Fostering early literacy in ECE settings: principles, practices, and progression

Literacy can be defined as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts[1]. Although literacy is considered a basic human right, universal literacy is something that even advanced nations struggle to achieve. This research review is designed to complement Supporting early literacy in early childhood education with further information about why the suggestions are important and how, through simple practices, teachers can foster children's developing literacy skills and support children's progression towards the learning outcomes in the Communication/Mana Reo strand in Te Whāriki[2] as well as helping them to have the range of experiences needed to meet the literacy learning progressions expected on school entry[3]. This research review will explore what we know and can do in the ECE setting to foster early literacy learning as part of the supporting children's life journey towards being a literate adult.

The role of family and ECE in early literacy development

There has been considerable research over the last 30 years into early or emergent literacy, as it is variously called. The research originally stemmed from the work of Dame Marie Clay, who coined the term 'emergent literacy' to describe the language and literacy knowledge, skills, and abilities that young children displayed on school entry in the beginning reading programme. She identified that the stronger these understandings from their experiences in homes and early childhood settings were, the more readily children learned to read and write. Literacy research in family and early childhood settings has confirmed Clay's proposition[4].

The research is clear that families can have a positive impact on children's literacy development[5]. While most parents value literacy and provide children with opportunities for language and literacy development, some children simply get more opportunities to develop literacy than others. In addition to the importance of regular story reading, children learn the purposes and skills for literacy through their parents' intentional engagement in activities such as playing board and card games, language games (such as 'I spy' and 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral'), writing letters and stories, recognising environmental print and using a wide range of vocabulary to extend oral language and comprehension[6]. The multiliteracies research further suggests that families can also effectively use digital media to support literacy development at home. The term multiliteracies is used to encompass a broader view of literacy teaching and learning which incorporates multimodal 'text' including audio, images, sound, graphics and film through technology[7].

The research is also clear that early childhood teachers can make a big difference to children's literacy development, and that this is particularly important for those children who may not have families who are able to offer a rich language and literacy environment in the home[8]. In an ideal world, teachers and families collaborate on the task of supporting early literacy learning and the multicultural, multilingual and multiliteracy experiences of the home are reflected in the early childhood setting; similarly, the literacy opportunities of the ECE centre are also encouraged in the home environment. One simple method for supporting this is to include suggestions for literacy activities in the newsletter that goes home to families. There are numerous free books and free games on the internet that provide useful learning opportunities for families who may not have books and other resources in the home.

Important early literacy experiences

Our understandings about which key experiences children need comes from the considerable body of research now available. One of the most important resources in the last few years is the National Early Literacy Panel Report [NELP][9]. This report identified some critical literacy understandings children need to develop in order to become literate, which include:

- knowledge of the alphabet

- phonological awareness (being aware of sounds in words)

- the ability to rapidly name letters, numbers, objects, and colours

- the ability to write their own name

- the ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time.

In addition, children need to understand print conventions and concepts, have strong oral language and the ability to match and discriminate visual symbols[10].

Of these critical understandings, knowledge of the alphabet and phonological awareness play a crucial role in the early years. Both are necessary, but neither are individually sufficient to support children's literacy learning. Each has a different role, but together they form the basis of the **alphabetic principle**, which is the understanding that speech sounds in words are represented by graphemes in print. The combined knowledge means children can use letters and sounds to make phonemically correct representations of words in reading and spelling on school entry. The differences in levels of knowledge and awareness that children have in ECE can impact on how easily they learn to read at school[11].

It is useful to think about two categories of literacy knowledge and skills that children learn in the early years: **constrained** and **unconstrained**. The first category of constrained skills is readily teachable because they are finite: for instance, the 26 letters of the alphabet or, later, the 20-30 common spelling rules. These skills have a ceiling which young children achieve quite readily[12]. The second category of unconstrained skills is more problematic because it is based on individual experiences. For instance, vocabulary and background knowledge are both unconstrained skills because they represent large domains of knowledge which are acquired gradually through experience. Unconstrained skills are strongly predicted by socioeconomic status and parents' education level, and they are particularly important for long term literacy success in primary school[13]. There is, therefore, risk for children if ECE settings focus on teaching only constrained skills, like knowledge of the alphabet, without also focusing on unconstrained skills through enriching and extending their vocabulary and giving children a rich range of learning experiences to increase their understanding of the world. There are further risks for children who are multilingual if they do not receive adequate support to retain their home language and literacy skills as well as learning constrained and unconstrained skills in English.

