

Literacy beyond mat-time: Bringing stories to life

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This article examines the role that early childhood teachers play in extending literacy interests and making them meaningful to children. Currently, shared book reading or story telling is often relegated to mat-times. This article serves to challenge teachers to consider how children's literature, particularly picture and concept books, can be intentionally used in early childhood settings. Aspects of an optimal environment, such as physical provocations as well as teaching strategies to nurture children's agency will be explored by drawing on a number of popular books published in Aotearoa New Zealand as well as classic picture books.

Introduction

"That's my book," announced my son, Ethan then aged two, as he handed me *Owl Babies* (Waddell, 2012) to read for the hundredth time. Like many other toddlers, his contribution to the story reading was to excitedly blurt out the last word of each sentence or shout "Mummy" towards the end of the book. Now aged four, his interests in books have diversified, from *We're going on a bear hunt* (Rosin, Oxenbury & Aldred, 1989) to more recently, stories about pirates, dinosaurs, construction, emergency vehicles and the much-loved children's animated series, *Paw Patrol!* (Golden Books, 2014). In this process, his sense of agency has developed, which is reflected in his active engagement with the stories by way of extending the themes of the books into his play and routines.

Children's literature may be used to support children's agency, which is understood as the sense of empowerment children have through engaging with stories and books in their own unique ways (Mathis, 2016). Agency and its influence on children's mana (in the Māori world, 'mana' means one's status, prestige and spiritual power inherited at birth) is a consistent theme within *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). For instance, children's right "to agency in their own lives" (MoE, 2017, p. 12) is visible through both the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*, such as Empowerment/Whakamana, and Wellbeing/Mana Atua. Children develop agency, autonomy and identity as well as enhance their literacy skills through active engagement and extension of stories and books (Mathis, 2016). When children engage with books, they begin to develop thinking dispositions such as critical thinking, creative thinking, communication and collaboration, which empowers them to develop life skills such as resilience, risk-taking, self-regulation and meta-cognitive skills (Claxton, Costa & Kallick, 2016; Whyte, 2019). Children's literacy skills and therefore agency is also enhanced through a growing understanding of content knowledge, particularly, syntax, vocabulary, phonological awareness and print awareness, which are all related to reading and writing (Gillanders & Castro, 2014). Often children come across a word that they might enjoy repeating for the sheer pleasure of how it sounds (Mathis, 2016). For instance, Ethan often exclaims, "Oh goody!" after having encountered it in a *Peppa Pig* (Astley, 2009) picture book we once read together. This type of joyful engagement increases children's understanding of content knowledge, enables them to participate in meaningful dialogue and encourages them to create stories of their own.

Children's books and agency

There are different genres of children's literature available to children in early childhood centres in New Zealand. Both fiction and non-fiction books are valuable in these early years and may include picture books, non-fiction picture books and concept books (Otto, 2018). In this section, I will discuss some classic picture books as well as some contemporary New Zealand publications to demonstrate how children explore their world through these books.



Image 1: Construction

When Ethan's interest in -his words- '*instruction*' (meaning construction) vehicles emerged during his third year, he would consciously look for books around this theme in our local library. Sally Sutton's books *Roadworks* (2009), *Demolition* (2013), *Construction* (2015) and *Dig, Dump, Roll* (2019) as well as *The Little Yellow Digger* series (1993) by Betty and Alan Gilderdale provided hours of uninterrupted fun as he played with his construction vehicle toys, recreating the stories.

As we drove past construction sites, he would excitedly point out and name the different types of vehicles, and make references back to the books he had read. During these sightings, Ethan would also ask questions such as, "Where do dump trucks sleep?" In his

anthropomorphic world, of course vehicles were alive! This again, brought about opportunities to 'wonder' co-constructively as we talked about how inanimate objects are different from humans. As early childhood educators, these opportunities tie in with the concept of dialogic pedagogy, a process that involves shared meaning-making with the child (White, 2016). This contributes to children's sense of empowerment as their ideas and experiences are affirmed and acknowledged. Furthermore, this process stimulates a new wave of creativity wherein children are encouraged to explore new ideas. Thus, early childhood educators could consider setting up provocations that offer opportunities for shared learning as children are encouraged to build on their working theories.

Children's books and literacy skills

Research indicates that one of the reasons children's interest about words may not be nurtured is due to teachers' uncertainty around how to support and extend them (Collins, 2014). Picture books and children's books serve to introduce a range of vocabulary, including sophisticated words that are not commonly used in everyday speech. This empowers children to experiment with new words in different contexts, such as in play or conversations with others. Similarly, picture books also offer children opportunities to understand orthography, the rules around written language, including punctuation, sentence construction and phonology (Gill, 2019). *The Book with no pictures* (Novak, 2014), an interactive book that teachers could use with children of all ages, highlights the concept of orthography in a humorous manner with words like 'blaggity blaggity, glibbity globbity' provoking laughter and amusement with young children. In contrast, picture books without words such as *Flotsam* (Wiesner, 2006) have images that are presented simultaneously with each turn of page. Visual images provide elements such as colours and expressions that words alone cannot provide thereby prompting children to construct meanings based on their own interpretations and even create sounds or words associated with the images.

The use of books within an optimal environment

According to Gordon and Browne (2014), the environment refers to a shared space where children and educators are involved in co-construction. Cornhill and Grey (2012) further explain an optimal environment as inclusive of the physical set-up as well as dynamic or interpersonal relationships.

