



# Exploring Literacy with Infants from a Sociocultural Perspective

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 2, Issue 2, 70-75, 2005*

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## INTRODUCTION

The way in which we view literacy impacts on how we view the process of literacy learning as well as how we view infants as literacy learners. If literacy is viewed narrowly as a set of reading and writing skills then the process of literacy learning becomes limited to the acquisition and refining of these skills. From this perspective our view of infants as literacy learners is strictly limited to what the infant is or is not capable of doing. However, when viewed from a sociocultural perspective, literacy becomes a contextually based, broad concept that is grounded in social practice. Literacy learning then becomes much more than acquiring skills but includes developing knowledge, attitudes and understandings about the forms, functions and purposes of literacy. From this perspective, infants can now be seen as active and capable literacy learners as they experience and engage with a wide range of literacy practices in their everyday contexts. This sociocultural approach to literacy also has some important implications for the way literacy for infants is viewed within the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), and how educators can support and facilitate literacy learning with infants within the early childhood education context.

## A SOCIOCULTURAL MODEL OF LITERACY LEARNING

The influence of sociocultural theory on early childhood education has resulted in a broadening of our understanding of how and what children learn. Sociocultural theory challenges us to widen our perspective beyond that of the individual child and of knowledge and meaning in isolation. Instead, children are viewed as inseparable from their social contexts, and knowledge and meanings are seen as embedded within sociocultural practices. As Fler (2002a) explains, 'meaning occurs in the context of participation in the real world' (p. 128).

A sociocultural model of literacy and literacy learning moves beyond a narrow skills and processes view of reading and writing to become a wide range of literacy practices and activities carried out for a range of purposes and occurring in a range of social and cultural contexts (Barratt-Pugh, 2002). Drawing on a sociocultural perspective of literacy, as well as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, Hamer and Adams (2003) define early literacy as:

The experiences, practices, attitudes and knowledge encountered in their early years across a range of settings which contribute to children understanding, enjoying, engaging with and using oral, visual and written language and symbols of their own and other cultures to express their individual identity and allow them to become active participants in a literate society.

(p.13)

This sociocultural view of literacy emphasises the role literacy plays in today's society and supports children to actively take part in and access a wide range of social and cultural activities. Literacy is not just confined to educational institutions, such as schools, tertiary education institutions or early childhood settings, but also occurs in homes and in the community, including libraries, shops, and the street. Each of these contexts has different purposes and forms of literacy.

This view of literacy is embedded in language and communication and includes not only written language and print-based literacy but oral literacy (such as narratives and oral story-telling), visual literacy (such as pictures in books and television images), and symbols (such as traffic lights, a smiley face). Literacy is more than 'knowing' or 'being able to' but includes broader understandings of the literacy-related experiences and practices in which people (including infants) may directly or indirectly take part. It also incorporates attitudes towards literacy (such as discovering literacy as purposeful, relevant and amusing). In addition literacy is viewed as a means to express and share ideas, thoughts and feelings.

## **LITERACY LEARNING AND INFANTS**

The notion of infants as literacy learners has not had much attention in the literature which has primarily focussed on language acquisition and the provision of rich language environments for infants. However, we are now much more aware of infants as capable and active participants who learn from and within their social and cultural contexts. If we now regard literacy as embedded within social practices we can also start to focus our attention on the sorts of literacy practices that revolve around infants and the possibilities and extent to which infants can participate in and learn from these practices.

When considering what a sociocultural model of literacy might mean for infants in early childhood education, three key aspects of literacy stand out: literacy is based in sociocultural contexts, literacy is a broad concept, and literacy meanings lie in social practice.

### **Literacy is based in sociocultural contexts**

A sociocultural model of literacy places literacy within the immediate and wider contexts of the infant, their community contexts and the wider context of society. The literacy forms and practices that occur in each community context that infants experience play an important role in their ongoing literacy learning. Of particular importance for infants are the immediate contexts of their home and early childhood education environments.

Reflecting an infant's home literacy practices in the early childhood education setting helps to support their literacy learning in three ways. Firstly, it acknowledges the literacy practices that are relevant and meaningful to infants

and their families as important and provides opportunities for infants to engage in these within the early childhood setting (Martello, 2002). Secondly, it provides a bridge between the infant's familiar home literacy culture and practices and those valued in the early childhood education setting, such as listening to stories in an infant's home language. And thirdly, understanding and reflecting the kinds of interactions and experiences the infant is familiar with in their home environment provides a sense of familiarity and security for the infant (Fleer & Linke, 1999).

The literacy forms and practices specific to the early childhood education setting also play an important role in the infant's literacy learning. These literacy forms and practices will reflect the particular structure, philosophy and culture of the early childhood setting the infant attends. However, as an educational institution, it is important for early childhood educators to debate, plan and reflect on the kind of literacy culture that is valued as well as how this literacy culture will be reflected in the centre. Such debate should consider the place and role of literacy in wider society, the early childhood community, as well as where and how literacy is reflected in the early childhood curriculum. This involves consultation with the centre staff, parents and community (Barratt-Pugh, Rivalland, Hamer & Adams, 2006, *in press*).

### **Literacy is a broad concept**

Language and communication are at the heart of literacy and providing infants with a rich language environment is particularly important. Fleer and Linke (1999) emphasise the importance of adults 'reading' or interpreting and responding to infants' non-verbal signals and messages as well as allowing for turn-taking and imitation when communicating with infants. Such an approach allows infants to be actively involved in communication with others.

