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The dilemma for teachers in choosing an early literacy approach

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Early literacy is the acquisition of skills by children during their early years that precede literacy skills such as reading and writing in school (Makin & Speeding, 2003). A recent New Zealand review of international research pointed out the important link between positive early literacy experiences and successful reading and writing in school (Adams & Ryan, 2002; Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008). From July 2000, the revised National Administration Guidelines in New Zealand prioritized children’s achievement in early literacy, especially during first four years of life (Education Review Office [ERO], 2000). In New Zealand, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996) was developed as an early childhood curriculum acceptable to a wide range of early childhood education services (ERO, 2000) which promotes child-directed approaches to early literacy.

Corrie (1999) describes a need to maintain continuity between the early childhood curriculum and the primary school curriculum by realizing the importance of teaching specific skills of early literacy to children through a teacher-directed approach. Cunningham, Zibulsky and Callahan (2009) propose it is important for early childhood teachers to know the importance of and be able to recognise children’s early literacy experiences and links to later achievement. The biggest challenge faced by early childhood teachers in New Zealand is to decide their role in children’s literacy acquisition and include appropriate literacy activities, especially in the light of government priorities for literacy (MoE, 2009). This literature review will look into current research on different approaches to early literacy that are child-directed, as supported by Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996) and teacher-directed, with a focus on the most appropriate approach for teachers to foster early literacy.

What is early literacy?

A number of independent skills have been identified as early predictors of later reading and writing success for children, which are referred to as early literacy (Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasapoulos, Peisner-Feinberg & Poe, 2003; ERO, 2011). A New Zealander, Dame Marie Clay, coined the term ‘emergent literacy’ or ‘early literacy’ and argued that children learn concepts of pre-reading and pre-writing in the crucial preschool years that are an integral part of later literacy (Clay, 2001). The research pointed out important areas of early literacy, such as print awareness, phonological awareness, letter name knowledge, vocabulary

**Child-directed approach for early literacy**

The research supporting child-directed approach for early literacy has been linked to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which states that children construct their own knowledge through their experiences (Berk, 2006; Hamer, 2005). *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) is a socio-cultural framework that views early literacy learning through active experiences of children with people, material, events and ideas, rather than through direct formal teaching or sequenced events (Bennett, 2005; ERO, 2011; Hamer, 2005). Spodek (1991) believes that the effectiveness of early literacy programs depend on children’s interest as the initiative for learning comes from within the child. The pedagogical environment must allow the inner ‘good’ of the child to unfold (Spodek, 1991). The literature highlights that children learn through observation in print-rich and literacy-rich environment at home and early childhood centres, where children construct their own understandings of alphabet, vocabulary and print concepts (Hamer & Adams, 2002; Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). In this model, children acquire oral language and phonemic awareness through rhymes, songs, oral conversations and emergent writing through drawing and writing materials (Kirkland and Patterson, 2005; Surman, 2003).

*Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) points out that providing literacy-rich play environments is most effective, as, during play, children are encouraged to use previous experiences to build upon and manipulate resources without the risk of failure (Foote, Smith & Ellis, 2008; Surman, 2005). The research confirms that didactic instruction with only modest amount of play is not an effective strategy to advance children’s long-term development (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). The play opens up opportunities for child-initiated literacy, such as preparing children for reading comprehension during pretend reading and engaging in oral conversations during socio-dramatic play (Foote et al., 2008; Raban, 2003). The foundations for learning early literacy are seen in *Te Whāriki* on learning dispositions such as curiosity and perseverance, which are built naturally during play and promote overall enthusiasm for learning, instead of being preoccupied with specific skills (Carr, 2001; Smith, 2003).

The literature on this topic has shown the concern of migrant parents in New Zealand about the acquisition of specific early literacy skills by children through formal instruction, rather than through play (Nuttall, 2003). The researchers supporting *Te Whāriki’s* (MoE, 1996) alignment with school curriculum reported that teacher-directed approaches are associated only with short-term early literacy gains (Marcon, 2002). The New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) also aligns key competencies at school with the strands of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996). MoE, 2013 states that the introduction of national standards in literacy will, however, not affect *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), and parents can expect children to develop early literacy skills through early childhood services.
McLachlan, Fleer and Edwards (2010) argue that Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996) is a competence based curriculum giving teachers maximum flexibility and allowing active involvement of children, yet is limited in the case of direct instruction centred solely on paper, pencils, and books. The curriculum planned with concrete materials, direct experiences, and hands-on activities builds bridges between the increasingly abstract content to be learnt and children’s unique way of learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In support of Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996), it has been argued that the identification of literacy skills, such as writing one’s own name or naming letters of alphabet, is formal, didactic, and drill-based (Foote et al., 2004). There are several researchers who reveal that children may not respond to teacher-directed early literacy and may show more negative outcomes on the measure of motivation as they depend on teachers completely for the formation of learning experiences (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels & Milburn, 1995).

The research shows that curricula that focus on motivational aspects of learning, rather than static skills, are associated with better performance in later schooling than those that are overtly ‘academically’ oriented (Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008). It is often seen that early childhood teachers do not introduce much teacher-directed pedagogy in the face of pressure to ‘push down’ the primary school curriculum into early childhood (Corrie, 1999). Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996) promotes children as competent and confident learners and views children as school ready when they have an inner curiosity for learning and can engage themselves in a task (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters & Carr, 2009). MoE (2013) report that Kei Tua o te Pae Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars (book 17) will guide teachers towards development and assessment of children’s oral, visual and written literacy. The literature in this study found the assessment tools that can screen children’s early literacy skills before school entry, as used in Australia, are not appropriate in New Zealand, as the focus is on development of overall curiosity for learning, rather than a focus on specific skills of early literacy (Guhn, Janus & Hertzman, 2007).

