



Peer- reviewed Paper

**Early learning skills and dispositions for reading comprehension: promoting equity through early childhood education.**

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Literacy is seen as an important indicator for success in school and work environments. However a significant number of children are still underachieving in this area of learning. A lack of reading comprehension has been identified as one of the contributors to poor literacy levels (Adams & Ryan, 2002) and research shows that literacy experiences in the early years, are a means for improving children's later achievement (McNaughton, 2002; Nuttall & Edwards, 2007; Roskos & Christie, 2007). This improvement in performance implies that early childhood education can create more equitable opportunities for children. The difficulty however arises when teacher initiated goals for literacy can be seen to be in conflict with the principles of the child initiating their own learning, as in the New Zealand curriculum *Te Whāriki*. This paper suggests that with a better understanding of reading comprehension and early learning, early childhood teachers can incorporate experiences that are both teacher directed as well as being relevant to the child's interests. Improved partnerships between teachers, parents and primary school, are also considered in promoting equal opportunities at school entry.

***Introduction***

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum '*Te Whāriki*', views the child as a capable and confident learner. The child is seen as a 'life-long' learner, in alignment with the overall purpose of the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996). Both *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand curriculum as a whole strives for equitable opportunities for children. It may then be useful for teachers to recognize how children from diverse cultures and backgrounds are underachieving in literacy. Māori and Pacific Island students and many students from lower socio economic groups are now identified as low achievers in reading levels at school (Adams & Ryan, 2002; Ferguson, Gorinski, Wendt Samu & Mara, 2008). Even though these children catch up quickly with knowledge of letter-sound relationships, their scores in reading comprehension and vocabulary remains lower than their peers (McNaughton, 2002; McNaughton, Lai, McDonald & Farry, 2004). As a result children can form negative self-concepts of themselves as readers. This can occur as early as the first two months of primary school (Chapman and Tunmer, 1995, as cited in Chapman and Tunmer, 2002; Nash, 2002; Roskos & Christie, 2007). This paper explores why some children are denied early literacy experiences and how early



childhood teachers might make the start of primary school a more equitable experience.

### **The issues with reading comprehension**

A closer look at reading comprehension shows that success in literacy brings about critical reading skills, sorting skills with information and the ability to respond to that information. These skills are important especially today when we must navigate through the internet options, take part in global communications and be always confronted with new technological innovations (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). The issue with the development of reading comprehension is that skills only develop through practice which includes explicit instruction in strategies used for comprehension. It is therefore hard for the child to pick up the right skills independently without a teacher's support and guidance (Pressley, 2002).

When values and knowledge held in the school system do not accord with those of the child's cultural background, the child might not fully benefit from the education the school system is offering. The child's *cultural capital* in terms of literacy at school entry may not provide an *easy way* into the system (Bourdieu, 1973, as cited in Turoa, Wolfram, Tanielu & McNaughton, 2002). Cultural capital refers here to the culturally based values and experiences that individuals, particularly in an educational setting, bring with them to school (Coxon, Anae, Mara, Wendt-Samu & Finau, 2002). To increase opportunities for success, teachers need to come to a shared understanding of the knowledge and values held by families from different cultures and the current school system, building onto this knowledge values and concepts that they know will be required for literacy (Farquhar and Fleer, 2007; McNaughton, 2002). The early childhood sector is well positioned to fill this need as planning is based on the child's prior knowledge connected to the home.

Teachers need to be aware of different approaches according to culture which might make it more difficult for a child to effectively take part in literacy activities such as discussions about texts (Au, 2002). Students who are taught at home only to respond when they know the correct answer for example, might not be involved in discussions about reading content. Through experience with this teaching style, the child comes to expect the adult to initiate the teaching activity, an expectation which is far removed from the co-constructed learning a teacher might expect at school (Tagoilelagi, 1995). This raises the question as to what teachers, parents and *whānau* (a term for extended family in New Zealand) can offer children to increase success in reading comprehension and learning of skills and dispositions at this level to reduce disparities in literacy achievement in school.

