interest in, environmental print to encourage children's reading and writing. In a nursery classroom the day after the children had heard the story reading of **Goldilocks and the Three Bears** the teacher prepared some porridge in the classroom for the children. Therefore, when they entered the room in the morning there was some hot porridge bubbling in a pan (protected by an adult). Inevitably the porridge led to a great deal of excitement. But first, before the children could sample some of the porridge they were taken by the teacher for a walk - just like the three bears - so that the porridge could cool.

Once back in the classroom the children were able to try the porridge for themselves with milk or without milk, adding sugar or salt or nothing at all. For the majority of the children it was the first time that they had seen or tasted

porridge, and some of the children were reluctant to try it - so they had none. The teacher was aware that there might be some reluctance. So in addition to preparing the porridge she had also brought into the classroom a dozen small cereal boxes and they were used also to ask the children to reflect upon their knowledge of environmental print:

Teacher: Who can pick out what they had for breakfast?

Samantha: Cornflakes.

Teacher: Can you go and take the cornflakes packet?

Samantha: This one.

Teacher: How do you know it is the cornflakes?

Samantha: 'Cos I do.

Teacher: Why?

Samantha: 'Cos it's got a chicken.

Teacher: Mmh, anything else.

Samantha: The writing says cornflakes.

Teacher: That's right.
That says cornflakes, doesn't it?

Samantha: And you can see the picture.

Teacher: Yes, you can.

Of course, it was not possible to say what enabled Samantha to select the cornflakes although the pictures and the writing were mentioned. Nevertheless, like other children in the class she was able to demonstrate her use of the features on a packet in order to recognize that packet. She was aided in that learning by

the teacher, who provided the opportunity for the learning to occur through an interaction with appropriate support.

Momentary engagements with print

Denny Taylor (1983), in her various studies of young children learning to read at home within the family, made reference to momentary engagements with print by young children. We know that toddlers will investigate their environment, move around the house looking at objects, picking up items, opening drawers and considering the contents, etc. Where the adults in those homes also provide readily available books for the child, then on their wanderings the child will be seen to pause, sit or lie on the floor and look through a book before moving on to other activities. They will engage with print for a moment.

However, it is insufficient for the adult just to provide the books. The child needs to know what to do with the book and what can be expected from it. So, over the weeks and months of the child's first few years, the adult will want to model the use of a book, sometimes when reading to oneself and sometimes when reading a story to a child. Those interactions between the adult and the child may involve a talk about the book as the adult turns the pages for a very young child or later, perhaps, follows the page turning of an older toddler:

Father: Now, shall we read this book?

Robert: (Gurgles)

Father: Let's see what's on the first page.

Robert: (Babbles)

Father: Yes, it's an elephant isn't it?

Robert: (Utters an intonation pattern which bears some resemblance to elephant)

Father: He's a big elephant, isn't he?
And he's got big ears.

Robert: (Coos an agreement)

Father: Now, let's see what it's going to do.
Oh dear.
Just like you he's going to have a bath.

Robert: (Smiles)

In that instance the eleven-month-old was enjoying the pictures and the comments from his father. However, the interaction provided a background and foundation for Robert to know how to engage with print when he wandered about the house. In the same way if the young child at home has access to writing materials and has seen adults using those materials, then the momentary engagement may be with writing at times and reading on other occasions.

In the school context we need to ask whether we have provided print materials which are readily available for the children to use. Furthermore, we have to consider the extent to which we have provided models of reading and writing and interactions with the child about literacy. All of that gives a background for the children to engage with print when their purposes lead them in that direction.

Shared book experience

Story reading is a very important part of the nursery and infant classroom day which teachers will want to continue to use. Nevertheless, as Don Holdaway (1978) noted, with a large class a number of the children may miss out on some of the aspects that might occur at home during a one-to-one story reading. At the simplest level the children may not be able to see the print and therefore may fail to recognize what the teacher is doing when a story is read. Such concerns lead to his suggestion of constructing big books (now more readily available for purchase) and having a shared book experience where the teacher reads from the big book and the children can see the pictures and the writing.

