Early language and literacy

Review of research with implications for early literacy programs at NSW public libraries

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Citing this report:

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This report is part of the collaborative research project *Developing a context-sensitive framework for supporting early literacy across NSW public libraries.*

Public libraries in Australia have the capacity to support and promote a stronger focus on early language and literacy development by providing free access to a range of books and other resources as well as designing and delivering effective early literacy sessions for babies, toddlers and preschool children and their families, and programs such as information events for families and childcare educators and the distribution of books for babies and children and other reading materials to families.

According to the Australian Library and Information Association's (ALIA) Early Literacy Group (2011), this capacity is significantly enhanced when libraries act as 'active connectors' – connecting people with resources and programs for supporting early literacy, with each other (e.g. parents and children through literacy experiences such as shared reading), and with other service providers as well as establishing and maintaining partnerships with the early childhood sector. Specifically, knowledge about a library's socio-economic and cultural setting provides a solid foundation on which every public library can build a strong 'active connector' profile by:

- including early literacy in every library's strategic plan
- offering professional development to other agencies
- accepting invitations to other agencies' professional development sessions
- providing resources and making them widely available (e.g. bulk loans for childcare services)
- providing outreach services for people who are vulnerable, hard-to-reach or unable to visit the library
- being actively engaged in creating early literacy programs for babies and toddlers as well as preschoolers
- being active in offering literacy-oriented parenting support
- participating in academic and other research
- collaborating with other libraries to jointly develop resources and programs locally and nationally
- being actively involved in reading and literacy debates
- including early literacy incentives (e.g. free DVDs, books, other materials) as a public library membership bonus.

(Adapted from Australian Library and Information Association's Early Literacy Group, 2011, p. 10)

In line with this vision and the leadership role of Australian, State and Territory libraries in national initiatives, State Library of New South Wales established a research partnership with the Institute of Early Childhood (now Department of Educational Studies), Macquarie University with the key aim of supporting public libraries in NSW to be: (1) recognised for the early literacy services many of these libraries already offer; (2) able to evaluate existing early literacy initiatives in public libraries across the state; and (3) supported in designing and implementing effective new early literacy initiatives.

This project's overarching goal is to develop a context-sensitive framework that public libraries across NSW can employ to evaluate existing and develop new early

literacy initiatives in ways that effectively respond to the specific needs of their individual socio-economic and cultural settings. To achieve this, the project involves the following processes, organised into three interrelated, and partially overlapping, stages:

Stage 1

1. Conduct a voluntary, anonymous (online) survey of public library staff involved in early literacy initiatives across council-run public libraries in New South Wales in order to collect information about the early literacy initiatives these libraries offer
2. Complete a comprehensive review of research on early literacy practices and development in diverse homes and communities and associated literacy outcomes; the aim of the review is to identify
    i. the prior-to-school literacy competencies and contextual factors (e.g. parental attitudes, socio-cultural and economic background) related to success at school and beyond
    ii. specific practices that support the development of these competencies

Stage 2

3. Perform close observation and analysis of early literacy sessions (ELS) for children from birth to school age and their families (e.g. Baby Rhyme Time, Toddler Time, Preschool Storytime) from NSW public library services representing a variety of ELS and library settings across the state
4. Conduct interviews with the presenters of these sessions to gain insight into the decisions library staff make as they engage in preparing and conducting early literacy sessions
5. Conduct a voluntary anonymous (paper-based) survey for parents/caregivers participating in these sessions to gather information about parental levels of education and attitudes and family practices related to early literacy, including attendance and attitudes about ELS

Stage 3

6. Use the findings of the research literature review, the surveys for library staff and for parents/caregivers and the close observation and analysis of early literacy sessions in NSW public libraries to build a context-sensitive framework that includes:
    i. a set of core literacy competencies that all young children should be given opportunities to develop prior to school, which NSW public libraries can use to evaluate their early literacy initiatives
    ii. professional development materials for library staff involved in the design of early literacy initiatives
    iii. guidelines for developing effective early literacy initiatives across different public library settings in NSW that identify the key elements of such programs, supported by examples of programs designed following these guidelines.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

