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Early Literacy and the Transition to School: Issues for Early Childhood and Primary Educators

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Abstract

The transition to school is a major event for many children and with it comes the transition into formal instruction in reading, writing and oral language. This paper examines the dominant approaches used internationally for promoting literacy during the transition from early childhood programmes to primary school. It also examines some key issues: teachers’ understandings of the predictors of literacy achievement; the importance of relationships; and establishing effective assessment and evaluation procedures. The implications for future research in this area are discussed.

Key Words: Emergent literacy; transition to school; teachers’ roles

Introduction

Internationally, New Zealand has been highly regarded for its approaches to promoting literacy. Within the country, however, there has been hot debate as to the best way in which to teach reading and writing, with proponents of whole language and phonics at logger heads over which strategy should be used. We know that approximately 75% (Nicholson, 2005) of children learn to read, regardless of method used, but the remaining 25% may not respond to usual methods of instruction, or to “reading recovery”. Rather than focussing on which method of instruction is the best, the focus internationally has turned to understanding what the predictors of successful reading achievement are and what the role of the teacher needs to be in order to promote it. Attention has turned to the early years in which literacy develops and the importance of the transition to school. This paper explores approaches to literacy during the transition from early childhood centre or home to school internationally, starting with New Zealand, followed by an exploration of the predictors of reading achievement, the role of teachers in supporting literacy development and the ways in which assessment could be used to identify and support children’s literacy progress during the transition to school.

Literacy Policy in New Zealand

In October 1998, the New Zealand government announced the goal that “By 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write and do maths for success” (Ministry of Education, 1999). The Ministry of Education established a 20 person task force to offer advice on how the goal should be defined, how progress toward it could be measured and the ways in which literacy learning could best be supported. Their recommendations included clear definitions, more information for teachers on reading instruction, analysis of teacher education programmes, professional development, up skilling of school principals, a
stronger base of interventions, externally referenced assessment of children’s progress and more assistance to low decile schools.

Following this, the Ministry of Education (2000) published a revision of the National Administration Guidelines (NAGS), which placed a renewed emphasis on the basics and established a “Literacy Leadership” programme designed to raise achievement in literacy in primary schools. The Education Review Office released a report on early literacy and numeracy, which stated that there was a lack of systematic assessment of literacy in early childhood programmes and inconsistent use of assessment strategies such as the School Entry Assessment tools on school entry (ERO, 2000). In 2001, New Zealand participated for the first time in the “Progress in International Reading Literacy Study” (PIRLS-01), which tests two areas of reading: reading for literary purposes and reading for intentional purposes. Although New Zealand’s score for year 5 students was higher than the international average (529 vs. 500), we had a wide spread of literacy achievement. 17% of children scored above the 90th percentile (615), but of concern was the 16% of children who did not reach the lower quarter percentile of 435. Girls scored better than boys (542 vs. 516), across all ethnic groups, while NZ European scored higher than Māori or Pasifika children. Similarly, in the latest “Progress for International Student Assessment” (PISA) study (OECD, 2004) New Zealand’s distribution of reading scores was larger than all but a few of the participating countries. In each study the majority of poor readers were from low income backgrounds, with an over-representation of Māori children.

In 2005, New Zealand participated again in the PIRLS-05/06. 6200 year 5 children completed the tests in November 2005, as part of groups of children from 40 countries. The results indicate that there are no significant changes in the mean achievement of New Zealand children since 2001. New Zealand still has the largest gender difference in achievement of any country, with girls’ achievement higher than boys, although there is no significant change in mean achievement since 2001. Of interest is that the 75th percentile is still high at 592, while of concern is the 25th percentile at 478, indicating that over a quarter of our children are still below the international benchmark for reading achievement (Chamberlain, 2007). These results do not suggest that the Ministry has achieved its objective of having every nine year old child reading and writing for success. This evidence isn’t surprising, given the results of Tunmer, Chapman and Prochnow’s (2006) longitudinal study, which found that literate cultural capital at school entry in New Zealand, predicted reading achievement seven years later. Literate cultural capital is defined as a generic term referring to reading related variables at school entry that are linked to activities in the home environment that support literacy. Tunmer, Chapman and Prochnow argue that although poverty exists in New Zealand, our standard deviations on international tests should be smaller than countries with extreme poverty. Furthermore the gap between good and poor readers should have been reduced following the introduction in the mid-eighties of the “Reading recovery” programme, but if anything the gap has increased. They state that whole language approaches have dominated New Zealand classrooms for the past two decades, with minimal attention given to word level strategies, in spite of research which indicates that the degree of explicitness and detail with which word level skills and strategies are taught is particularly crucial for beginning and struggling readers.