Literacy in the curriculum

The Communication/Mana Reo strand in Te Whāriki has a useful set of suggestions for the types of language and literacy practices that teachers might use with infants, toddlers, and young children. The suggestions for leadership, organisation and practice provide a useful framework for self-review of literacy in the curriculum and the questions for reflection[14] are a good place to start when thinking about how to foster literacy in the curriculum. The learning outcomes also give a strong indication of the range of experiences that children need in the Communication/Mana Reo strand of the curriculum. The learning outcomes suggest that over time, with guidance and encouragement, children become increasingly capable of the following:

- Using gesture and movement to express themselves | he kōrero ā-tinana

- Understanding oral language and using it for a range of purposes | he kōrero ā-waha

- Enjoying hearing stories and retelling and creating them | he kōrero paki

- Recognising print symbols and concepts and using them with enjoyment, meaning and purpose | he kōrero tuhituhi

- Recognising mathematical symbols and concepts and using them with enjoyment, meaning and purpose | he kōrero pāngarau

- Expressing their feelings and ideas using a range of materials and modes | he kōrero auaha

The key principles from the NELP report for how literacy develops are clearly expressed in these outcomes. It is important that children have opportunities to dance and sing, to talk with teachers and peers, to listen to stories and tell stories to others, to be engaged with print symbols and mathematical symbols in a range of forms, and to use a range of media for writing, drawing and creating their own artefacts. It is also useful to think of Vygotsky's twin notions of **access** and **mediation** in terms of literacy curriculum for infants, toddlers, and young children[15]. Children need access to resources and opportunities in the ECE setting, but they will be limited if they do not have thoughtful and intentional mediation of literacy at each phase of development. Scaffolding children's developing understandings of literacy in a way that is meaningful and enjoyable for children in different age groups is a key role of the ECE teacher.

The literacy learning progressions on school entry

The Ministry of Education's Literacy Learning Progressions[16] chart the expected progress in literacy from school entry to year 8 in New Zealand and are a useful resource for ECE teachers. It explains that children's progress in school has a foundation in the experiences that children have in homes and ECE settings prior to school entry. Children need a foundation of language and literacy experiences before starting school in order to make a smooth transition to literacy in primary school, including opportunities to develop:

- curiosity about oral language and a willingness to experiment with it, for example, by playing with rhyme and alliteration

- a wide oral vocabulary of nouns and verbs and also many adjectives and prepositions

- willingness and confidence to talk about things happening now, in the past, and in the future

- the ability to retell an experience, an event, or a known text

- an awareness of rhyme and of words that start with the same sound, along with the ability to hear and distinguish some other phonemes in spoken words.

As this list shows, this is not a 'skill and drill' approach to fostering literacy and helpfully it is not focused simply on constrained skills, but rather on rich literacy learning experiences that can be achieved through story reading, language games, dramatic play, singing and other activities. In addition to developing confidence with the abilities listed above, most children's engagement with written texts in various media will have enabled them to acquire some specific knowledge and skills for reading and writing, including the following:

- the ability to read their own name and also some familiar signs and symbols from their environment (such as logos, brand names, and cultural symbols)

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- an awareness of some concepts about print (for example, they hold a book the right way up, and they know that a book is read from front to back)

- the ability to identify the first letter of their name and some other letters

- the ability to write their own name

- the ability to form some other letters correctly

- the ability to securely hold a pencil, crayon, or other writing and drawing tool.

The experiences named in the Literacy Learning Progressions provide a good place to start when looking for the sorts of experiences children need as they make the transition to school.

Assessing progress towards the literacy learning outcomes in the Communication strand

There is a growing body of research on how to assess literacy acquisition both prior to and after school entry. Research has demonstrated that, although many children in low SES centres may have a limited range of constrained and unconstrained skills, these can be strengthened through teachers intentionally enriching the early childhood environment and focusing on supporting alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, vocabulary and comprehension through the activities they provide and the stories they choose to read to children. Doing much more story reading is a useful strategy for most ECE teachers as it is one of the most important gifts you can give a child and is foundational to literacy development[17].

