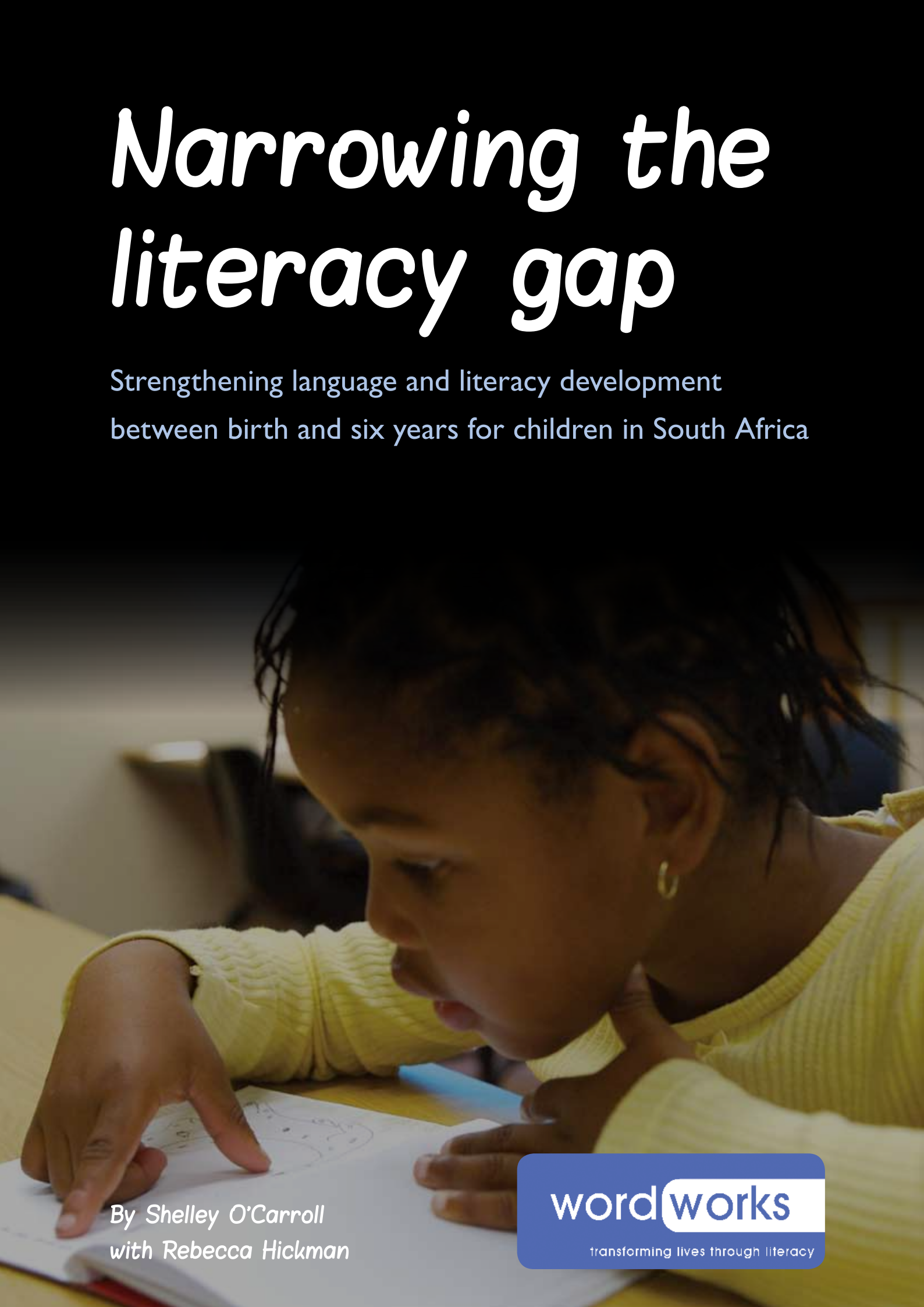
Narrowing the literacy gap

Strengthening language and literacy development between birth and six years for children in South Africa



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Chapter 1

Introduction

WHILE THE VAST MAJORITY of children in South Africa now receive formal schooling, children living in poverty still have much less chance of learning to read and write successfully. National and provincial assessments conducted over the past ten years show that a high percentage of South African children are not acquiring basic literacy skills in their first three years at school. International data indicate that even when compared with low-income countries in Africa, South Africa compares poorly on tests of literacy.[1] The reasons for this are complex and rooted in factors that go well beyond the classroom and are relevant from the day a child is born. But while our poorest children fail to learn to read, our education system will not succeed in improving life chances and breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

In trying to tackle South Africa's persistently low literacy rates, policy-makers have tended to focus on school quality issues, such as management and leadership, quality of teaching and coverage of the curriculum. Strategies to tackle low literacy levels that are remedial in nature and focus on classroom-based interventions appear to have had only limited impact. One study found that, "with few exceptions the developmental trajectory of most children appears to be well established at school entry. However, although it has been found that good teaching can improve a child's developmental trajectory, what seems to happen more commonly is that schooling simply reinforces the emerging developmental trends and usually widens the gap between good and poor readers."[2]

There is now a compelling body of evidence showing that if we are to give our poorest children a better chance of learning to read and write successfully, the right foundations for learning must be laid in the period before formal schooling begins. This will require a new approach which challenges four commonly held assumptions about literacy acquisition: "literacy development starts at school, the 'context' is the classroom, the 'messenger' is the teacher and the 'resources' consist of those available to the teacher in an academic context."[3] It will also require a deeper understanding of the importance of early language development to later success in literacy.

While the focus of this document is on building language for literacy, strengthening early language has other benefits for young children. Providing children with the confidence to use language effectively is vital for the communication skills needed for children to flourish socially and academically. Studies have shown that vocabulary at an early age is linked to early numeracy skills.[15] Early maths requires that children have the language skills to be able to express their thinking, for example when sorting, classifying, matching or ordering. A certain level of language proficiency is also necessary for the kind of arithmetic reasoning and problem-solving that is inherent in many mathematics tasks, and studies suggest that in this way, early language development supports the acquisition of early numeracy skills.[16]

The broader impact of poverty on cognitive development

While a focus on early literacy and language development requires a narrow lens, it is nevertheless necessary to frame this within the broader impact of poverty on cognitive development. We know that the structure and functions of the brain are affected by a wide range of environmental factors, including malnutrition, disease, stress and under-stimulation. It has been estimated that worldwide over 200 million children under five years do not attain their potential in cognitive development because of such factors.[4] Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to risk factors, which broadly fall into two categories: psychosocial risks, such as trauma, stress and exposure to violence; and biological risks, such as poor nutrition and disease.

A child's social and emotional wellbeing influences motivation to learn, curiosity, concentration and awareness of the environment – all critical for early learning. Socio-emotional difficulties are often related to home factors such as parenting skills and parent-child relationship, and are significantly more likely to occur among children from poorer backgrounds.[5] Many children from low socio-economic contexts in South Africa are at risk of socio-emotional difficulties as a result of fragmentation of families and exposure to violence.