Although the new curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2007) empowers schools to develop their own curricula and in many curriculum areas the curriculum has been reduced, the English curriculum has become more specific. The Ministry has identified that children must learn to decode as well as take meaning from text. The previous document, English in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994) did not reflect that children needed to learn to decode, but assumed that they were able to begin reading from the
beginning. The development of literacy learning progressions (Ministry of Education, 2007) provide literacy milestones that are expected of children at school entry, after six months, after one year, and so on. The literacy progressions are based on a model in which there are three aspects to literacy acquisition: the first is the ‘learning of the code’; the second is to make meaning; and the third is to think critically.

Of further interest is New Zealand’s ranking at 24th of the 40 countries for reading achievement. The highest ranked countries include Eastern Europe, Asia, Canada, Italy, Western Europe and Scandinavia. The explanation given for the highest ranked country, the Russian Federation, is that the number of years of primary schooling had been increased from 3-4 years, so that children were starting school at six (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007). That this has made a difference to overall achievement makes New Zealand’s scores even more puzzling, given that our children have had 4.5 – 5.5 years of schooling by the time they take the PIRLS test. Clearly the way we are teaching our children bears further scrutiny.

Other countries have reacted in similar ways to New Zealand. In the USA, which is ranked 18th in PIRLS, the government has adopted similar measures with its “No Child Left Behind” Act (2001), Reading Excellence Act (1998) and a raft of influential educational reports advocating the support of early literacy in young children (see Ostrofsky, Gaffney & Thomas, 2006). The emphasis on early literacy represents a paradigmatic shift in childcare priorities from socialisation, safety and nurturance to recognition that early childhood “is an untapped resource for the development of literacy” (McGill-Franzen, 2000, p. 904). Two particularly influential documents (IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998) highlight the need for early childhood teachers to develop skills in the assessment and teaching of reading and writing that are responsive to individual, cultural and linguistic diversity. In the UK, ranked 19th, the “Every child matters” policy and the Foundation Stage curriculum are aimed at promoting the competencies that children will need to be successful in school. This policy is implemented across Britain through the “Sure Start” programmes. The UK has a statutory school start age (the term after a child turns five), but in practice most children begin school at four. The Foundation stage curriculum was implemented in 2000 for children aged three to the end of the reception year in primary schools, by which time most children have reached statutory age. Communication, language and literacy are one of six “early learning goals” (Aubrey, 2004). In Australia, which did not participate in PIRLS, literacy policy is shaped by the “Adelaide Declaration”, the national goals for schooling in the 21st century, released by the Australian Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (1999, in Tayler, 2006). Within this framework, the focus is on ‘students’ and their learning outcomes, which are presented as a basis for working together to promote productive learning partnerships (Tayler, 2006). Early childhood teachers may have to articulate how their curricula links in with the key learning directions of the primary school curricula. Li and Rao (2005) discuss the differences in policy for early childhood literacy in Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore. In Beijing, teaching literacy is banned until children are six years. In Hong Kong child centre curriculum is promoted but ignored by parents who want intensive drilling in the English language. In Singapore, there is a compulsory bilingual policy, but English is taught as the first language. Notably Hong Kong scored 2nd in PIRLS, while Singapore was 4th.

