

# Early Education



*Volume 65 Spring / Summer 2019*

- Politics of funding for Playcentre
- Walking the talk: Leadership in ECE
- Te Whariki and inclusive practice
- Soft skills of collaborative reading
- Joining a Kahui Ako
- Quality in ECE in China



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## Design and layout

Margaret Drummond

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Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

*Early Education* welcomes:

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- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

Contributions can be sent to the 2020 editors

Claire McLachlan:

[cmclachlan@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:cmclachlan@waikato.ac.nz)

Karyn Aspden:

[k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz](mailto:k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz)

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# Soft skills surfacing in collaborative reading practices at home and early childhood centre

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Marjolein Whyte

*When children and adults take part in reading collaboratively, both the child and the adult are active in sharing and contributing to the story. The benefit of this mutual engagement is that teachers and family members are able to introduce the child to reading comprehension skills and soft skills in meaningful and playful ways. When reading comprehension skills are developed through active engagement with a story, rather than passively listening to the story, soft skills such as curiosity, creativity, resilience, imagination and meta-cognitive skills develop (Claxton, Costa & Kallick, 2016). This article investigates how teachers and parents can introduce a child to literacy skills while simultaneously developing soft skills through collaborative reading, as an important building block in preparation for school.*

## Introduction

In this paper, I will explain what soft skills are and why they are important for later comprehension and fluency of reading. 'Soft skills' is a broad term for positive dispositions towards learning that Claxton et al. (2016) call thinking dispositions. Thinking dispositions such as critical and creative thinking, being able to see things from a different angle and contributing ideas that link to foundational knowledge from home make learning meaningful to the child (Claxton et al., 2016; Hedges, 2007, as cited in Payne, Wilson, & Corley, 2010). These skills and dispositions depend on the development of language skills for which the foundation is laid in early childhood (Education Review Office [ERO], 2017; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2011; 2017).

The Education Review Office (2017) has found that many children have trouble expressing their ideas clearly by the time they enter primary school, and therefore they urge early childhood teachers to

focus on strengthening story-telling, thinking and discussion skills, culminating into being able to consider multiple perspectives and reflecting on their own position. A strong focus on oral language skills and reading comprehension in early childhood education is important as these skills can be more difficult for children to develop in primary school due to less opportunity for individualised programmes (Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Tolosa, Turner, & Hsaio, 2009). Oral language skills, especially active engagement, and soft skills such as resilience, confidence to take a risk and try again, and self-regulation skills can help children tackle a challenging task like learning to read (ERO, 2017; MoE, 2017).

## What is reading comprehension?

Reading comprehension skills involve strategies needed to understand what a story is about and engage with the story at a deeper level (Pressley, 2006). Learning these skills can be challenging for the child, which is why soft knowledge skills and learning dispositions such as curiosity, thinking skills, communication skills and being able to persevere with a challenge are crucial components in children's learning (May, 2013; MoE, 2017). The development of reading comprehension requires adults to actively engage in dialogue with the child and discuss new vocabulary within the context of the story, while linking to the child's interest, which in turn further develops the soft skills mentioned above (Lai et al., 2009; MoE, 2011, 2017; Sim et al., 2013). New vocabulary coupled with the child's interests acquires meaning and is likely to be remembered (MoE, 2011). This joint attention requires the adult to be in the moment and stay on the same page as the child, without changing the focus to a learning goal the teacher may have had in mind (Bateman, 2013; Degotardi, 2017).

A young child is only just learning to see things from another person's perspective, so taking time to listen to the child, allowing them to share their ideas and recognising how the child's ideas and working theories make sense in the child's context and experience is important (Peters & Kelly, 2011). Allowing the child to make connections between their own experiences and the story is crucial for their understanding of the story, to make meaning out of it, predict what might happen next in the story and retell the story in their own words (ERO, 2017; Lai, et al., 2009).

White (2016) positions dialogic pedagogy as a "dynamic meaning-making event between the adult and child" (p. 46). In order to develop shared understanding teachers can consider

- What do they know about the child?
- What does the child have knowledge/experience about and how does that link to the story?
- What is meaningful to the child right at this moment in time and what is the child curious about?

