Supporting language and early literacy practices in kindergarten

A definition of literacy

Literacy includes talking, listening, visual literacies such as viewing and drawing, and critical thinking — not just reading and writing. In addition, the literacies of technology (e.g. computer games and activities, internet searching, faxes, emails), popular culture (e.g. movies, theatre, arts), functional literacy (e.g. road maps, timetables), ecological literacy (especially for Indigenous groups) and literacies other than English are relevant to the lives of young children today.[1]

Kindergarten programs based on this definition of literacy aim to provide young children with the foundation they need for a successful transition to the literacy learning focuses in the Prep Year.

Contents

1. **A conceptual framework for supporting language and early literacy learning and development**

   This section identifies key characteristics of learning environments that promote language and early literacy learning and development and includes questions that teachers can use as a starting point for critically reflecting on their practices.

2. **Strategies for language and early literacy learning and teaching**

   This section provides advice for teachers planning a balanced approach to supporting language and early literacy learning and development. It describes a range of strategies teachers can use to develop social relationships and focus on socially appropriate communication in context, promote vocabulary development, develop phonological awareness, develop alphabetic and letter–sound knowledge (phonics) and provide a rich literacy environment in which literacy is purposefully used and discussed.

3. **Snapshots of a balanced language and early literacy program in kindergarten**

   This section shows snapshots of how teachers promote language and early literacy learning and development within their kindergarten programs.

   Appendixes

   a. An integrated approach to supporting early literacy development in kindergarten

   b. Learning and teaching language in kindergarten

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[1] B Raban, M Brown, E Care, F Rickards & O'Connell, T 2011, *Young Learners — Learning and Literacy in the Early Years*. AARE International Education Research Conference, 29 Nov – 3 Dec 2009, www.aare.edu.au/09pap/rab091255.pdf.

1. A conceptual framework for supporting language and early literacy learning and development

> As an experienced kindergarten teacher I often find myself having to justify why I teach the way I do through play-based learning. Increasingly, there has been pressure from parents, who connect commercial phonics programs with becoming literate and ready for school, to teach differently. Media pressure that devalues the place of play-based learning and promotes the need for 'school readiness' contributes to parent confusion about how best to help their children. I find I often need to explain how I promote children's literacy learning, including phonics, within my program.

This teacher's predicament is a common one faced by early years professionals working in prior-to-school settings and in the beginning years of schooling.

Early years teachers are faced with challenges such as:

- a range of viewpoints about the best ways to support children's literacy
- media focus on literacy results and the perceived need for educational systems to improve children's literacy
- questions about the value of play as a powerful context for learning over more formalised and directed approaches to teaching children
- the promotion of phonics based materials as 'the answer' to ensuring that all children become literate
- fears of curriculum 'push down' amongst early years educators
- diversity of parental and community expectations.

Dealing with these challenges in early years education while sustaining a rich literacy program for young children requires a positive and proactive approach.

A conceptual framework for supporting language and early literacy learning and development in kindergarten

The conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1 (below) reflects a holistic approach to teaching and learning that aligns with the principles of the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* (*QKLG*). It is based on an ecological perspective that recognises the influence of children's social and cultural experiences and prior knowledge on their learning and development in early education and care settings. It acknowledges that children's interactions with people, objects and symbols affect their understandings, capabilities and dispositions towards learning. It foregrounds the importance of children having opportunities to engage with peers in interesting and meaningful learning opportunities facilitated by supportive adults. Underpinning this holistic framework is the perspective of the engaged child, engaged teacher, engaged parent and engaged teaching and learning described in the *QKLG*.

While this framework describes influences on learning and development in general, it is also useful for thinking about ways that adults can support young children's language and literacy learning and development, since these are essentially social practices.

As Raban and Coates note:

> What is now evident is that the development of literacy is profoundly social and is being experienced and experimented with throughout children's daily lives. Indeed the concepts
> of literacy that young children bring to school will be defined by their experience and understanding of the functions of literacy in the world that surrounds them.[2]

Focusing on language and literacy development as a social practice is a particularly helpful conceptual framework to support teacher practice. This framework acknowledges the importance of social and cultural contexts to children's learning, and recognises the significance of children's diverse backgrounds and the richness of the language and literacy knowledge they bring to kindergarten. It moves beyond the perspective in which language and literacy development is treated as a series of technical skills that can be taught independently of the social context. As Hamer observes, '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.'[3]