As this brief discussion indicates, many countries have policies which shape approaches to literacy at school entry. Furthermore, there is no clear cut relationship between literacy and years of schooling or early childhood experiences, as the countries’ scores reflect a raft of approaches to both early childhood education and school entry age. The possibility of a ‘downward push’ of academic curriculum is clear in all the instances identified, but the
solution of how to achieve the best education and literacy outcomes for children is a complex and sometimes difficult balance to achieve.

‘Noticing, Recognising and Responding’ to the Predictors of Reading Achievement

In New Zealand, the notion of “noticing, recognising and responding” underpins the early childhood assessment exemplars, Kei tua o te pae (Ministry of Education, 2005) which are promoted as a way of assessing children’s learning from a sociocultural perspective. It is argued that as teachers work with children they notice a great deal, recognise what they notice as learning, and respond to some of what they recognise. Drummond’s (1993) definition of assessment is used for shaping the ways in which early childhood educators are encouraged to assess children’s learning:

…the ways in which, in our everyday practice, we (children, families, teachers, and others) observe children’s learning (notice), strive to understand it (recognise) and then put our understanding to good use (respond) (cited in Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 6)

This notion of recognising and responding to learning is consistent with the international literature on how to support children’s emergent literacy. One of the key factors recent research highlights is that the role of the teacher in children’s emergent literacy is crucial. Wong Fillmore and Snow (2000) argue that there are five functions of language that teachers need to have an in-depth understanding of the predictors of literacy development and how to support emergent literacy development. The five functions are as follows:

1. Teacher as communicator – an understanding of linguistics and diverse patterns of language;
2. Teacher as educator – selection of appropriate resources, understanding of which language problems will resolve themselves and which require intervention;
3. Teacher as evaluator – when making decisions about children teachers need to understand that children differ in their inventory of skills and abilities because of their social context and may not reflect deficiencies;
4. Teacher as educated human being – good understanding of the English language, including spelling, grammar and punctuation and how to support bilingualism; and
5. Teacher as agent of socialisation – teachers who respect the vital role they play in assisting children to make the transition from home to school, and from home culture to school culture play a significant role in children’s literacy development.

In addition to these understandings of teacher role, Wong Fillmore and Snow argue that teachers need to have an in-depth understanding of the predictors of literacy development and how to support emergent literacy development. The term emergent literacy is used to:

…denote the idea that the acquisition of literacy is conceptualised as a developmental continuum, with its origins early in the life of a child, rather than an all or none phenomenon that begins when children start school. This conceptualisation departs from other perspectives in reading acquisition in suggesting there is no clear demarcation between reading and pre-reading. (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 848)

Emergent literacy means that children develop reading, writing and oral language concurrently and interdependently as a result of children’s exposure to social contexts in
which literacy is a component and in the absence of formal instruction (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Children’s knowledge in specific concept areas predicts later reading achievement in English (Nicholson, 2005). These concepts are: knowledge of alphabet letters and sounds; phonological awareness or sensitivity; grammatical sensitivity; concepts and conventions of print; receptive vocabulary; ability to use ‘book’ or decontextualised language; ability to produce narratives; pre-conventional spellings; and an extensive vocabulary of unusual words. Letter name knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of reading achievement because it acts as a bridge to the alphabetic principle and in turn to phonological awareness (Foulin, 2005). Along with letter-sound knowledge, phoneme awareness is generally considered an important component of decoding skill. The teaching of these skills and knowledge are considered to be essential for children most at risk of reading difficulties (Tunmer, Chapman & Prochnow, 2006). Such children have less emergent literacy knowledge, particularly in the inside-out skills of phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge which can develop into an understanding of the alphabetic principle. Teachers’ understandings of the progression of alphabetic knowledge and phonological awareness allows them to tailor instruction appropriately for children (Anthony & Francis, 2005).

A child’s language development and family literacy patterns are also strong predictors. Children who are language delayed or come from families where there is a known history of reading difficulties may likely have difficulties with learning to read. Children who may be especially ‘at risk’ (Justice & Pullen, 2003) of reading failure include: children with impaired vision or hearing; cerebral palsy; intellectual disability; specific early language disorder; attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder; emotional disturbance; and speakers of other languages. A lower literacy achievement is not inevitable but these children may need dedicated help in order to develop literacy skills.