### **Issues with Te Whāriki**

The 'Literacy Taskforce' (as cited in Nicholson, 2002) recommended teaching phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge as a base for reading and comprehension, especially for children from less privileged backgrounds. Tunmer and Chapman (2002) supported this, pointing to children who are less advanced in reading, have insufficient word-recognition skills. McLachlan-Smith and Shaker (2002) reported that rich literacy experiences before starting school, such as storybook reading, knowledge of letter-sound relationships and



extensive vocabulary makes a difference to success in literacy at school. Despite the recommendation of the Literacy Taskforce, the New Zealand Ministry of Education advised early childhood teachers to focus on creating *print rich* environments (Cullen, 2002). More recent research on literacy achievement has again stressed the importance of early literacy experiences including, vocabulary growth and comprehension skills for learning to read (Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, Turner & Hsaio, 2009; Hamer & Adams, 2003). The divergent approaches to teaching literacy have led to teaching of specific pre-literacy skills despite this not being in accordance with the 'Te Whāriki,' a teaching philosophy based on following the interests of the children (Cullen, 2007; Hedges & Cullen, 2005; McLachlan, 2007).

Another aspect that makes planning for pre-literacy skills difficult for teachers is "the lack of specific detail and direction provided in the (*New Zealand*) early childhood curriculum document" (Hamer and Adams, 2003, p.25). It is only in the Communication strand that reference to aspects of literacy is made but only in terms of cultural symbols (MoE, 1996). Basic building blocks to literacy such as alphabet knowledge and phonological skills are not explicitly mentioned relying on teachers' and parents' knowledge of the type of early learning experiences needed for reading comprehension and on their active involvement in preparing the child for success in reading (McLachlan, 2007; Nuttall, 2005). An awareness of the current issues in literacy and reading comprehension together with knowledge about literacy development will enable teachers to plan pre-literacy experiences for reading comprehension. These exercises enable pre-literacy experiences for reading comprehension to be linked to the children's interests (Cullen, 2003; Harris, 2007; McLachlan, 2007).

### **How can teachers incorporate early literacy experiences for reading comprehension within Te Whāriki curriculum?**

Early childhood education experiences which facilitate early literacy can also be connected to children's pretend play. Play is an important vehicle for learning in the early childhood curriculum (MoE, 1996) and a good preparation for reading comprehension in itself (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Learning dispositions which are important foundations for learning to read, such as curiosity, inquisitiveness, communication and perseverance, are fostered naturally in play (Carr, 1998). Other skills require ongoing intervention and support from parents and teachers, for example efficient word recognition strategies, which includes word-decoding skills. Having these skills allows the child to concentrate on integrating text with other comprehension strategies such as visual cues (Adams, 1990, as cited in Chapman and Tunmer, 2002). To promote word recognition and word decoding skills teachers and parents can consciously link pre-literacy skills to the child's learning interest, for example by adding *work in progress* signs to the block corner, different sized letters for an *eye-test* and pencil and paper for prescription to the *doctor's corner* and *stop and go* signs to car and train games (Roskos & Christie, 2007). To do this effectively it is important to know the child well in terms of their understanding of literacy concepts and their interests in order to extend the child's knowledge (McNaughton, 2002).

Literacy practices a child is familiar with at home, such as encouraging the child to label items, telling stories and re-telling experiences, build onto and value the child's social and cultural background knowledge (Hedges & Cullen, 2005). An example of one of these practices that form a good foundation for reading



comprehension is a child being able to retell a story in their own words relating it to their own experience. The skill to ask and answer questions as well as the ability to think creatively when making predictions based on a story line or in response to visual images can also be developed (Pressley, 2006). The early childhood teacher can thus model curiosity and ask questions to encourage participation, being responsive to the child's contributions and ideas.

