



## CULTIVATING LITERACY SKILLS THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN EARLY YEARS - THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASSUMPTIONS

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### **Abstract:**

This article is about children's literature in the early years of children's development, and it touches on many issues relating to children's literature, literacy models and literacy skills through research approaches. This article provides a few actions for cultivating the love of reading and the value of sharing literature with a few effective ideas to use literature to help children learn to read and write. When used sensitively by early childhood professionals it entertains and helps children develop self-awareness and understanding. Through an example of a children's picture book, ideas will be sharing about how adults can develop the kind of rich literacy environment that provides an excellent basis for learning literacy.

**Keywords:** literacy, children's literature, literacy models, cultivating love of reading, early years

### **1. Introduction**

The early years of children's lives are very important as their experiences and backgrounds influence their future lives and during these crucial years, they acquire the foundations for their development in relation to reading. The teacher has a key role in encouraging both children and parents to read books, as this process is an effective way of contributing to early language development and the issue of literacy in early childhood is a topic that has been and continues to be of concern to scholars in the relevant scientific field.

As young children learn their mother tongue, they develop a certain degree of literacy naturally in their family, cultural and social environment and then go to school for formal education. In the last two decades, there has been a change in the way children

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learn to read and write and it is taken for granted that children are growing up in an appropriate environment dominated by the printed word, in their own unique way, and begin to understand and develop their relationship to reading and writing.

From the earliest years of their lives and to communicate with their environment, they use the spoken word, which is part of language, and in a natural and completely effortless way, they learn and develop the necessary skills for using language. This concept is inextricably linked to the original theory that children from birth live in the world of letters and literacy and do not need to reach a certain age, such as primary school, to learn to read and write and is a natural and expected response as children try to interpret the world around them (Bonnafé, M., 2017).

The written language is an integral part of children's lives so they try to appropriate and make sense of it through emergent literacy in which the child is not treated as a passive recipient of a formal form of reading instruction nor does the child master and use the written language only through formal instruction in formal education but the emphasis is placed on the process of learning where children as active learners process, comprehend various texts and learn through their interaction with them (Anderson, Heibert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1994)

Furthermore, reading is regarded as a part of language development rather than a single skill of speaking, comprehension and writing because the skills that are developed during reading and writing are interrelated. For example, a child does not learn to read first and then to write or vice versa, but both skills are carried out simultaneously and the person's listening skills are enhanced at the same time. In other words, once children have mastered the oral language, i.e. improved communication with adults, it is assumed that comfort in reading and writing respectively is distinguished (Anderson et al., 1994) and the whole process to reach literacy acquisition and in particular reading, ability differs from child to child and is related to the frequency and quality of experiences in the close environment, the family environment and perceptions and views towards books (Baker, C. D., & Freebody, P., 1989).

## 2. Literacy models

*"So great is the importance of the child's development before he has even started school that the role of the teacher can only be regarded as complementary to the progress made at home."* (Butler & Clay, 1979: 7)

The issue of literacy in early childhood is a subject that has been and continues to be of concern to scholars in the relevant discipline. In general, the concept of literacy refers to the individual's ability to function effectively in various environments and communication situations using language in all its forms (oral, written, polytropic-multimodality).

In defining the concept of literacy, we could say that *"...to be literate is to be able to make use of the more elaborate forms of language used in written speech - and the system of social*

*values that accompany it*" (Halliday, 2007: 110) while we use the term literacy *"to refer specifically to writing as distinct from speech: to the practices of writing and reading, the forms of language and the modes of signification typically associated with them"* (Halliday, 2007: 111) and the term emergent literacy expresses the whole range of behaviors that precede and evolve in conventional literacy knowledge (Sulzby, 1989), a term which renders in Greek the English term (emergent literacy) used to argue that the acquisition of literacy skills does not begin when a child enters school, but is a process that starts very early in a child's life, before systematic teaching of reading and writing begins (Sulzby, 1989).

*"An evolving range of knowledge about print and a variety of behaviors that begin before school and lead to conventional knowledge of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking"* (Zygouris - Coe, 2001:6).

Learning the literacy acquisition process is achieved through sustained effort and research emphasizes the way in which children will achieve literacy through informal teaching implemented in the daily activities in which children take part either during their stay at the nursery, school, or in the home environment and which make language development and literacy an unchanging factor [*"the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading"* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1994: 23)].