The literature on emergent literacy, which stems mainly from cognitive and psycholinguistic research, is complemented by research on literacy from a social practice perspective in which children are seen to come to schools and early childhood centres with a diverse range of literacy expectations and experiences (Makin, Jones Diaz & McLachlan, 2006). As Makin (2006, p. 6) argues:

Literacy learning starts within children’s homes and communities, with families as children’s first literacy educators. Increasingly, the critical nature of their role is recognised. The greater the discrepancy between home and community literacy practices and school literacy practices, the greater the challenge for children to show their knowledge and competence. Nistler and Maiers (2000, p. 670) suggest that families can ‘provide teachers with a vast reservoir of talent, energy, and insight’; a reservoir that often remains largely untapped.

Furthermore, this body of research indicates that children develop literacy practices both inside and outside of formal educational settings (Knobel & Lanshear, 2003), as part of their participation in cultural, religious, family and community based activities, such as youth groups, language classes, religious instruction and so forth. They argue that ‘literacy as social practice’ research has three purposes: it documents parent-child interactions with print; compares home literacy performance with school experience in order to understand transition; and responds to studies of literacy that do not take account of social and cultural literacy variations in children’s literacy trajectories. The point is that children may be successful with literacy in the out-of-school contexts, which use different approaches to
conventional educational settings and teachers need to find out what experiences the child has had.

Although the social practice perspective reminds teachers to find out what children do bring to their own learning, it is also important for teachers to be aware of the particular language and literacy issues that have been identified as potentially affecting some learners (Tabors & Snow, 2001). Second language learners are a particular group to be closely monitored in New Zealand and include Māori and Pasifika children who have attended total immersion language nests, the children of recent immigrants and refugee children. Although these children bring a wealth of literacy experiences with them into early childhood and primary settings, they are in danger of losing their language and literacy skills when they enter mainstream New Zealand educational settings. When children start to acquire a high prestige societal language (such as English in our society), there is real threat that they will, at the same time, suspend development in or even lose use of their first language (Tabors & Snow, 2001). Tabors and Snow’s research indicates that children who are put into monolingual early childhood centres are at risk of losing their first language or becoming ‘at risk bilinguals’; not being a stable user of either the home language or English. Research by Tagoilelagi-Leota, McNaughton, MacDonald and Ferry (2005) with Samoan and Tongan children from six months before school entry until a year after school entry, indicates that children who were incipient bilinguals at the beginning of the study were supported to gain language and literacy skills in both their home language and English when they experienced programmes which focussed on the quality of teaching in reading to children, guided reading and telling, and retelling of stories. The variability in children’s achievement across two languages though meant that ongoing assessment by the teacher was crucial.

Harris (2006) argues that teachers need to focus on difference rather than deficiency when helping children to develop emergent literacy in English. Although children may be gaining emergent literacy in their own language, they may be completely unfamiliar with the sounds and conventions associated with the English language, such as directionality, the alphabet, grammar and so forth. Tunmer, Chapman and Prochnow (2006) argue for “differential instruction”, rather than deficiency, so that children’s differing skill needs are met. Teachers need to have a strong understanding of the predictors of reading achievement to understand the literacy experiences that children have had and be able to respond appropriately to support learning.

The Importance of Relationships

Within a sociocultural perspective, children’s development and learning is a function of their participation within their families, communities and institutional settings. Literacy can be described as “situated”: it occurs in and through children’s interactions in their local home, community and school settings (Reid, Edwards & Power, 2004). Literacy develops as a social and cultural process situated within communities of people with culturally and socially determined language practices, behaviours, and ways of thinking (Gee, 2004).

