

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**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
1996

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 focusses 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.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisors, Dr. Alison St.George and Professor William Tunmer for their advice, assistance and encouragement throughout the course of this work. I am extremely grateful to Alison for her ongoing support and careful consideration of all parts of the research. I am also very grateful to Bill for his positive and encouraging comments on various parts of the research.

Thanks are also due to the following:

The New Zealand Federation of University Women, for the award of a doctoral fellowship, to allow completion of the research while living the United States. The Massey University Research Fund and Education Department Research fund, for funding to support this research. The Faculty of Education, Massey University, for the award of an Assistant Lectureship from 1991-3.

The teachers and parents in all of the kindergartens studied in this research, who gave so willingly of their time and their experience. I am very grateful to everyone for making me feel so welcome and for giving me such interesting data to study.

Professor Beth Graue, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin - Madison. I wish to thank Beth for her support and many helpful discussions regarding early childhood theory and research. I am also grateful to Professors Michael Apple, Gary Price and Joseph Lawton at UW, for very helpful discussions regarding early childhood education.

Dr. Joy Cullen, for her valued suggestions, ready supply of useful resources and many helpful discussions regarding this research. I am also grateful to Associate Professor Dick Harker and Diana Bloor, for helping to clarify aspects of the data analysis, and Professor Tom Prebble, for his kindness and support over the last few months.

Last, but by no means least, I want to thank my family, for all their patience, support and encouragement over the last four years. I want to thank my parents, Dolly and Stuart McLachlan, for inspiring my interest in literacy and encouraging me to study, and my children, Daniel, Jeremy and Jessica, for inspiring my interest in how children learn. Finally, I want to thank my husband, Clyde Smith, for encouraging me to keep studying, helping me to fulfil the multiple roles that being a mother, a wife, a student and a teacher involve, and for all of his help and support at every stage of this research.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of contents	iv
List of tables	viii
List of plates	ix
List of figures	x
1. Introduction	1
2. Review of Literature	4
The development of emergent literacy	4
Emergent literacy	4
Story book reading and the development of language and literacy	12
Meaning construction	15
Parent roles in literacy development	19
Parent beliefs about child development and education	22
Teacher roles in literacy development	25
Teacher beliefs about development and education	28
Socio-cultural perspectives: A framework for promoting literacy in the curriculum	31
Vygotsky and the social construction of child development	31
The co-construction of literacy	36
Conceptualising a literacy centred curriculum for kindergarten	40
Literacy rich environments	40
Literacy centred curriculum	46
Kindergarten in New Zealand: From Froebel to Piaget	50
Kindergarten curriculum across the century	50
Piaget: Connections with progressive education	57
Summary	63

3. The Present Study	65
Aims of the research	65
Data collection	66
Ethical considerations	69
4. The In-depth Interview with Head Teachers	70
Methods	70
Sample	70
Data collection	71
Analysis	74
Results and discussion	75
Common sense knowledge	75
Folk wisdom	84
Skill knowledge	88
Contextual knowledge	98
The curriculum	106
Developmental /educational theories	120
Social and moral philosophy	135
Summary and discussion	141
5. The Structured Interview with Parents and Teachers	145
Methods	145
Sample	145
Data collection	149
Analysis	151
Results	152
Reasons for the choice of kindergarten as an early childhood experience	152
Views of children learning	157
Views of language and reading	164
Story reading experience	169
Language experiences and environmental print	180

Summary and discussion	185
Promoting children’s learning and literacy development	185
Emergent literacy experiences	190
6. Domains of Literacy Activity in Kindergartens	196
Methods	196
Sample	196
Data collection	196
Data analysis	199
Results and discussion	201
Domains of literacy : Access and availability of print	201
Domains of literacy : Mediation of literacy environment	233
Summary and discussion	256
7. Summary and Conclusions	263
Summary and discussion	263
Views of cognition and emergent literacy in kindergarten	263
The role of the parent and the teacher in literacy development	266
Domains of literacy activity in six kindergartens	269
Toward a literacy centred curriculum for kindergarten	271
Identification and assessment	272
Enrichment of the literacy environment	273
Increase literacy activity	275
Appropriating the literate “voice”	276
Implications for future research	277
Conclusion	278
8. References	280
9. Appendices	299
Appendix 1 : Research proposal given to Head Teachers	299
Appendix 2 : Ethical approval	302