Examples of biological risks in the South African context include HIV/AIDS, childhood growth retardation (also called stunting) and impaired hearing. It is estimated that 333,000 children under 14 years in South Africa are infected with HIV, and this has been linked with an increased risk of delay in language acquisition.[6] Stunting affects one third of under-fives in developing countries and is caused by poor nutrition and infections. International studies have found that it is associated with low school achievement and impaired cognitive development.[7] Children who have inherited hearing loss or who experience recurrent ear infections in the early years are also at risk of delayed acquisition of language and oral skills. Hearing impairments often go undiagnosed and untreated, even though research suggests that early intervention is crucial in order to mitigate the potential negative impact on language development.[8]

Maternal health and mental health are also important. Studies have shown that maternal depression has a direct effect on growth of expressive vocabulary in children aged between one and three years.[9] Inadequate maternal nutrition and infections affect fetal brain development.[10] A 2001 study in the Western Cape examined the impact of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) on the development of children. It found that "the FAS group was markedly deficient in language skills in comparison with the control group".[11]

Given the challenges faced by children growing up in poverty in South Africa, literacy and language development from birth to six years should be seen in the context of addressing young children's broader developmental needs, including healthcare, nutrition and psychosocial wellbeing. Community outreach programmes that address risks for mothers and their children before, during and after birth are therefore particularly important and will directly impact on school performance: "by enhancing children's health and developmental status, interventions at this early age are effective in improving their chances for success in learning to read later on."[12]

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Interventions in non-ECD specific settings

There are many possibilities for creative partnerships that target more than one developmental area for vulnerable children. Interventions that support responsive parenting, shared book reading and storytelling have both language and socio-emotional benefits. Waiting rooms in clinics and hospitals have the potential to become open-access learning and resource spaces in communities where trained community workers can demonstrate shared book reading. An innovative programme aimed at encouraging parents to read to very young children is the Reach out and Read (ROAR) programme in the United States (www.reachoutandread.org). Parents receive an age-appropriate book to take home each time a child from six months to five years of age visits the doctor. Parents are also given information about how to read to children, and waiting-room volunteers model reading aloud and book sharing. Research shows that parents who have participated in the ROAR programme are more likely to read to their children and that their children have higher scores on vocabulary tests. While acknowledging the constraints in the health sector in South Africa, this case study is an example of an integrated approach that addresses both health and language development.

Understanding the context

In many communities in South Africa, parents are inclined to minimise their role by assuming that preschool and school are the proper places for learning. Parents in disadvantaged communities are also likely to lack the confidence, knowledge and skills that can empower them to play a central role in supporting their child's literacy and language development. Held back by assumptions about their own efficacy, they often feel that their own educational background does not 'qualify' them to support their child. Homes in disadvantaged communities lack appropriate resources which might enable parents to engage in language and literacy-related activities.

South African society is characterised by single-parent families, with mothers working long hours as well as being tasked with the responsibility of bringing up children. Early childhood development (ECD) centres become vital spaces for nurturing early learning. It is therefore of great concern that a recent National Planning Commission (NPC) report states that, "the quality of early childhood education and care for poor black communities is inadequate and generally very poor. Early childhood development is underfunded by government and is largely provided through support provided by donors to nongovernmental organisations. Despite the policy commitment to early childhood development, implementation in the poorest communities lags behind."[13]

Internationally, there is a growing body of research showing that the phase of development from birth to six years is critical to reading development in the school years. In other countries around the world, early literacy specialists have been set the task of developing policy around early language and literacy and this has led to the development of programmes and campaigns targeting families and ECD practitioners. However, in the South African context, there is a lack of policy, research and examples of effective practice that specifically address language and literacy development from birth to six years.

Historically, the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and service providers in the ECD sector has been informed by a very broad mandate to support young children. The sector has been dominated by issues such as access to centre-based provision, quality of infrastructure, nutrition, HIV, psychosocial wellbeing and safety of children. Teacher qualifications, teacher remuneration and registration of preschools with the relevant government departments remain significant challenges in the ECD sector. These very real issues have meant that a targeted focus on language and literacy in the early years has not been a priority. As a result, many preschools suffer from a lack of appropriate teaching resources and sometimes under-qualified staff who are not encouraged to value their role in laying the foundations for language and literacy learning.

In the ECD sector, teacher training delivered by Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges and NGOs is constrained by the Unit Standards determined by the South African Qualification

Authority (SAQA). The development of language and emergent literacy is a small component of the Learning Programmes based on the Unit Standards. There is a concern that the current Unit Standards may limit the extent to which early literacy and language development can be prioritised in teacher-training programmes.

In South Africa, teacher training has been characterised by limited opportunities for practice teaching as well as an absence of mentoring for practitioners. Recent South African research found that, "in addition to providing a range of opportunities to see and practice best teaching, including observations, simulations, role-plays and working in contextually appropriate model environments, there was a strong recommendation coming through this research that practice teaching (…) has to include some form of mentoring in classrooms."[14] Both the content and delivery of teacher training in the ECD sector appears to limit the extent to which early years practitioners can be apprenticed as skilled teachers of language and emergent literacy.

Creating a framework for success

As a result of poor literacy results in South Africa, we have seen the introduction of 'task teams' and 'literacy strategies' at school level. This degree of prioritisation now urgently needs to be extended to the preschool phase. Indeed, until language and literacy development are placed at the heart of early childhood development, later interventions to support reading and writing skills will meet with only limited success among children who missed out on crucial language development in their formative years.

The following chapters examine language and literacy development at different stages from birth to six years. Each chapter looks at why language and literacy development is important at this stage and what helps to foster it. The final chapter considers how new approaches can be implemented and makes recommendations for action. Throughout, a range of good practice examples from both South Africa and overseas are used to illustrate the narrative and provide practical ideas and suggestions for educational and early years planners and practitioners.

Chapter 2

The period from birth to three years

Key points:

- From birth to three years, children are doing crucial language work as they become familiar with the speech sounds of their native language and start saying some words and understanding many more.
- Early receptive and expressive language skills have been shown to be linked to children's literacy acquisition in their first few years at school.
- To assist children's language development during this period:
  - » parents should be encouraged to talk to their children as much as possible, even when they are babies;
  - » parents and caregivers should be attuned and responsive to babies' vocalisations and attempts to engage their attention;
  - » oral storytelling, songs and nursery rhymes should be used in homes and preschools to expand children's exposure to language;
  - » shared storybook reading should be used to extend children's vocabulary and help them develop a love of books.

ALTHOUGH INFANTS ARE not able to engage in literacy in the formal sense of reading and writing, the first few years of life are critical for the development of language skills that will support later literacy learning. As young children become readers and writers, competence in both receptive and expressive communication will enable them to understand what they read and to articulate their ideas in writing. Furthermore, even at this young age, there is much to be learnt about books and stories. In this chapter, we will consider how babies' and toddlers' experiences in homes and ECD settings are linked to literacy outcomes in later years.

Why early language matters

From birth babies start to recognise important sounds in their environment and by six months most are able to recognise the main speech sounds that comprise their native language. Between 10 and 14 months infants typically start saying some words, and show signs of understanding many more.

Research has demonstrated that even before children are able to speak, it is possible to measure differences in their word learning, and that these differences are linked to later language outcomes. Tests of infants between 15 and 25 months have revealed that children who are faster to identify familiar words in speech, are better word learners, and that differences in speed of understanding at two years are linked to children's language levels at eight years.[iii] The researchers conclude that "early experience with language, beginning in infancy, promotes fluency in understanding and growth in vocabulary, building the foundation for later literacy."[17]

Researchers who have examined language development across socio-economic contexts have shown that differences in the ways mothers use language with their children "create differences in the children's vocabulary growth and that these differences in experience systematically advantage children from higher socio-economic strata."[18] In one of the first studies of language development in family homes, researchers recorded interactions with children between 9 and 36 months of age on a monthly basis.[19] They found variations in the amount of speech directed at children, and estimated that by the time they were three years old, children of professional parents had heard 48 million words addressed to them, while children in families receiving welfare benefits had heard 13 million words. The amount of talk children heard correlated with

iii It is difficult to measure receptive language development at this age, and researchers have traditionally relied on parental reports of whether young babies and toddlers understand words. More recently researchers have started using the 'look-while-listening' technique, which involves infants looking at two pictures while listening to speech naming one of the pictures. Their gaze patterns are video recorded and researchers measure the time taken to look at the correct picture. This technique allows researchers to not only measure how many words a child understands but how efficient they are at identifying familiar words.

differences in their vocabulary, with children who had heard more words achieving higher scores on vocabulary tests at age three and better vocabulary and reading comprehension at age nine.

