

The Early Literacy Handbook

Making sense of language and literacy with children birth to seven – a practical guide to the context approach

by Dominic Wyse and Christine Parker

BIRTH
TO
SEVEN

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Building on what children know



Sharing story books at home

Children should be at the centre of decisions made about teaching and learning. In order for this to happen, educators need to build on children's interests, experiences and understanding. However, it is too easy for what we might call child-centred education to be nothing but a truism; the practical reality takes sensitivity and rigour.

Child-centred learning is a much misunderstood idea, but a careful reading of the more thoughtful theorists reveals its relevance for modern educational environments. John Dewey, one of the leading thinkers in relation to child-centred education, argued that good teaching is built on the educator's understanding that there should be an interaction between educational aims and children's experiences and ideas. Less effective learning takes place if, instead of interaction, an opposition is built. Over-emphasis on transmission of facts to be learned from a formal

syllabus is one example of such opposition. Dewey was clear that the best knowledge available to society was the appropriate material for children's learning (hence it is untrue to imply that child-centred education is only about 'children teaching themselves'), but only through teaching that made a connection with children's experiences and thoughts. Dewey identified three "evils" of inappropriate curriculum material: a) material that is not organic to the child; b) material where the connecting links of need and aim are missing; c) lack of logical value.

To Dewey logical value was curriculum organisation that represented the best knowledge in society organised through a natural progression involving authentic hands-on experiences for the child. He said, "Guidance [by educators] is not external imposition. It is freeing the life-process for its own most adequate fulfilment"¹.

Working with multilingual reading resources

There are many books available for young children written in more than one language. In addition to these texts, it is important to have books written in a single language other than English to reflect the languages spoken in the setting and community. In addition, listening equipment placed alongside the book area can be used to provide opportunities for children to hear both stories and songs in a range of languages.

With the provision of bilingual and multilingual books, educators can share these texts with either individual children or small groups of children. This allows for children to ask their own questions about the texts and the language.

Continuous provision of these texts is enhanced by the planning for a series of sessions to draw children's attention to the texts.

Hello World!⁴ Session one

The educator introduces the five minute session by welcoming the children in a language other than English. He asks the children if they know any other ways of saying "Hello!" The educator then explains that he wants to go on holiday to Germany and maybe the book he has brought to share could help them to find out how to say "Good morning!" He reads fragments of the book until he finds "Guten Morgen". To finish the session he places the book on the book shelf in a prominent place and plans to note if any children choose to look at the book for themselves.

Hello World! Session two

The educator has invited a parent to introduce the second session. As a result of the setting's newsletter a child's mother who is a fluent Italian speaker offered to speak to

the children in her first language. The children are fascinated to hear one of the parents speak in another language. They are delighted to show her their book and where it says "Ciao!" The children are encouraged by the educator to ask the parent questions about being Italian: What food does she like? Does she listen to Italian songs? Can she sing an Italian nursery rhyme? How does *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* go in Italian? The children find out that pizza and pasta are Italian. The educator invites the parent to return another time to demonstrate how she makes pasta.

Hello World! Session three

The educator has noticed in his observations that the children are increasingly interested in the book. To begin the session the educator reads it all the way through, noting which greetings the children are most interested in. The educator suggests to the children that they can make their own greetings book. He has prepared some ready-made books by simply folding pieces of A4 card in half. He has also prepared different greetings in different languages on small strips of paper. He explains that when they go to

Aims for reading sessions with three year olds

Teaching aims

- Develop children's awareness of different languages spoken in the community.
- Develop the children's enjoyment of listening to different languages.
- Learn to say greetings in different languages.

Assessment evidence in children's language

- "I know lots of languages!"
- "Listen to me! Bonjour!"

⁴ Stojic M (2009) *Hello World!* Boxer Books Limited, London, UK.