Before preschool children learn to read and write, they externalize the corresponding behaviors and strategies, such as when a child goes through the process of pretending to read everything in a familiar environment that is related to the printed word (Morrow, 2005) or trying to write, or imitating an adult and pretending to read a book which means that he or she has begun to have some conceptual knowledge about the printed word and has begun to experiment by applying this knowledge (McGee & Righels, 2003). Another example could be when he/she draws different lines - improvised letters, sometimes with scribbles, sometimes with combinations of letters and numbers, sometimes with random symbols, manifesting emergent writing behaviors such as 'Writing' from top to bottom and from left to right, or 'Writing' with different writing materials (markers, pencils, crayons) to indicate that the 'texts' they write have a different function or leaving a space between words (Kaderavek et al., 2009).

So, Emergent Literacy may include encompasses a range of Knowledge, Skills and Forms of Behavior which are seen as precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing as forms of behavior associated with the printed word, whereas speaking, writing, and reading are skills that are inextricably linked (Gillen & Hall, 2013).

Subsequently, visual literacy is one of the most basic skills that modern man must master and is related to the ability to interpret, critically evaluate, and create visual messages (Kubicek, L. F. & Emde, R. N. (2012). Children through the constant barrage of images are trained to decode visual messages and form ideas, values, and symbols in a changing social world and the power of the image in social, economic, and cultural reality has created this need for a new form of education, visual education, or visual literacy.

Critical literacy is associated in the late 20th century with the social practices through which the student is not "*the one who is able to read*" but "*the one who is a reader*", and goes beyond decoding and understanding the words of a text (Eurydice, 2011) and cultivates linguistic and social skills, precisely because they are a prerequisite for the future active citizen.

The aim of critical literacy is for students to acquire critical thinking in the context of a reflective situation, with the teacher's main concern being to formulate authentic situations capable of activating their critical thinking (Comber, 2003). Consequently, the teacher poses a problem based on a topic that interests children and is appropriate for their specific stage of development and then asks them to propose solutions to this problem. The development of critical literacy skills can be combined with the application of the problem-solving strategy, with the aim that young learners gradually learn to use the three stages of this strategy independently:

- 1) Identifying the problem,
- 2) Action,
- 3) Adapting the action plan.

Reading children's literature, as far as preschool children are concerned, is the most widespread approach to the development of critical literacy, and it fascinates children by being a vehicle that can bridge their own world with the world of the school (Goodman, 2005).

Finally, the term "multiliteracies", (multiliteracies), denotes the variety of texts related to information and multimedia technologies (Kress, 2003) and the variety of text forms produced in a multilingual and cultural society. Multiliteracies, have as their main characteristic multimodality and are based on design, which is the key term and refers to the use of all existing resources to structure and create a text.

But what is the role of children's literature in the holistic development of children?

### **3. Children and Children's Literature. Research Assumptions**

Through exposure to children's literature, the child matures emotionally, and this is evident from the role attributed to it by Appleyard (1994). Appleyard distinguishes five roles that the reader acquires and follows in a relatively predictable order, depending on the age at which they are.

Thus, for the adult reader, the role of performer and pragmatist is assigned; for the adolescent reader, the role of intellectual; for the school-age child, the role of protagonist is assigned; and finally, the role of the reader as a player is assigned to the preschool child, because although he/she cannot yet read, he/she is in an imaginary world in which his/her fears, worries and desires are reflected and through identification with the hero of the myth or story, he/she imagines that he/she is solving problems of a disorganized world that is in a sense his/her own world (Sutton et al., 2007).

Therefore, the child, in a protected, but at the same time free space, can play with his desires and impulses, and life experiences, but also observe many of his emotions safely (Spink, 1990).

Thus, reading offers us the possibility to discover both the behaviour and attitudes of others and our own identity, because it is one of the means of self-discovery. As Marcel Proust states:

*"In fact, the reader at the moment of reading is a reader of himself. The writer's job is to supply the reader with a kind of visual instrument, so that he can discern that which without the book he might never have found in himself."* (Spink, 1990:70)

The playful methods that can be used in reading and in children's literature in general, enhance individual consciousness and organized mental structures while maintaining interest and enthusiasm for memory and learning (Singer & Lythcott, 2004: 77). Besides, play is the most natural way of learning and expression for the child and therefore, almost all activities can be integrated into it (Kitsaras, 2004: 78 ).