Figure 1 (adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of developmental processes) highlights the importance of moving forward from a technical view of language and literacy learning that focuses on a narrow set of skills and processes to a more holistic sociocultural perspective.
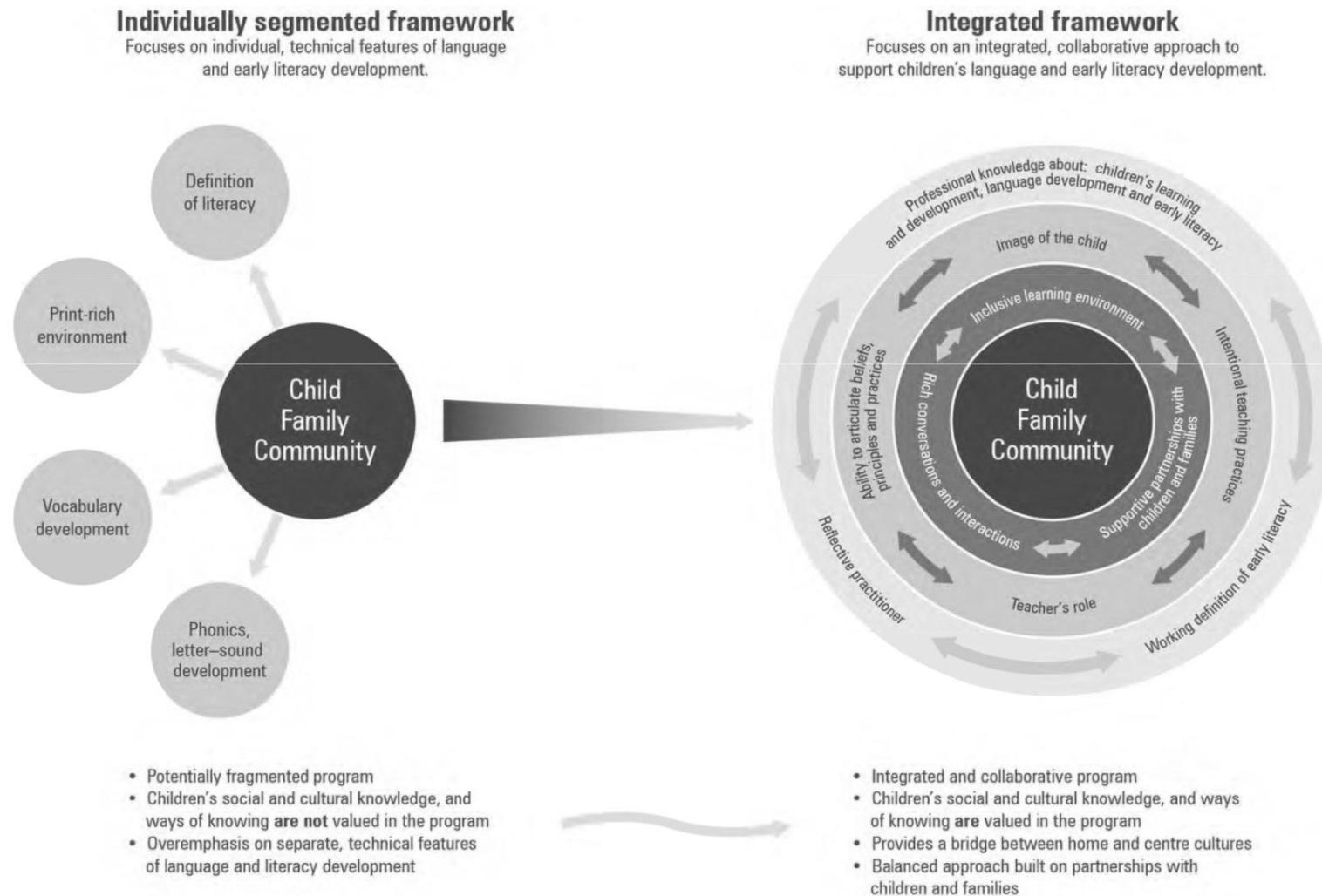
This conceptual framework highlights the importance of:

- teachers' critical reflection on their practices
- the inter-relationships of:

  - educational research into young children's learning and development, language development and early literacy learning, including their working definition of early literacy

  - beliefs, principles and practices, including the teacher's role, the image of the child and intentional teaching practices

  - rich conversations and interactions in the kindergarten learning environment

  - supportive partnerships with children, parents, families and communities

  - inclusive learning environments and children's capacity to experiment and engage with literacy through play

  - connections with children's prior language and literacy experiences, family priorities for supporting literacy, children's interests and strengths and community and family opportunities for language and literacy learning.

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[2] B Raban & H Coates, 2004, 'Literacy in the Early Years: A follow up study', *Journal of Research in Reading*, 27, 1, pp. 15–29 (quote from p.16).

[3] J Hamer, 2005, 'Exploring Literacy with Infants from a Sociocultural Perspective', *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work,* Volume 2, Issue 2, www.teacherswork.ac.nz/journal/volume2_issue2/hamer.pdf, pp. 70-75 (quote from p.70).

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Figure 1: A conceptual framework for supporting language and early literacy learning and development in kindergarten

Individually segmented framework
Focuses on individual, technical features of language and early literacy development.

- Definition of literacy
- Print-rich environment
- Child Family Community
- Vocabulary development
- Phonics, letter–sound development

- Potentially fragmented program
- Children's social and cultural knowledge, and ways of knowing **are not** valued in the program
- Overemphasis on separate, technical features of language and literacy development

Integrated framework
Focuses on an integrated, collaborative approach to support children's language and early literacy development.

Professional knowledge about: children's learning and development, language development and early literacy

- Image of the child
- Inclusive learning environment
- Intentional teaching practices
- Working definition of early literacy
- Teacher's role
- Reflective practitioner
- Ability to articulate beliefs, principles and practices
- Rich conversations and interactions
- Supportive partnerships with children and families
- Child Family Community

- Integrated and collaborative program
- Children's social and cultural knowledge, and ways of knowing **are** valued in the program
- Provides a bridge between home and centre cultures
- Balanced approach built on partnerships with children and families

Using the conceptual framework to support language and early literacy learning and development in kindergarten

Teachers incorporating this framework into their daily practice would find it helpful to:

- keep up-to-date with current research about language and early literacy practices, children's learning and development
- draw on current research to inform discussions with parents and families
- be familiar with current recommended practice in early childhood settings (see sections 2and 3)
- clearly articulate the ways that children's language and literacy learning and development are supported within play-based curricula
- provide parents with resources to help them support their children's literacy learning, highlighting the important role they play
- communicate with parents regularly about the kindergarten program and their child's language and literacy learning and development, and invite them to participate in the program
- demonstrate respect for the diversity of experiences and beliefs others hold about supporting children's language and literacy learning and development.