Researchers have also found links between the reading of books to children at home and early language and emergent literacy.[20] In a recent study of mother-child book reading at 14, 24 and 36 months, daily reading to children was positively associated with vocabulary and cognitive development at 36 months.[21]

What fosters language development from birth to three years?

Early language development from birth to three years should focus on developing a strong language base in a child's mother tongue. Research shows that "the better developed the conceptual foundation of children's first language, the more likely children are to develop similarly high levels of conceptual abilities in their second language."[22]

There are three main areas of support that can specifically benefit early language development from birth to three years:

- parents' and caregivers' verbal interaction with and responsiveness to their children
- engagement with children through activities such as storytelling and singing songs
- shared book reading

Quantity and quality of language in the home

"Early language development is rooted in the interactions children have with their parents, significant caregivers, childcare providers, and peers. These early social exchanges both foster developing language skills and provide a vital foundation for children's school readiness and academic achievement."[23]

One study of young children's language learning analysed parent-child talk and found two main types of talk. All parents of young children did a certain amount of 'business' talk aimed at getting a message across. Examples of this type of talk would be instructions such as "stop that" or "come here". Parents who talked more with their children in the first three years were not only using 'business' talk, they were also using more 'conversational' talk. This type of talk involved listening to the child and elaborating on their comments and responses, using prompts such as "what if…" and "remember when…". Extra 'conversational' talk before children were aged three was closely connected with vocabulary at age nine.[24]

While more talk in homes has been associated with children's language development, in low socio-economic contexts, the quality of language children hear may be even more important for early language outcomes than the amount of language.[25] Research[iv] that looked at indicators of the richness of mothers' spoken language and at children's vocabulary growth found that, "mothers who talked more (…), who used a richer vocabulary (…), and who produced longer utterances had children who grew in their productive vocabulary more than the children of mothers who talked less, used fewer different words, and spoke in shorter utterances."[26] A recent study of children from disadvantaged backgrounds showed that "infants who hear more and richer language from their caregivers also develop stronger processing skills, which in turn enable them to learn language more quickly."[27]

Parental responsiveness

It is not only the amount of talk that children hear that is important to their language development, but also the extent to which parents notice and respond to babies' and toddler's vocalisations and attempts to initiate communication. At this age, children may not be able to contribute to conversations in sentences and their speech is likely to be in fragments. However, by engaging with and responding to the words that their child is using, parents will help them to develop their expressive vocabulary. In order to learn to associate words with objects, children need to hear the word just as they are looking at or reaching out for something. How a parent responds to a child's vocalisations appears to explain some of the variability in the development of language.[28]

In a recent study, mothers from low socio-economic backgrounds participated in an intervention designed to encourage a responsive parenting style. Mothers were coached to use behaviours to support children's language, cognitive and socio-emotional development, particularly when engaged in shared reading and toy play. They were supervised by trained in-home supporters, and also had the opportunity to observe videos of themselves and other mothers as they engaged with their children. The intervention was effective across different cultural and educational groups, with mothers' increased use of rich language and greater responsiveness leading to related changes in children's language.[29]

iv Hoff videotaped conversations between 61 mothers and their 18 to 29-month old children in their homes at two time points 10 weeks apart. Recordings were taken of morning mealtime, mothers getting children dressed for the day, and mother-child toy play (Hoff, 2006).

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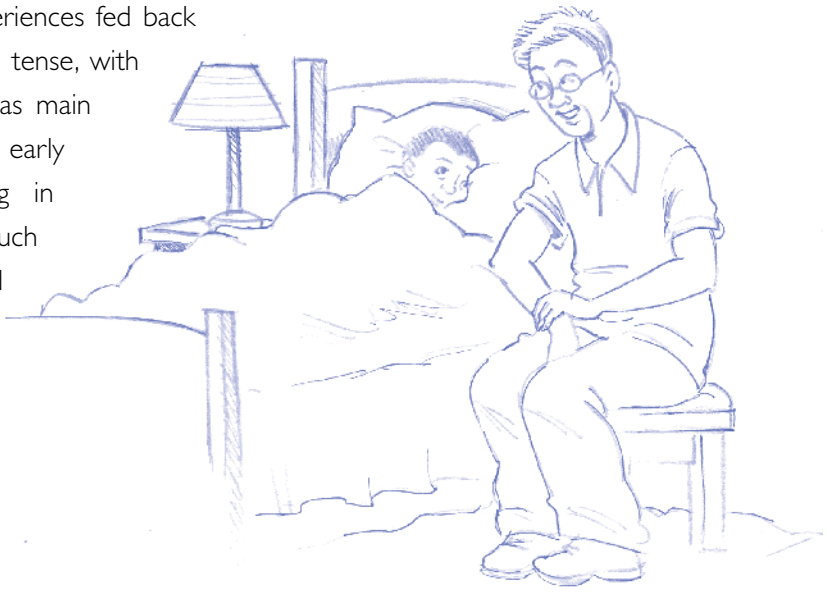
Encouraging parents to talk to their babies

In 2002, the National Literacy Trust in the UK launched a 10-year national campaign to raise awareness of the importance of language development between birth and three years. The aim of the 'Talk to your baby' campaign (www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk) was that by the end of the period all children would be receiving a stimulating language-rich start to their lives. To achieve this, the campaign made available a wide range of information, advice and resources to help parents.

Storytelling and songs

Between birth and three years, children are not only hearing words but are also exposed to conversations that involve stories. Mealtime conversation provides an opportunity for children to acquire familiarity with narratives when, for example, family members talk about the day's activities.[30] In a recent publication aimed at promoting children's early reading success, parents are advised that, "Children learn about narrative through the oral stories they hear in the world around them (…) tell children some of your own stories, about when you were a child, or about your own parents or grandparents (…) children learn about narrative when they hear their own personal experiences fed back in the form of stories, told in past tense, with themselves or people they know as main characters."[31] An example of an early narrative is children participating in telling an autobiographical story, such as recounting what happened during a visit to their grandparents. From two years, children can be encouraged to produce the most basic narrative form, which is the telling of one past-tense event.



Singing songs and reciting nursery rhymes is also a fun way of expanding language knowledge and usage in infants. Songs have been shown to "greatly facilitate language learning, especially when it comes to more complex grammatical constructions."[32] Repeated singing of rhymes and songs offers routine and predictability, which are key factors in language learning. After repeated exposure to rhymes and songs, the child can learn to join in and also to 'fill in the blanks' when prompted. Early knowledge of nursery rhymes is related to early reading skills, even when children's IQ and parents' education and social class are taken out of the equation.[33]

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Supporting family outreach

The Early Learning Resource Unit (www.elru.co.za) has developed a Family and Community Motivators programme which undertakes outreach work to the parents and caregivers of vulnerable young children. The programme includes information on children's developmental needs, practical guidance and advice, suggestions for activities, and books on a range of topics to be used in conversation with parents.

The Valley Development Project (www.valleydevelopment.co.za) works among the communities of Ocean View and Masiphumelele in the Western Cape. The Family Community Motivators Project is one strand of their early learning support programme and aims to increase the capacity of parents and caregivers of children not attending preschool to support early learning at home.

The Foundation for Community Work (FCW) has developed a Family in Focus Programme as an alternative to centre-based ECD provision. Home visitors regularly visit families to provide guidance and support and increase parents' capacity to create an effective home learning environment. Home visitors participate in an accredited training programme that covers early childhood development, community development, health and safety and child protection.

Each of these initiatives is ideally positioned to provide parents with ideas and resources to support early literacy and language development.