Ostrofsky, Gaffney and Thomas (2006) argue that the child’s relationship with the teacher is the key in an early years education programme because of the importance of establishing and maintaining motivation for literacy. Substantial relationships between teachers, children and families, are needed so that children are understood and supported as they take risks, make attempts and develop literacy skills. They argue that astute teachers foster children’s social emotional relationships around literacy and feelings of competence by attending to changes in motivation. As they state, “The value of emotionally satisfying relationships and
the need for adult scaffolding to support learning that challenges – but does not frustrate – children are the foundation of quality ECE practices.” (p. 175)

The relationship between the early childhood centre, family and the primary school are important during a child’s transition to school. Tayler (2006) reports on three case studies of partnership with parents and families in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales during children’s transition years. In all of the studies the key factor for successful partnerships identified was the stance of the school principal in leading effective early education partnerships. Leadership fostering collaborative networks and respect for all players was found to be most effective, especially if the relevance, style and manner in which literacy outcomes would be achieved was negotiated.

Some recent action research studies in Masterton, as well as the “Picking up the Pace” (Phillips, McNaughton & McDonald, 2001) project suggest that greater collaboration and negotiation between early childhood centres and primary schools can support continuity in language and literacy development. Hohepa and McNaughton (2006) argue that teachers need effective strategies to add to the literacy experiences that children bring from home and also to add to their classroom practices. “The challenge facing educators is to have strategies that enable effective collaborations between professional and family knowledge. With this knowledge, two strategies are possible: to add to the proper literacies of family and to add to the effectiveness of classroom instruction.” (Hohepa & McNaughton, 2006, p. 227)

Assessment of Children’s Literacy in NZ Early Childhood Services

Assessment of children’s developing literacy before, during and after school entry is clearly an issue that needs attention. In the early childhood education sector the predominant framework used for assessment is Kei tua o te pae (Ministry of Education, 2005), however there is also instruction in the Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPS) (Ministry of Education, 1998) for chartered services that “Educators should implement curriculum and assessment practices which: (a) reflect the holistic way that children learn; (b) reflect the reciprocal relationships between the child, people and learning environment; (c) involve parents/guardians, and where appropriate, whānau; and (d) enhance children’s sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners”. These four points relate to the principles of Te Whāriki; family and community, empowerment, relationships and holistic development. Kei tua o te pae also stresses that “assessment for learning implies that we have some clear aims or goals for children’s learning” (Ministry of Education, 2005, Book 1, p. 9) and states that Te Whāriki provides the framework for defining learning and for what is to be learned. The goals and indicative learning outcomes in Te Whāriki of well-being, belonging, contribution and communication provide further guidance for teachers. Kei tua o te pae also advises teachers to monitor children’s learning dispositions, drawing on Carr’s (2001) work in this area, as a further tool for assessment and urges teachers to make sure that “assessment notes what children can do when they are “at their best” (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 18).

Although I do not argue with the notion of catching children at their best, I think we need to think carefully about what it is that we are assessing in terms of children’s literacy development. An analysis of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) shows its holistic nature; there is nothing wrong with the statements provided, they are just open to interpretation. For instance, the principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships are all relevant as a framework within which to encourage literacy. The major link for literacy in Te Whāriki is the Communication/Mana reo strand, in which children develop verbal and non verbal communication for range of purposes, experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures and discover and develop
different ways to be creative and expressive. The strongest statements in terms of literacy are in Goal 2 “children experience an environment where they develop verbal communication skills for a range of purposes” (p. 76). There are also more minor links with Contribution and Exploration.

References on how to promote literacy are non-specific. Apart from affirming that adults “should respect and encourage children’s home language” (p. 73), that the “first language is valued” (p. 76), and that “there should be commitment to the recognition of Maori language – stories, myths, arts and crafts” (p. 72), the document does not discuss multi-literacies and bilingualism/biliteracy in any depth, which are now significant issues. The curriculum also does not provide specific advice on the role of the teacher in terms of promoting reading achievement, as the key predictors of reading achievement – alphabetic awareness and phonemic awareness – are not named, although it does discuss children having experiences with rhyme, rhythm and alliteration. Te Whāriki highlights the need to plan for a coherent pathway for transition to school, but gives no specifics on how this will be achieved.