Creating supportive learning environments to promote language and early literacy

Rather than promoting debate about the 'best' way of supporting early literacy, as though there is a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that will suit all learners' needs, it is helpful to work from a perspective that recognises the diversity of children's interests, experiences and prior knowledge.

Current research about language and literacy learning and development, and ways of engaging children in learning, provides strong evidence of the need for supportive adult interactions in rich, inviting learning contexts where language and literacy learning is related to real-life purposes. Children 'learn best when, with the support of a knowledgeable and trusted adult, they are actively involved and interested.'[4] For teachers, it is particularly useful to build strong relationships with parents so that their relationships with children are built on knowledge of parental expectations, priorities and children's home experiences. The more 'teachers know about parent's beliefs and the activities in which they engage with children at home, the more they can help to build a bridge between home and school literacy'.[5]

The importance of a supportive learning environment is highlighted by Hyson's research, which identified a number of factors that undermined young children's positive approach to learning. She found that such things as unsupportive relationships between adults and children, unchallenging and irrelevant learning experiences, and teaching methods that failed to support children's engagement and motivation to learn were associated with children becoming disengaged as learners.[6]

It is, therefore, essential that teachers critically examine their current practices for planning and implementing literacy programs within the contexts of everyday kindergarten experiences including play, real-life engagements and routines and transitions.

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[4] I Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, 'Curriculum, pedagogy and progression' in Early Education, Sustained Shared Thinking, Spring, p. 6.

[5] J Lynch, J Anderson, A Anderson, & J Shapiro, 2006, 'Parents' beliefs about young children's literacy development and parents literacy behaviours', *Reading Psychology,* vol. 27, iss. 1, 1-20.

[6] M Hyson, 2008*, Enthusiastic and engaged learners: Approaches to learning in the early childhood classroom*. Early Childhood Education Series, Teachers College Press: Columbia University.

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Reflecting on language and literacy learning and teaching practice: A starting point for teachers

Using the following reflective questions to guide thinking about current language and early literacy learning and teaching practices is a helpful starting point.

Ask yourself:

- How does the language and literacy component of my program fit with a holistic view of young children's educational experiences?
- What are the strengths and gaps in the way my program incorporates recommended 'best practice' in promoting language and literacy learning and development? (See Parts 2 and 3 for specific examples.)
- How connected is the language and literacy component of my program with emergent curriculum perspectives? (See Modules 3 and 4 of the QKLG Professional Development materials for detailed explanations of emergent curriculum.)
- What language do I use to describe the language and literacy component of my program?
- What does this reveal about my understandings of children's learning and development and the practices I value?
- To what extent does the language and literacy component of my program build on children's interests, engage and motivate children to learn, and promote independence and self-regulation?
- What opportunities are there for rich conversations and interactions that promote language and literacy learning and development?
- What opportunities do children have to engage in language and literacy learning through the contexts of play, real-life engagements, and routines and transitions?
- How does the language and literacy component of my program support the diversity of children's experiences and the cultural knowledge that they bring to kindergarten?
- How flexible and responsive is my program in terms of engaging and challenging children with meaningful, relevant language and literacy learning experiences?
- What intentional teaching strategies have I used to promote language and literacy learning and development? To what extent are they related to real-life language and literacy?
- To what extent does the language and literacy component of my program incorporate family priorities and connect with family and community expectations and learning opportunities?
- How well could I talk to families and other educators about my approach to language and literacy learning and development?
- What aspects of language and literacy might I need to clarify or learn more about?

Considering these questions and developing a clear understanding of how language and early literacy are learnt and developed are invaluable. This reflection will assist you to plan learning and teaching experiences to build a strong foundation of dispositions, knowledge and skills for children's continuing language and literacy learning in school settings. It will help teachers explain to parents how their program works, and why it is important to provide a rich and balanced program. In addition, these reflective questions will help teachers make informed decisions about which resources to use in their programs.

Appendix A provides a collection of questions that will help you review your practices for supporting language and early literacy learning. It is based on the informed decision-making model of the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* (Figure 2, p. 18).

2. Strategies for language and early literacy learning and teaching

What does a balanced approach to supporting language and literacy development include?

Konza suggests that adopting a balanced approach to support young children's language development and literacy learning involves the following six features:

- developing social relationships that draw on children's strengths, interests and prior knowledge
- focusing on socially appropriate communication in context (pragmatic language use)
- promoting vocabulary development
- developing phonological awareness
- developing alphabetic and letter–sound knowledge (phonics)
- providing rich literacy environments in which literacy is purposefully used and discussed.[7]

Developing social relationships and socially appropriate communication in context

The *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* incorporates a perspective of language and literacy learning and development that acknowledges the crucial roles played by parents and other supportive adults. Early literacy experiences with family and supportive adults occur through social interactions that combine children's growing understandings about the world, and their place in it. Language and literacy development at this point in children's lives is 'as much about relationships as knowledge and understandings.'[8]

As children explore sounds and babble, play games and interact with adults, listen to and enjoy songs, rhymes and stories, and engage in conversations in the context of everyday social and cultural experiences they build language skills. These skills provide a foundation for literacy learning. Language is essential for building relationships and social practices:

> The relationship between social and emotional competence and language ability seems to be reciprocal; language serves to support social interactions and social interactions provide a context to further develop linguistic skills. These skills are supported by interactions with adults and peers where opportunities for establishing and practicing language skills, role modelling, and offering feedback are provided.[9]

Using language to communicate in socially appropriate ways that fit varied contexts is an important skill for young children to begin learning. Kindergarten is a time to learn the social conventions for communicating, e.g. to take turns when talking with a partner, to stay on topic, to listen and to wait, to ask questions, to make requests and to use social language vocabulary such as 'please' and 'thank you'. As children learn to communicate with peers at kindergarten, their communicative competence has a significant impact on their developing social relationships and their acceptance by other children. Recent studies by Bonamy[10] and

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[7] D Konza, 2011, Supporting Oral Language and Reading development in the Early Years. Spotlight research into practice: research monograph 5, Victorian Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, February, p.2.

