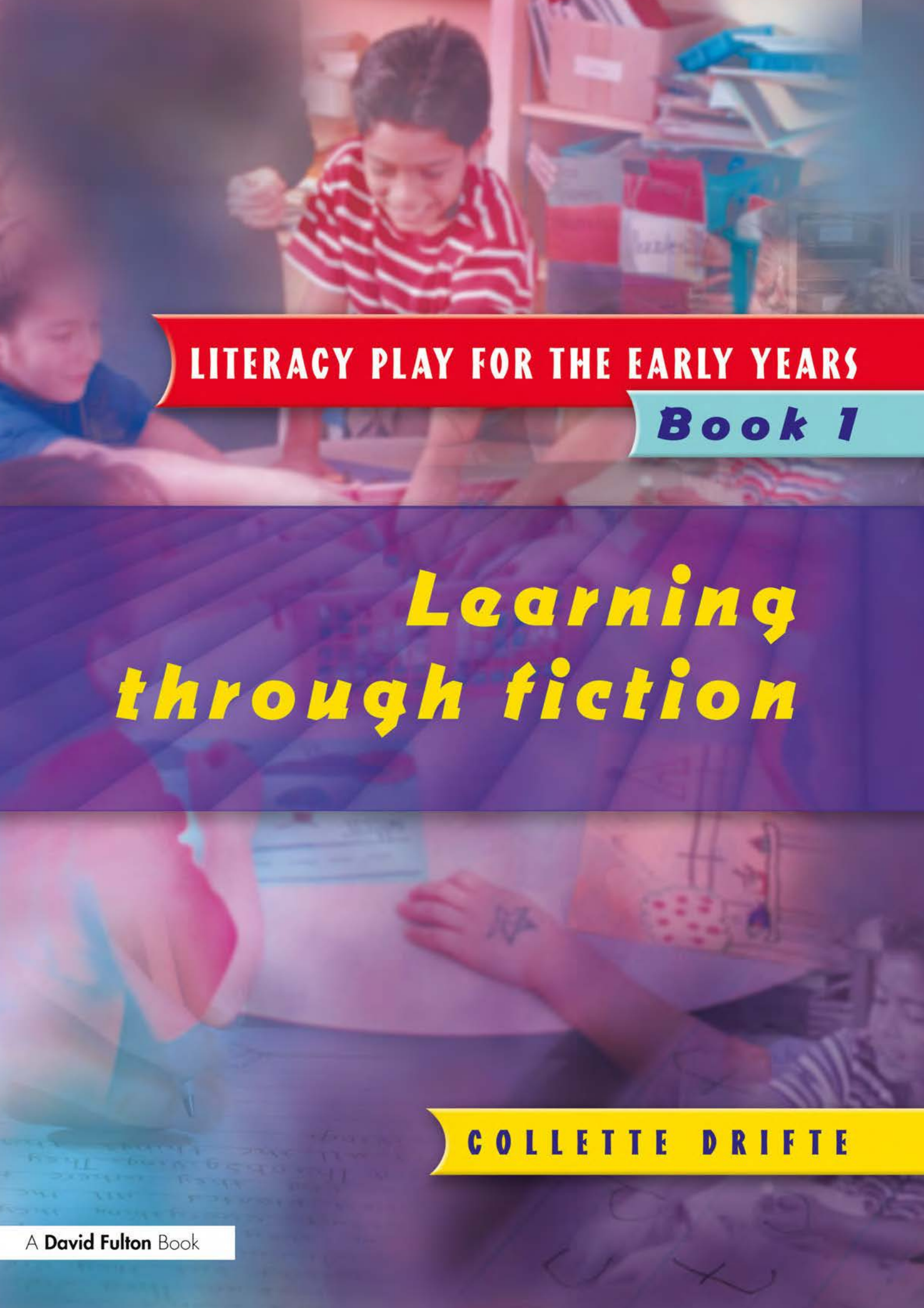

LITERACY PLAY FOR THE EARLY YEARS

Book 1

Learning through fiction

COLLETTE DRIFTE

A **David Fulton** Book

LITERACY PLAY FOR THE EARLY YEARS

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Learning through fiction

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

For Reinhard

First published 2003 by David Fulton Publishers

Published 2013 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 13: 9781853469565 (pbk)

