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The Federal Government’s intention to introduce a Year 1 Phonics Check may well cause early childhood educators to ask: ‘Where does phonics fit in an early years literacy program?’

International research supports a balanced literacy program as the best foundation for building capable readers and writers (Rose, 2017). The Buckingham report, Focus on phonics, which underpins the Australian government’s phonics initiative, in fact identifies five ‘keys’ to reading:

- Phonemic awareness—the ability to identify and manipulate the distinct individual sounds in spoken words.
- Phonics—the ability to decode words using knowledge of the relationships between letters and sounds.
- Fluency—reading with speed, accuracy and expression.
- Vocabulary—knowing the meaning of a wide variety of words and the structure of written language.
- Comprehension—understanding the meaning and intent of the written text.

(Buckingham, 2016, p. 5.)

The Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne, 2008) agrees that phonemic awareness and letter identification knowledge facilitate transition to literacy, and adds two broader elements:

- Conventions of print—including understanding the basic concepts of reading and writing text.
- Literacy-promoting environments—including home literacy activities and shared reading activities.

Early childhood educators who responded to Early Childhood Australia’s (ECA) survey about the Year 1 screening check support this view of literacy as a rich tapestry of dispositions, concepts and skills. They note that quality early learning settings build on the literacy capital that children bring from their homes and communities, which may include experience with several languages, a love of story and engagement with digital texts.

What does an early literacy program look like in action?

One of the crucial things we need to acknowledge about early literacy development is that it doesn’t begin at age three or four; it begins at birth.

Educators in early learning settings, therefore, should:

- surround children with abundant talk from infancy, encouraging the to-and-fro pattern of natural conversation
- share quality picture books with infants and encourage families to tell oral stories and read books aloud at home
- introduce picture books with sophisticated descriptive language so that preschoolers enrich their expanding vocabulary
- chant nursery rhymes and action songs with babies and toddlers to ‘tune their ear’ to rhythm, rhyme and the sound patterns of the English language
- build preschoolers’ phonemic awareness by saying and clapping each child’s name, asking them to repeat the pattern (Em-i-ly; Pe-ter); play syllable games, inviting children to break familiar words into their parts and put them back together (su-per-mar-ket)
- encourage children to ‘sign in’ as soon as they show interest, demonstrating the purposes that written language serves; draw attention to the letters of each child’s name; label drawings and paintings, and caption digital images, involving children in writing and reading them
- co-create an alliteration book—brown bear; slippery slug; wobbling wombat
• develop children’s letter and word knowledge, making alphabet books and personal dictionaries of well-used words
• have children write letters and words using sand, paint, plasticine, crayons and paper, and provide many real-life purposes for reading and writing
• develop children’s comprehension through interactive reading, asking: ‘What is happening? What might happen next? What was that story all about?’

What should guide our literacy programs?

In the United Kingdom (UK), teachers refer to ‘phonics phases’ (TheSchoolRun.com, n.d.) to guide their teaching and assessing for this aspect of literacy.

In each phase, children are introduced to letter–sound combinations, starting with the most common sounds and high-frequency words, and moving on to more difficult phonemes and ‘tricky words’ of increasing complexity.

In Australia, educators have informative local frameworks to guide literacy programs.

The Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) informs educators working with children from birth to five years. Learning Outcome 5: ‘Children are effective communicators’ indicates the kind of evidence of children’s learning that educators should look for and how they should respond. Key components of Outcome 5 cover oral language, listening and responding to sound patterns, understanding letter–sound relationships, concepts of print, and gaining meaning from texts.

The Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2015) is the roadmap for teaching children from age five. The Language strand (V8), under the heading ‘Phonics and word knowledge’ sets explicit expectations for children’s progress in those aspects of reading and writing. In the Foundation Year for example, children are expected to recognise and generate rhyming words, alliteration, syllables and sounds in spoken words; use knowledge of letters and sounds to spell words; know how to read and write high-frequency words, etc.

Both curriculum frameworks balance a focus on phonics with teaching other reading and writing strategies. Both frameworks assume intentional teaching, instruction in contexts that make sense to the learner and ongoing assessment of children’s progress.

Intentional teaching is particularly important to promote literacy learning. Educators need to establish play environments that are rich in language and literacy opportunities; deliberately engage children in focused reading and writing experiences; and consciously interact with children to co-construct and scaffold in what has been described as the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (McLeod, 2010).

When children start school, the debate on ‘how to teach phonics’ becomes more pointed. The Federal Government’s plan to use the UK Phonics Screening Check indicates a push for a stronger synthetic phonics approach, rather than analytic phonics, which is already widely taught in Australian schools. Should the initiative proceed, Foundation and Year 1 educators will require deep knowledge of alternative approaches to teaching phonics, so they are able to select strategies that will meet children’s different learning needs. The government needs to be prepared to provide support for educators to broaden their expertise in literacy teaching.

We need to remember that the goal of reading is comprehension, and the goal of writing is communication. Everything we do in language and literacy with young children should be directed towards helping them reach those goals—with confidence, a sense of competence and enthusiasm for learning.

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References

ECA RECOMMENDS

Language, literacy and early childhood education (2nd ed.)
By Janet Fellowes and Grace Oakley
$87.95

This comprehensive textbook focuses on language and literacy development and learning in children from birth to eight years. It encompasses four main early childhood settings: the family and community, childcare, the preschool years, and the early years of school.

To order or find out more please visit
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/shop/sund630
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