

Lynne Hill  
100033438

Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network: Third Call for Student Papers –  
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[Jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk](mailto:Jackie.musgrave@open.ac.uk) and Dr Nikki Fairchild  
[n.fairchild@chi.ac.uk](mailto:n.fairchild@chi.ac.uk)**

<b>Student Name</b>	Lynne Hill
<b>Name of Institution</b>	University of Derby
<b>Title of submission</b>	Considering the use of children's books and digital material to support emerging literacies within an early years setting
<b>Level of study</b>	5
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<b>Tutor name and signature</b>	Ellen Yates 
<b>Feedback from ECSDN</b>	This is a sound piece of work, please could you include a final paragraph with some positive reflections on the implications for practice or your own development. Could you also make your comments in the final paragraph appreciative in nature – just 'soften' the language a little. Very well done!

Considering the use of children's books and digital material to support emerging literacies. within an early years setting

Being literate is immensely important, low levels of literacy can affect us at every point in our lives; from work and education to navigation of everyday tasks. (National Literacy Trust 2017). Children's literature can be viewed as a device for early socialisation (Burke & Copenhaver 2004), through which 'social expectations' (Waugh & Neaum 2013) and cultural ideologies are communicated (Varga & Zuk 2013). Literature aimed at children enhances their understanding of human behaviour and gives them opportunity to experience a diverse range of situations and events (Gamble & Yates 2011). Between 2 and 4, children experience a rapid growth in vocabulary and begin to experiment with word order and sequencing. This developmentally sensitive time should be used to encourage and promote literacy as a pleasurable concept before they are absorbed within the National Curriculum which can offer an all together more sterile and work-based approach to reading and writing (Perkins 2017) and where the teaching of phonics has the potential to alienate children who do not meet expectation (Marsh 2015 cited in Dyson).

The setting discussed below is an early years stay-and-play centre which utilises an old Sure Start building. Funding is limited, and the centre relies heavily on donations which has been borne in mind when suggesting improvements.

The centre has a small selection of books available; freedom of choice increases interest in reading (Lockwood 2008). Unfortunately, as there is no adult assigned to this area and the children are often reluctant to explore the resources, an enthusiastic leader available to select books based upon the interests and level of each child would be emotionally and imaginatively engaging (Perkins 2015). Consideration could also be given to including books on more diverse topics such as race, to help build literary skills (Monoyiou & Synmeonidou 2016) in addition to the more familiar and well-loved picture books to reassure the younger children (Melrose 2012).

Children enjoy re-enacting favourite scenes from literature and media as a form of experimentation and self-expression (Brock & Rankin 2008). It also offers opportunity to understand how stories are structured (Goodwin 2008). There is a fancy-dress box at the centre however; many of the outfits provided are generic. It would be more engaging perhaps, if the outfits and accessories reflected one or two of the books in the book corner to enable them to continue exploring the stories meaningfully. Symbolic play such as this offers a holistic way for them to develop their narrative skills (Levy 2011), early narrative competence being thought to lead to a secure foundation for literacy and long-term success in school (Cremin & Flewitt 2017 cited in Cremin et al).

There is a play house within the centre, where children can focus their play around a specific scenario. Play here invariably involves use of printed materials and signs and often 'pretend' writing is involved, promoting writing for purpose, and developing their desire to write (Vincent 2014 cited in Bower).

It has been shown that children pick up words spontaneously from TV, food packaging and street signs without direction (Gough & Hillinger 1980) therefore the importance of incidental, environmental print should not be underestimated. The setting is fortunate to benefit from much of its environmental print being left over from when the Sure Start centre was in residence and much of the material on the walls is child focused. Posters are positioned at low levels, encouraging

interaction and engagement. Included within the display is a poster which shows greetings in different languages and scripts. This is particularly enjoyed by children with dual heritage and it is also beneficial for other children who learn to recognise different languages and are beginning to appreciate diversity (Pitts et al 2015, Monoyiou & Synmeonidou 2016). Also; there is a poster printed with braille letters which is somewhat dated. Blind and partially sighted children do not often benefit from incidental opportunities to access literacy within the environment (Roe et al 2014) so this is an excellent resource however; it would be more engaging to all if it were refreshed with an updated and more colourful version, as bright pictures communicate more directly to young children (Nodelman 1999 cited in Hunt). Text in the environment also fosters knowledge of print conventions such as directionality (Neumann et al 2013). Young children especially are sensitive to personally significant letters within print (Neumann et al 2013) and are drawn to text which is attached to content meaningful to them (Levy 2011). The centre may benefit from a more structured letter or alphabet board where children can identify their own special letters and be encouraged to look at others. Similarly, the inclusion of more displays featuring recognisable characters from popular culture, may also provide a point of interest and engagement. Although children's programmes can be a point of controversy, popular culture produces ideologies and social views that children absorb whilst simultaneously gaining pleasure in the viewing experience (Hamston 2004). A recent study into this area highlighted the different forms of literate behaviour which can be associated with a popular program and where the behaviour, being linked to an area of interest for the child, is more actively engaged with (Vasquez 2005). In terms of use within the centre, this should be handled with care as parents many not necessarily agree on the possible virtues of popular culture and inclusion of too much media-based material may alienate some users.

To be an efficient reader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, children need to be conversant in a variety of literary sources; from words and images, to audio and hyperlinks (Perkins 2017). Children are encountering and interacting with literature in new ways (Neumann & Neumann 2017) and are becoming fluent in handling on-screen commands and prompts often before they can read the words (Levy 2011). With the emergence of multi-modal texts, so grows a population of on-screen readers, (Graham 2005 cited in Reynolds), parents and practitioners should have information on and access to useful apps with guidance on how to mediate the safe usage of technology (Neumann & Neumann 2017), and the centre could assist in the provision of this information.

The setting discussed provides quite a wide range of literacy-based activities and is certainly thoughtful in its approach to nurturing the emerging literacies of its users. There are several improvements, mentioned within this essay, which could be implemented to further enhance the child's experience; the main area that is lacking being access to digital media. It is important that early years settings provide opportunities for children to experience a wide range of literacies and digital texts are prominent within these. As previously mentioned, this setting does not have access to the financial backing required to furnish them with the most up to date technology. As suggested, more focus could be placed on providing the necessary access to and scaffolding around the more traditional literacies of reading and writing, with emphasis on pleasure in these pursuits.

**Word count: 1147**

Lynne Hill  
100033438

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