Appendix 3 : Interview consent form	303
Appendix 4 : Interview questions	305
Appendix 5 : Case study sent to Teacher 11	306
Appendix 6 : Copy of a transcript sent to Teacher 11	311
Appendix 7 : Information sheet given to parents	322
Appendix 8 : Structured interview protocol for parents	323
Appendix 9 : Structured interview protocol for Assistant Teachers	332
Appendix 10 : List of available print in K1	341
Appendix 11 : List of available print in K2	342
Appendix 12 : List of available print in K3	343
Appendix 13 : List of available print in K4	344
Appendix 14 : List of available print in K5	345
Appendix 15 : List of available print in K6	346

List of Tables

- Table 3.1 : Flow chart of data collection and analysis
- Table 4.1 : Profile of kindergarten characteristics
- Table 5.1 : Parent' s family income
- Table 5.2 : Parent's reasons for choosing kindergarten for child
- Table 5.3 : What Assistant Teachers think children gain from attending kindergarten
- Table 5.4 : What parents think children gain from attending kindergarten
- Table 5.5 : What teachers think is expected of them in kindergarten
- Table 5.6 : What parents expect of teachers
- Table 5.7 : What teachers expect of parents in this kindergarten
- Table 5.8 : What parents think is expected of them in kindergarten
- Table 5.9 : What teachers think they should do to help children learn
- Table 5.10 : What parents think teachers should do to help children learn
- Table 5.11 : What teachers think parents should do to help children learn
- Table 5.12 : What parents think they should do to help children learn
- Table 5.13 : How teachers think they help children learn language and reading
- Table 5.14 : How parents think teachers help children to language and reading
- Table 5.15 : Is what teachers do more important than what parents do in terms of language and reading?
- Table 5.16 : Where do children learn to read?
- Table 5.17 : How children develop at this age (3:6 to 5 years)
- Table 5.18 : How children learn their language and culture
- Table 5.19 : How often parents checked books out from the library per month
- Table 5.20 : Numbers of books available to child at home and at kindergarten
- Table 5.21 : Teachers and parents views of literacy activity in kindergartens and home
- Table 5.22 : Number of times that parents and teachers have re-read one book in one session
- Table 5.23 : How often children ask questions about stories at times other than reading sessions
- Table 5.24 : Types of words from books used in play
- Table 5.25 : Language games played at kindergarten
- Table 5.26 : Language games played at home
- Table 5.27 : Signs and labels children often "read"
- Table 5.28 : Other language and reading activities at home and at kindergarten
- Table 5.29 : Other reading items which teachers use in kindergartens
- Table 5.30 : Other reading items which parents use at home
- Table 6.1 : Numbers and types of print available in kindergarten classrooms

List of Plates

- Plate 6.1 : Example of print directed at children in K6
- Plate 6.2 : An unusual choice of location for the lending library and major source of books in K2
- Plate 6.3 : Obstructed view of parent lending library in K4
- Plate 6.4 : A poor supply of books on display in K5
- Plate 6.5 : Location of books and maori language print at child's level in K3
- Plate 6.6 : Sign up list in K3, the parent help roster
- Plate 6.7 : Similarity of messages for parents about activities in K1 and K4
- Plate 6.8 : Messages to parents in K5 and K6 about child development and their role in the activity
- Plate 6.9 : "What do I learn in kindergarten?", an example of the message seen in many kindergartens, from K5
- Plate 6.10 : Locker list with corresponding code in K3
- Plate 6.11 : The washing and bilingual weather list at child level in K6
- Plate 6.12 : Labelled boxes keep children's clothes organised in K2
- Plate 6.13 : Where are the labels at this nature table in K3?
- Plate 6.14 : Magnetic name tags in an accessible spot in K5
- Plate 6.15 : A typical writing table in K4
- Plate 6.16 : A typical paper table next to examples of children's writing on their self portraits in K3

Lists of Figures

- Figure 5.1 : How children learn at kindergarten
- Figure 5.2 : Most common type of learning at home
- Figure 5.3 : Most common type of learning at kindergarten
- Figure 5.4 : Most common type of learning for learning ideas about literacy
- Figure 5.5 : Most important type of learning for children in any context
- Figure 5.6 : Major influences on beliefs about language and literacy development
- Figure 5.7 : Number of times per week that child is read to at home
- Figure 5.8 : Length of story reading sessions at home and at kindergarten
- Figure 5.9 : Questions children ask about stories at home and at kindergarten
- Figure 5.10 : What teachers think story reading does for children
- Figure 5.11 : What parents think story reading does for the child
- Figure 5.12 : Reading items used at home and at kindergarten
- Figure 6.1 : Numbers of books in kindergartens
- Figure 6.2 : Printed bilingual communication
- Figure 6.3 : Communications with parents
- Figure 6.4 : Use of labels in kindergartens
- Figure 6.5 : Verbal directions for activities
- Figure 6.6 : Directions for use of centres
- Figure 6.7 : Songs observed during kindergarten sessions