

Literacy in the Steiner Waldorf Kindergarten: A Language Rich Environment

Intent

The Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood literacy curriculum aims to support the development of children who are in the process of becoming fully literate: fluent and enthusiastic readers with a wide vocabulary, creative and imaginative writers and eloquent and articulate speakers¹.

Within the kindergarten, the development of language and literacy skills is embedded into daily life. This 'living' or experiential approach to Language and Literacy builds a strong physical, emotional and technical foundation for a more formal academic approach when entering the Lower School after their 6th birthday. Most importantly, children should leave the kindergarten with a broad vocabulary and a deep love of language in many forms, and a strong motivation to read for pleasure, supporting lifelong learning.

Implementation

Effective Interactions

- Adults model language that is worthy of imitation: appropriate conversational skills, clear speech, active listening
- Adults create opportunities for meaningful interactions in the kindergarten day, for example during craft activities, at snack time, working together in the outdoors, etc. Best practice is derived from evidence based research². Interactions arise in the moment and in response to the child's interests. Adults are part of the context, consciously adjusting their responses and using language that is contingent on competence. Sustained shared thinking is developed when there are opportunities for children and adults to work and solve problems together.
- Peer-to-peer interactions are valued, and opportunities for description, explanation, negotiation, sustained shared thinking, co-operation and review are plentiful in extended periods of child-led play. Adults observe and assess children's language development carefully at these times to inform their interactions.

Songs, Rhymes, Language Games and Poetry

Children take part in a daily 'ring time' of songs, movement, language games, rhymes and poetry. Songs and rhymes are also used frequently throughout the kindergarten day, for example at transition times. Older children play listening and language games such as 'Hunt the Slipper', 'Fruit Bowl' or 'I-Spy'.

- Songs, rhymes and poetry develop understanding and skills in rhyme and rhythm, enabling children to hear the segmentation of phrases into words, words into syllables, and syllables into their constituent sounds³.

¹ "The overarching aim for English in the national curriculum is to promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written word, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment" The National Curriculum in England, Key stages 1 and 2 (2013), DfE

² Fisher, J. (2016) *Interacting or Interfering*, Oxford University Press. Based on research from the Oxfordshire Adult Child Interaction Project, Fisher and Wood (2012)

³ 'If children are unable to break words down into the component phonemes, they will be quite unable to learn about the alphabetic code. A child who cannot work out that the word 'cat' can be broken down into three constituent sounds will

- Tongue twisters and language games develop phonemic awareness and ability to hear initial sounds.
- Repetition and recitation of songs and rhymes support children’s ability to organise language, recognising patterns and developing their understanding of grammar and syntax.

Story

Children listen to an aural story daily; these range from simple, repetitive stories with a refrain, through fairy tales with a clear story arc, to longer, more intricate stories. Adults will also make use of story-telling resources - from simple props as a visual aid, through to complex puppet plays, staged by multiple adults.

- Stories and puppet shows of increasing complexity, repeated several times over several days, develop children’s skills in listening and attention, memory, narrative understanding, sequencing, predicting and inference.
- Stories use ambitious vocabulary, with children’s comprehension supported by story context and repetition⁴.
- Oral story and simple puppets support children’s growing ability to create mental imagery⁵.
- Children are provided with open-ended materials to enable them to recreate and retell stories.

Print Awareness and Motivation

- Examples of the use of the written and printed word are part of everyday kindergarten life. There are pictures and posters in the cloakroom, letters and fliers for parents, registers in daily use, controls on cookers and heaters and name labels. Adults are seen to be reading and writing, and their activities are imitated by the children in their play.
- A range of well-chosen picture books are available for the children. Adults demonstrate how books are used, cared for and to be respected.
- Book versions of told stories and puppet plays are often provided, enabling children to make the connection between the spoken and the written word, and gain a conceptual understanding of writing as a symbolic representation of speech on paper.
- Play with non-directive, open-ended resources further develops this understanding of symbolic representation. Children also create props using emergent writing, such as tickets, menus and shop signs.
- Adults read chapter books to older children, deepening their listening and attention skills, and requiring them to maintain interest in a narrative over an extended period of time.

Physical development

Children participate in a range of activities to support their physical and mark-making development.