Shared storybook reading

Shared book reading provides opportunities for developing language and a love of books from an early age. However, there are many different ways of reading books with young children. The frequency and duration of shared reading is relevant, as is the style and quality of the activity. There is a distinction between reading to and reading with a child. When most adults share a book with a child, they read and the child listens. Although children can benefit when a book is read all the way through without stopping, as this helps them understand the continuity of the story, research suggests that central to language development is "what the parent and child add to the text […] the conversations, comments and questions that occur during book reading."[34] Even at a young age, children can be encouraged to participate in interactive book reading, through pointing and responding to questions about the pictures in a book.

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High quality resources

DVDs can be a useful way of demonstrating important skills and techniques to teachers and parents. New Readers Publishers (www.newreaders.org.za) have produced a DVD called 'Family literacy: Bringing literacy home' which shows real South African families enjoying books and literacy activities in their homes. The film includes footage of children using reading and writing in play, with parents joining in, highlighting the kind of literacy practices that can enrich family life and help children develop a love of reading and books.

PRAESA (www.praesa.org.za) have produced a short film called 'Feeling at home with literacy' (also available in Afrikaans and isiXhosa) in which a young girl who is just starting to read and write is followed for a day. The DVD explores the literacy stimuli that are all around her and how her mother and teachers can use all of the languages present in the classroom as a resource.

Chapter 3

The three- and four-year-old child

Key points:

- There are links between children's experiences with language at ages three and four years (for instance, through conversation, storytelling, books and pretend play) and later literacy ability.
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to lack opportunities to build their language skills. Early intervention can therefore help to avoid an achievement gap emerging between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.
- A range of practices and activities in the home and preschool can assist children's language development during this period:
  - » Engaging children in talk about past events and oral storytelling as well as social pretend play helps them to develop narrative skills.
  - » Interactive storybook reading helps children develop a love of books from a young age and provides an important platform for extended conversations, as well as exposure to new vocabulary, grammar and syntax.
  - » Certain games and activities (such as 'I spy…' and nursery rhymes) will help children to start to identify the separate sounds that comprise words.
  - » Pretend play areas that include writing tools will help children understand the purposes of written language Drawing, scribbling and pretend 'writing' are an important foundation for learning to write.

IN THIS PHASE of development, the home environment and parental involvement continue to play a central role in children's early language development. Research has shown that the nature and quality of a parent's interaction with their child is more important than the parent's education in helping to foster language development.[35] Shared reading, playing word and rhyming games, singing songs, experimenting with letters and sounds, and visiting the library together are more significant in determining a child's progress than the parent's own academic qualifications.[36]

In addition, vocabulary-rich early childcare environments that give children many opportunities for dialogue, storytelling and pretend play, are essential for literacy and language development during this phase.[37] These settings can help to redress the effects of a poor home learning environment.[iii] Early years settings have an important role to play in supporting the development of language skills and "what happens in preschool has a strong influence on whether children will learn to read with ease or difficulty and the ultimate level of their reading skill. These relationships hold true for both English only and English learner children."[38] The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project in the UK has demonstrated that preschool supports the intellectual development of all children and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit in particular.[39] Furthermore, there is a significant link between children's literacy and numeracy scores at age six and the quality of the preschool they attended. Indeed, the benefits to reading of high quality preschools were found to persist to age ten years.[40] Quality, in turn, was strongly linked to the training and qualifications of teachers.

Why language and literacy matter for three- and four-year-olds

Research on preschool language and literacy shows clear links between children's experiences at age three and language and literacy ability at age five years and older. For example, reading aloud to children in the early years has been found to be associated with language growth, early literacy and reading achievement in the school years.[41] In a study of families in a low socio-economic context, "children at age three who were being read to daily (often by more than one person), who owned more books, and who used the library and bookstores demonstrated greater language and literacy skills at age five than those who did not have these experiences at this early age."[42]

iii The EPPE study found that, "there is a strong relationship between a child and family background characteristics at entry to pre-school but this reduces (though is still strong) by the time a child enters primary school. This indicates that pre-school, whilst not eliminating differences in social backgrounds, can help to reduce the disadvantage children experience from some social groups and can help to reduce social exclusion." (Sylva et al, 2004, p4)

There is also a link between parents who speak more, use wider vocabulary and discuss more varied and non-immediate topics with their children, and stronger language and literacy at ages three, four and six years.[43] One study found that if parents supported early narrative skills at age three, their children had better narrative skills at age five, and these in turn were related to subsequent literacy achievement even up to Grade Four.[44]

In other words, children who have limited opportunities for building language and early literacy at ages three and four, are also more likely to be those children who score poorly on early literacy measures from Grade R onwards. This is of concern, given that research also shows that children from poorer socio-economic contexts lack many of the experiences that support early development.[45] In order to close the achievement gap between children from different socio-economic backgrounds, targeted early intervention is therefore crucial.

Which language?

In a multilingual country, early development of language inevitably leads to questions about 'which language'? Many South African children do not attend a preschool that teaches in their mother tongue. In an attempt to gain access to better schooling, parents often feel the need to teach children English from a young age, even when this is not their first language.

Local and international research shows that "helping families use the language that they and their children know best is important for promoting and maintaining primary language and fostering social emotional development and cognitive development."[46] Research has also indicated that competence in a mother tongue has benefits for a second language. In a recent study, parents were encouraged to do interactive reading with their five-year-old children at home, and this was followed by classroom storybook reading of the same books in English. Some parents read the books in their primary language at home, while others read English books. The researchers found that "preschool English learners were just as successful in acquiring English storybook vocabulary words when they read books at home in their primary language as when they read the same books in English," and concluded that "rather than being in competition with each other, first and second languages are interdependent in children's language development."[47]

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Access to language-appropriate books

Projects such as 'First Words in Print' (www.nlsa.ac.za) and 'Little Hands' (www.littlehandstrust.com) seek to ensure that young children have access to picture books and storybooks in their mother tongue. By exposing children to books that are relevant to their day-to-day experiences, these initiatives aim to foster a love of books and reading in children from the youngest age.

Biblionef South Africa (www.biblionefsa.org.za) is a book donation agency that focuses on providing books for schools and libraries in more disadvantaged communities. Through improving access to books, they seek to support literacy development and enjoyment of reading among South African children. Biblionef donate books in all 11 official languages.

What fosters emergent literacy and language development in three- and four-year-olds?

This period should be a time of ongoing language development and increasing enjoyment of stories, storybooks and pretend play. Children should also begin experimenting with sounds in words and show an interest in print and letters in their environment. They should start to understand that drawing and writing are different.

Shared storybook reading (interactive or dialogic reading)

Shared storybook reading is widely regarded as one of the most important ways of supporting literacy development. Research has shown that children who are exposed to more books not only have better vocabulary, but also become better readers.[48] The impact of shared reading is not necessarily seen on early word reading skills, but rather on language skills which support reading comprehension. Through books, children encounter new vocabulary and more complex sentence structures, syntax and descriptions.[49]

It is both language in books and the talk associated with shared book reading that are important for language development.[50] Books provide a platform for talk, both about things in the book and about things that are not in the book itself. A key feature of this interactive approach to storybook reading is encouraging parents to ask questions about the story and the pictures, and include open-ended questions such as "I wonder if…", "what if…", "why do you think…". Studies have shown that parents of all social backgrounds can be taught to read in this way, and that this kind of extended talk is linked to higher language and literacy scores at five years.[51]

Books can lead to discussions about past experience or predictions about what will happen. Inferences can also be made about things that are not in the text or illustrations. One way to help children to engage in this type of 'non-immediate' talk is through repeated readings of favourite books, as studies have shown that children generally participate more in later readings of the same text, which can include more speculation and interpretation.[52] Repeated readings may especially benefit second-language learners as they may be more dependent upon hearing a story more than once to gain full understanding of it.