Children's literature is a kind of literature known and familiar to young and old, teachers, parents, students, and in general all over the world, and its value for the child and for all those involved in it has been pointed out from time to time by many scholars, scientists, writers, etc. and one of the definitions that could be assigned is:

*"Children's Literature is the set of aesthetically justified texts that are able to contribute to children's entertainment and their spiritual cultivation, that is, to the development of the capacity for the perception of beauty in the maturation of personality and the formation of free consciousness."* (Givalou, 1995:282)

First, we should emphasize the role that literature plays in the acquisition of literacy. In particular, the acquisition of the basic strategies for processing a literary text is already carried out in preschool age, in the context of literacy events, when studying a written text. Early literacy experiences, including reading books, can help build children's vocabulary, develop oral language, and cultivate communication skills (Marulis & Neuman, 2010)

Consequently, children learn language through interesting listening to literary texts that correspond to patterns or language scripts they have formed before they go to school. Using the story as a vehicle, children can learn the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of the language, while short, illustrated stories adapted to the child's receptive ability can help enrich the vocabulary of preschool children and lead them to new -fantastic but enjoyable situations, which can encourage forms of communication.

Reading books has a positive impact not only on children's early literacy and vocabulary development, but also supports other areas of development, such as personal, social-emotional, and intellectual development by enabling children to learn new things about the world, remember things they already know, and relate their personal

experiences to events or situations they encounter in books by reflecting their personal experiences and seeing others' perspectives to learn about their own experiences.

From time to time, much research has been implemented on storytelling in the early years children, in particular on the frequency of reading between parents and children, the importance of it in the acquisition of language skills and more generally the emergent literacy skills considered necessary in the learning of the reading process (Sutton, Sofka, Bojczyk & Curenton, 2007).

There is a strong emphasis on measuring the frequency of children's reading experiences with adults where they have shown that when children are more frequently exposed to a variety of reading activities either when staying in a familiar environment or when entering the school context, their discourse is more likely to include complex sentences, inductive and grammatical comprehension skills, to understand the meaning of a story more easily, to feel familiar with letters and symbols and their decoding, and to feel familiar with letters and symbols and their decoding, and to be more familiar with the:

*"There is nothing magical about reading stories to children. The magic emerges when we encourage the child to take part in reading by interacting with the written text, and it is this participation and interaction that helps children become proficient readers." (Bergin, 2001:682)*

#### **4. Filanagnosia (love of reading) and children's literature in the field.**

The specific term "filanagnosia" (love of reading) refers to the connection that can be created between the reader and the book, but also to the specific activities designed to develop this connection through the synthesis of necessary cognitive skills, social skills and sensory criteria. The main aim is to familiarize the child with the written word, reading literary books and gradually to implement a friendly-positive attitude with books that will help him/her to develop skills such as critical thinking, communication, cooperation, creativity (4CS), to cultivate imagination, to develop his/her own personality, to recognize and manage his/her emotions, thus developing emotional intelligence.

Actions related to children's literature are nowadays becoming more and more extensive. Today, filanagnosia, the love of books, and especially children's love of books, is a term well known to educators, parents and children, and its value has been appreciated by many scholars, while the cultivation of filanagnosia and the child's contact with books, at the level of cognitive, emotional, personality formation, development of all kinds of intelligence, socialization, is an undeniable fact.

Being the main and crucial element of mediation between the two "poles" - child and book - the teacher must know and synthesize their main characteristics. On the one hand, he or she must be equipped with not only a love of, but also a profound knowledge of books and literature - whether it is aimed at adults or children. At the same time, it is

essential to know the role that literature can play, not only in the cultivation of linguistic expression and the enrichment of the child's knowledge - as it has been used up to now - but above all in his aesthetic cultivation, the development of his imagination and his smooth socialisation.