[8] Learning Together Research Program, 2007, Investigating children's early literacy learning in family and community contexts: Review of the related literature, Commissioned for the Government of South Australia, p.6.

[9] J Dockrell, K Sylva, L Huxford, F Roberts, 2009, Oral language skills in the early years, pp.3-4.

[10] RO Bonamy, 2011, 'Social cognition and conduct problems: a developmental approach', *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, vol. 50, issue 4, pp. 385–94.

Leonard[11] have found that children who have less competence in communicating in a way that inappropriate to the context are more likely to have social skills problems.

Conversational skills that influence peer acceptance include:

- initiating conversation appropriately
- contributing to ongoing conversations
- communicating intentions clearly
- presenting more positive than negative comments
- adjusting communication strategies to suit the listener's needs.[12]

Engaging in these language skills and contexts helps young children learn that the rules for communication vary according to the situation and the purpose.

Promoting vocabulary development

Kindergarten is a significant time in young children's lives for a rapid growth in vocabulary development. It is essential that children have multiple opportunities to learn new words, and to use them in context, since a rich vocabulary is a strong predictor for the development of early reading skills. 'Knowing a lot of words usually reflects knowing a lot about the world. Preschool children with strong receptive vocabularies tend to have better listening comprehension, word recognition and reading comprehension in the later primary years'.[13]

Supportive adults can enrich young children's developing vocabulary through play, real-life engagements and routines and transitions. Vocabulary development is easily embedded within the daily program:

- Intentionally introduce and use new or different words in authentic contexts, e.g. when children are interested in a particular topic or investigating a particular idea (see table below for examples).

New Language	Learning experience	Context
Labelling nouns	When pouring a drink at snack time the teacher refers to the **object**: 'Pass me the jug please'.	Meal time
	During dramatic play the teacher refers to **people**: 'What kind of uniform does a flight attendant wear?'	Dramatic play
	When reading a book about transport the teacher **explains**: 'The bus station is the name of the place where you catch a bus.'	Story time
Using verbs	When making animal movements the teacher introduces **action** words: 'Let's slither like a snake across the floor'.	Music and movement
Comparing	One child speaks to another about her block design: 'My road's longer than Kym's.'	Play
Describing	When talking about a story the teacher comments, 'The monster was enormous.'	Group discussion

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[11] M Leonard, et al. 2011, "The role of pragmatic language use in mediating the relation between hyperactivity and inattention and social skills problems", *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, vol. 54, pp. 567–79.

[12] J Dockrell, K Sylva, L Huxford, F Roberts, 2009, Oral language skills in the early years, p. 4.

[13] Scarborough (2001, "Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory and practice". In S Neuman & D Dickinson (eds) *Handbook of early literacy research.* Guilford Press, New York, pp. 97–110) cited in D Konza, 2011, *Supporting Oral Language and Reading development in the Early Years.* Spotlight research into practice: research monograph 5, Victorian Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, February, p.2

New Language	Learning experience	Context
Pretending	The teacher joins in a child's retelling of a familiar fairy tale with felt pieces, 'I'm the grumpy goat that stomped on the bridge.'	Play
Creating	When painting, a child comments, 'I'm painting Father Bear really big because he's scary.'	Play
Using prepositions	Using prepositions in games and when giving instructions, e.g. Simon says: 'Put your hands on your toes'; 'Please put your name-card under your construction.'	Games Giving instructions

- Use specific words to talk about language and literacy concepts (metalanguage), such as:
  - concepts of print: when reading large print and writing, talk with the children about the text, identifying and using the terms such as: 'letters', 'words', 'full stops', 'spaces between words', 'reading from top to bottom' and 'left to right'; referring to 'print' and 'pictures'; referring to the title on a book cover or the title of a song

  - concepts of digital literacy: e.g. 'scroll', 'mouse', 'menu', 'icon'

  - language: when developing phonemic awareness, listen for and use the terms 'sound', 'word', 'pattern'

  - text types: refer to 'stories', 'songs', 'signs', 'name-cards', 'labels', 'recipes', 'lists', 'instructions', 'webpages', 'magazines', 'catalogues', 'maps', 'diagrams'

  - text purposes: refer to why we read or write particular text types, e.g. explain that 'the website will tell me how to make a kite'; or 'I'll write a list to help me remember what to buy'.

- Introduce mathematical vocabulary when talking with children about learning experiences (see table below for examples).

Mathematical concept	Mathematical vocabulary in the learning experience	Context
Measuring	Referring to 'a full cup' when cooking.	Real life
1 to 1 correspondence	At snack time, asking a child to get a cup for each child at his table. Then counting the number of children in the group, asking how many cups he'll need so that everyone at the table gets a cup.	Routines and transitions
Estimation length	When making a dramatic play prop, suggesting to a child that she finds a piece of material or paper long enough to go around her head.	Play
Shapes	Recognising shapes, e.g. when playing card games with shapes, naming the shapes that match.	Small group game

- Organise small group or one-to-one experiences with a supportive adult to increase the quality of the interaction, the variety of words children are exposed to and the number of words that they are likely to hear
- Share quality texts. It is important that children engage in focused interactions and conversations about the texts, their meanings and purposes. Quality literature provides opportunities for children to build a rich vocabulary by learning unfamiliar words such as new descriptive vocabulary, e.g. bird movements can be described as 'flutters', 'floats', 'flaps'.