It is very important that teachers check on children's progress towards the Communication strand learning outcomes in their approaches to assessment[18], and it is useful for teachers to have a plan for assessment which has long-term, medium-term, and short-term approaches[19]. The revised Te Whāriki advocates a similar approach, suggesting that teachers gather data informally as it happens but also use some planned approaches to assessment which include time to reflect on the range of evidence of learning and development collected[20]. It is useful to start with the learning outcomes and decide what type of learning to look for in relation to each outcome and which data collection method is needed. For instance, recognition of the alphabet is recommended by research[21] and one of the Te Whāriki learning outcomes includes recognition of print symbols, so teachers might identify which letters children know and plan learning opportunities to extend that. One strategy might be to read an alphabet book with a child to identify which letters they know, and then intentionally draw their attention to other letters while engaging with them in story reading and play.

Research suggests that 'Letter of the week' type strategies common in ECE are not particularly effective for anyone[22]. Children are more likely to know the letters of their own name and the name of an uppercase letter if it is in their own name. They may also be more familiar with letters early in the alphabet – especially A, B, C - due to repetition. In addition, some letters occur more frequently than others (such as T and E as opposed to Z and Q). Children are more likely to know consonant letter names with the most commonly associated sound at the beginning (such as B) or the end (/m/ in M),and to learn letter sound correspondences for phonemes that are easy to pronounce (such as /m/, /b/, and /p/). They are also more likely to know letters that are visually distinct (like X) and confuse letters that look similar (such as C and G). Finally, children may be confused by letters with multiple corresponding sounds (like /k/ and /s/ for C). There is also a typical sequence in which letter names and letter sounds are learned, which means that teachers need to know which letters children do and don't know in order to teach the alphabet effectively[23]. The table below suggests the typical sequence of development.

Letter names	Letter sounds (phonemes)
First initial of name	C A
O	B
B	TPS
A	KOJZFD
C	MVE
X	G
PSEHT	LHNR
WMRKD	Q
FLYZ	IWX
GJNIQ	
U	
V	

New entrant teachers will look explicitly for knowledge of the alphabet and phoneme recognition, but ECE teachers can equally gather evidence through a range of data-gathering strategies to build up a picture of a child's early literacy learning. It is also important that ECE teachers think about which types of data-gathering techniques are being used to gather evidence of progression towards learning outcomes. Recent research in New Zealand shows that, when teachers extend the range of tools they use for gathering data, they have increased insights into what and how children are learning[24]. The recent 'Data, knowledge, action' research project with Ruahine Kindergarten Association showed that teachers can use data collection tools such as the Child Experience Observation System (CEOS) (where teachers code children's play over a period time), the Play and Learning Analysis System (PLAS) (in which a child wears a GoPro body camera), or the Child Information Profile (CIP) (which teachers and families complete) to strengthen the range and types of data they have available. The research showed that teachers' knowledge of children increased, and that it enabled more intentional teaching for some children to support learning[25].

Focussing on practice: Literacy in the ECE setting

It is important that ECE teachers are aware of where children are on the continuum of literacy development and provide a range of interesting and meaningful opportunities to support early learning. This is not about teaching beginning reading – it is about laying the very important foundations for literacy and valuing the importance of what ECE teachers do to support children's foundational understandings of literacy. This section examines what can be seen as the 'big picture' and 'little picture' views of literacy in ECE settings. The big picture is about how teachers 'notice, recognise and respond' to young children's early literacy development, while the little picture is about specific things teachers can do to support early literacy.

Fostering children's literacy prior to school entry: The big picture

- **Know the predictors of reading achievement** and recognise when children demonstrate achievement of these (refer to the NELP report and the Literacy Learning Progressions)

- **Determine children's linguistic capacity** and in what language (again, refer to the NELP report and the Literacy Learning Progressions)

- **Find out about the literacy experiences the child has had at home** and build on these

- **Provide opportunities to give children unfamiliar literacy experiences** that they may not experience at home

- **Make intentional choices about literacy resources**, focusing specifically on the language development aspects of resources (in relation to the NELP report and the Literacy Learning Progressions). Make sure the choices are age appropriate: for example, phonics packages are not designed for use with infants and toddlers

- **Maximise 'teachable moments'** by noticing, recognising and responding to everyday literacy opportunities

- **Use a range of teaching and learning strategies** so that children experience some continuity during their transition to school and are used to some group work and group story reading

- **Document observable literacy behaviours**, so that your assessment includes evidence of what children already know and can do

Fostering children's literacy prior to school entry: The little picture

- **Encourage knowledge of nursery rhymes**, which is really helpful for phonological awareness. You can sing nursery rhymes, emphasising the rhyming parts and pointing out the humour. Try using rhymes at appropriate moments ('we know a rhyme about that…'). You might also make up 'our very own rhymes' or change the words in familiar rhymes.