Young children learn about literacy in collaboration with others, so the role of adults in preparing the child for reading comprehension is important (Cullen, 2002; McNaughton (2002). Incorporating letters and sounds that are linked to special objects or names in children's play, increases motivation for literacy learning. Another strategy is to consciously and purposefully introduce rich vocabulary by reading books that are linked to play itself thus linked directly to the children's interests and experiences (Ashton, Woodrow, Johnston, Wangmann, Singh & James, 2008). Duke and Pearson (2002) confirm that using texts that are relevant to the child increases their motivation to read, such as choosing a book that links in with the child's focus of exploration or helping the child make a book of their own story or about their family and friends. Teaching and learning strategies for reading comprehension such as predicting, questioning, clarifying and re-telling stories can then be practiced by talking about the story, linking it to the children and asking questions. It is also important to encourage children to ask about a text and to predict what will happen next in a story, from the pictures (McNaughton, 2002; Pressley, 2006). Through practice the child will use these comprehension techniques independently once at school.

For Adams and Jackson (2002) storybook reading is the most important core literacy practice assisting children's comprehension. They recommend that adults work together with children, co-constructing meaning of different aspects of a story. Pressley adds that it is essential to teach words in context, which means ascertaining which words children know and what they know about these words (Pressley, 2006; Stahl, 2003). Modeling active reading strategies is another strategy, asking children to make predictions, talk about the story and make predictions (Duke and Pearson, 2002). According to Lai et al. (2009), children who have good comprehension skills are able to retell a story in their own words and make up visual images about the story and relate it to their own experiences. This can thus encourage the child to make visually representations by making a painting or a collage.

### **Parent/whānau partnerships**

Parents and whānau have an important role to play in reading books to their child. This can be done in a fun way by organizing a *read-a-thon* or setting up a lending-library at the centre. Encouraging the parents to read stories often to their child, explaining how it prepares their child for reading comprehension, showing how to talk with the child about the story and how to encourage the child to ask questions, could align teaching and learning strategies between home and school. To further develop equitable outcomes in education, teachers can visibly and actively promote early literacy experiences for children at the centre.

When English is not the child's first language, support for the child's first language is especially important if the parents are not fluent in English (Tabors



& Snow, 2001). Amituanai-Toloa and McNaughton (2008) point out that bilingual children who receive initial instruction in their own language are at an advantage and take a shorter time to learn to read because these children are able to translate strategies learnt in their own language to English. Teachers can also support the child by allowing access to prior knowledge in their own language, using peers to translate (Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Presley, 1999). By considering prior experiences the child's own language becomes a resource for learning, rather than deficit (Dyson, 1997; Lee, Spencer & Harpalani, 2003). Sharing each other's cultural stories also widens the children's view on the world and increases their reference points from which they might understand new stories. To make stories more accessible to children with English as a second language teachers could introduce multiple ways of conveying the content of a story, such as using visual, audio, gestural and spatial ways of expressing themselves (Healey, 2008; Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke & Harrison, 2008). An example might be choosing music to go with their story, using gestures and include video and photos in their re-enactment of a story. This enables children from diverse backgrounds to relate their experiences and knowledge in ways that might be more accessible to them.

### **Conclusion**

Adams & Ryan (2002) identified ongoing disparities in literacy achievement and lack of reading comprehension in particular as an issue especially for children of diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Early literacy experiences that are congruent with current school practice can make a significant difference to children's achievement in reading comprehension and overall academic success (MoE, 2002; Nuttall & Edwards, 2007; Roskos & Christie, 2007). Being aware of disparities in literacy achievements for certain groups of children does not however mean following a 'deficit' approach to teaching. It means that we know that some children might come to school with knowledge, values and approaches to learning that do not quite match the current school culture, which might prevent the child from fully taking part. I believe we should celebrate a child's abilities and knowledge connected to their culture in a way that enables them to successfully engage with the education system. It is important that experiences and practices at home, early childhood centres and schools are congruent and that partnerships exist in the transition to school, so that teachers and parents may work together to achieve equitable outcomes in literacy within the context of the child's play, to create a base from which the child can develop for all children. Finally I would encourage further exploration by parents and early childhood teachers in providing early literacy experiences into a proficient reader.

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