

What bugs you about teaching reading?

Karyn Johns

Acknowledgement:- This classroom program approach to emergent literacy and the more formal teaching of letters/sounds for reading and writing combines and integrates many excellent programs and resources from a range of sources. The successful "trial" of this blend of programs was conducted in the three Kindergarten classrooms at Lindisfarne Anglican Grammar School in 2008/09. Further opportunities have occurred in other schools in Sydney, the Gold Coast and more recently an early childhood centre in Coomera.



Karyn Johns

Karyn Johns is a Speech Language Pathologist who has worked with children and families for over 20 years. She graduated in W.A and has worked for a number of health and education agencies in SA, ACT and QLD, including Education Queensland for ten years. From 2007-09, Karyn worked part time at Lindisfarne Anglican Grammar School on the Tweed Coast with the aim being to support pedagogical change and curriculum development that strengthens the early years of learning, and integrates "up-to-date" teaching practices in the classroom. Since 2005 Karyn has also

consulted for the Communities for Children project which has led to the development of resources and intervention approaches for the 0-5 years sector as well as the delivery of many workshops. Finally, Karyn is a partner in a thriving private practice (S.P.E.E.C.H Pty Ltd) on the Gold Coast, providing services to children in four private schools, as well as clinical services in their rooms in Coomera. Karyn is passionate about sharing information and strategies with families, teachers and early childhood professionals that will support language, literacy and social skills development. Karyn has two children – aged 14 and 10 years. They have taught her an incredible amount and probably have had the most important and significant impact on the work she does and the advice she provides to others.

The current reality (and what bugs us!!)

Never before has there been the level of intense focus and attention on early childhood education, development and care. The media and professional literature contains reference to many complex issues such as:

- providing access to quality care and education for all children (www.deewr.gov.au)
- publishing new frameworks, curriculums and standards (www.qsa.qld.edu.au)
- ensuring school readiness (www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)
- developing literacy and numeracy skills (www.ocecc.gov.au/education/learning_resources.htm)
- increasing incidences of delays, difficulties and "problems" (www.aedi.org.au)
- advances in our knowledge of brain development (www.changingbrains.org)
- supporting the workforce and levels of staff training (www.pscq.org.au).

In addition, the political and economic factors often “cloud” the everyday work efforts of early childhood professionals to simply do a “good job” and enjoy their day with young children and delight in how (most of them) thrive and learn from the many opportunities and experiences we provide. Also, there are the conversations with parents about their child’s progress and, increasingly, parents are asking staff in “non-school” settings when they are going to start teaching the children to read !!!

However, the **reality** is that we are under pressure to deliver (with a smile):

- best practice teaching methods
 - quality early learning experiences
- in a climate of
- increasingly complex child and family needs
 - competitive “education” environments (e.g. My School website)
 - a plethora of new initiatives, projects and early years services
 - pressure to “close the perceived gap” between private centres and more formal “education” settings
 - QLD sector trying to “catch up” to standards and outcomes of other states.

Our reality (and what bugs us!!)

This paper endeavours to provide some facts about early literacy development and share some tools and resources that support the delivery of a fun and engaging approach which we believe is flexible enough to sit comfortably into a variety of curricula including:

- *Early Years Learning Framework* (www.deewr.org.au)
- *National English Curriculum* (www.acara.edu.au)
- *Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline* (www.qsa.qld.edu.au).

In fact, as we write this paper, we are confronted by the many terms and concepts (e.g. *emergent curriculum, developmental curriculums, portfolios, provocation, learning stories etc.*) that are written and spoken about, which potentially conflict or compete for status as the best or correct way to educate young children. Even as experienced practitioners, we were feeling anxious about the words we might choose to use in our paper and presentation since they could be misinterpreted as not being part of the “in” jargon, or our message rejected on the basis of not using the correct or current terminology.

We hope and would prefer the sector “pulls together” in this regard since it may only cause to confuse the community or, worse, even discredit some services.

Understanding reading (and what bugs us!!)

As early educators, we are charged with the responsibility of explicitly teaching a skill since “evolution did not wire us to read” (www.childrenofthecode.org/interviews/tallal.htm#Neuroanatomyofreading). That is, many developmental skills such as walking, and talking are actually pre-wired human capacities that will develop (in over 95% of the population) given a reasonable or “good enough” learning environment. As adults (parents, educators or carers), we are the facilitators in this learning process. However, literacy develops from the result of our teaching (in the vast majority of

cases), but builds from the critical brain capacities we nurture and shape in the critical years **BEFORE** formal education begins. The *learning to read skills* (and thus the teaching of them) cannot be separated from the following early years experiences:

- talking
- listening
- sharing stories
- playing
- singing.

These play-based learning experiences help build the brain capacities we depend upon for future teaching and learning i.e. memory, attention, processing speed, sequencing (Burns, 2010, www.brainconnection.com). Thus, for phonological awareness (decoding) activities, we need children to be able to:

- **attend** (listen for syllables, rhyme, sounds)
- **process** fast streams of sounds (a syllable is only 0.25 seconds in length)
- **sequence** (two sounds in UP; three sounds in boat)
- **remember** what the concepts letter, sound, word, sentence mean

For listening/reading comprehension (After all, isn't that what reading really is?) we need children to be able to:

- **attend** to the story or information
- **process** the words and their meanings (quickly)
- **sequence** the events, ideas
- **remember** what was read

To apply the KISS (Keep it Simple Stupid) principle, then think of as **Reading = D x C:**

D = decoding (phonological awareness and speech skills) and

C = comprehension (vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, talking skills).