1   Introduction

The 2015 Australian Early Development Census identified over 1 in 5 children starting school as vulnerable in one or more of five domains – physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). Poor language proficiency contributes significantly to these figures. For example, among those children from English-only background who are not proficient in English, 3 out of 4 are developmentally vulnerable (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). The latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, from 2015, index a significant decline in Australian school students' conventional literacy skills since 2009: only 61% of all students met the National Proficiency Standard in reading, and this rate was as low as 44% and 41% for students from provincial and remote areas respectively, and 32% for Indigenous students (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Underwood, 2017). These results resonate with mounting research evidence of the strong connection between early language and literacy experiences and later reading and academic achievement (Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010; Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012), and with studies showing that such experiences vary significantly across families and communities (Hart & Risley, 2003; Heath, 1983).

Public libraries across Australia have a strong commitment to and history of helping to raise literacy levels in the communities they serve, in partnership with families and other organisations (Australian Public Library Alliance, 2015). Public libraries are ideally positioned to make a positive contribution to these efforts, as they are "the only government-funded agency available to children from babyhood, providing year-round, free access to resources and services that support reading and literacy" (ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee, 2015 [2011], p. 1). In addition to access to resources such as picture books, DVDs, electronic resources, and toys, public libraries seek to also directly foster early language and literacy learning by offering sessions such as Baby Rhyme Time, Toddler Time and Preschool Storytime for children aged from birth to the beginning of school and their carers. These sessions present opportunities as well as challenges that are specific to public libraries and may be unique to each library setting and its demographic profile. Critical awareness of relevant research on early language and literacy development, however, will support library staff in seizing and creating such opportunities and effectively addressing these challenges.

This literature review aims to support library staff, policy makers and funding bodies to draw on existing research in order to understand, prioritise and advocate for the best ways in which public libraries can support early language and literacy in the communities they serve. Specifically, the review will:

1. Outline the strengths and challenges associated with public libraries as a unique context for promoting early language and literacy

2. Examine current definitions of literacy

3. Identify the competencies underpinning the development of reading and writing prior to school and their interaction

4. Analyse the connection between oral language interactions and early literacy, in relation to key milestones in children's language development from birth to five years of age

5. Explore the impact of social and environmental factors on early language and literacy learning

6. Identify the ways in which the activities of public library sessions for children and their carers support specific language and literacy skills.

This review of recent and seminal studies of early language and literacy development and pedagogy will advance the argument that in order to effectively promote early literacy in the communities they serve public libraries need to adopt a holistic understanding of the relationship between language, literacy, learning and social context, and continue to foster literacy practices that extend beyond teaching the letters of the alphabet or phonics (letter-sound correspondences). A holistic approach will allow libraries to mobilise their unique strengths as an informal, community-based learning context, and be intentional in creating developmentally appropriate experiences and language- and literacy-rich environments that can enable young children in their communities to build the motivation, language skills and knowledge required for successful participation in literacy practices.

2   Public libraries, young children and literacy: aims, opportunities and challenges

In Australia and worldwide, public libraries have a long tradition of providing children's services, and promoting early literacy and library use as a pathway to lifelong learning and prosperity in the communities they serve. It is their mission to "provide an opportunity for children to experience the enjoyment of reading and the excitement of discovering knowledge and works of the imagination", and encourage them "to use the library from an early age" (International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), 2001, p. 26). "Public libraries have a special responsibility to support the process of learning to read, and to promote books and other media" and "provide special events" for children (ibid., p. 26).