A sociocultural model of literacy views literacy as a broad concept that includes oral, visual, symbolic and written literacy as well as a range of literacy forms, functions and practices that occur in various contexts. In early childhood education, infants' literacy learning can be facilitated by providing opportunities for infants to engage with a range of literacy resources, practices, experiences and interactions that reflect these literacy areas. For example, valuable literacy experiences may include sharing picture books, singing nursery rhymes, and retelling stories, but can also include giving infants opportunities to observe others creating and using visual texts, images and signs, and using various literacy tools within their environment for a range of purposes (such as signing rolls and writing lists).

In addition, infants can be supported to develop understandings and meanings in three important aspects of literacy: comprehension (through experiencing a wide range of literacy texts and forms within a rich language environment), decoding (through engaging with sounds including the rhymes and rhythm of language), and motivation (through literacy experiences that are enjoyable, comforting, meaningful and purposeful) (Hamer & Adams, 2003).

### **Literacy is a social practice**

A sociocultural model of literacy views literacy learning as a cultural activity embedded in social practice. This means that infants' literacy learning occurs through their involvement in the literacy activities and practices that occur within their social environment. As Rogoff (1998: 691, in Fleer, 2002a)

explains, 'what is key is transformation in the process of participation in community activities not acquisition of competencies defined independently of the sociocultural activities in which people participate' (p.128). As infants participate either directly or indirectly in the literacy practices within their immediate contexts they observe, explore and develop understandings about literacy skills, practices, attitudes and meanings.

A sociocultural model of literacy learning emphasises infants as actively involved in constructing their own literacy knowledge and understandings. In particular, Rogoff (1999, in Flear, 2002b) highlights the active nature of infant learning through observation, and notes that, 'since children are embedded within the community they have numerous opportunities to observe real world activities that are important in the community' (p.111). Infants' literacy learning can be enhanced by providing them with the time, space and opportunities to observe literacy forms and practices that occur around them. In addition, joint attention and social referencing are processes by which infants are actively involved in interpreting new situations 'in ways that stretch their understanding and channel it to the viewpoint of those around them' (Rogoff, 1990: 70). This highlights the importance of educators' own attitudes, beliefs and knowledge of literacy and of the 'literacy culture' of the early childhood setting. Educators who value and enjoy literacy will assist infants to develop the same positive attitudes.

The social environment of infants lays the foundations for their learning. As with all areas of learning, a consistent, caring and responsive environment provides a secure base for infants' literacy learning to occur. Flear and Linke (1999) highlight the importance of providing an 'emotionally sustaining environment to enable infants to make the most of their learning capabilities' (p. 2). Early childhood educators can support infants' literacy learning by building close relationships with infants, identifying each infant's personal preferences, paying attention to the infant's focus and level of attention, and treating each infant with respect.

## **INFANTS, LITERACY AND *TE WHĀRIKI***

*Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) provides educators with a valuable framework for working with infants in the area of literacy. The four principles provide strong support for a sociocultural approach to literacy with infants. For example, the principle of *family and community* emphasises the importance and validity of each infant's home and community literacy practices as well as the importance of these literacy practices in providing a familiar bridge between home and early childhood literacy practices. The view of literacy as a broad concept is supported by the principle of *holistic development* which highlights that literacy understandings and meanings are developed through numerous and varied experiences with literacy resources, experiences and interactions. Such experiences with people, places and things are also supported by the *relationships* principle. For infants, the reciprocal and responsiveness of such relationships are particularly significant in supporting their literacy learning. Finally, the *empowerment* principle emphasises the importance of educators viewing infants as active and capable literacy participants.

The strands of *Te Whāriki* support the provision of a wide range of literacy resources, experiences and interactions for infants in early childhood education. For example, when considering *well-being*, care routines and tasks provide

ongoing and regular opportunities for engaging infants in meaningful literacy practices with adults, such as the singing of nursery rhymes during nappy changes. *Belonging* reflects the importance of supporting infants to develop a sense of security by incorporating familiar and favourite home literacy practices into the early childhood setting as well as developing familiar centre-based literacy practices. Providing a range of familiar and new literacy resources, experiences and interactions supports infants to actively explore and make sense of these (reflecting the *exploration* strand). The *communication* strand emphasises that literacy includes both verbal and non-verbal forms of literacy, symbols, written and oral stories as well as the role of literacy in self-expression. Finally, the *contribution* strand emphasises infants' direct and indirect active engagement with literacy both on their own and with others.

## CONCLUSION

When literacy is viewed from a broad sociocultural perspective, instead of being 'not yet ready', infants can be viewed as both capable and active literacy participants and learners. A sociocultural perspective emphasises that infants experience, participate in and develop literacy knowledge, attitudes and skills as they directly and indirectly take part in literacy practices within various social and cultural contexts. Understanding how infants learn through their participation in their social environment highlights the importance of educator's own literacy knowledge and values. By viewing infants as active literacy participants and learners, educators can provide opportunities for infants to take part in a wide range of relevant, purposeful and contextually meaningful literacy practices. This approach to literacy learning with infants sits well with the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* which provides educators with valuable guidance when considering how to support infants' literacy learning.

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*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 2, Issue 2, 2005*

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