ASSESSING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

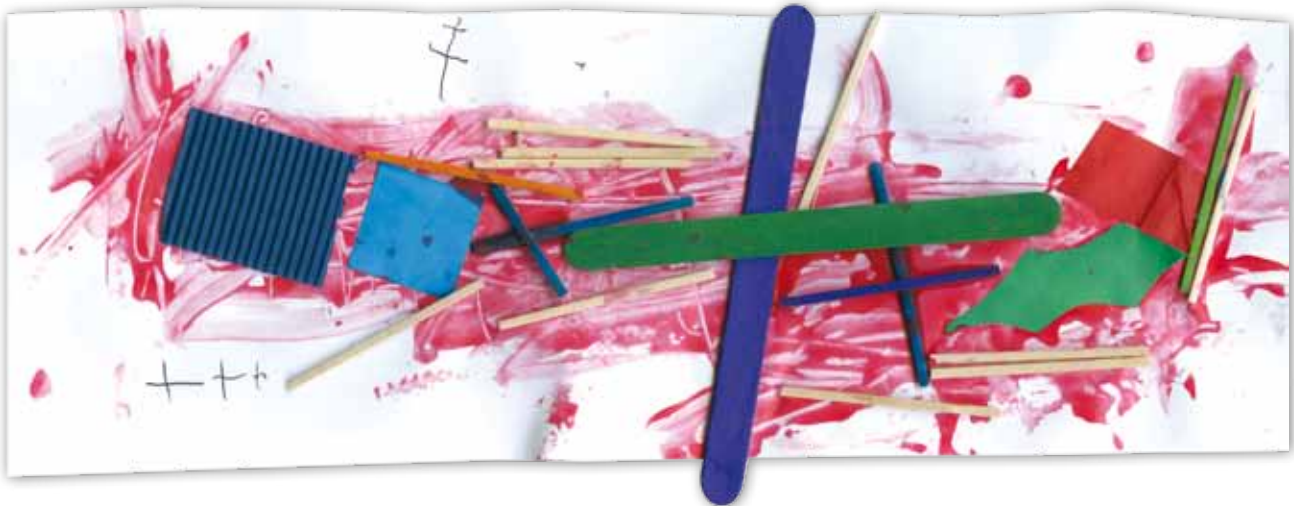
Figure 6.1: A child's dialogue with her mother

Transcription of a child's talk	Commentary
<p>Rosie is drawing a picture of her family.</p> <p>Mum, I'm playing hobblesticks on this picture. I've got bare toes because everyone has to have bare toes to play fiddle balance. Shall I do it sunny day or a rainy day?</p> <p>I'm writing names. Now I've got to do dots. Dotty is its name. I'm going to do a floating 'A' for Alice. Actually that would spoil the picture. I'm doing my family.</p> <p>One toe sticking out of that leg, two toes sticking out of that trouser leg. Mum, what else would you like?</p>	<p>Rosie uses talk to describe, imagine and explain her picture.</p> <p>Rosie asks her mother for her opinion as she draws.</p> <p>Rosie shows that she has a rich vocabulary that she uses to great effect to describe her actions and her picture.</p>

Figure 6.2: A child describes her small world play

Transcription of a child's talk	Commentary
<p>Shannon: Then he went on a boat. Then he fell back in the water. Then he found another boat. It was good enough for the other one. The boat kept sinking and in that boat making the sand wet in there.</p> <p>Then a crocodile came.</p> <p>Then a crocodile came.</p> <p>Then a crocodile came.</p> <p>A crocodile coming!</p> <p><i>Shannon says "crocodile" in a high pitched voice.</i></p> <p>Shannon: He snapped the boat! ... He got him!</p> <p>The crocodile has caught the man.</p> <p>Look here's a baby one ... I put them on a boat and they never be nasty to him anymore. Snapping each other. The crocodile snapped his tail and he bit his tail.</p> <p><i>Another child joins Shannon.</i></p> <p>Shannon: Let me show you this.</p>	<p>Shannon uses talk to imagine and tell her story.</p> <p>Shannon builds up the drama of her story through repeated phrases. This is a construct she will have heard in stories and songs.</p> <p>Shannon has learnt that you can change the pitch of your voice to dramatic effect.</p> <p>Shannon reaches a resolution and then decides to return to the fighting theme.</p> <p>Shannon is keen to share her story with another child.</p>
<p>Next steps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recast Shannon's talk so that she hears grammatically correct verbs in the past tense. ● Scribe one of Shannon's narratives, type it up and print it off. ● Show Shannon the script and record her response. ● Suggest to Shannon that she could illustrate her story. Alternatively take photographs of her story using the small world play resources. These can be shared with the whole class on either the interactive whiteboard or visualiser or in a display book. 	