- **Encourage knowledge of beginning sounds**: this can be done during story reading with large groups, small groups and one to one (for example, pointing out that f is for f/ish, f/ootball, f/amily so that children learn they begin with the same sound), and during songs, rhymes and language games like 'I spy'.

- **Encourage alphabet awareness** beyond the alphabet song by talking to children about alphabet charts, perhaps singing the song while pointing to the letters. You might also use a letter card to send children off the mat, use cards and magnetic letters to make words in activities, and read books with lots of emphasis on the alphabet with older children and simple books on the alphabet with babies and toddlers.

- **Use story book reading to promote knowledge about language** by playing with rhymes and rimes (word families, such as lock, block, clock) and identifying beginning sounds. You can also talk about links between pictures and words to help children's vocabulary and comprehension, and define unfamiliar words, as vocabulary gains are doubled if you explain the meaning of new words. Use both 'print referencing' and 'dialogic' (questioning) approaches to reading as they support different aspects of early literacy.

- **Encourage recognition and writing of children's own name** using name boards, dictating or writing names on artwork, and using the first sound of children's names to send them off the mat (for example, names beginning with /p/ sound). You might also provide lots of opportunities for writing

throughout the centre: clipboards are indestructible and really useful for supporting emergent writing. For example, you might use sign up lists for activities.

- **Support children to use digital technologies** for writing, reading stories or researching different topics, remembering to scaffold and mediate their learning .

Endnotes

1　UNESCO. (2004). The plurality of literacy and its implications for policies and programmes. UNESCO Position paper, p. 13.

2　Ministry of Education (2017). Te Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum.

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4　Teale, W.H., Whittingham, C. E. & Hoffman, E. B. (2020). Early literacy research 2006-2015: A decade of measured progress. Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 20(2), 169-222.

5　Sénéchal & le Fevre, 2014.

6　Sénéchal, M., & le Fevre, J. (2014). Continuity and change in the home literacy environment as predictors of growth in vocabulary and reading. Child Development 85(4).

7　McLachlan, C. (2020). Multiliteracies in early childhood education. In A. Hynds (ed.), Oxford Bibliographies in Education. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

8　Teale et al., 2020.

9　National Early Literacy Panel. (2009). Developing early literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel, Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Literacy.

10　NELP, 2009.

11　NELP, 2009; Teale et al., 2020.

12　Snow, C.E. & Matthews, T.J. (2016). Reading and language in the early grades. The Future of Children, 26(2), 57-74.

13　Snow & Matthews, 2016.

14　MoE, 2017, p. 45.

15　Vygotsky, L. (1978). Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

16　Ministry of Education, 2010.

17　McLachlan, C.J. & Arrow, A.W. (2013). Promoting alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness in low socioeconomic child-care settings: A quasi experimental study in five New Zealand centres. Reading and Writing, 27, 819-839. DOI: 10.1007/s11145-013-9467-y

18　The Ministry of Education has recognised that the screening of children's literacy abilities at the age of 6 - a year after school entry for most - is too late for children who do not display strong early literacy on school entry. The

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Ministry is now prioritising screening and progress monitoring in the first six months of school to provide greater support to children who have not had adequate early literacy learning experiences in homes and ECE settings (Ministry of Education, 2019, Learning support action plan: 2019-2025).

19 McLachlan, C., Edwards, S., Margrain, V. & McLean, K. (2013). Children's learning and development: contemporary assessment in the early years. Sydney, NSW: Palgrave MacMillan.

20 MoE, 2017.

21 NELP, 2009.

22 Piasta, S. (2014). Moving to assessment-guided differentiated instruction to support young children's alphabet knowledge. The Reading Teacher, 68(3), 202-211.

23 Piasta, 2014.

24 McLaughlin, T., Cherrington, S., McLachlan, C., Aspden, K., & Hunt, L. (2020). Building a data culture to enhance quality teaching and learning. Early Childhood Folio, 24 (2).

25 Hunt, L., McLaughlin, T., Cherrington, S., Aspden, K., & McLachlan, C. (2020). Data, knowledge, action: A teacher led inquiry into data informed teaching in early childhood education. Early Education, 66, 35-38.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY

Professor Claire McLachlan

Professor Claire McLachlan is Dean, School of Education at Federation University Australia. She completed her Ph.D at Massey University on the topic of emergent literacy in kindergartens. She has written and researched this topic for the last 30 years and still finds it fascinating. She was also a member of the writing team for the revision of Te Whāriki.

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