Apart from the vagueness of the curriculum document in relation to literacy, Te Whāriki has never been formally evaluated and therefore we do not know how effective the curriculum is for promoting children’s learning in general (Nuttall, 2005) and literacy in particular. This is in contrast to the current National Curriculum Framework which has been evaluated twice by international experts and now has a new curriculum statement (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Following the release of Te Whāriki the need for better alignment of assessment procedures with the curriculum document became apparent (Carr, 2001; Nuttall, 2003). Carr’s (2001) project provided the concept and the methodology which has since evolved into the foundation for Kei tua o te pae, in which 50 early childhood centres participated in a two year pilot project, which ran alongside the National Exemplar project in schools. The purpose was to document exemplars of learning which reflected Te Whāriki. Although Kei tua o te pae is a lovely resource and addresses “how” teachers should assess, apart from referring teachers back to Te Whāriki, it does not address the issue of “what” to assess. As one early childhood teacher recently said to me, trying to assess using Te Whāriki is like “trying to stick jelly to the wall”.

**So What Should Teachers Assess?**

There is clearly a tension between the research evidence around literacy, which states that there are some very specific things that teachers could be promoting and watching out for and the notion that teachers should always “catch children at their best”. In my research, I have found that many teachers do not use Te Whāriki as a framework for literacy in centres (McLachlan, Carvalho, Kumar & de Lautour, 2006), instead drawing on their own previous understandings of how to best promote literacy, suggesting that literacy practices are diverse.

In one of the few critiques of the exemplars, Nuttall (2005) argues that the exemplars do not provide enough guidance on what should be assessed and how teachers can make sense of children’s learning. Nuttall (2005) states that although the exemplars are based on sociocultural theorising that the development of higher mental functions depends on fostering engagement with more knowledgeable members of the culture, this is not borne out in the teachers’ interpretations in Kei tua o te pae. As Nuttall argues, the problem is that teachers do not appear to be recognising the children’s literate funds of knowledge, skills or understandings in their observations. She states, “Many of the exemplars, for example, show children engaged in sophisticated literacy practices, yet these appear to be overlooked in the
Teachers’ interpretations. Instead the teachers tend to emphasise dispositions such as collaboration and exploration.” (p. 21)

Cullen (2006) argues that as a result of complex political decision making around emergent reading in New Zealand schools, the early childhood sector has not seen itself as responsible for supporting children’s initial competencies and skills related to literacy. She states that “lack of attention to literacy competencies and meanings could reflect a gap in initial teacher education and professional development” (p. 5). Cullen (2006, pp. 5-6) considers that early childhood teachers have three major responsibilities with regard to literacy education: to monitor gaps in children’s competencies as well as strengths and interests; that curriculum should support both skills and meanings; and to engage in ongoing professional development about literacy and the implications for teaching practice.

Walpole, Justice and Invernizzi (2004) identify five key areas that research has identified as being the key to literacy success for children, which include teachers knowing the predictors of reading achievement and identifying vulnerable children, understanding individual differences, knowing different approaches to instruction and how to prepare effective learning environments and understanding school and curricular variables which influence achievement. Wong Fillmore and Snow (2000) argue that teachers need intensive preparation in ‘educational linguistics’, as most teachers gain inadequate preparation in this in their pre-service teacher education programmes. Kane’s (2005) review of teacher education programmes in New Zealand suggests this also is true of early childhood programmes, where most students get minimal preparation on understanding literacy.

Assessment of Literacy during Transition to School

Espinosa (2005) argues that a robust assessment system is needed when teachers are dealing with children who are culturally and linguistically diverse. She cautions against the use of standardised assessments, but proposes that assessment should improve instruction and improve learning, identify children who need specialist help, and enable evaluation and decision making about programmes. She further draws on the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) position statement on assessment, which has the following key recommendation on assessment:

To assess young children’s strengths, progress, and needs, use assessment methods that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children’s daily activities, supported by professional development, inclusive of families and connected to specific, beneficial purposes: (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning, (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focussed intervention for individual children, and (3) helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions (2003, p. 10).