- Explore rhythm and rhyme in language and features of different texts, e.g. exploring the characters, conflict/problem and resolution/solution in a narrative, the use of pictures and captions in a diagram or the use of graphics and print on a webpage.
- Provide children with daily opportunities to explore and talk about a range of texts for different purposes, e.g. information texts, magazines, catalogues, comics, recipes, maps, illustrations, diagrams, websites, audio and video recordings. (These texts should be available in children's first language).

Appendix B summarises language learning and teaching focuses in kindergarten.

Phonological awareness

'Phonological awareness is the ability to focus on the sounds of speech as distinct from its meaning; on its rhythm, the patterns of intonation and most importantly on the individual sounds.'[14]

Phonemic awareness is a part of phonological awareness and is the ability to segment words into phonemes (individual sounds). Phonemic awareness is a prerequisite to learning the alphabetic code because children need to be able to hear the separate sounds in words in order to relate these sounds to the letters of the alphabet. However, young children find it easier to hear syllables in words before they can hear the sounds of individual letters because speakers do not normally break spoken words into separate sounds.

The earliest phonological skills children begin to develop are an understanding of the concept of rhyme. When children learn to recognise, match and then produce rhyming words they are demonstrating initial phonemic awareness because to produce words that rhyme, (e.g. 'cat', 'fat', 'bat') they are actually deleting the first sound in a word (the 'onset') and replacing it with another. This is an essential foundational skill that is built on in the Prep Year.

The introduction of rhyming games is an important first step in helping children to develop phonological awareness. Intentional teaching strategies that support phonological awareness include:

- encouraging children to play with rhymes and rhyming sounds
- playing games where children match objects that rhyme; then progressing to card games where children match picture cards
- segmenting spoken words in different ways, e.g. clapping the syllables in their name: 'Clar-a', 'Ben-ja-min'
- reading quality picture books and computer games with rhyming text; on subsequent readings, listening for the rhyming words; children saying the rhyming word when the adult pauses.

Alphabetic and letter–sound knowledge

When children develop an awareness that words can be broken up into sounds and letters, and that symbols are used to represent what they hear on the page, they are building a understanding of the alphabetic principle. This knowledge involves understanding that there is a systematic relationship between the letters of the alphabet and their sounds.

Isolating sounds in words and understanding the relationships between sounds and written letter (phonics) is difficult for many kindergarten children and is more likely to develop during the Preparatory Year. Until a child has well-developed phonemic awareness they are unlikely to benefit from phonics teaching.

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[14] D Konza, 2011, Supporting Oral Language and Reading development in the Early Years. Spotlight research into practice: research monograph 5, Victorian Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, February, p. 2.

In the Kindergarten Year children are beginning to develop the phonemic awareness that provides the foundation needed for successful learning in the Prep Year, when phonics becomes a focus of learning and teaching. By the end of Prep, children are expected to know most letters and their sounds and how to write these letters. They are also expected to recognise rhymes, syllables and sounds (phonemes) in spoken words by the end of Prep. (See Australian Curriculum English Foundation Year www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Curriculum/F-10)

During kindergarten, children:

- need time to build their interest and confidence to explore letters and sounds in purposeful contexts
- begin to show interest in letters and their sounds in different ways and in different time frames
- explore words, letters and sounds significant to them used for real purposes, e.g. when they:
    - want to help write 'post office' for a pretend play game, they will listen and watch as an adult refers to the alphabet chart. With support, they can talk about the letter sounds and write letters to represent the sounds they hear in the word 'post office'
    - notice that two children's names start with the same letter and want to be able to tell which one is their friend's name (e.g. discussing how 'Samantha' has more letters than 'Siena', but both start with the sound 's')
    - watch an adult use an alphabet chart to find a letter they want to copy or write
    - sing and play games to explore letters of the alphabet and their sounds.

This interest leads them to begin to recognise a few familiar letters in other contexts (e.g. on a sign or in another person's name) and begin to use the names of a few familiar letters. Learning to chant the alphabetic sequence is a starting point for future learning about letter names and sounds. Developing alphabetic knowledge takes a significant amount of time and cannot occur before children have opportunities to build foundational understandings.

These foundational understandings are best developed in everyday purposeful contexts. For example:

- as you help children to make a menu for a pretend game, say words slowly to emphasise the 'sound parts'. Explain how this helps you work out how to write the word. You could break a word into syllables (e.g. 'pan / cake'); break a word into an onset and rime (e.g. 'c –ake'); break a simple C-V-C (consonant-vowel-consonant) word into individual letter sounds (e.g. 'p – a – n')
- when writing a message to share with parents, use an alphabet chart (from time to time) to show how you locate a letter that you need to write
- play with sounds in words to build children's sensitivity to individual sounds in words, e.g. make up tongue twisters using a child's name ('Karrie can catch a kite') or emphasise similar sounds in lyrics in familiar songs ('**M**iss **M**ary **M**ac').

Adults should also respond purposefully to children's questions and comments about letters and their sounds to extend children's understandings about letter–sound relationships and how letters and sounds are used; for example:

- if a child asks, 'What does that number say?' respond by saying, 'This is the letter "s". I need to write it at the start of this word on our sign about the 's-s-sausage sizzle'
- when a child comments, 'Charlie starts like my name (Cate), but it sounds different,' you could respond, 'Sometimes letters work together and make a different sound. The "c" and "h" work together to say "ch" in Charlie's name.'