The illustrated children's book, which is distinguished between the picture book and the picture book (Kanatsouli, 2002), has its own dynamics as it contributes significantly to the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the child (Karpozilou, 1994), while by mobilizing the perceptual capacity, it contributes to cognitive and linguistic development, exercising observation, abstract and critical ability and cultivating imagination. The connection between the text and the pictures, which are a very powerful means of communication and expression (Chapman, 1993) the cover and back cover, (Nodelman, 2009), and the title that decorates the book which should be revealing the connection between the title and the pictures (Giannikopoulou, 2016), are key elements of a picture book.

The picture plays an important role in the plot and the development of the story by acquiring its own narrative structure, stimulating the reader's imagination, and cultivating critical ability (Tsilimeni, 2007). In modern times, the relationship between illustrated children's books and the relationship between images and the written word leans in favor of images (Anagnostopoulos, 2003), while visual literacy is one of the most basic skills that modern man must master and is related to the ability to interpret, critically evaluate, and create visual messages (Kress & Vann Leeuwen, 2001).

According to Nodelman (2009:23), picture books convey information or tell a story through a series of varied pictures along with the text, states that pictures in children's books attract the interest of the young reader, make the content more appealing and thus ensure greater benefits during reading and listening to the stories.

Children's picture book introduces children very early to the world of literature and makes them readers without yet having mastered this skill as Landes (1985) states and according to her, children's picture book is divided into two modes of narration, visual and verbal. The visual aspect of storytelling is easily carried out as it is done through the understanding of the pictures while the verbal requires the presence of an adult where both together expand the meaning, thus experiencing a literary experience. An example of a combination of visual and verbal storytelling is the children's book "The Rapture of the Hen" by Rodriguez Beatrice which is a book that has no words and where the narration is done only with pictures. In this book, after the children had the opportunity to "read" it with the pictures only, the educator then encouraged the children to visualize the story by creating in groups a cardboard floor game with the narrative path brought to life by the children themselves.



Figure 1



Figure 2

## 5. Conclusions

An essential factor for a child's personal and professional success is the formation of a positive attitude towards books, while children's engagement with children's books is



directly related to their future career, both at school and in academia. A variety of stimuli in relation to books attract children's interest during the preschool years and the knowledge that the child gains through the processes that he/she invents, pursues, and conquers on his/her own is a key motivation to continue further engagement with books. Parents who believe that shared reading and various literacy activities should be part of children's everyday life from their earliest years (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006) are more likely to foster their children's positive attitudes towards the reading process by forming a loving relationship with books.

Subsequently, the educator by assuming the role of animator and helper in the child's first contact with books and encouraging the child to engage with a variety of books freely and effortlessly without conveying that this is an obligation but a free activity with proper guidance and meaningful intervention can create positive attitudes towards books and contribute to the gradual acquisition of literacy. Finally, children with reading experiences that become meaningful when they interact with the reading challenges offered to them will be able to develop a friendly attitude towards books and love them. Young readers are transformed from inactive translators of visual stimuli into dynamic active hunters of meaning.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Author**

Paraskevi Foti is an Educational Coordinator at Regional Directorate of Primary & Secondary Education of Attica and formerly Head of the 4th Kindergarten of Agia Varvara. She has studied classic piano and theory at the National Conservatory of Athens, and she holds a PhD in Language with Honours from the Department of Philosophy of Pedagogy and Psychology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, a Master's Degree (MEd) with Diploma in Intercultural Education and Management of Diversity and a Master's Degree (MA) Specialization in ICT and Special Education with Diploma in STEAM and Educational Robotics in inclusive kindergarten. She has published writings on topics related to language, Intercultural Education, STE(A)M and educational robotics and scientific articles and studies in international and national scientific journals. Her first book, "Otherness, Prejudice and Stereotypes in the School Class. Teacher Management Methods" (ed. Grigoris, 2016) was selected as a university chart at Harokopeio University of Athens and she has participated in a collective volume on digital educational scenarios (ed. Grigoris, 2017). Other books are "Understanding our Language, Ancient and New Greek through Aesop" (ed. Grigoris, 2020), "STREAM and Educational Robotics for children aged 3-8 years" (ed. Grigoris, 2020) "I dream to be.. I can be Engineer/ Computer scientist" (ed. Grigoris, 2022). She has published in many international and national conference proceedings as well as in scientific journals and has a keen interest in Information and Communication Technologies and their contribution to the teaching process and in STEM Education, as a

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