Engaging children in conversations during storybook reading is also important in preschool settings. Instead of simply reading to children, teachers should use open-ended questions to encourage children to express their own ideas and initiate a discussion. Preschool settings that successfully support literacy and language development are characterised by these kinds of extended conversations.[53]

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Supporting shared book reading, storytelling and writing

The Family Literacy Project in KwaZulu-Natal supports shared book reading through box libraries, family literacy groups, book clubs and community libraries. One aspect of the programme is home visiting, where women take books with them to read to children and at the same time share ideas with parents for games and activities to support the development of early literacy skills. They also use parent and child journals to involve parents and children in conversation and writing together. Parents are given a book to use for the journal, and along with their child they draw or paste a picture into it, talk about it together and then the adult writes down the conversation in the journal.

www.familyliteracyproject.co.za

Conversations in the home and preschool settings

Conversations with parents and caregivers are the cornerstone of language development in the early years. In an analysis of teachers' conversational styles during free play, one study found that later language outcomes were linked to whether teachers spoke to children in ways that extended children's comments through indicating interest, asking questions and commenting on children's efforts.[54] The EPPE study findings also emphasised the importance of the quality of adult-child verbal interactions and of following the child's lead. The researchers referred to the practice of "sustained shared thinking" which "occurs when two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding."[55] They found that in settings where children made the most progress "sustained shared thinking" and open-ended questioning by teachers were more in evidence.[56] These findings challenge traditional views of teaching where children sit quietly and listen while the teacher does all the talking. They suggest that language development is enhanced when children are given opportunities to be active participants in problem solving and conversations.

Teaching moments where a teacher and children work together to solve a problem are also likely to support the development of concepts and language for early maths. Maths vocabulary includes terminology to describe shape, size and position in space (under, above, below). Understanding descriptive words (empty/full) and comparative words (more than/less than) is also vital for early mathematical reasoning.

IN PRACTICE

Guidelines and resources for language development

Every Child a Talker (ECAT) is a £40 million UK government programme to provide training and support to those working with young children on early years language development. It has been funded for delivery in all local authorities in the UK between 2008 and 2011. Through providing good practice guidelines, tips, and fun, practical ideas to both parents and preschool practitioners, this initiative supports the creation of "developmentally appropriate, supportive and stimulating environments in which children can enjoy experimenting with and learning language."[57] ECD settings that are targeted for the programme receive support from a local authority ECAT consultant. Each setting identifies an 'Early Language Lead Practitioner' who is tasked with developing language practices in their setting, with the aim of maximising language learning opportunities for children.

Story-telling

When children are read to or told stories, they are exposed to a special type of language that is different to the language they use in everyday speech. This 'decontextualised language' uses words to convey information about things happening at another time and place and is critical for school learning.

In communities where books are scarce, oral narratives can play an important role in helping children to become familiar with language that is removed from the 'here and now'. Children telling or re-telling a story or recounting a past experience learn that they need to follow a specific order of events and explain how one event influenced another. They also need to give a context to their story, such as who was there and where it took place. "Oral event-narratives that children learn to tell as preschoolers are similar to the texts that children learn to read in school. As a result, learning about and using narratives help children form expectations about how written texts are organised."[58]

Parents and preschool teachers have a role to play in helping children develop good narrative skills,[59] by encouraging children to talk about events, experiences and plans. Narratives often develop over a number of turns in a conversation, with adults elaborating on what a child says and prompting them with questions such as "what happened next?" Adults can also help children to reflect on the narrative by using evaluative talk (such as "that was interesting/ scary…") and pondering aloud ("I wonder why she did that…?"). In these kinds of conversations, it is important that children can talk without fear of being corrected and that they feel they are being listened to and their ideas taken seriously.

Social pretend play

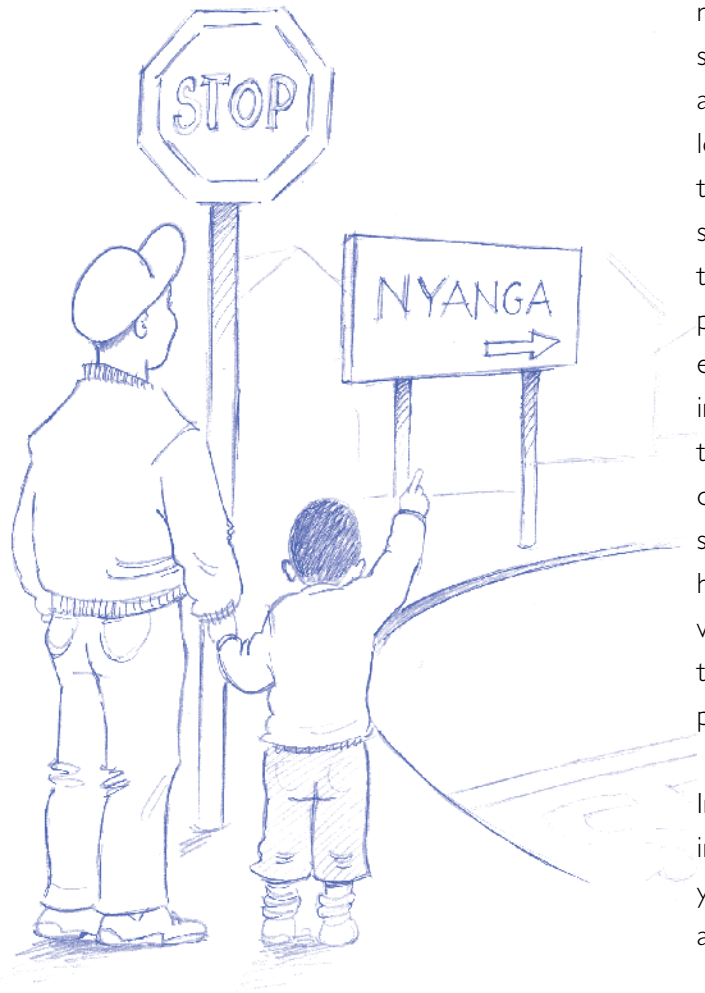
Play is the primary 'work' of children in the early years, and social pretend play is important for language and literacy development for a number of reasons. A specific kind of language is used in pretend play, where children need to explain their play and attribute actions, thoughts or feelings to inanimate objects. It also involves assigning roles and enacting typical scripts or routines of everyday events or making up a story about someone or something. Studies that have analysed mother and children's talk during play at three years have shown that talk in pretend play at this age is related to language and literacy skills that are important for children to have acquired before starting school.[60]

Pretend play is important for a second reason. Because it involves the use of objects to stand for or represent other objects, it serves as an important first step towards understanding that things can stand for other things (symbolic representation). From play, children start representing things in drawings, and later begin to understand that written language represents spoken language.

Finally, pretend play settings that include crayons, paper and other literacy tools are important because they give children opportunities to 'write' for a purpose. A literacy area should be part of any early years classroom and should include a reading corner as well as a writing area supplied with writing implements (crayons, khokis, pencils) and stationery. When children initially use writing in their pretend play they tend to use scribbles, marks and a mixture of numbers and letters to 'write' (e.g. a shopping list or doctor's prescription). In this way, children play out functional uses of literacy which they have seen modelled by parents and caregivers in everyday situations. This shows that they understand that print carries a message and has a purpose.

Playing with sounds and noticing letters

In order to learn to read and write, young children need to develop a language skill which involves focusing on sounds in words rather than word meanings. This is generally referred to as phonological awareness and it requires that children shift from focusing on what words signify to the separate sounds that comprise them.