- Fine motor skills are developed through daily adult-led activities. These might be domestic

be at sea with the alphabet’ Bryant, (1993). *How Nursery Rhymes Can Tackle Dyslexia*, Goswami, U. Cambridge Institute for Neuroscience in Education (nd)

⁴ Vocabulary at age 5 predicts: how well children achieve at the end of KS1 and KS2 (Feinstein and Duckworth 2006); the qualifications achieved at school-leaving age and beyond (Feinstein and Duckworth 2006); whether children who experience social deprivation in childhood will escape poverty later in life (Blanden 2006)

⁵ “Teachers should try to help children develop the metacognitive skill of visual imagery as a strategy for improving comprehension” Oliver, M.E. (1982), International Reading Association. Reading comprehension performance is improved by ‘elaborated mental modelling of text’, Woolley, G (2010) *Developing Reading Comprehension: Combining Visual and Verbal Cognitive Processes*, Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 33: 2

tasks such as peeling vegetables or kneading bread, or crafts such as sewing, cutting, felting, weaving, woodwork, wax modelling etc.

- Gross motor skills, core body strength and other large muscle groups needed for writing, such as shoulder rotator cuffs, are developed through heavy work (sweeping, moving wheelbarrows, digging in the garden). Large scale play such as den building and large block play also build strength and dexterity. Daily outdoor time and regular eurythmy classes support physical and proprioceptive development.

Artistic activities such as drawing, painting and other craftwork support the emergence of a healthy aesthetic sense, and confident mark making. An effective pencil grasp develops through the regular use of a variety of tools, including block and stick crayons, paint brushes etc.

Impact

The curriculum is delivered through a planned, balanced combination of activities to engage the children in areas which they would not easily discover for themselves without adult intervention, as well as a safe, nurturing and enabling environment in which to practice them within a group and independently.

The early years literacy curriculum, with its meticulous approach to building all the skills that are essential for later formal literacy, generates a very ready assimilation of these skills from the age of 5 ½ - 6 years. Before the start of Class 1 (6+ years), the children have already developed good listening habits and working memory, phonological awareness, narrative understanding, a wide vocabulary, the ability to use their imagination to generate mental images, and can work independently and with individuality. There is a continuing emphasis on fine motor skills, working sequentially, visual and auditory discrimination through games and varied artistic activities – designed for maximum effectiveness.

***Please see expanded literacy developmental descriptors below. You can add these to your existing developmental descriptors for assessment purposes.**

Developmental Descriptors/Age Related Expectations

		K3 (age 3-4)	K4 (age 4-5)	K5 (age 5-6)
C & L	L A	I listen to others one to one, and in small groups when the conversation interests me. I listen to simple stories and/or puppet shows, and join in with refrains. I listen to adults' instructions.	I listen attentively in a range of situations. I listen to stories, accurately anticipating key events, and respond to what I hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. I pay attention to what others say and respond appropriately while engaged in another activity.	I maintain and sustain my attention for longer periods of time. I listen carefully to and retain details of stories and conversations. I am able to give my attention to more than one thing at a time, dividing my attention appropriately in a wide range of situations.
	U	I respond appropriately to simple instructions and comments. I demonstrate my understanding through appropriate imitation.	I follow instructions involving several ideas or actions. <i>I demonstrate understanding in response to stories or events or when recounting my experiences.</i>	I am able to understand more complex stories, and have a more sophisticated understanding of nuance. I am beginning to understand the intent of the speaker, interpreting what is behind a person's words. I carry out detailed sequential instructions.
	S P	In play, I begin to use language to recreate roles and experiences. I connect ideas, and retell simple events in sequence. My vocabulary and conversations are focussed on people, objects and stories that are important to me.	I express myself effectively, showing awareness of listeners' needs. I use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. I develop my own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events.	I talk coherently, ordering my ideas in a logical sequence. I use a wide range of vocabulary in imaginative ways to add information, express ideas or explain events. I show some awareness of the listener, responding to their actions, reactions, responses and body language and might modify my words for their better understanding. I recount experiences and imagine possibilities.
L	R W	I enjoy rhymes and rhyming activities. I listen to and join in with stories and poems. I join in repeated refrains and anticipate key events in stories. I show an interest in books and look at them independently.	I am developing pre-reading skills, including phonological awareness, an understanding of the language of story and verse. I can make a connection between the written and spoken word. I am developing a wider vocabulary. I can be imaginative by 'reading the pictures'. I am developing physical dexterity in turning pages appropriately. I can mark make effectively with paint and crayons.	I have a conceptual understanding of text as speech on paper. I have a well developed phonological awareness, including the ability to create rhymes, express rhythm, and break speech down into smaller units of words, syllables and sounds. I am able to re-tell or make up stories. I demonstrate a desire to communicate through the medium of text, and joy and curiosity around emergent reading and writing. I have the physical skills necessary to begin to learn to read and write in a more formal way, including eye tracking and fine motor skills (e.g. able to weave, sew and use both block and stick crayons). I am conscious in mark making, decide what shapes or words to draw or write, and represent these on paper.