Cover design by Phil Barker
Designed and typeset by FiSH Books, London

Also available in the Literacy Play for the Early Years series:

Book 2: *Learning through non-fiction* ISBN 1-85346-957-2
Book 3: *Learning through poetry* ISBN 1-85346-958-0
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Acknowledgements

The author and publishers would like to thank the copyright holders of the following texts used in this book:

Dogger, Shirley Hughes, Red Fox 1993
The Most Obedient Dog in the World, Anita Jeram, Walker Books 2000
Whiff or how the beautiful big fat smelly baby found a friend, Ian Whybrow and Russell Ayto, Picture Corgi Books 2000
Jack and the Beanstalk, Val Biro, Oxford University Press 2000
Guess How Much I Love You, Sam McBratney and Anita Jeram, Walker Books 2001
Handa's Surprise, Eileen Browne, Walker Books 1999
Morag and the Lamb, Joan Lingard and Patricia Casey, Walker Books 1992
Dear Daddy, Philippe Dupasquier, Andersen Press 2002
Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?, Martin Waddell and Barbara Firth, Walker Books 2001
Paddington Goes to Hospital, Michael Bond and Karen Jankel, Collins Picture Books 2002
A Letter to Father Christmas, Rose Impey and Sue Porter, Orchard Books 2001

I should like to thank the following for their support and encouragement throughout the writing of this book: Helen Fairlie of David Fulton Publishers for her sound suggestions and professional friendliness; Alan Worth, also of David Fulton Publishers, for seeing the book through the production process; Sophie Cox for her excellent copy-editing; friends and professionals who tried out the activities and made suggestions; the children's parents; and, finally, but probably most important of all, the children themselves. Some of them feature in the little scenarios but, for reasons of confidentiality, their names and details have been altered.

Collette Drifte

Introduction

Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage, National Literacy Strategy and learning through play

Many early years practitioners find it difficult to reconcile the Early learning goals of the foundation stage and the objectives of the *National Literacy Strategy* (DfEE 1998). The philosophy of learning through play is emphasised in *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* (DfEE 2000) and rightly so – it is beyond question that young children learn both more, and more effectively, through involvement in activities that are enjoyable, fun, and contain an element of play. The *National Literacy Strategy* (NLS) document outlines its objectives without touching on this in any depth and the practitioner may perhaps feel that it is a sterile document in terms of addressing the concept of learning through play. But the two documents aren't mutually exclusive and they can live alongside each other fairly well, since many of the NLS objectives do actually tie in with the Early learning goals.

For example:

Early learning goals from *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*, Communication, language and literacy:

- Enjoy listening to and using spoken and written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.
- Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences.
- Hear and say initial and final sounds in words, and short vowel sounds within words.

Objectives from the *National Literacy Strategy (YR)*:

- To use a variety of cues when reading: knowledge of the story and its context, and awareness of how it should make sense grammatically.
- To use knowledge of familiar texts to re-enact or retell to others, recounting the main points in the correct sequence.
- To hear and identify initial sounds in words.

James, Leanne, Daniel and Melanie share with the practitioner *Kipper's Birthday* by Mick Inkpen (Hodder Children's Books 1994). Melanie looks at the author's name on the cover and says 'That's "M" like "Melanie".' The practitioner reads the story, pausing occasionally to let the children guess the next word, or what might happen next. Later the children role-play in the Home Corner and plan a birthday party. They talk about how to go about it, then 'write' invitations and 'make' a cake, before having the party itself. In this scenario, all the foundation stage goals and NLS objectives listed above have been achieved.

Advisers and inspectors are recommending that early years practitioners give priority to the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* in their setting, so the children should not lose

out on either the stepping stones or the learning through play philosophy. As long as you plan your activities within the framework of *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*, you will still be addressing many of the NLS objectives when targeting the Early learning goals.

Some professionals working at the foundation stage, however, feel pressurised to teach towards the goals themselves, and are concerned that the stepping stones become overlooked. It is crucial that each child works at an appropriate level and is not pushed ahead too soon towards future outcomes. As professionals, therefore, we need to stand firm in our approach to working with all children at their own level, in their own time. By recording their achievements and showing why they are working on the current stepping stone, we will be able to illustrate the positive reasons for doing this.