Physical set-ups and provocations

Early childhood educators can consider how they position books within the environment to stimulate children's imagination and promote literacy skills. The sandpit for instance would be perfect to roll the construction vehicles around to encourage pre-writing skills such as directionality and visual-perceptual skills (Mathis, 2016; Otto, 2018). The recent initiative prompted by the COVID-19 nation-wide lockdown, *New Zealand Bear Hunt* has been a source of inspiration for many literacy initiatives. Mutch (2020) has also created a series of books with her toy bear as the protagonist based in and around her *bubble*.

Another classic picture book, *The Tiger who came to Tea* (Kerr, 1968), could inspire a tea party set-up in the centre (the family corner or perhaps even outdoors under a tree), with children bringing in their own toys.



Image 2: The Tiger who came to tea

Including a range of books and genres encourages children to engage with the books independently. The selection of books then becomes a professional responsibility for the teacher to ensure both a sense of belonging and inclusion (Education Council, 2017). The local library is an excellent source and often a trip with the children to one near the centre is an opportunity to build community. Moreover, these books can open more avenues to explore different cultures and traditions that support children to make meaningful connections to their own experiences. For example, a selection of books on dragons could be used to raise awareness of cultural festivals like the Dragon Dance and Dragon boat festival (China). Children's exploration could be supported with additional resources such as drums and costumes for them to act out characters in books. Early childhood educators could curate a list of books pertaining to the current interest, which can then be revised as the interest develops and diversifies. *The Sapling* (2018) is a New Zealand based literary website that publishes book lists ranging across themes. For instance, a current interest across early childhood centres is around nature and bugs. This book list includes a rundown of New Zealand native species identification guides and other non-fiction nature books. Following this, the provision of resources such as magnifying glass, observation jars, and mini planter box can support with the extension of their learning.

Dynamic strategies to promote agency and literacy skills

"What is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"

- Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter 1 (para 1).

This quote from one of the most famous pieces of literary works for children sums up the importance of engaging children in meaningful interactions around books they read. Educators could use strategies such as asking open-ended questions, intentionally making links to the books they have read in conversations with children, using prompts and by acknowledging and responding to children's play.

Open-ended questions can stimulate children's thinking dispositions and provide them with opportunities to use new vocabulary they may have learned through the story as well as re-tell the story in their own words (Horst, Stewart &

True, 2019). The authors also suggest using prompts when talking to children about the book for instance, “When I think of a digger, I think of Rubble whose job is ... “ (making reference to a character in *Paw Patrol*). Prompts such as these offer children opportunities to make connections between prior knowledge and apply those ideas to their interests (Whyte, 2019). This could further be extended in a situation that requires children to develop their thinking dispositions. Take for instance, if a child is challenged by an outdoor jungle gym, the educator could refer back to a book that the child is familiar with, such as “I wonder what the family in *We’re going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosin et al. 1989) did when they met with obstacles. Remember, they could not go over them, they could not go under them but they could go (through them, that is right!)”.

Some books offer children opportunities to be protagonists within the story itself. *The Little Ghost who lost her Boo* (Bickell, 2019) is one such family favourite. The story has a delightful twist in which the reader is left with a sense of empowerment after having helped the little ghost to finally find her Boo! Similarly, *The Book with no pictures* (Novak, 2014) also offers the reader (in most cases, the teacher) and the listener (the child) to engage in playful banter, with the child making decisions as to what the reader should read aloud from the book. A similar sense of involvement is present in the manipulation of touch and feel books or lift-the-flap books targeted at infants and toddlers. These books are valuable to early literacy development and vocabulary development (Chiong & DeLoache, 2012). Popular books in these series include *Where’s Spot* by Eric Hill (2011) and more recently, *That’s Not My...* books published by Usborne. However, the effectiveness of these types of books in learning new words or increasing literacy skills has been challenged due to the time spent manipulating the flaps and textures (Chiong & DeLoache, 2012). Yet, these fun, playful interactions with the book often serve as the first experience babies have with books, perhaps kindling an interest to explore books over time.

Agency can be nurtured by noticing, recognizing and responding to how children use references to stories and/or books in their play. Teachers can consider how children enact a story through make-believe play or in solitary play. Dialogues can be recreated from the original source (“Run, Run as fast as you can. You can’t chase me, I’m the Dinosaur Man” instead of The Gingerbread Man), or reproduced when engaging in dramatic play. For instance, children may use specific terms and phrases related to pirates when playing a pirate themed game. These experiences allow the child to move in and out of characters, improvise storylines as they play and intersperse reality with make-believe play, for instance, a school for dinosaurs. These opportunities not only serve to encourage oral language skills but also support the development of skills such as listening and interpreting which are important in retelling a story (Education Review Office, 2017). Educators could yet again, be reflective of these experiences and use them as moments to build on literacy and agency, sometimes being a play-partner themselves! For instance, impersonating the Troll in *Three Billy Goats Gruff* or The Big Bad Wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*, both classic favourites in early childhood centres.

Conclusion

To conclude, children’s picture books are excellent resources to nurture children’s working theories, dispositions as well as literacy skills. Early childhood teachers can use picture books to help develop children’s agency and to empower them as they make sense of the world around them. Educators can be instrumental in setting up optimal environments including physical aspects such as setting up provocations that include books and literacy-based experiences. Dynamic strategies such as engaging in rich, meaningful conversations and using open-ended questions both give children voice while continuing to nurture and promote their agency.

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