To achieve these aims, public libraries offer far more than free access to books and other resources for children. A public library is a space where children and their families can interact with these resources, with each other and with other members of the community. Most public libraries also offer sessions designed specifically for young children aged from birth to the beginning of school and their carers such as Baby Rhyme Time, Toddler Time and Preschool Story Time (Irwin, Moore, Tornatore, & Fowler, 2012; Langan, 2009; McKenzie & Stooke, 2007; McKenzie, Stooke, & McKechnie, 2013; McNeil, 2014; Stewart, Bailey-White, Shaw, Compton, & Ghoting, 2014; Thomas, 2008; Walter, 2010; A. Williams, 2007). In addition, there are initiatives to reach out to underserved members of the community who cannot access or are not patrons of the library, which include mobile library services, storytime sessions presented at shopping centres or early childcare and education settings, book gifting interventions, and the video-recording and webcasting of early literacy sessions (Bamkin, Goulding, & Maynard, 2013; Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2016; Campbell-Hicks, 2016; Martinez, 2008; Redrup-May & Castledine, 2015).

The provision of space, resources and children's programs at public libraries has associated strengths and challenges, which are summarised in Table 1 and reviewed in this section. As a community space, a public library, unlike commercial and formal educational settings, strives to make everyone feel welcome and treat library visitors as equal regardless of differences in their age, socio-economic status, cultural or linguistic background. As Aabø and Audunson (2012) explain, this is what allows a public library to function as a meeting place that encourages a multiplicity and fluidity in the ways people use the space and supports community building through exposure to diversity and opportunities for social interactions, with family, friends and neighbours as well as strangers. For example, library visitors may engage in private activities such as reading or writing or attend events such as storytime sessions. One's activity in the library may be 'high intensity', with a clearly defined purpose (for example, to find information for a project), or 'low intensity' (for example, browsing through DVDs with no particular title in mind or socialising with other parents or children before or after a storytime session).

Associated with this multiplicity and diversity are several challenges. First, the design of the library spaces needs to accommodate different people and be flexible enough to allow for different types of activities to be conducted within the same building (or section within it) (Feinberg & Keller, 2010; State Library of New South Wales, 2012). Their design needs to serve, for example, people with a traditional view of the library as a quiet space for reading or study as well as infants and toddlers and their caregivers during Baby Rhyme Time sessions, which typically involve singing, clapping and dancing and make considerable noise (McKechnie, 2006a). It also needs to provide access (physical as well as electronic) and inclusion for children with disabilities and their families (Kaeding, Velasquez, & Price, 2017). Second, rules of conduct may vary not only in different sections of the library but also according to the activities that take place in it – what is appropriate behaviour before and after a storytime session may not be appropriate during the session (Stooke & McKenzie, 2009). As in other public spaces, and contrary to formal education settings, ensuring library visitors adopt appropriate behaviour is a delicate task, and research has shown that visitors monitor each other and restrict inappropriate conduct more readily than library staff do (McKechnie, 2006b). For example, carers are more likely than storytime presenters to censor the behaviour of their own and others' children (Nichols, 2011; Becker, 2012). Third, people who stand to benefit the most from using the library resources and programs may not be able to physically access the library or make full use of what it offers, and/or their use may be difficult to document. To illustrate, several studies have suggested that it is usually more highly educated parents, and in particular mothers, who take their children to early literacy sessions and help their children to select books and other resources to borrow from the public library (Becker, 2012; Neuman & Celano, 2012b). To attract families with lower socio-economic status and other underserved community members to visit the library, many libraries are located in or next to shopping areas and transport junctions; this, however, increases the need for libraries to successfully compete against commercial events and spaces for the time and attention resources of families (Nichols, 2011). Additionally, an ethnographic study from Norway suggests that people with low income and low education are significantly more likely to use the library as a meeting place, and not for borrowing resources (Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010). While such use of the library serves an important social function as

it equalises opportunities for civic participation, it is difficult to document and therefore cite in bids for continued or increased public library funding.