Dialogic reading takes place when the adult actively encourages the child to discuss and question what is happening in a story. Strategies to facilitate reading comprehension may include looking at the pictures to encourage the child to predict story outcomes, talking about the story in their own words, and linking the story to prior experiences. When reading aloud to children, White (2016) suggests to 'linger lovingly', which includes moments of silence and taking time to find out more about the child. White (2016) adds that "if we agree that learning takes place in moments of significance rather than simply because knowledge is offered, it is vital for teachers to appreciate what is meaningful for the children they teach" (p. 57).

## How soft skills can be acquired in the process of learning the skills for reading comprehension

As May (2013) has pointed out, soft skills are crucial for learning. May (2013) highlights the importance of self-regulation skills, confidence, communication and independence. Looking at some key aspects of reading comprehension, this article will now look at how soft skills (or thinking dispositions) are acquired in the process of introducing a child to reading comprehension skills:

- Retelling the story

In order to be able to retell a story, a child needs sophisticated communication skills. According to ERO (2017), children in many early childhood services need a stronger focus on oral language. When children are given the agency to tell the story in their own words, they are using their imagination, making links to their prior knowledge from home and developing confidence with their oral language skills. Retelling a story also involves metacognitive skills as well as listening and responding, to make sense of the story. ERO (2017) reiterates that "one of the best ways that parents and teachers can help young children develop their oral language skills is through shared conversations" (p. 8).

- Asking questions

Asking questions taps into several learning dispositions that support a child's ongoing learning (MoE, 2017). In order to come up with questions, the child needs to be able to take an interest and be curious about the characters in the story. The child will build the confidence and ability to express their thinking and imagine different scenarios. By contributing a question, the child may share new and innovative ideas with their peers and teachers (MoE, 2017). Discussions can take unexpected turns, called lines of flight, which form when the child notices a difference or discord to their own experience or an idea of a peer (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, as cited in Whyte & Naughton, 2014).

- Linking to experiences from home

The principle of Family and Community and the strand of Communication in *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (MoE, 2017) promote links to the child's prior knowledge, culture and stories they know. This creates a feeling of belonging and builds onto the child's understanding of the story by giving the child reference points they are familiar with, which is a great technique for learning and developing thinking dispositions. Teachers can introduce new vocabulary in context of the story and of the child's experiences and interests (ERO, 2017).

- Predicting what might happen next

Another strategy the child can use to understand what is happening in a story is

looking at the pictures to predict what might happen next (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2006). The teacher can encourage the child to look closely at the detail in the picture and use rich vocabulary to describe what is happening in the picture. Looking closely develops thinking dispositions such as paying attention to detail, curiosity, and creative thinking (Claxton et al., 2016). Furthermore, literacy skills are further developed when the child uses multiple literacies such as visual, gestural and spatial literacies, to explore possible story lines at a deeper level (Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke, & Harrison, 2008).

## Encouraging follow up of these practices within the family/whānau

New Zealand's early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki*, aims for children to make a meaningful contribution to society through the development of learning dispositions and key competencies such as communication and thinking skills, relating to others, self-regulatory skills and the ability to participate and contribute in meaningful ways (MoE, 2007, 2017). These skills are promoted through collaborative learning principles where children and teachers can both be a learner and a teacher and where children are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, while interacting with adults and skilled peers (MoE, 2007, 2017; Tamati, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). While Harris and Goodall (2008) indicate that "parental engagement in children's learning in the home makes the greatest difference to student achievement" (p. 277), families accustomed to a performance style of teaching that centers on imitating, memorising and reciting, may struggle to adapt to the more interactive learning style used in early childhood and school (McNaughton, Amitanai-Toloa & Wolfram-Foliaki, 2009; Tagoilelagi, 1995). By making connections to 'funds of knowledge' from home teachers can draw families in to become engaged in a more interactive teaching and learning style during which the child shares their own ideas.