Providing a rich literacy environment

One of the most important ways in which kindergarten teachers can promote children's literacy learning is by creating, with the children and their families, a learning environment in which literacy is purposefully used and discussed. Focused conversations are characteristic of rich literacy environments. Adults and children discuss ideas and experiences throughout the day, building children's understandings about communication, developing their thinking abilities and extending their vocabularies.

Conversations around shared books that address issues such as the setting of the story, the attributes and motivations of the characters and the order of events have been found to support children's early literacy development. The extent to which teachers engage children in intellectually challenging conversations around ideas and the meanings of new words is also strongly related to measures of emergent literacy.[15]

Adults read and use a variety of texts for real purposes with the children and encourage them to use texts in their play. For instance, they might investigate a website with children, follow a recipe to cook, read a picture book for enjoyment or an information text to find out about a topic of interest, or read the instructions on a seed packet to make sure they are planting seed correctly.

A kindergarten room should be full of print, images and other symbols used for a wide range of purposes that are both adult- and child-initiated, e.g.:

- favourite and new books invitingly displayed
- songs and rhymes written on posters and accessible to children
- children's art work aesthetically displayed with explanatory labels
- plans for the day written with the children and displayed on a wall or easel
- children's collections of objects labelled, e.g. a collection of shells
- shelved equipment and materials labelled
- a clock referred to as part of the daily routines
- personal name-cards easily accessible to the children
- notices and messages written collaboratively with children for families and visitors, incorporating the children's ideas
- signs, labels, menus, tickets, price tags, shopping lists written with the children during their dramatic play
- purposeful signs created with the children during their play, including using construction materials to make signs for outdoor play
- writing materials and cardboard, paper, and so on accessible to children in easily portable boxes to use during play.

As everyday events in kindergarten, adults read and write, and draw children's attention to what they are doing and its purpose. For instance, they might say, 'I'm going to write a note so that I remember to get some more string for tomorrow'.

Reading to children and modelled and collaborative writing should be daily routines in kindergarten. Children also need encouragement and time to try out their developing literacy understandings in their play, e.g. making signs for a construction, drawing a map of an obstacle course.

Modelling involves talking about the thinking that accompanies the writing and reading. It is a powerful way of helping children understand the range of purposes for which we use literacy in our society and also developing their concepts of print. Adults could explain:

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[15] B Raban, M Brown, E Care, F Rickards & O'Connell, T 2011, Young Learners — Learning and Literacy in the Early Years. AARE International Education Research Conference, 29 Nov – 3 Dec 2009, www.aare.edu.au/09pap/rab091255.pdf.

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- where/how the meaning is shared, e.g. in particular words or in pictures, sounds (narration, music) or captions
- that print (written words) can be 'read out loud' (turned into speech)
- how print is read from left to right and top to bottom on a page, and sometimes print goes above and below an image
- how we use a scroll bar to move down the screen when reading on a computer and explain the concept of menus and icons
- aspects of the print, for example, words, letters, repeated phrases, use of speech bubbles or large/different font
- and use letter names, and explain that particular letters make particular sounds, e.g. to find a repeated word on different pages of a book
- how ideas are represented through print, e.g. when writing for or with children to make a sign for a block building, names in an appointment book as part of pretend play, a list of equipment needed for a game or when scribing a caption for a painting.

A combined focus on the six features identified by Konza is essential for supporting young children's language and early literacy development. A balanced language and literacy program also combines planned learning experiences created in response to observations of children's interests, skills, strengths and needs and spontaneous experiences that arise from children's emerging interests. The combination of planned and spontaneous experiences with children focuses on purposeful language and literacy use supported by caring adults with whom they have a mutually trusting and respectful relationship.

Kindergarten provides time for children to explore and experiment with language. When the program is balanced and language-rich, children's interests and engagement in learning is stimulated and they are more likely to develop positive dispositions to learning.

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3. Snapshots of a balanced language and early literacy program in kindergarten

In broad terms, by the end of the kindergarten year, children would have had experience with a wide range of language and literacy experiences. These should include games that involve matching rhyming pictures, making up nonsense and real word rhymes, shared rhyming stories and creating simple rhymes as a group. These games are likely to occur during focused language sessions, in small group games, as part of transition songs and rhymes activities, and incidentally as children play with the sounds of language.

Supporting name recognition in daily routines

One daily routine in this kindergarten class is marking the roll. Since second term, children have taken turns to mark the roll, calling each child's name and putting a tick alongside it if the child is there. Each name has a picture of the child alongside it to help the children identify the names. By the end of the year, many children were marking the roll by identifying the words, without needing to refer to the pictures.

Using literacy in a real-life context; recognising familiar, significant words

Children in this same kindergarten setting have many opportunities to see and recognise each other's names. At the beginning of the year their individual storage boxes are labelled with their name and picture. Their pictures are removed as children become competent at recognising their own names. By the middle of the year the children generally only have their name on the label. If necessary, they help each other identify the name to find the correct box.

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Playing with rhyme

An example of spontaneous word play using understandings built through many games and discussions of rhymes and listening for sounds

Towards the end of their Kindergarten Year, Min and Tran were playing with the puppets of farmyard animals.

Min started singing her version of 'Old MacDonald had a farm' and, after she bounced her duck, sang: 'With a quack, quack here and a quack, quack there.'

Tran nodded her cow puppet and sang, 'With a mack, mack here and a mack, mack there,' then laughed at her clever way of playing with sounds.

Min responded by picking up the dog puppet and singing, 'With a back, back here and a back, back there,' and joined in the laughter.