Table 1. Strengths and challenges of public libraries for promoting early literacy

	Strengths	Challenges
Space	- free access to everyone - all library visitors are treated as equal - multiplicity of functions - social diversity and rich opportunities for interactions with others in the community	- need for flexible design - censoring inappropriate behaviour in an informal educational, community setting - attracting underserved members of the community to the library - encouraging borrowing and documenting library use - competition for space with other library users
Resources	- free access to a rich variety of resources: reading materials, multimedia and new technologies promoting quality children's literature - librarians as educators and guides to resources - librarians as 'media mentors/curators'	- need for evidence-based selection of materials to make available and recommend to children and families - overdue fines may be a disincentive for some families to borrow library resources
Early literacy sessions	- free for all children - potential language-and-literacy rich environment - availability of resources for planning outcomes-based programs - learning opportunities beyond language and literacy: learning about the library, support with school transition, socialisation - children attend with caregivers - libraries as 'active connectors', having strong familiarity with the local community	- ensuring active and appropriate participation by children and caregivers alike - variability in attendance frequency and regularity, group size, children's ages, and who brings children to the session - expectations of presenters to act as 'teacher and coach' despite few having qualifications in early language and literacy and lack of suitable frameworks for developing and evaluating early literacy sessions - identifying strategies for including children who experience disability

One of the most significant ways in which libraries promote early literacy is by providing free access to a variety of reading, audio-visual and multimedia materials for children and their parents. They also promote quality children's literature (both fiction and non-fiction); in Australia, this is done in partnership with organisations such as the *Children's Book Council of Australia* through special events such as

National Simultaneous Storytime and *Book Week*. With the significance of electronic media, software and online resources rising steadily over the past three decades, librarians have adopted a new role too: by selecting online and other electronic resources for library subscription and showing children and families how to use these, they act as 'media mentors and curators' (Feinberg, 2007; Lopez, Caspe, & McWilliams, 2016; Lopez, Caspe, & Simpson, 2017; Walter, 2010).

In resourcing the children's collection, libraries — like early childhood education settings — must resist the temptation to meet popular demand for new technologies and the resources that children can access through these, and base their decisions on research evidence of the educational value of these resources. For example, pre-packaged and expensive, commercial phonics programs are heavily advertised as building knowledge of sound-letter correspondences and thus supporting children in learning to read and write. These claims, however, would not be supported by independent research on how preschool-aged children learn to read and write, which shows that this is best achieved through individualised, child-driven, play-based and authentic experiences with print (Campbell, Torr, & Cologon, 2012, 2014). The benefits and drawbacks of online and technology-based programs in which presenters read picture books to the audience and of interactive picture books must also be carefully weighed (Moody, Justice, & Cabell, 2010; Parish-Morris, Mahajan, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Collins, 2013; Takacs, Swart, & Bus, 2015; Zhang, Djonov, & Torr, 2016a).

Another challenge in the provision of resources is how to provide incentives for families with young children to borrow and use these resources, and limit disincentives such as financial penalties for overdue loans or for borrowed materials that have been lost or damaged (Hyde, 2017, December 21).

Public libraries also provide sessions for young children aged from birth to the year they start school and their families, and are expected to offer activities for infants and toddlers as well as for preschool-aged children (IFLA: Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section, 2003, 2007). This includes children with disabilities and their families (Kaeding et al., 2017; Prendergast, 2016).

Sessions such as Baby Rhyme Time and Preschool Storytime aim to "entertain, educate, and make [children] lifelong learners" (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009, p. 13) and especially to promote early literacy in three main ways:

1. enhancing children's language and literacy development by engaging them in activities such as reading picture books, singing, talking, writing/craft and playing

2. educating families about why and how they should support young children's language and literacy learning from birth

3. encouraging a love of books and reading, and building a community of library users.

These sessions are a suitable vehicle for reaching these goals. They are free for all children, which is particularly valuable for those without access to a language- and literacy-rich environment at home or at their early childhood settings. Early literacy sessions are a key avenue for making the library a language- and literacy-rich

environment for young children and their families: they not only feature reading of picture books and singing of songs and nursery rhymes, but create a context for talking about these texts and interacting with other people, and thereby connecting books and the library to other aspects of everyday life.