Together with letter knowledge, awareness of sounds in words is one of the strongest predictors of early reading ability.[61] There are many levels of phonological awareness and it generally develops through activities such as clapping out syllables in words (e.g. e-le-phant), listening to nursery rhymes, nonsense word play or playing games such as "I spy with my little eye, something starting with…". Research indicates that the best way to get children to think about sounds in words is to focus on the beginning sounds of words. In one study, four-year-old children were taught how to recognise words that begin and end with the same sound, and three years later there was evidence of the benefits of the programme in the children's reading.[62]

In addition to becoming aware of sounds in words, at the ages of three and four years, children should also start to show an awareness of print in their environment

and to 'read' signs using visual cues such as shape and colour. Road signs, shop signage and other everyday print can provide the prompts for this kind of learning. Children might also start learning some letters at this age, particularly the letters of their own name and those of family members.

IN PRACTICE

Strengthening literacy and language teaching in preschools

The Knysna Education Trust (www.knysnaedutrust.co.za) works to improve the standard of education of children in disadvantaged ECD settings, through upgrading facilities and resources and providing skills development programmes and teacher training. They have also provided the Souns Literacy Programme to the preschools that they work with. This programme enables children to develop letter knowledge from a young age.

Khululeka Community Education Development Centre (www.khululeka.org.za) works in the Eastern Cape to increase access to high quality ECD through training ECD practitioners and providing resources and support to ECD settings. Khululeka has developed a learning programme towards an NQF Level 5 qualification called 'Literacy for Young Children'. It is based on the High/Scope Curriculum and covers print concepts, comprehension and vocabulary, phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge.

Drawing and writing

At three and four years, children should be experimenting with representing their world through drawing and painting. This helps to develop fine-motor skills that will be important for writing. At this age, children might 'pretend' write with a mixture of scribbles and letter-like shapes and might start to realise that drawing and writing are different. If children see parents using writing in everyday activities, they might show an interest in how things are written and ask a nearby adult to "write it down". This is an important part of writing development, for even though they are not physically doing the writing, children are learning important things about written language: that spoken words can be written, and that each spoken word corresponds to a written word.

Chapter 4

The five- and six-year-old child

Key points:

- At ages five and six, children continue to build important language skills that will equip them to understand what they read and express their ideas in writing. In order to start school with the tools to learn to read and write, five- and six-year-olds also need to develop their phonological awareness and letter-sound knowledge.
- Children learning English as a second language should continue to be encouraged to strengthen language skills in their mother tongue, as these skills will transfer over to their second language learning.
- A range of practices and activities in the home and preschool can assist children's language development during this period:
  - » Interactive storybook reading continues to provide a platform for extended conversations and for learning new vocabulary and syntax, as well as exposure to print conventions.
  - » Oral storytelling encourages children to use more complex narratives and this helps them to bridge the gap between oral and written language.
  - » Teaching the different letter-sounds and building awareness of sounds in words helps children to understand the relationship between the spoken and written word and equips them with a 'self-teaching' system.
  - » Encouraging children to 'have a go' at writing, with limited emphasis on correct spelling and neat writing helps children make further connections between the sounds they hear and words on a page.

IN THE YEAR they turn six, all children in South Africa are supposed to enter Grade R, a year that is officially overseen by the Department of Basic Education as part of the Foundation Phase. While increasing numbers of children are being accommodated in Grade R classes, the challenge is now to ensure quality of teaching. A study in a disadvantaged community in the Western Cape found that children's preschool environments offered "inadequate quality and quantity of access to literacy resources and activities," and expressed concern about the "extent to which teachers are adequately equipped to promote children's language and literacy development."[63] Other recent South African research suggests that too few children in Grade R classes display basic early literacy competency.[64]

In this chapter, we will explore how both parents and Grade R teachers can help to ensure that five- and six-year-olds start school with the competencies that will enable them to grow into skilled readers and writers.

Why language and literacy matter for five- and six-year-olds

It is essential that children enter Grade One with a strong language foundation. There are correlations between vocabulary scores at age five and reading comprehension levels in Grades Three, Four and even Seven.[65] Studies in the US have shown that children who enter kindergarten or first grade without a solid language foundation often do not gain the skills necessary to fulfil their academic potential.[66]

While language skills are critical for later reading comprehension, code-related skills are also vital for learning to read and write. Having letter-sound knowledge and phonological awareness are two of the best indicators that children will learn to read successfully.[67] They are also important contributors to early reading skills for children whose first exposure to English is when they start school.[68] Local and international research indicates that children from disadvantaged communities generally begin school with less well-developed letter knowledge and phonological awareness than their middle-class peers.[69] When preschool children from disadvantaged contexts participate in targeted interventions, their letter knowledge and phonological awareness improve, and positive effects are seen in their word reading and spelling skills.[70] One study found that preschool children from low socio-economic backgrounds who participated in an intervention to teach beginning sounds and letter knowledge, continued to perform better than control-group children at the end of Grade One, and produced spellings that were at the same level or better than a middle class sample.[71] Similarly, interventions for English second language learners that focus on letter-sound knowledge have shown strong effects on the development of word reading and writing skills.[72]

It is vital that five- and six-year-old children are given the time and space to engage with written language – using writing in play and experimenting with print as they start to figure out the way the system works. Without this foundation, many children spend their first few months in Grade One learning letters and remembering words by sight and stories by rote, but not understanding how the letters they are learning are connected to words and books. They also become passive recipients of knowledge from the teacher, rather than beginning school with the tools to be active participants in the process of learning to read and write.

Multilingualism

In the South African context, language issues come to the fore in the years from five to six because of the urgency of getting children to a level of proficiency in a second language that might well be the medium of instruction at the local primary school. This often leads to abandonment of the home language in favour of English. Both local and international research supports a model of bilingualism that provides ongoing support for the mother tongue as children gradually become competent in a second language.[73]

Research has shown that development of language and literacy in two languages is a reciprocal process. This is encouraging because it means that strengthening skills in a child's mother tongue, such as narrative storytelling, can have beneficial effects on a second language.[74] A growing body of research has also shown that phonological awareness is a skill that appears to transfer from a child's first to second language and is not restricted to the language in which it is first developed.[75] One study on speakers of a variety of languages concludes that "the ability to attend to sounds of language rather than meaning is learned once and can be applied to all languages an individual speaks."[76]

One of the realities of living in a multilingual context, is that many children will not be orally proficient in a language when they are faced with the task of learning to read and write in that language. Research seems to suggest, however, that developing literacy should not wait for a certain level of oral language competence. The impact of limited proficiency in a second language is on comprehension of text rather than on early reading.[77] Research suggests that "children can learn to read before they have oral competence in the target language. Indeed, it is clear that these young children are learning English through their reading."[78] In other words, books are important teachers of a second language to 'emergent bilinguals' and can even lead oral language development.

What fosters emergent literacy and language development in five- and six-year-olds?

Interactive storybook reading

Shared book reading continues to be important at ages five and six, helping to foster a love of reading and contributing to vocabulary development and language skills that support school learning.[79] Book reading at home usually takes place between an adult and one or two children. This provides an excellent environment for language learning, as language growth is optimised through 'dialogic' story reading, where children gradually take over the process of telling the story, and questions and conversations precede and follow the narration. Small-group reading sessions are also ideal for supporting language learning in the classroom, enabling teachers to engage with individual children's level of understanding and to extend their language skills through conversation.[80]

Storybook reading is also an opportunity to support the understanding of the concepts and conventions of print, including the awareness that we read from left to right. Children at this age often 'pretend read' a familiar story and this reflects their knowledge of print concepts and behaviours associated with storybook reading. Young children generally 'read' by making up or reciting a story to match the pictures in a book, but might still not have a clear concept of what a word is. Storybook reading provides an opportunity for adults to point out how spoken words relate to the printed words on a page.

IN PRACTICE

Supporting book reading

Vulindlela Reading Clubs seek to foster a love of books and stories among disadvantaged communities in the Western Cape (www.praesa.org.za). The clubs provide children with access to culturally-appropriate storybooks in a range of languages as well as opportunities to take part in supported reading sessions. By promoting and enabling reading for enjoyment, they are helping to create a culture of reading and to foster positive learning habits among vulnerable children.