What is needed, I suggest, is a broader conception of assessment which includes assessment of children before, during and after school entry. The nature of the assessment data gathered could be negotiated between centres and local schools prior to school entry, as part of what Mutch (2002) describes as a ‘democratic learning community’, in which all interested stakeholders make decisions about what is documented. Although I am not arguing for the use of standardised testing prior to school entry, I am arguing for a robust evidential base on which to make decisions around children’s learning.
Roskos (2004) argues that literacy assessment should be thoughtful, sensible and good – and based on evidence gathered over time in order “to see” emerging skills and forming concepts, most often embedded in children’s activities, as children are unlikely to be able to talk about or write about what they know. Roskos argues that without a coordinated system of information gathering, assessment becomes fragmented and difficult to use. The notion of triangulation that is common in qualitative research for cross checking sources of information is crucial for ensuring that a wide range of information is analysed and interpreted.

Assessment approaches may be formative and include narrative techniques already used, along with a range of other data collection methods. The notion of a learning portfolio is a good one but its usefulness has been overlooked in recent times with the intense focus on writing learning stories. A portfolio of a child’s learning could include a wide range of evidence or artefacts of the child’s learning. Such artefacts might include, but are not limited to, observations of various types (time, event, incident sampling and so forth), running records, tape recordings of the child speaking, interviews with children, videotapes or photos of the child at play, examples of the child’s work over time (such as writing, art work etc.), checklists, test results (from specialist services) and so forth. Clearly standardised assessment would be faster to collect, but would not reveal the complexity of a child’s learning. The collection of different types of evidence could be negotiated with local schools and families, so the portfolio of evidence has relevance for multiple groups. I strongly believe that a comprehensive portfolio of assessment artefacts, especially one that had been negotiated with the local new entrant teachers, would be a valuable way in which to add to the child’s literacy learning from home and add to and enrich early childhood and primary school teaching practices.

Summary and Conclusions

The topic of literacy before and after school entry is immense, so this paper has examined issues of relevance to the early childhood sector and primary schools in New Zealand. The policies used internationally for promoting literacy from early childhood to primary were explored in relation to our reading achievement issues and policies and the key features for promoting literacy achievement were highlighted. The research literature around the predictors of reading achievement was examined, which highlighted the knowledge that teachers need to have about how children develop literacy. Some key issues in the supporting literacy development were also explored: the importance of relationships surrounding children and literacy; teachers’ ability to notice, recognise and respond to the predictors of literacy achievement and what it means for their role as a teacher; and establishing effective assessment procedures which have a comprehensive evidential base.

We know that the approaches to supporting literacy that early childhood and primary teachers have been using for the last several years are not supporting at least 25% of our children, as revealed by New Zealand’s results on two iterations of the PIRLS study. Noticing, recognising and responding is clearly a desirable goal for children’s literacy learning, but it is imperative that teachers know “what” they are noticing and recognising and “how” to respond. Further research needs to be done on exploring the content of early childhood and primary teacher education programmes to see what student teachers are being taught about literacy. Further research is also needed on what teachers are assessing in terms of literacy within their everyday practice and how this information is used to support children’s literacy through the transition to school.
My suspicion, supported by my research over the last 15 years (see McLachlan-Smith, 1996; McLachlan, Carvalho, Kumar & de Lautour, 2006) is that teachers in early childhood use eclectic understandings of literacy to develop their programmes and focus on providing a literacy-rich environment and shared book reading. However, teachers could be using specific strategies to develop understandings of alphabetic and phonemic awareness within the context of a holistic curriculum.

We need to be clear about which children need these opportunities most and respond to them. The late Dame Marie Clay many years ago urged against the dangers of waiting for literacy to occur and letting misunderstandings and bad habits habituate (Clay, 1991). Are we now going to ignore that advice because we only want to “catch the child at their best”? It is important to find sensible ways forward in which teachers are able to document “the child at their best”, recognising and responding to the literacy understandings and funds of knowledge that the child brings to their learning, as well as supporting the specific literacy understandings that children will need in order to learn to read.

References


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