**Teacher-directed approach for early literacy**

The research promoting a teacher-directed approach shows that, while children do construct ideas about early literacy without obvious teaching, for most children, developing knowledge about early reading and writing for a range of purposes requires explicit teaching and is not simply acquired through use (Planta, Masburn, Downer, Hamre & Justice, 2008). The research points out that children at risk are from low socio-economic backgrounds, as they may have difficulty in development of literacy skills due to lack of relevant socio-cultural experiences (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1999). This is related to Brofenbrenner’s theory of ecological systems, stating that children’s environment and close relationships affect their acquisition of skills (Nagel, 2009). The ‘Literacy Taskforce’ (as cited in Nicholson, 2002) reported that children from less privileged backgrounds require explicit instruction in teaching phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge for enhancing their reading and comprehension skills.

McLachlan (2008) has declared that Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996) encourages children to develop learning dispositions and working theories about themselves and the world around them, which may result in limited preparation for the
transition to compulsory schooling. Mitchell, Hagarty, Hampton and Pairman (2006) have cited pedagogical practice and curriculum as major areas of contention between culturally diverse teachers and parents. The mandated curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), embraces learning through play (Nagel, 2009). However, the New Zealand Curriculum from years one to thirteen (MoE, 2007) represents a system of national standards, which are to be achieved within designated age ranges. This philosophy would seem to be a complete reversal of the emergent curriculum of early childhood, and it is perhaps understandable that parents display anxiety about formal learning (Bennett, 2005).

*Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) does not address recent research that has reported that children require teacher directed approaches in early literacy areas of alphabetic awareness, phonemic awareness, questioning, clarifying and narratives (Hedges and Cullen, 2005; Piasta and Wagner, 2010; Tunmer, Chapman and Prochnow, 2006). The phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of long-term reading and spelling success and it refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds in spoken language (McGee & Richgels, 2005). The best time to learn phonemic awareness is during preschool years, as learning how letters correspond to sounds is critical for beginner readers to sound out word segments and blend these parts to form words. This practice requires a teacher-directed approach (Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000; McGee & Richgels, 2005).

Timperley and Robinson (2007) have referred to the dilemma of early childhood teachers’ concern regarding primary school teachers pointing out to them that children are unable to display certain early literacy skills, these skills being those that early childhood teachers believe children have achieved. The holistic and generalized nature of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) provides little guidance to teachers, in terms of fostering children’s knowledge in relation to particular subject content areas of early literacy, as literacy is seen only in one of the goals of the communication strand (Blaiklock, 2008a; Blaiklock, 2008b; Brostrom, 2003, ERO, 2011). Yet, early childhood teachers are in agreement with *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), as it matches with what they have been doing and views school readiness as inclusive of social skills, instead of academic skills, such as alphabet knowledge, as a priority (Blaiklock, 2008b; Hedges & Cullen, 2005). The research indicates that many teachers have an inadequate understanding of how literacy develops and lack content knowledge, and they consequently miss opportunities to foster early literacy (Moats & Foorman, 2003). The early childhood teachers have limited understandings of literacy, and it is seen that professional development improves teachers’ knowledge of how to impart teacher-directed approaches, leading to better outcomes for children (ERO, 2011; Philips, McNaughton & McDonald, 2002).

The teacher directed approaches do not always mean didactic instructions, but teachers can act as a facilitator in the child’s discovery of early literacy (Watkins & Slocum, 2003). The teacher-initiated approach can include simple and regular co-constructed activities like reading aloud for instructional purposes, helping children to encounter an interpretation of print, building vocabulary and oral language skills (Brabham & Villaume, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). According to Vygotsky (1986), the teacher can scaffold children’s learning within the zone of proximal development (the point at which a child can perform a new task with adult assistance), providing a combination of encouragement, prompts,
reminders, and questions to move the children from doing something with support to performing independently (Durkin, 2004). These approaches can be used to teach early literacy in a meaningful context, to maintain children's interest and enthusiasm without the feeling of being drilled (Watkins & Slocum, 2003). Pressley (2002) concurs that, during storybook reading, explicit instruction in strategies used for comprehension help reading in school, and it is hard for children to pick up concepts of semantics and syntax patterns themselves.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, there two major schools of thought for early literacy learning, which are child-directed and teacher-directed approaches to early literacy. The child-directed approach is supported by *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), which views children as actively engaging in the acquisition of early literacy by constructing knowledge through literacy-rich environments and play, rather than through formal directions. *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) encourages teachers to develop learning dispositions that are the basis of learning in school, rather than concentrating on the development of specific skills of early literacy. The introduction of National standards of literacy in school has made early childhood teachers wonder whether the child-directed approach should remain the exclusive approach to early literacy. However, if teachers want to introduce teacher-directed approaches, they lack guidance from the curriculum for enhancing specific early literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge, which, according to the literature, are shown to have been successful predictors of later reading and writing. Many migrant parents desire to see teacher-directed approaches for literacy, as they have never seen a curriculum based on play in their countries, which places pressure on teachers. The expectation of the New Zealand curriculum for supporting children-directed approaches by not ‘pushing down’ school curriculum into early childhood places teachers in a real dilemma as to the most appropriate approach to impart early literacy (Hedges, 2003).

**References**