Figure 6.7: Delilah, nursery, 3 years 9 months



Delilah goes to the art area and selects a rectangular piece of white paper. She applies red paint across the paper and experiments by taking a stick and making vertical and horizontal marks. Delilah decides to select material to stick on top. She chooses different coloured and shaped paper, lollisticks, purple, green, orange and natural coloured sticks.

Delilah takes the adult's pen and makes some marks. She explains, "That one's a baby cross, big cross, medium, little. I can draw a little one up there. How about if I just did one of them like that and two ones like that?"

Delilah describes her actions and gives explanations.

Figure 6.8: Vlads, Foundation Stage/Reception class, 4 years 6 months



Vlads decides to draw a picture of his educator Ms Patel. He tells Ms Patel that he has written his name, thus ascribing meaning to the marks he has made. He also makes marks to represent 'Mama!'

TEACHING LETTERS AND PHONEMES

moon, soon and boom and /oo/ as in oops, look, footprints and took. Words that are onomatopoeic are great to reinforce in children's play, such as /sp/ and /sh/ in splash and /w/ and /ee/ in whee. Playing in puddles provides an ideal opportunity to focus on the word 'splash' and going down the slide fast is a natural reinforcement of whee.

When reading the story *Meg on the Moon* to a group of children, the focus can be either on the characters' names or the words in speech bubbles. These focus words can be provided in the writing area to reinforce and promote application. The following witch's spell:

Three chunks of cheese,
A very loud sneeze,
Man on the moon,
We'll see you soon.

offers an opportunity for the children to decode a complete text and then to be motivated to create their own spells.

Aliens Love Underpants²⁵

Aliens Love Underpants is a text written in rhyme. In addition to their intrinsic value, stories that rhyme support the children's growing awareness of phonemes. Having read the story through several times, the children will enjoy the rhyming words, words that help them to memorise the text and enrich their spoken vocabulary. This is a great text for reinforcing /u/. In the phonic session the children apply their phonic knowledge when sounding out /u/ /n/ /d/ /u/ /p/ /a/ /n/ /t/ /s/. They can show the educator the number of times the word 'underpants' appears in the story. The children can decide which is their favourite part of the story, which is the funniest part of the story and share their ideas for a new story. To follow up the phonic session the children can design their own underpants!

25 Freedman C, Cort B (2007) *Aliens Love Underpants*. Simon and Schuster, London, UK.

26 Harter D (1997) *Walking Through the Jungle*. Barefoot Books, Bristol, UK.

27 Powell H (2001) *Game-songs with Prof Dogg's Troupe* [book and audio CD]. Second Edition. A&C Black, London, UK.

28 Carter D A (2010) *The Happy Little Yellow Box. A pop-up book of opposites*. Tango Books Ltd, London, UK.

29 Mayo M, Ayliffe A (2002) *Emergency!* Orchard Books, London, UK.

Walking Through the Jungle²⁶

This text presents a song, which, if the educator does not know the tune, can be chanted instead (the song is available in *Game-songs with Prof Dogg's Troupe*)²⁷. It offers the opportunity to support the phonic teaching of, for example, /w/ for walking, /th/ for through, /j/ for jungle and /ch/ for chasing. Travelling words like these can be successfully developed both outdoors and in physical education sessions. The educator invites the children to travel around in a way that begins with /w/ and then in a way that begins with /ch/. This idea can be further developed by taking on the children's ideas. They might suggest /j/ for jumping or /s/ for sliding or /h/ for hopping.

Non-fiction texts to inspire more learning about phonics

The Happy Little Yellow Box²⁸

This is a short text that focusses on positional language, for example 'outside and inside', 'high and low' and 'up and down'. The happy little yellow box features on each page and there are tabs to move and flaps to lift. It can be used to focus on either specific phonemes, such as /h/, /l/, /y/, /b/, or /ks/ as in box. Children love to play with boxes and so there is a lot of potential to develop children's reading skills by providing written suggestions in a box modelling area. Children can make either their own happy little yellow boxes or their own variations.

Emergency!²⁹

Young children frequently engage in emergency services role play. This text embraces their enthusiasm. Each page depicts a different emergency service coming to the rescue. The repeated phrase "Help is coming – it's on the way!" is one