Early literacy and the teacher’s role
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Understanding the importance of supporting literacy in high quality early childhood settings is a crucial role of the kaiako (teacher). The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of the kaiako in creating opportunities to promote engagement in a literacy rich environment. Therefore, a range of strategies to support kaiako to facilitate the child’s skill development in constructing meaning from contexts and communicating their ideas will be explored. We will use the term kaiako throughout this article to emphasise the role of kaiako as active facilitators, who support early literacy development in infants, toddlers and young children. Kaiako means teacher in te reo Māori and is composed of two words: kai meaning food, and ako meaning to learn or create knowledge together.

Introduction

In an early childhood context, Excell and Linington (2011) define the literate child as “one who is able to read, write, speak and listen” (p. 20). Smoldon and Howell (2014) however, explain that being literate in the early years is about children making meaning for themselves, and communicating with others. The principles and strands of Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa (Te Whāriki) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) “encourage a holistic view of literacy where infants, toddlers and young children engage with literacy in ways that reflect their growing expertise, and that incorporates their home literacy practices” (Educational Review Office [ERO], 2011, p. 5). With the development of literacy, a child’s potential is limitless (Sanderson, 2015), emphasising the importance of kaiako in creating an environment that provides opportunities for literacy learning within a play-based curriculum. This means that today’s teachers must be equipped to engage in pedagogy in both planned and emergent ways which require a range of teaching strategies, content knowledge and on-going professional learning. Where Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) provides an “open non-prescriptive framework” (ERO, 2016, para. 2), The New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) offers kaiako more specific learning outcomes for application and completion with each level. Within the English strand, two key areas are combined to represent “oral, written, and visual forms [of literacy]” (MoE, 2007, p. 18). These three forms of literacy will provide the framework for this article to emphasise the holistic ways in which early literacy is gained, while connecting to key concepts from both Te Whāriki and The New Zealand Curriculum.

Oral literacy

It is widely recognised that language acquisition begins in infancy through the spoken sounds of language. Children as young as nine months begin to articulate sounds according to the language they hear, with coherent words being spoken generally by one year of age (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009; Christie, Enz, Vukelich, & Roskos, 2014). Harris (2008) notes that language is highly connected to the sociocultural experiences of each child, with Newman (2016) adding that literacy is not just a “function of everyday life” (p. 95) but also how culture is transmitted. Through intentional interactions with the child, kaiako are able to support the child in extending their thinking, vocabulary, and developing their listening skills. Oral literacy is more than words; it is a tool that provides children with the ability to be imaginative, communicate their experiences, and share and respond to others (Smoldon & Howell, 2014). “Talk whether internalised self-talk or externalised conversation is one of our most powerful tools for organising thinking” (Burman, 2009, p. 20). Therefore, listening and responding to children becomes fundamental to the development of their oral literacy skills. From infancy, children are able to recognise the voice of their carer and quickly learn to differentiate between human voices and other sounds (Kearns, 2017). Over time, children develop the awareness that spoken
language symbolises objects and can also represent actions (Meade & Sears, 2012). This development has been termed as auditory perception and consists of the awareness of sounds, decoding, discrimination, memory and sequencing, which are all essential skills for the development of listening and oral literacy (Kearns, 2017). Through being listened to and interacting with others, children learn how to listen (Jalongo, 2010).

Visual Literacy

Visual literacy is defined in The New Zealand Curriculum as the ability to interpret, manipulate and problem solve using words and images (MoE, 2007). Additionally, Smoldon and Howell (2014) explain that reading is not just looking at print with one’s eyes, but also with one’s ears and mind attuned. With this definition, it can be said that children engage and interpret forms of visual literacy through their everyday experiences. Westerveld, Gillon, van Bysterveldt and Boyd (2015) emphasise that before a child is able to read to learn, they must first learn to read which includes understanding and making meaning of visual literacy such as through images, illustrations, letter knowledge, and print. Christie et al. (2014) support this view and highlight the value and effectiveness of supporting early reading through a print rich environment. However, Sanderson (2015) points out that children should be encouraged to be the producers of information as well as consumers. McLachlan (2010) laments that many kaiako miss cues to support and extend on children’s learning through play in moments of painting or play dough, which accentuates the child’s role as merely a consumer. Excell and Linington (2011) and ERO (2011) both urge kaiako to seize opportunities to support children in documenting their ideas and presenting these to others, making them producers as well as consumers of visual literacy.

Written Literacy

Writing is a complex skill that requires integration of both physical and cognitive aspects. Children’s first writing attempts will be presented as mark making or scribbling before moving onto recognisable shapes and drawings. These efforts are the child’s way of communicating their ideas and representing them in a written form (Smoldon & Howell, 2014). Infants, toddlers and young children must have sufficient physical development to hold their body in place to make marks on the writing surface. Excell and Linington (2011) explain that through gross motor skills children develop balance, control and coordination which then go on to support the development of fine motor manipulation.

