

# LITERACY TEACHING IN THE EARLY YEARS OF SCHOOL

Fact sheet 6/2020 (for teachers)



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## OVERVIEW – LITERACY FROM K – 2

The crucial importance of the early years of schooling in laying the foundations for children's literacy development is undisputed. However, debate about approaches to literacy pedagogy has persisted, associated with a large and sometimes contradictory body of empirical research.

The *UK-based Education Endowment Foundation*<sup>2</sup> has synthesised the best current evidence, to provide guidance about good practice in the teaching of literacy in the early years of primary school. Their guidance has been updated for the Australian context by the *Evidence for Learning (E4L) Group*<sup>3</sup> and aligns well with the Australian Curriculum<sup>1</sup>. This fact sheet provides an overview of the eight recommendations in these Guidance Reports, illustrated with examples from our research in Tasmania<sup>5</sup>.

Key overall points:



The elements of literacy are interconnected, although they are separated in the recommendations<sup>2,3</sup>.



Effective teachers of literacy in the early years of school integrate and balance two important aspects of literacy<sup>4</sup>:

- learning the codes of written language
- understanding the purpose of literacy in ways that are meaningful to the learner.

## SPEAKING AND LISTENING

### 1. Developing speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language

- Oral language skills are foundational for literacy learning and for developing children's wider understanding of language.
- Teaching aimed at improving young children's speaking and listening skills also improves their comprehension and their emergent writing ability.



Tasmanian early years teachers talked about using music, rhyme, and song. Strategies included accompanying singing with body movements to enhance letter-sound associations.

## READING

### 2. Integrating decoding and comprehension skills in an engaging way

- Children need to learn both how to translate written words into the sounds of spoken language (decoding) and to understand the language they read (comprehension).
- Offering diverse media, genres of texts, and topics can support enjoyment and motivation as well as reading comprehension and inference skills.

### 3. Effectively implementing a systematic phonics program

- Phonics is central to learning to read and needs to be taught explicitly in the early years of schooling.
- Children need to have the opportunity to apply and practise phonics skills by reading and writing stories using letter-sound combinations they have already been taught.
- There is not enough evidence to favour a synthetic versus an analytic phonics approach.
- While there are many (commercial) phonics programs on offer, not all have been rigorously evaluated and many do not have sound evidence of effectiveness.

### 4. Teaching strategies for developing and monitoring reading comprehension

- Students can be taught specific metacognitive strategies to improve their reading comprehension. These strategies are:
  - Activating prior knowledge
  - Prediction
  - Questioning
  - Clarifying
  - Summarising
  - Inference.
- It is more effective for students to learn to integrate multiple comprehension strategies rather than rely largely on a single strategy.



In Tasmania teachers recognised phonics as the 'cornerstone of reading'.

Popular reading strategies were encouraging children to make their thinking visible; and to associate animals with specific sounding-out strategies to match graphemes to phonemes, such as Listening Lion, Chunky Monkey, Eagle Eye, and Stretchy the Snake.

## WRITING

### 5. Teaching strategies for planning and monitoring writing

- Learning to read and write are both complex, but there is less evidence about the best way to teach writing compared to reading in the early years of schooling.
- Useful writing strategies include planning (e.g. with a graphic organiser), drafting and editing their own texts, and reading and editing the work of fellow students.
- Even young children benefit from explicit teaching of text structures in different genres and from modelling how to move from constructing simple sentences to more complex ones.

## 6. Promoting fluent transcription skills and explicitly teaching spelling

- There is relatively little evidence related to teaching physical handwriting and/or keyboarding skills.
- Becoming fluent in the physical aspect of writing (transcription) takes time, practice, and effective feedback. Once fluent, children can pay more attention to composition.
- Spelling needs to be explicitly taught as a key component of writing fluency.
- Based on the limited evidence, it is likely to be useful to ensure the teaching of spelling is linked to lesson content; to use 'look-say-cover-write-say-check'; and to teach word patterns ('word study').



In addition to the 'mechanics' of writing, Tasmanian teachers were keen to give students in the early years opportunities to write for meaning-making and to follow their own interests. This requires modelling and fostering children's confidence so they are 'willing to have a go'. Teachers said small group collaborative writing tasks were useful to help children shift to independent writing.

## ACCURATE ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

### 7. Accurate assessment and diagnosis

- Formal literacy tests provide teachers with valuable information to monitor and diagnose students' current abilities.
- Staff benefit from professional learning to use and interpret diagnostic tests appropriately.
- Teachers' professional judgement and diagnostic tests supplement each other.
- Based on all the information about students' current capabilities teachers then change the focus of teaching (e.g. on a specific aspect of literacy) and/or approach to teaching (e.g. to provide more scaffolding) as needed.

### 8. High-quality interventions for struggling students

- Differentiated teaching should reduce the need for targeted interventions. However, it is likely that in all classroom there will be some learners who will benefit from additional and appropriately targeted intervention.
- Early identification and intensive, structured intervention and support, matched to the specific nature of the difficulty, have positive impacts on the literacy development of young children who are not reaching their literacy milestones.
- Additional literacy support should be clearly connected with normal classroom lessons.



In Tasmania, teachers recognised the importance of identifying the need for extra literacy support early, because otherwise it may be hard for children to 'catch up'.

Classroom staff used various assessment tools, including the Kindergarten Development Check, 'observation surveys', and running records. They worked closely with parents, speech pathologists and school psychologists to provide the right support to each student.

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This is fact sheet #6 (out of 11), produced as part of the  
“Review of Literacy Teaching, Training, and Practice in Government Schools”  
and is intended to align with the Department of Education Literacy Plan for Action 2019-2022.  
<https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Literacy-Plan-for-Action-2019-2022.pdf>

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Please cite as: Stewart, S. & Te Riele, K. (2020) Literacy teaching in the early years of school. Fact sheet 6/2020. doi:10.25959/100.00035389



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