The foundations for this reading formula come from the oral language and speech skills that young children bring to "school" or the learning to read context. So are we valuing and nurturing these skills and experiences in the early years or being "pushed" into formal learning structures too soon?

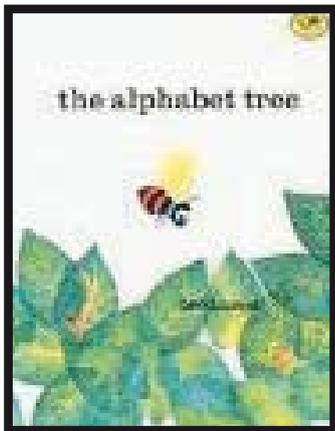
THE ALPHABET GARDEN - A Suggested Framework for the Teaching Process

Research (see <http://inteachershands.education.ecu.edu.au/>) has repeatedly shown that the quality of the teacher and their own metacognitive knowledge about how children learn is the key to achieving the "best outcomes" – not the program (some of which can cost many hundreds of dollars). Incidentally, the other factor critical for good literacy outcomes is your partnership with parents - so once you know what you are doing, and why, then tell the parents !!!!

The remainder of the paper will describe some tools (but there are others that could be used!!) that have assisted early childhood professionals. They should be:

- consistent in the use of their instructional language
- visual and engaging in their delivery of language and literacy experiences
- strategic and incremental in the sequence of skills "taught"
- integrated and connected across "teaching" areas.

The educators who have engaged with the materials we describe have all applied the ideas in their own way with their own



style. It is not prescriptive. However, the tools and resources we utilize, deliver on the current understandings and research knowledge about the strategies,

capacities and knowledge base children need for successful literacy acquisition.

The context or overarching tool is a story book about literacy and how reading works.

There are a number of these types of stories available e.g. *The Bear Who Wanted to Read* by Lee Davis, *Reading Makes You Feel Good* by Todd Parr, *The Flyaway Alphabet* by Mary Murphy. We have used the **The Alphabet Tree** story book by Leo Lionni, because it provides a framework of reference for critical metalinguistic concepts (word, letter, sound, sentence) for emergent literacy (www.nifl.gov/). It supports the introduction of the concepts of letters and sounds to young children. As the story

unfolds the letters are presented as leaves on the tree that huddle together from the wind to make **words** (introduced by the word bug). Then the caterpillar explains



that words should group together as **sentences** to say something meaningful (so the words climb onto the caterpillar's back). The story ensures terminology for important literacy concepts, such as "word, letter, sound, sentence", is supported by visual clues.

Multi-sensory learning approach

to sounds. Many young children are struggling with auditory processing and, since the speech stream is so fast, hearing individual sounds can be challenging. There are a number of programs that support the learning of the speech sounds for literacy but we have chosen **Cued Articulation** (by Jane Passy and available from ACER). This system for the sounds of English (for which there are 44 – many more than the 26 letters!!) uses hand movements which relate directly to the parts of the mouth and the way the sound is made. This means that, as children discover sounds in words, they can be related to the tree as leaves and the hand cues presented to them, using the cued articulation approach, helps ensure visual and tactile information about speech sounds is also shared.

Another option is to colour code (arbitrarily) the consonants according to specific features of sounds (e.g. *short* sounds p,b,t,d, k, g and *long* e.g. s,f and others ; *nose* e.g. m, n), so that incidental reference to the type of sound includes both auditory feature information as well as visual prompts. Finally, vowel letters (for short vowel sounds) can be another coloured leaf. It would be recommended that a Speech Language Pathologist assists you in this process or, alternatively, access the ELF program available from UQ (training and materials can be purchased from www.uq.edu.au/literacyprograms/about_literacy-for-life).



Engaging and sustainable teaching practices

The **word bug** can become a regular classroom visitor (be brave and dress up!!). The concept of rhyme (which children should have acquired in preschool) and the phonological awareness skills of blending and segmenting sounds (in simple consonant/vowel, consonant/vowel/consonant structures) can continue to be reinforced. High frequency words can also be introduced by the word bug but in a contextualized and integrated way (for high frequency words printed on bugs see www.sparklebox.co.uk/cll/keywords/minibeasts.html). Finally, the children are reminded when they are “writing” that their sentences are like the caterpillar in the story. That is, words go together to make sentences that mean something. Children visit the **Principal** with their “sentence writing” attempts and important messages.

SUMMARY

We acknowledge the increasing pressures in the early childhood sector to meet the goals, outcomes and principles described in a plethora of frameworks, curricula and guidelines emerging in the sector.

There is growing pressure from parents and community to start the teaching of reading early. Also, research and knowledge about brain development is also “exploding”, which can add to an overwhelming sense of information overload. However, this paper endeavours to embed and integrate some of the key “facts” about the teaching and learning processes for reading into a framework, with recommended tools, that will assist early childhood professionals and children to grow their own “**Alphabet Garden**” in their setting.