Planned activities and appropriate intervention

A second debate to come out of the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* is the principle it promotes of 'activities planned by adults' and 'appropriate intervention' to help the children in their learning (DfEE 2000: 11). Some practitioners feel that children should be left to learn through play, without any intervention by adults, while others may find themselves heavily directing the children's activities in order to highlight a learning point.

Most practitioners, though, would agree that the ideal is a balance between these two and the skill comes in knowing when and how to intervene, to maximise the children's learning opportunity. Leaving children to play freely in the belief that they will eventually learn the targeted skill or concept through discovery, assumes that learning is a sort of process of osmosis by which knowledge is automatically absorbed. This takes learning through play to a questionable extreme and will end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater – a child can play freely all day long without actually coming around to the learning point that the practitioner is aiming for. On the other hand, intervention can easily become interference – it can stifle children's exuberance and enthusiasm for the activity, because their curiosity and creativity are hampered by too much direction from the adult. This will never lead to effective learning. The practitioner needs to be sensitive as to when and how to intervene in the children's play, to help them discover the learning point.

In her book *Understanding Children's Play* (Nelson Thornes 2001), Jennie Lindon outlines the different roles that the professional plays when interacting with the child, including, for example, play companion, model, mediator, facilitator, observer-learner, etc. If you come to recognise which of these roles is appropriate to adopt in a given situation, you will go a long way to making sure children's learning is positive and successful, and fun. The skill lies in ensuring that structure and intervention are there in your planning, which in turn allow the children to determine the nature of the play.

Working towards literacy

When working to develop children's literacy skills, we need to bear in mind that literacy is not confined to reading and writing. All aspects of language as a whole, including speaking, listening, comprehension, expression and conversational skills, are crucial components of literacy. Without language, literacy skills can't be learnt. Speaking and listening feature largely in the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* and so are acknowledged as the fundamental basis of the acquisition of literacy skills. While self-analysis and consideration of others' opinions are featured as objectives at a later stage of the *National Literacy Strategy*, children in the early years need to be introduced to these concepts. Paying attention to and taking account of others' views is part of the foundation stage work. Very young children have differing opinions as much as adults and older children, and they need to realise that opinions

which are different from their own deserve to be respected and valued.

The reverse of this coin is that they should be able to develop the confidence to express their own opinion in the knowledge that it will be seen as a valuable contribution to the discussions held by the whole group. They must know that even if their opinion is different from others', it is a valid one and will be welcomed by everyone as an alternative view.

Imaginative play, creativity and role-play are also important elements in language development, and therefore in acquiring literacy skills. If we enable children to explore and play in imaginative situations, their ability to understand and enjoy fiction will be enhanced, as will their own creative literary abilities. Fiction and stories are, after all, only a different medium for expressing the creative play that goes on in every early years Home Corner!

Literacy (and language), as such, is not an isolated bubble or a 'subject' of the curriculum to be taught at specific times of the day. It cuts across every area of learning and is part of everything we do. While it is convenient for the sake of record keeping and planning to talk about 'Literacy', it's really something that can't be pigeon-holed or put onto a form with tick-boxes to record when we have 'done' it. It permeates every part of learning: reading the labels on maths equipment together may happen during a maths session, but it's still literacy; writing captions on the bottom of a painting links art and literacy.

So it soon becomes clear how using play, games and fun activities are ways we can approach literacy, enabling the children to develop the skills they need.

Who is this book for?

I hope that all early years practitioners will find something useful in this book and by 'all practitioners', I mean professionals who work in any capacity within the field of early years education. I have tried to use 'neutral' language in the book, i.e. not school-based terms, since the education of early years children takes place in many settings other than schools or nominated educational establishments. Although I have explored some of the issues involved in the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage/National Literacy Strategy* debate, this is not to say the implications are only for schools. I would argue that they affect everyone providing education for young children and so the issues are just as relevant to non-school settings.

But aside from this, I hope that the book will be useful to practitioners because of the practical nature of the ideas and suggestions. The activities can be done either within the framework of a session aiming for one of the official curriculum targets, or as a non-curriculum session with the setting's own aims in view. Of course, the activities are only suggestions, and practitioners could easily adapt or change them to suit their own situation.

What's in the book?