Kaiako can foster oral, written and visual literacies through:

- **Facilitating a print rich environment:** Newspapers, brochures, books, signs and posters, and artwork all provide opportunities for children (regardless of age) and kaiako to engage in conversations and interactions with the symbols that represent oral language. This could look like letters and words of different sizes in both the indoor and outdoor environments, as well as being intentional in pointing out print and symbols to
Positioning equipment and materials: Children need to have access to a range of tools and resources (including relationships) to engage in meaningful and relevant literacy experiences. MacNaughton and Williams (2009) explain that this strategy enhances children’s learning as they are able to select and practice using their own materials which is empowering at any age. Children need a range of print material and mark making equipment to allow choice, time and space to gain confidence and muscle control. The positioning of the kaiako as a resource in actively engaging children in the exploration of materials and literacy concepts should not be overlooked.

Describing and narrating: Kaiako and children hold a range of knowledge about “people, places and things” (MoE, 2017, p. 12). When kaiako consciously narrate as children complete tasks or when engaged in play, children are supported to put words and names to actions and objects. Narrating also supports children in learning about positional language and order, for example; first, next, after. This puts actions and observations into words to support children’s meaning making and development of language for communication. McLachlan and Arrow (2014) relate this to reading a book to children and argue that it is insufficient to just read. To create an active learning experience, kaiako need to engage children in the story. This can be done through explaining that they are reading from left to right, sounding out letters to support phonology and using illustrations to support imagination and problem solving, thus providing opportunities for active learning. Kaiako can encourage children to tell their own stories and provide an environment that supports this type of recount. Resources such as story stones, picture tiles and photographs can be used to prompt children to recall and describe prior experiences, order their ideas, make connections between experiences and use their imagination to develop their understanding.

Co-constructing: This strategy supports developing children’s working theories as kaiako recognise what children already know, and extend teachable moments. It is particularly important when supporting literacy development for infants and toddlers, to work collaboratively with families to access funds of knowledge and strengthen consistency between the home and the early childhood education settings. Through inquiring alongside children and their families, kaiako work with children to make meaning of a new concept or idea (MoE, 2017).

Modelling, scaffolding and inviting: Erickson and Wharton-McDonald (2019) highlight the importance of specifically modelling literacy skills such as writing and reading. Creating opportunities to invite children to engage in literacy skill development during play supports kaiako to intentionally model and scaffold children’s learning, based on their current knowledge and abilities. This may take place in the form of writing lists, translating children’s oral stories into text, and involving children in shared writing experiences. Specifically relating to reading, Harris (2008) suggests three key ways in which children engage in reading with the first being modelled reading. This is where kaiako read to children. Secondly, guided reading where kaiako read with children and lastly independent reading where children read by themselves which includes reading through pictures (Harris, 2008). It is important to recognise that these three methods need to occur concurrently and require kaiako to invite, model and scaffold children’s learning through a range of both formal and informal reading opportunities.

Listening: To encourage children to develop their listening skills, kaiako need to actively listen and respond to children. Responding to the infant’s efforts to communicate and act accordingly demonstrates to the child that their voice is valued and heard (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). For the toddler, an unhurried approach
that allows the child time to order their thoughts and practice word pronunciation encourages the child to persist with difficulty (Burman, 2009). Listening to the young child provides the opportunity to learn about their thinking and to support the child to strengthen their working theories. Through acknowledging children at all stages of development, it affirms their learning and provides validation that they are using the words for the right purpose and meaning. Kaiako can actively support the development of listening skills through pointing out new or interesting sounds in the environment. Listening to the sound of the wind in the tree could develop into a game, but kaiako can also encourage quiet times that raises children’s awareness of the sounds in the environment (National Institute for Literacy, 2009).

- **Turn-taking or shared conversations:** When kaiako take turns in conversations with children, they provide the child with time and opportunity to process language and respond (Burman, 2009). Children learn to communicate and develop oral literacy from birth through engagement in conversations with those that care for them. This is why it is important for kaiako to use increasingly complex language to support children in developing their vocabulary. Kaiako can explain new words and play with words that sound interesting such as ‘discombobulated’. Rich learning experiences provide material for children and kaiako to talk about. Walks around the neighbourhood provide opportunities for shared conversations of what is observed. Kaiako should remember to view and connect to the child’s previous experiences about their world.

**Final thoughts**

In writing this article, we hoped that it would provide support for kaiako with intentional ways to scaffold and promote literacy. The complexities of language and literacy need to be developed concurrently from infancy onwards. As highlighted in the introduction by Smoldon and Howell (2014) being literate is a lifelong tool for all children, regardless of age, to make meaning and understand their world amongst others. This requires kaiako to be deliberate and collaborate with the child, their whānau and other teachers to access the child’s funds of knowledge and create opportunities for intentional pedagogy.

Children do not learn in isolation but rather through interactions with “people, places and things” (MoE, 2017, p. 12). We have highlighted a range of strategies that kaiako can implement to promote and intentionally create a literacy rich environment for infants, toddlers and young children. The lasting thoughts of this article urge kaiako to consider the importance of being intentional around their implementation of literacy within early childhood education. This is not to be confused with formal instruction as all of the strategies above can be woven into everyday moments, they just require kaiako to recognise and act on teachable moments.
References