Most kindergarten children enjoy chanting alphabet songs and rhymes. They may have a general awareness that letters have names, but they may not necessarily know the name of particular letters. They may know their name starts with an 'm' and notice other words that start 'like their name'. They may recognise their name in familiar contexts, usually by noticing the first letter, and the length and shape of the word. They may see another word that looks similar to their name and say, 'That's my name,' (e.g. 'Lauren' and 'Laundry'). In Prep, children will continue to develop their alphabetic knowledge and understandings about letter–sound relationships within play and active learning contexts.

Pretend reading

Kindergarten children also enjoy pretending to read. For example, they may make up a story to match the pictures and approximate telling the story from memory.

Using literacy for a real-life purpose; pretend reading to entertain

Reading a familiar book is a regular choice during outdoor time in this kindergarten setting. A box of books that have previously been read to the children is placed on a rug in an inviting position. It is a favourite choice of many children.

Here we see Travis 'reading' a book to two friends. He is reading from memory, taking his cues from the pictures. He knows the story so well that it is almost word-for-word accurate and he 'reads' it with great expression to make the story exciting for his listeners.

Children in the Kindergarten Year often write or approximate writing their name and they may pretend to write using some letter-like symbols, e.g. to make a sign for block play, to write an invitation, or to send a friend a message. As part of the daily program children should have many opportunities to enrich their vocabulary by sharing their ideas, posing questions, participating in discussions, telling stories and engaging in dramatisations of familiar tales.

Literacy in dramatic play

The travel agency

Using literacy in real-life contexts: language and pretend reading and writing

Mia and Taylor had set themselves up as travel agents with a collection of printed material for reference – a calendar and brochures. When they answered the phone to imaginary customers, they took bookings for particular days, referred to the brochures and wrote down where the customer was going, and quoted prices for the booking. They had several customers agreeing to go on million dollar journeys!

Retelling familiar stories

Using literacy for real purposes: story retelling and language

Eve and Sophie cooperated to retell a story about a starfish, using felt story props. They selected the background pieces first as they chatted about the setting and then found the felt pieces for the characters.

As they retold the story, they moved the characters against the background. When Eve left out one of the events, Sophie reminded her of it, took over the character, a crab, and hid it behind a rock.

Catching the bus

Zehra suggested to a group of friends that they might build a bus in the home-play area. The four children moved the dolls and dolls' beds to make room and then collected chairs from around the room. They arranged the chairs in pairs and while Zehra was the driver, up front, her three friends sat on chairs as passengers. By this time several other children had become interested in what was going on and also joined in as passengers.

The teacher came by at this point and asked the children where the bus was going, because she was waiting for a bus and wanted to make sure she got on the correct one. Zehra announced that the bus was going to the beach, so the teacher suggested that they make a destination sign for the front of the bus so that passengers knew where the bus was going.

Using literacy in real-life contexts: pretend writing and copying words

Zehra asked two of her friends to make the sign so they went to a table near the store of pens and paper.

Olivia wrote her sign on a strip of paper as a series of long wavy lines. She was very happy with her 'pretend writing' and stuck it on a chair at the front of the 'bus'.

Rachel, on the other hand, asked the teacher to write – to the beach – for her. She then painstakingly copied each word, letter by letter. Her teacher had pointed out that there was a space between each word and Rachel made sure that she had a space too. When she had finished to her satisfaction, Rachel also attached her sign to the first chair in the bus.

Conclusion

During the Kindergarten Year the focus for language and literacy development is on providing a balanced and rich program through the contexts of play, real-life engagements and routines and transitions. For instance:

* during play, an adult might model how to find a letter on an alphabet chart when writing a sign for a block building; a child might create a plan or map as part of a pretend game
* during transitions and routines, an adult might help a child use labels to help put things away or find a name on a helper's chart
* during real-life engagements, an adult might talk about the purpose for reading instructions on the plant seed packet, or talk with a child about the images and letters on the covers of books or search engines to help them choose the one that might have the information they need for their investigation.

The role of adults is to support children's developing understandings about language and its purposes, to build on existing knowledge and experiences and to nurture their confidence to communicate through a range of social experiences. Current research indicates that 'good outcomes for children are linked to sustained and shared talking time, involving open-ended

questions to extend the child's thinking and giving formative feedback during the activities in real time'.[16]

Avoid focusing exclusively on any one aspect of literacy, such as letter recognition, as this is 'likely to send a clear message that this is what is most valued by teachers in literacy learning. This narrow focus is unlikely to allow individual children to have their strengths recognised.'[17]

Providing a balanced program that emphasises the centrality of play in young children's learning is the focus of the kindergarten program. As current research highlights, play is an essential context for supporting young children's language and literacy development.

> Play offers a chance to provide experiences which replicate or approximate the ways literacy is genuinely used in everyday life, thereby offering children insights into what it feels like to be literate.
>
> This will be more potent for their developing awareness and understandings than providing them with decontextualised literacy experiences that they may find bewildering and confusing in relation to what they see adults around them doing. This is the danger of introducing a formal school curriculum during the early years, before children have developed a flexible conceptual framework within which they can use such item knowledge.[18]

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[16] B Raban, M Brown, E Care, F Rickards & O'Connell, T 2011, *Young Learners — Learning and Literacy in the Early Years.* AARE International Education Research Conference, 29 Nov – 3 Dec 2009, www.aare.edu.au/09pap/rab091255.pdf, p. 5.

[17] S McKenzie 2006, *Making Connections to Promote Early Literacy.* Literacy and Numeracy Innovative Projects Initiative: Final projects report for Round Two, Commonwealth of Australia, www.dest.gov.au/literacynumeracy/innovativeprojects/mckenzie_making_connections/default.htm p. 20.