Storytelling

Research in multicultural contexts has shown that children may come from environments that provide them with rich experience of language, but that do not expose them to the types of language used in teaching and books in formal school settings.[81] At school, children will read storybooks and textbooks in which language is decontextualised, more complex and more formal. They will also encounter new written language customs and linguistic devices such as use of figurative language, which are crucial for reading comprehension.[82] Narrative skills are essential for bridging oral and written language.

In the earliest stages of recounting events and telling stories, children generally include information about the context, characters and events that make up a story. As narratives become longer and more complex, children begin to show an understanding of causality and demonstrate an ability to take the perspective of different characters in the story. It is these more sophisticated narrative abilities that lay the foundation for making inferences – one of the most important aspects of reading comprehension.

Developing alphabetic understanding

One of the key challenges facing beginner readers is discovering the alphabetic principle – that letters represent sounds in words, even though the representation is only approximate.[83] This awareness may be obvious to literate adults but should not be taken for granted in children. Before learning to read and write, most children are familiar with drawing as a way of representing things – but in their experience, drawings look something like the things they represent. The difficulty with writing is that words are not in any way related to how things look, and children must learn that written words are related to how we say things, not the things themselves.

Before understanding the alphabetic principle, children rely heavily on context when reading print in their environment, such as using colour cues to remember that a street sign says 'STOP' or reading 'KFC' because of the logo. They may see reading as remembering a purely visual sequence of letters or using whatever cues are most helpful, such as word length and shape, and patterns of letters. A child might remember the word 'look' because it has two 'eyes' in the middle. These links are arbitrary and are likely to mean that children frequently confuse words with similar letters. More importantly, a purely visual learning strategy means that an emergent reader is initially reliant on someone to tell them what a word says.

In contrast, children who understand the links between sounds in words and letters on a page have a system they can use to decode written words. For example, a child who has some letter knowledge might use the 'l' and the 'k' as clues to help them read the word 'look'. In English, even though not all the letters in irregular words correspond to the sounds in the word,

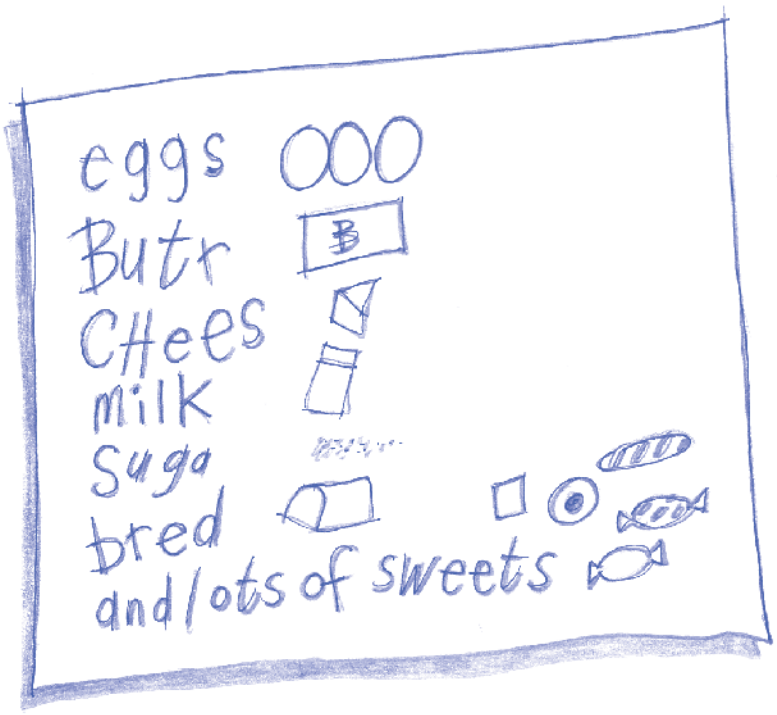
there will be some letters that do and can be used to anchor the word in memory. In this way, beginner readers start to recognise words by connecting one or two letters in a word with their corresponding sounds.[84] This is the beginning of a self-teaching system.

Understanding the alphabetic principle requires that children have some knowledge of letters and some awareness of sounds in words. Children generally learn letter-sound relationships through alphabet books, games and incidental encounters with print in the environment. There are also structured programmes to teach letter-sounds in Grade R. Games such as 'I spy with my little eye…' and activities that involve clapping for sounds, help children to break words into sounds that can then be represented by known letters. At five to six years, children should be able to listen for the smallest units of sound in words (phonemes), and should be developing skill in breaking up words into phonemes and putting phonemes together to make words (e.g. the word 'bus' can be broken into the sounds /b/ /u/ /s/ and the sounds /b/ /u/ /s/ make the word 'bus'). Awareness of individual sounds (phonemes) in words is difficult for young children, but particularly important for successful literacy acquisition.[85] Activities for developing phonological awareness should therefore be built into the daily curriculum for five- and six-year-old children.

IN PRACTICE

Literacy resource centres

The Sithanda Ukufunda Literacy Programme is run by the Greater Stellenbosch Development Trust (www.ikhayatrust.org.za) in the community of Kayamandi. It seeks to help children become lifelong readers and writers, by empowering and training teachers, parents and volunteers. Through the establishment of a literacy room in their main centre, equipped with books and literacy materials, they have created a multi-functional resource for the community. The space is used for sessions for children, the training of volunteers and teachers, and workshops for parents of preschoolers.



Opportunities to write

Scribbling or writing using random letters and symbols is an important developmental step. However, it is the next phase of writing development that shows that a child has taken the first steps into literacy. We know that children understand the alphabetic principle when they begin to display 'invented spelling' and experiment with how to represent the sounds in words. The child is starting to discover how the system works.

Research suggests that the ability to write words the way they sound precedes the ability to read among children, and that alphabetic understanding might well be evident in children's writing before their reading.[86] Invented spelling has also been found to be linked to later reading ability and "children who tend to give a higher proportion of phonologically-accurate, pre-conventional spellings tend to become better readers in the first grade."[87] However, South African studies have shown that in high poverty contexts children are less likely to have an 'invented spelling' phase,[88] and that "to most of the children writing was something that they needed to be taught by a teacher and until such time as that happened, they did not write any words."[89]

It is important that parents and teachers of children in Grade R value children's first attempts to write words as they sound. Children should be encouraged to 'have a go' and try to write words phonetically, with limited emphasis on correct spelling and neat writing. Young children who are

learning to write are still developing pencil control. Their letters might not be the same size, and they might also write some letters the wrong way around. This is all normal in the process of learning to write, and if children are asked to focus too much on neat writing, they will become overly anxious about making mistakes. It is a good idea to get children to write big letters in the sand, on a blackboard or on a concrete floor with a paintbrush dipped in water. Once they can feel how to write these big letters, then it is easier for them to write them on paper.

IN PRACTICE

Targeted early intervention

Wordworks (www.wordworks.org.za) delivers a range of projects to support early literacy among children, many of whom are learning to read and write in English as a second language. Through the Early Literacy Programme, volunteers are trained to work with small groups of children to support their emergent reading and writing. The weekly lessons include reading a new book, emergent writing and drawing, and playing word and sound games.

Chapter 5

Strategies for success

THIS CHAPTER CONSIDERS how educational and ECD planners and practitioners can support language and literacy development between birth and six years. It outlines a range of practical measures and initiatives that are needed in order to ensure that all six-year-olds enter Grade One with the literacy and language skills to succeed. Targeted support for early language is not only important for the development of literacy skills. Research has shown links between language and early numeracy skills, with the completion of basic mathematical tasks depending on the understanding of maths-related language terms.