This book explores a variety of fiction texts and how they can be used as the basis of activities that are fun and contain an element of play, yet still have a literacy skill as the target. There are new titles and classics, old favourites and traditional stories included in the book. I make no apology for using some of the old favourites since there are always new practitioners and new children entering early years settings, who will discover these delightful stories for the first time. The veterans of the game will know that the children who are familiar with the texts never tire of hearing them over and over again, often knowing the stories word for word!

There are two observation and assessment sections at the end of the book to give the practitioner an idea of what to look for when children are working to acquire specific skills. These sections are by no means exhaustive and practitioners can 'pick and mix' the elements that are most useful to them, adding anything that they may feel needs to be included. I can't stress enough the importance of observation as a tool for assessment, since so much can be

gathered of a child's achievements, progress and performance by this simple but extremely effective practice. The stepping stones in the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage* can also provide a useful guide to the child's achievements, particularly as the colour bands help to put the stepping stones into an age-related context. But we need to remember that they are just that – a guide to the child's progress en route to the Early learning goals – and not be tempted to use them as an assessment or teaching tool as such.

There are also some photocopiable pages which are linked in with the activities. They are not worksheets to be given to the children to 'do', but are a resource to save the practitioner preparation time. They must be used by the adult and the children working together on the activity, in a fun way without pressure.

What's in a chapter?

Each chapter follows the same format:

- Featured text – the title, author and edition used.
- Story synopsis – a brief outline of the story.
- Early learning goals from *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*, which are relevant to the chapter's focus.
- Objectives from the *National Literacy Strategy*, which link in with the Early learning goals.
- Materials needed – everything needed to do the session and activities.
- Optional materials for other activities – a list of resources needed for the other structured play activities.
- Preparation – details of what needs to be done beforehand. This often includes something like *Make a set of picture matching cards using Photocopiable Sheet 5*. The most effective way of doing this is to photocopy the sheet, stick it onto card and when the glue is dry, cut the sheet into the individual cards. You might like to ask the children to colour those cards that have pictures. You could laminate the cards for future use and to protect against everyday wear and tear.
- Introducing the text – for you as the practitioner either with everyone together or in groups, as you require. Although this section has been scripted, this is for guidance only and naturally you should present the material in your own 'style'. There may be questions asked and issues explored in this section which you feel aren't appropriate for your children's achievement level. The flexibility of the session means that you can 'pick and mix' those bits that *are* relevant to your own situation, leaving out what you don't want, or exploring further something that may be looked at in less detail than you'd like. (Note: There may be times when you prefer to explore a text together over several sessions and therefore you might use only a part of this section each time.)
- Focus activities – these can be done in whichever way you prefer, e.g. adult-led, in groups, independent, child-selected, etc. They have been designed to cater for different achievement levels and obviously you should 'pick and mix' as you require. You could adapt, add to or ignore them according to your own setting's needs. Some of the games have a competitive element in them, for example by winning tokens or avoiding 'elimination'. These can be adapted, if you prefer, to leave out that element of the game, in which case the children's satisfaction at their own achievement is the outcome of the activity.
- Other structured play activities – suggestions for other things to do as an 'optional extra'. They bring in wider aspects of Early learning goals and the NLS objectives, beyond the chapter's main focus. Some of the activities are competitive but, as mentioned above, you can adapt them to leave out this element if you prefer.
- Related photocopiable sheets.

CHAPTER 1

Dogger

by Shirley Hughes (Red Fox 1993)

Story synopsis

Dave loses his favourite toy, Dogger, and is extremely miserable. When he sees Dogger for sale at the School Summer Fair, everything seems to be fine again, until Dogger is sold to someone else before Dave manages to get the money. Dave is distraught, but his sister, Bella, finally comes to the rescue and everything turns out well.

Early learning goals from *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage,* Communication, language and literacy:

- Interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation.
- Enjoy listening to and using spoken and written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.
- Sustain attentive listening, responding to what they have heard by relevant comments, questions or actions.
- Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences.

Objectives from the *National Literacy Strategy (YR)*:

- To use a variety of cues when reading: knowledge of the story and its context, and awareness of how it should make sense grammatically.
- To use knowledge of familiar texts to re-enact or retell to others, recounting the main points in the correct sequence.
- To hear and identify initial sounds in words.

Materials needed

- *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes (Red Fox 1993), if possible use a Big Book version and have small book copies available as well
- Cuddly toy dog