[18] B Raban, M Brown, E Care, F Rickards & O'Connell, T 2011, *Young Learners — Learning and Literacy in the Early Years.* AARE International Education Research Conference, 29 Nov – 3 Dec 2009, www.aare.edu.au/09pap/rab091255.pdf, p. 4.

Appendix A: An integrated approach to supporting early literacy development in kindergarten

Monitoring and documenting learning

How do you monitor and make judgments about children's language and early literacy knowledge, skills and dispositions?

What opportunities do you create for children to discuss their ideas and knowledge about literacy using sustained, shared thinking?

How do you observe children as they engage in language and literacy through play, real-life engagements and routines and transitions?

When do you engage in learning conversations with children and parents about literacy?

Selectively documenting learning

What significant early literacy learning have you observed? (See *QKLG* Table 3, p. 33.)

How can you most effectively document this learning, e.g. anecdote, photo or work sample with commentary, learning story, conversation record?

Note: When possible and appropriate, involve parents and families in gathering and documenting learning.

Interacting and co-constructing learning
Engaging in literacy learning

How do you support literacy development through the contexts of play, real-life engagements and routines and transitions?

What intentional teaching practices do you build into your literacy program? (see *QKLG* Appendix 1, p. 63).

How do you celebrate diversity in your literacy program?

Partnerships with parents and families

How do you engage children, parents, families and communities in conversations about the importance of early literacy?

What opportunities are available to parents to share their priorities and expectations about children's early literacy learning?

How confident are you in being able to articulate current perspectives on early literacy development with parents, families and communities?

Teacher, children, parents, family and community perspectives and priorities

Reflecting on language and literacy practices
Identifying learning possibilities

What is happening to promote this child's literacy learning?

How can this child's / these children's literacy learning be further promoted?

What conversations, questions, materials, partnerships or learning contexts could be planned?

What do you need to record, share or communicate? Why? With whom? How?

What opportunities are provided for children to demonstrate literacy learning?

What self-assessment tool for literacy are you using?

Planning and organising for literacy learning

Look at the resources available in the kindergarten setting to support early literacy

Does your kindergarten room provide a rich literacy environment?

How would this be evident to a visitor to the room?

How do you incorporate children's prior knowledge into the literacy program?

Considering the decision-making elements (see *QKLG* pp. 19–37)

How do you promote early literacy development through:

responsiveness to children

building partnerships

creating learning environments

developing learning contexts — play, real-life engagements, and routines and transitions

promoting children's literacy learning and development (see QKLG, p. 61).

Assessing children's learning
Making judgments
Interpreting documented evidence of learning

What is happening in the situation or conversation you have observed and documented?

What important information does it give you about this child's or children's literacy learning, e.g. learning strengths, motivations, needs, interests, skills, knowledge or dispositions?

Why is this learning significant?

What other information do I need to gather to understand this child or these children's literacy learning?

What does this mean for future decisions?

What other evidence do I have that enriches my understanding of this child's/ these children's literacy learning?

Making judgments

Identifying and reflecting on 'where the child has come from'; 'where they are now' and 'where they are going'.

Reviewing evidence of learning collected over time in a portfolio of learning:

What does this evidence tell me about this child's developing literacy knowledge, skills and dispositions?

How is their literacy learning progressing?

What does this mean for future decisions?

Considering the level of support provided and whether the literacy learning occurred in a familiar or new situation. (Referring to the *Continua of learning and development,* pp. 35–37, while making judgments about the phase of learning.)

Reviewing the relevant collections of descriptions

Making a more-like judgment, e.g. 'this child's learning is more like a learner in the emerging phase than the exploring phase because …'

Appendix B: Learning and teaching language in kindergarten

What are the focuses for learning and teaching?	How do adults facilitate the learning?
What are the focuses for learning and teaching? Learning and teaching focuses on: • developing and extending vocabulary for describing what children see, hear, taste, smell, touch and feel • developing and extending vocabulary for describing imaginative experiences, past and present personal experiences and topics of personal interest • developing and extending vocabulary for describing mathematical and scientific ideas • developing confidence in using language in familiar situations • sequencing information • playing with rhyme and sounds through songs, games and group experiences • using simple sentences in informal situations, e.g. to comment, ask a question, give directions, or explain a relationship • using language for a range of social and personal purposes.	**How do adults facilitate the learning?** • Adults use a range of intentional teaching strategies and activities including: • talking with children • discussing topics of interest • planning collaboratively, and modelling this process with children • modelling language strategies for children to use when needed, e.g. how to request help, negotiate a turn • scaffolding socio-dramatic and fantasy play to extend the range of ideas and language use • planned and incidental teachable moments to extend vocabulary • talking about vocabulary used in texts by people or characters • modelling 'pair and share' discussion strategies with a partner • sorting and classifying activities to extend language using feely bags to develop children's descriptive vocabulary • same and different games where children describe why things are the same or different • playing rhyming games to help children hear the sounds in words — 'tuning up the ear' • discussing social problems and role-playing expected behaviours • making explicit, behaviours for children to use in group times • modelling what listening looks like, sounds like, feels like.
For what purposes do children use language in kindergarten? Children use language to: • join in play and social activities • participate in discussions • express needs and feelings to familiar people using verbal and nonverbal elements of their first language and SAE and/or signed language or AAC devices • direct others • explain games, rules and how to do something • imagine • negotiate turns • recount events and share news and ideas • reflect on experiences • ask questions to seek clarification.	
What conventions do kindergarten children learn to use when interacting and listening? Children learn to: • develop an awareness of listener's needs • take turns as listener and speaker • use polite conversational strategies including 'please', 'thank you', 'excuse me'.	