An example of a shared book experience is taken from a nursery classroom with a class of four-year-olds:

- Teacher: Shall we have a look at this book?
- Children: Yes.
- Teacher: So what do you think it is about?
- Danny: A baby bear.
- Teacher: About a baby bear, right.
How do you know it's going to be about a baby bear?
- Danny: 'Cos it's little.
- Jade: You can see the picture.
- Teacher: That's right, the picture, Jade.
Is there anything else that tells us it might be about a teddy bear?
- Georgia: The writing.
- Teacher: Where's the writing?
- Georgia: At the top of the picture.
- Teacher: That's right, at the top of the picture.
- Rachel: We could colour that in.
- Teacher: Yes, we could, couldn't we?
It says *Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear*.
Shall we start?
- Children: Yeah.
- Teacher: Right, what do you think the Teddy Bear is doing in this picture?

Leigh-Anne: Playing.

Teacher: Playing, yes. Does anyone think it is doing something else?

Russell: It's turning around.

Teacher: Good boy. I think Russell might be right, he says it's
turning around.

Shall we read what it says?

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear,

Turn around.

You were right, Russell, yes.

As with the story reading in the classroom the nursery teacher both read from the big book and engaged in a dialogue with the children about the book. As part of the dialogue the children were asked to justify their comments: 'How do you know...', and the teacher responded to their comments. Additionally, the writing at the top of the page was noted, and when the teacher read the captions a pointer was used so that the children could see where the words were printed.

During such shared book experience the teacher may not have been teaching reading directly but the children were informed about the print, and the teacher modelled the reading for them. That modelling was extended in the example above, because, when the book was completed, the teacher and the children read through the book once more. However, that reading took place without interruption, because the children were encouraged to read alongside the teacher or as an echo of the reading. The teacher's strategies were helping the children to learn about reading and, in part, to read.

The use of big books, or teacher constructed big sheets/books, can also be used to model writing. For instance, when the children are reciting with the teacher a nursery rhyme, the teacher might ask the children for help to write that rhyme on a big sheet. During that process the children can supply the words and the teacher can write, from the children's instructions, the nursery rhyme. So the children will see the teacher construct some writing and the teacher can talk about the writing as it is constructed. Of course, the example of using nursery rhymes is an appropriate one to utilise because we know from a number of research studies (eg

Goswami and Bryant 1990) that children develop a phonemic awareness from engaging frequently with the sounds and rhymes of nursery rhyme favourites and that can help in their subsequent development as readers.

Shared reading

We have noted already how children will take part in story readings by making comments about the story, asking questions about it or relating the story to their own personal experiences. Furthermore, we have seen how the adult will expect the child to take part in a conversation about a book, and do so even before the child has the words necessary to make a substantial contribution to those conversations. Those events lead naturally to the one-to-one shared readings between an adult and a child which are part of home and school life. In particular shared readings are an important feature of the infant classroom. For instance, five-year-old Richard shared his book with his teacher:

Richard: I've got **The Hungry Caterpillar**.

Teacher: It is **The Hungry Caterpillar**, isn't it?
Shall we read it together?

Richard: Yeah.

Teacher: Come on then.
In

Richard: *In the*

T/R: *light*

Richard: *of the moon*
the-the(a)

T/R: *little*

Richard: *egg*

Teacher: Yes.

- Richard: *lay on a leaf.*
- Teacher: Yes
It lay on a leaf, didn't it?
Can you see the egg?
- Richard: Yeah-Yeah.
Yeah, but the other day I looked at the pictures and I thought it was a hole.
- Teacher: Did you? (Laughs)
Come on then.
- R/T: *One*
- Richard: *Summer (Sunday)*
My mum's got **The Hungry Caterpillar** - it's - my mum's got -
I've got that book like you.
One Summer's(Sunday) day(morning) the warm sun came out(up)
and - pop! - //
Eh.
- T/R: *out*
- Richard: *of the egg*
a very(came)
- Teacher: *came*
- Richard: *came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar.*
- Teacher: It did come up, didn't it, one morning.
Yes.

Although only a small part of the interaction was presented above (the complete transcription has been presented elsewhere, in Campbell 1992) nevertheless the efforts of the teacher to support the developing reader were evident. Even the

opening comment by the teacher - 'Shall we read it together?' - suggested to the five-year-old that he would get support from the teacher in a collaborative reading. There was no suggestion of the reading performance being tested, and, providing the teacher matched that comment with subsequent supportive comment and guidance, then the child was likely to find the interaction enjoyable as well as instructive.