1. Supporting parents

Parents and caregivers have a crucial role to play in supporting language development in the months and years immediately after birth. Yet parents are often hindered by their construction of their role ("education is the responsibility of teachers not parents"), their assumptions about their efficacy ("I don't know enough to be able to help my child"), and limited opportunities to gain relevant knowledge and skills. Policies and programmes therefore need to ensure that the type of parent-child interactions outlined in the previous three chapters become much more common in South African homes, through a focus on informing and empowering parents. Our vision should be of homes that provide rich language environments where caregivers read to children, tell stories, sing songs, talk about letters and sounds, and take their children to the library. To achieve this, more targeted initiatives specifically aimed at encouraging and equipping parents and caregivers to support early language development are needed.

Recommendation 1

More classes and workshops should be made available to parents and caregivers, aimed at encouraging and empowering them to support early language development in the home. Interventions should promote and celebrate the role of parents as first teachers, as well as equip parents practically with the information, skills and confidence to support their children's language acquisition. As far as possible, initiatives should be embedded in the communities that they seek to serve and delivered in partnership with preschools and primary schools.

Recommendation 2

To help parents understand and value their role, targeted awareness-raising campaigns should be used, which include posters and information leaflets that can be distributed through preschools, clinics, community centres and outreach workers.

Recommendation 3

Preschool teachers and community, social and health workers need to be properly informed about the importance of parental involvement in early language learning and familiar with the practical strategies that can support emergent literacy and language learning in the home.

Recommendation 4

Greater efforts should be made to make culturally relevant storybooks in all South African languages more widely available to parents and caregivers, in particular through community libraries.

IN PRACTICE

Supporting parents

Wordworks' Home-School Partnership programme empowers and equips parents of children aged between four and seven years to support informal learning in the home (www.wordworks.org.za). Parents attend seven weekly two-hour workshops where they learn how to support their children's learning through practical activities and strategies, and are provided with fun and user-friendly resources that they can use in the home context. Wordworks offers training and ongoing mentoring to facilitators on how to run the seven-week course. This programme not only helps to foster a culture of learning among families, but also helps to build stronger relationships between preschools/ schools and the families they serve.

2. Supporting communities

There are many ways in which communities support the language and literacy learning of their future generations. Literacy resource centres, run by local non-profit organisations, community centres and places of worship, often run sessions for both parents and children. By improving access to books, these kinds of initiatives also provide opportunities for children to explore storybooks and develop a love of reading.

As individuals working directly alongside children during a crucial developmental period, family field workers, outreach workers and community volunteers all need to have better access to knowledge and resources about early language and literacy development. Family outreach workers often visit vulnerable families in their homes, providing important opportunities for improving and supporting the home learning environment.

IN PRACTICE

Community libraries

The Masiphumelele Corporation and Trust has funded the building and resourcing of a community library in Masiphumelele (www.masicorp.org). The library provides a vital community resource, ensuring that picture books and storybooks can be accessed by all families in the community, while also providing a space for other community projects, including, afternoon literacy classes for school children, read-alouds for local preschool children, workshops to empower parents to support informal learning in the home and training for preschool teachers to strengthen teaching of early literacy and language.

Recommendation 5

The programmes used by family outreach initiatives and similar community projects should be strengthened with more specific guidance, ideas and resources for language and literacy development in the early years, as well as training on the kinds of techniques that parents can use in the home to support this development.

Recommendation 6

Community projects and spaces that encourage a love of books and reading should be supported and resourced. These might be run through libraries, community centres, places of worship, and non-profit organisations.

3. Supporting preschools

Research has established the vital role that high-quality preschools can play in equalising chances for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds by ensuring that they start school with the key component skills for learning to read and write already in place. Yet preschool teachers and carers are sometimes under the misconception that helping children with language and literacy development is a task that begins at school. Preschools and crèches also suffer from a lack of appropriate resources and sometimes have under-qualified and underpaid staff who are not encouraged to value their role in laying the foundations for literacy learning.

Improving the quality of preschools must be a national priority. It is important but not sufficient to widen access to ECD provision – the quality of the facilities, resources and teaching matter too. Moving forward, provision of appropriate teacher training and practical learning resources are likely to be key determinants of the impact and effectiveness of preschool education on offer in South Africa and hence of literacy outcomes for our children.

Recommendation 7

Evidence should be gathered about the effectiveness of existing ECD training programmes, materials and skills-development courses, with a specific focus on language and literacy. This should be used to inform revisions to Unit Standards and Learning Programmes, in order to ensure that all newly-qualified ECD practitioners and Grade R teachers are conversant with best practice around supporting language and literacy development, and trained in the methods and approaches that have been shown to be most effective.

Recommendation 8

Inservice training should be more widely available for preschool teachers and teaching assistants, along with ongoing, on-site mentoring and support. Training should focus on providing them with practical strategies and ideas for supporting the language and literacy acquisition of the children in their care.

Recommendation 9

Steps should be taken to develop and distribute more high-quality resources and materials for use by crèches and preschools in supporting literacy and language development.

Recommendation 10

More early intervention initiatives designed to work intensively with children from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or learning English as a second language are needed, delivered in partnership with preschools and schools.

IN PRACTICE

Training, curriculum support & materials for Grade R teachers

READ Educational Trust offers inservice training and resources for Grade R teachers, helping to strengthen practitioners' skills and capacity to support children's emergent literacy abilities (www.read.co.za). This is achieved through training practitioners and supplying schools with appropriate books, materials and equipment.

In partnership with the Centre for Early Childhood Development, Wordworks has developed resources and teacher guidelines for early literacy and language to ensure that learners enter Grade One with a solid language and literacy foundation (www.wordworks.org.za). The training programme covers language development through storytelling, emergent writing and drawing, incidental reading and development of letter-knowledge and phonological awareness. Teachers are introduced to a range of user-friendly materials and techniques, through training and on-site mentoring.

Supporting knowledge-sharing

Knowledge and skills-sharing must be at the heart of a successful early literacy strategy. There is a particular need for further local research on early literacy and language development in the South African context. The newly constituted South African Early Childhood Education Research Association and the South African Journal of Childhood Education are examples of recent positive developments in this area. Research should be translated into practical guidelines and resources that can be made widely accessible through open-access learning and resource spaces in communities.

Recommendation 11

Umbrella bodies, partnerships and networking initiatives should be used to co-ordinate research, disperse learning and expertise and share good practice. Some of these alliances should be specific to early language and literacy development. All should work closely with established initiatives, such as the National Early Childhood Development Alliance and Bridge Communities of Practice. As new evidence emerges on what works and new methodologies make a measurable and positive impact, systems should be in place to ensure that best practice and learning can be disseminated as quickly as possible across the ECD sector.

Conclusion

The previous chapters have shown that there is extensive evidence and understanding of how language and literacy skills are developed from birth. We now need the strategies, resources and determination to use this knowledge to do things differently, in order to alter the academic trajectory of children from disadvantaged communities. This will require a committed and collaborative effort between educational planners and practitioners, supported by all those connected with the ECD sector. Change and innovation at the point of delivery of ECD services is crucial, but will only happen systematically alongside the correct identification of priorities at national and regional levels, and the proper provision and funding of materials and training. In South Africa, there are plenty of examples of best practice at programmatic level, delivered by state, non-profit and community providers. But these examples tend to be scattered, the exception rather than the norm, and until they are mainstreamed throughout ECD provision, many children will continue to lose out.

While a refreshed and strengthened policy framework is essential, incremental changes and evidence-based innovation at the point of delivery can happen immediately – and indeed, in many places are already happening. Small but significant advances in home learning environments, preschool provision and community programmes will continue to reap big rewards in language and literacy learning and will make a profound difference to the futures of our children.

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69 Willenberg, 2004; O'Carroll, 2006; Nadler-Nir, 1997
70 Blachman, Ball, Black and Tangel, 1994; O'Carroll, 2006
71 Tangel and Blachman, 1995
72 Stuart, 1999; Stuart, 2004
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