



LITERACY PLAY FOR THE EARLY YEARS

Book 3

***Learning
through poetry***



COLLETTE DRIFTE

A **David Fulton** Book

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***Learning
through poetry***

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Dedicated to the memory of
Christopher Rowe (1942–2001)
whose poems and songs have brought pleasure to many children
and practitioners over the years

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Collette Drifte

Introduction

Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage, the 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:

- Listen with enjoyment, and respond to stories, songs and other music, rhymes and poems and make up their own stories, songs, rhymes and poems.
- Explore and experiment with sounds, words and texts.

Objectives from the National Literacy Strategy (YR) :

- To understand and be able to rhyme through recognising, exploring and working with rhyming patterns.
- To reread and recite stories and rhymes with predictable and repeated patterns and experiment with similar rhyming patterns.

Philip, Joel and Wesley enjoyed reciting *Humpty Dumpty Sat on a Chair* with the practitioner, doing some actions at the same time. (*Humpty Dumpty sat on a chair/ Eating ripe bananas./ Where do you think he put the skins?/ Down his new pyjamas!!* Anon.) They recited the rhyme several times together, with the practitioner pausing to let the children supply the last word of each line, or taking turns to recite a line each. Later the children decided to write an extension of the rhyme. They talked about the things that Humpty could sit on, including a motorbike and a horse, before settling on a swing. They also changed the fruit to oranges. They wrote their new poems on paper, using the original as a model and for support, and they illustrated it themselves before it was displayed on the wall. 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 allows 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 thanks to 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 poems 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. While speaking and listening remain integral elements to every session, I have chosen to focus on either reading or writing poetry in any one session. Young children often find difficulty in sitting still for long periods of time in a more formal situation, and focusing on both reading and writing poetry in one go would demand this.

There is both modern and traditional poetry 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 enjoy exploring these in more depth for the first time. The veterans of the game will know that the children who are familiar with the poems never tire of hearing them over and over again, often reciting them perfectly themselves!

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 the children are working to acquire a specific skill. 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. These 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, with suggestions for two sessions, one focusing on reading poetry and the other focusing on writing it. The basic framework of each chapter is as follows:

- One or two featured poems – the title(s) and the poet(s).
- 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 poem – 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. There may be times when you prefer to explore a poem together over several sessions and therefore you might only use 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.
- The poem(s) featured in the chapter.
- Related photocopiable sheets.

Pick 'N' Mix Zoo

by Celia Warren (p. 13)

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

- Listen with enjoyment, and respond to... rhymes and poems...
- Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences.
- Explore and experiment with sounds, words and texts.

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

- To understand and be able to rhyme through recognising, exploring and working with rhyming patterns.
- To have a knowledge of grapheme/phoneme correspondence through hearing and identifying initial sounds in words.
- To use a capital letter for the start of own name.

Materials needed

- Enlarged version of the poem (see 'Preparation') and the copy on p. 13
- Easel and Blu-tack
- A bag of pick 'n' mix sweets, if possible including some of the varieties in the poem
- The children's name cards
- Flip-chart and marker pens
- A set of cards with the words from the poem on them (see 'Preparation')
- Photocopiable Sheet 1 (p. 14) made into a set of cards (see 'Preparation')
- Plastic alphabet letters – *b, c, e, h, k, l, m, p* and *s*. You could add a few more that aren't needed if the children can manage an extra challenge
- Tokens
- Paper, paint, brushes, etc. for pictures of some of the animals
- Paper and pencils for labels or captions

Optional materials for other activities

- Ingredients listed in the recipe(s) in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 (pp. 11 and 12), cooking utensils, children's aprons/overalls
- Card, scissors, string, paint and brushes to make masks
- A selection of books related to zoos or wild animals
- Picture cards made from Photocopiable Sheet 1 (p. 14)
- Feely bag
- Shoe boxes or similar, malleable materials (e.g. plasticine, play dough, etc.) and model junk (e.g. empty packets, boxes, cardboard tubes, old wrappings, egg boxes, etc.) to make the pick 'n' mix stall. (Check whether any of the children have allergies, to avoid triggering a problem from minute traces of food that may be in the junk.)

Preparation

- ▲ Put the sweets into the feely bag.
- ▲ Either enlarge the poem (p. 13) on a photocopier or type it on a computer using 26-point Tahoma with 1.5 line spacing, then print it out. Fix it to the easel and cover it up.
- ▲ Write on the flip-chart 'drops' and 'lollipops', 'bears' and 'hares', 'kangaroo' and 'zoo' and cover it up.
- ▲ Type the poem on a computer using 48-point Tahoma with double spacing and then print it out. The poem will be distorted, but don't worry because you only want the individual words. Stick the sheets onto card and then cut out each word (except for 'Red jelly', which should be kept together).
- ▲ Make a set of cards using Photocopiable Sheet 1 (p. 14), either for the group as a whole, or for each child in the group, as you require.
- ▲ Collect the ingredients for making peppermint creams and toffee (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

Introducing the poem

- Hold up the feely bag and ask the children to guess what might be in it – spiders, screws, pencils? Have some fun with the suggestions they make. When they guess 'sweets', spend a bit of time talking about the sweets in the bag. Which are their favourites? Why? Which sweets don't they like? Why not? Are any of the sweets new to the children? Explore them by talking about the colour, size, shape, taste and so on.
- Do they know what 'pick 'n' mix' means? Have they ever bought sweets from a pick 'n' mix stall? Do they know of other things we can pick 'n' mix as well as sweets? (For example, a salad bar in the supermarket or the mini-toys in toy hypermarkets.)
- Tell the children you're going to share a poem about pick 'n' mix. Read from the small version, letting the children enjoy the idea of sweetie-animals. When you've finished, ask them whether they liked the poem. Were they surprised to find it's about a zoo? Why or why not? Do they know what a zoo is? Let some of them talk about their visits to the zoo. Which is their favourite animal? Why? Are there any animals that the children don't like? Why not?
- Who can remember some of the sweetie-animals in the poem? Tell the children you're going to read the poem again and they should listen for any sweetie-animals they forgot to tell you about. Which animal in the poem is their favourite? Why? Can they make up some more sweetie-animals? For example, candy-floss kittens, popcorn penguins or chocolate chimpanzees.
- Can anyone tell you some words in the poem that sound the same ('drops' and 'lollipops', 'bears' and 'hares', 'kangaroo' and 'zoo')? Do the children know the word we use when words sound the same like this ('Rhyme')? Can they tell you some words that rhyme with those in the poem? For example, with 'drops' and 'lollipops' they could have 'shops', 'mops', 'stops' and 'hops'; with 'kangaroo' and 'zoo' they could have 'shoe', 'glue', 'stew' and 'two'.
- Help the children to make up some actions to represent each of the animals in the poem and practise them for a few moments. Then uncover the enlarged version of the poem and read it again to the children. Point to each word in the text as you say it, making sure your finger doesn't lag behind or run ahead as you read.
- Ask the children to help you design a logo or picture to show the action for each animal and draw it beside each line. Before you recite the poem together, make sure the children understand the logos. Leave the enlarged version pinned up for the children to explore in their own time.