## Seeing parents and whānau as confident teachers of reading skills

One of the reasons that parent involvement can be hard to achieve in ECE centres is that many parents see the teacher as the expert, especially when parents are used to teaching styles and cultural practices that

are different from the dominant culture and styles in the centre (Mitchell et al., 2015; Whyte, 2015). Compounded by their child spending long hours in the early childcare education service, a parent may feel unsure how to teach their child beginning literacy and relinquish this job to the centre (Whyte, 2015). At the ECE centre however, children may miss out on quality interactions, especially when still learning English (ERO, 2011; McGee & Richgels, 2003). As opportunities for one-to-one conversations are crucial for learning, parents can fill an important gap by reading to their children at home. Rich funds of knowledge can be tapped into when these interactions take place in the child's home language. Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2013) indicate that linking to the funds of knowledge from home helps the child form a positive self-concept as a learner and an identity as a reader. Reminiscing about stories (real or fictional) between parent and child can be instrumental in teaching the child about relationships, problem solving and developing self-regulation (Kulkofsky, 2011). During this process, the "parent's sense of efficacy to help their child, is central to whether they perceive themselves as contributing meaningfully to their children's education and the level to which they become involved with their children's schooling" (Gutman & Akerman, 2008, as cited in Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012, p. 37).

## Strategies that offer parents and whānau a focus in contributing to their child's learning

Teachers often assume that parents do not have time or are not interested in taking part in their child's learning at the centre. However, parents are often unaware of their role in sociocultural assessment, where ECE regulations state parents should be part of the planning and learning in the centre (MoE, 2011; Whyte, 2015; 2016). There is a danger of this trend of non-involvement being continued at primary school. Many parents want to be involved but are unsure how. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) recommend to "give parents specific information about what they can do to be involved" (p. 120). Knopf and Swick (2008) agree that parents welcome it when teachers indicate clearly how they can be involved, because of their uncertainty around their role in the teaching-learning process. Hence, a clear invitation by the teacher generates opportunities for dialogue and enhances parent efficacy (Whyte, 2015; 2016). Sharing reading comprehension strategies and connections to soft skills/thinking dispositions with parents, can open up meaningful and practical

ways for early childhood education ECE teachers to empower parents to contribute to the teaching-learning process. Teachers can inform parents about comprehension strategies that parents can introduce to their child during storybook reading, for example:

Teachers can also ask other parents in their community to translate the reading comprehension strategies into other languages, as strategies learned in their home-language can help children understand and practice these (Cummins, 2000, as cited in ERO, 2017).

Reading comprehension strategies require children to reflect on their experiences and their feelings more than they would do when answering direct questions (Kulkovsky, 2011). The dialogue between parents/whānau and their child therefore raises the parents' awareness of learning at the centre. This has the additional benefit that it prepares the parent for the transition to school, where it is an expectation that the parent engages with their child's assessment and evaluation of their learning at school (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins, & Reid, 2009). Moreover, increased sharing and involvement of families helps teachers to understand the child better and form close-knit relationships between parents, teachers and children (ERO, 2011).

## Conclusion

This article has investigated how teachers, parents and whānau can introduce children to skills and dispositions that will help them to learn about and apply reading comprehension strategies they need later on in school. During early childhood, a solid base of skills and dispositions (soft skills) can be formed which will help the child not only build reading skills but will contribute to language and literacy skills, important for success in each subject at school (ERO, 2017). In order for this to happen, teachers and parents need to be aware of the value of reading strategies, learning dispositions and soft skills that children develop during one-to-one or small group reading. Examples of learning dispositions and soft skills discussed include involving children in retelling the story in their own words and having the confidence to discuss multiple perspectives, possibilities and story-endings with an adult, whānau member or peer. This develops children's imagination, considering different views and communication skills (ERO, 2017; May, 2013; MoE, 2017).

Examples of reading comprehension strategies such as retelling the story, asking questions, linking to experiences from home and predicting what might happen next, have also been discussed and links to learning dispositions and soft skills identified. The skills and strategies shared with parents and whānau/family can make a significant difference to the engagement of parents and whānau/family in their child's learning throughout early childhood education and primary school. The reading comprehension processes encourage parents and whānau/family to practice learning dispositions and soft skills with their child that contribute to the resilience much needed for success in school.

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