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Emergent literacy in New Zealand kindergartens: An examination of policy and practices

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Massey University

Claire Jane McLachlan-Smith
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Abstract

Current research into emergent literacy suggests that children learn about literacy prior to formal education. Children develop the knowledge and skills of literacy within the context of their home and preschool relationships. A view of literacy as a developmental process which is socially constructed within children's relationships is proposed in this thesis. A kindergarten curriculum which focuses on providing a literacy rich, mediated learning environment is argued to be the most appropriate way to promote children's emergent literacy.

This thesis documents a research project undertaken in New Zealand kindergartens, which examines teachers' and parents' view of children's literacy development. Results of in-depth interviews with Head Teachers and structured interviews with parents and Assistant Teachers will be presented, as well as the results of observational studies, which examine the domains of literacy activity in six kindergartens. Teachers in these kindergartens are constructivist teachers, who seek to promote independent learning through a range of "free play" curriculum. They argue a commitment to providing a literacy environment for children. Parents, who come from a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds, all describe a high level of literacy involvement with their children and firm beliefs about how children learn and what children need from early childhood education. Observational studies demonstrated that not all children receive the same exposure to literacy activities or to literacy-rich environments. Factors influencing the availability of literacy activities include teachers' views of cognitive and literacy development, curriculum design, kindergarten layout and the resources available to the kindergarten.

The strengths and weaknesses of a constructivist curriculum for promoting literacy development are examined and alternative views of teacher role, literacy environment and parental involvement are proposed. The implications for developing a curriculum for kindergarten which would promote emergent literacy development in children are explored.
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