Of course, as we might expect, Richard did miscue some words including the (a), Summer's (Sunday), day (morning), and out (up). However, none of those miscues disrupted the meaning of the story and, therefore, the teacher did not mediate. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how the teacher both encouraged Richard and provided a model of part of the reading by commenting 'It did come up didn't it one morning , yes.' More directly, his miscue of a very(came) did receive some teacher guidance with the text word, came, being provided.

Many infant teachers organize their classrooms with great care and skill so that they can engage in one-to-one shared readings with the children. They do so because it enables them to model the reading, in some cases, and subsequently to support, guide and encourage the children's own reading of the book. Furthermore, those interactions help the teacher to ascertain the child's current progress as a reader and therefore suggest what strategies might be employed to support the child's future literacy development.

Opportunities for writing

In the earlier sections the emphasis has been on a variety of reading experiences. However, the children will also learn about print and literacy by writing. Therefore, we need to ensure that in the classroom there are opportunities for the children to write. Those opportunities can be provided in a number of ways. Typically, young children have a play area/home corner in nursery and infant classrooms. Those play areas support the children's learning and growth in many ways. However, the area can also be used to encourage an involvement with literacy. Hall and Abbott (1991) indicated, with some very practical examples provided by class teachers, the way in which a play area, first, could be arranged to serve some particular function and, second, could have materials added in order to encourage literacy. After all 'the dentist's' would need some magazines in the

waiting area, posters, appointment cards, forms, etc. Even more simply a telephone message pad sited next to the telephone can be used to note messages - especially if that is modelled first by the teacher.

In one nursery classroom where a telephone pad was added to the play area next to the telephone, the children quickly became regular writers of notes. Of course, some of those notes produced by the three-year-olds appeared to be no more than scribbles. However, some children included some letters, or shapes which approximated to letters, in their writing, while others produced lines of letters - although that writing was not easily decipherable as a message.

As well as the writing opportunities in the play area, a writing centre as part of the classroom organization adds to the opportunities for the child to write. The teacher needs to organize a table and some chairs, together with a variety of paper shapes and sizes, and writing implements. For younger children it might also be necessary to model writing occasionally and to sit with the children to talk about the writing from time to time. During such conversations the children will tell the teacher about what they have written. Those conversations can be informative, for example, when four-year-old Russell, in a nursery classroom, told his teacher about his writing (which was linked to his picture of a monster) :

o m l o w o
o l m m o

he indicated that it said 'One monster talking with other monsters'. That provided insights into the extent to which he appeared to be making sense of print. Although we should not overextend our analysis of the connection between his statement and the writing that he produced, nevertheless, there would appear to be a suggestion that Russell is beginning to use his growing awareness of language sounds when writing. The provision of opportunities to write will encourage and guide children towards an exploration of print and that is aided when the adult, from time to time, models the writing and then supports the children in their own efforts.

Role of the adult

Although this article has emphasised six particular literacy activities, what will have been evident within each of those activities was the important role of the adult in ensuring that the opportunities for literacy were made available and subsequently that the children were supported during those activities. The adult role, as it permeated each of those six literacy activities, was varied. Nevertheless, it included the need to:

provide

The books to be read were made available at both home and school, and opportunities for writing were organized.

model

During story reading, shared book experience and shared reading the reading was modelled for the children, and writing was modelled in the play area and at the writing centre.

observe

The children were observed during their encounters with literacy so that the adult could develop the opportunities for engaging with print.

interact

The adult worked alongside the children in order to model, support and guide them.

support

The children's comments and questions received the adult's support by an acceptance of what the children could do and some guidance towards development.

guide

The adult used comments to guide the children towards conventional literacy.

encourage

The efforts of the children received praise and encouragement.

instruct

The children were provided with information where that would help their understanding.

evaluate

The adult was evaluating the literacy activities and the literacy of the children, in order to consider what might need to be provided in the future.

As we noted in the first paragraph, Frank Smith has suggested that children must learn from people. That is a view that was supported by the research of Margaret Clark when she looked at the background of thirty-two young fluent readers when starting school. A key feature of those children's background was an interested adult with time to devote to them when they were interested in reading (1976: 102). That feature, of an interested and supportive adult, or teacher, is required at home, in pre-school and nursery classrooms and the infant classroom. Those adults are required because the children learn about literacy from them.

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