There are also numerous publications that offer 'ready-to-go' storytime programs as well as many that provide guidance for designing and delivering storytimes. An example from Australia is *Enjoying library storytime: A guide for practitioners* by children's librarian Jo Potter (2007). Many well-known recent ones are published by the American Library Association and based on the first or second edition of its *Every Child Ready to Read (ECCR)* framework (Public Library Association (PLA) & Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC), 2004, 2011), which follow the recommendations of scientific reports by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD), 2000) and the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) respectively. Books based on ECCR1 (Ghoting & Martin-Díaz, 2006; Totten, 2009) are organised around the six early literacy components that the panel has recommended children must be given opportunities to develop prior to starting school: phonological awareness, vocabulary, print awareness/conventions, letter knowledge, narrative skills and background knowledge. With the aim of being more accessible to library staff and the families they need to educate about early literacy, the second edition, *ECCR2*, and books based on it (Ghoting, 2014; Ghoting & Martin-Diaz, 2013; Hopkins, 2013) are organised around five practices – singing, talking, reading, writing and playing – through which early literacy sessions can support these components.

While early language and literacy is the key focus of these sessions, and they are referred to as 'early literacy sessions' in this project, they also offer children and their families other learning opportunities: to become familiar with the library, to build knowledge across different fields (e.g. about the numbers, seasons, colours), to transition to school more easily, to socialise with other children and families and to learn about other services available in the local community. All these opportunities are highly regarded by the communities public libraries serve. Recent studies from the United States suggest that caregivers evaluate early literacy sessions very positively for supporting children in developing social, physical motor and cognitive skills, which include but are not limited to language and literacy (Clark, 2017); and 85% of 2,004 Americans aged 16 and over surveyed by the PEW Research Centre in 2015 "say that libraries should "definitely" offer free early literacy programs to help young children prepare for school" (Horrigan, 2015, p. 3).

A distinctive potential advantage of early literacy sessions at public libraries is that children can only attend with their caregivers (Albright et al., 2009; Nichols, 2011; Ramos & Vila, 2015). Caregivers, especially parents as every child's first teachers, are an invaluable resource that libraries must harness in order to successfully promote early literacy not only at the library but also in children's homes and communities.

Another strength of public libraries is their deep knowledge of the communities they serve. This powers their ability to be 'active connectors', connecting:

- organisations operating in the early childhood sector
- parents/caregivers with resources

- parents/caregivers and their children, through the reading experience
- parents/caregivers with other service providers, especially where families are from diverse cultural backgrounds and don't know about the help and support that is available until they discover the information at their library.

(ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee, 2015 [2011])

For early literacy sessions, strong familiarity with the local community can support efforts to select topics and materials that children and their families can relate to, as well as present them in appropriate ways, identify places outside the library (early childhood centres, shopping centres, parks) where such sessions can be presented in order to attract 'hard-to-reach' families, and connect families with speech and language pathology or other services that can support them in addressing difficulties in their children's development, including disabilities (Prendergast, 2016).

Even when making the most of these strengths, public libraries face significant challenges not just in conducting early literacy sessions but also in evaluating and improving the extent to which they promote early literacy. One challenge concerns the ways children and carers participate in early literacy sessions. Inappropriate behaviour may be difficult to control in the context of the library as an informal, community-based education setting. As Nichols (2011) explains, in these sessions "maintaining children's attention and active participation [is] an achievement co-produced by the presenter, carers, and the children themselves" (p. 181), and carers are expected to prevent children's inappropriate behaviours (for example, wriggling, uninvited or prolonged interaction with the presenter and attempts to take books or other materials being used by the presenter) and do that unobtrusively, which may be at odds with the ways they control their children's behaviour at home. Carers must also avoid engaging in certain behaviours themselves, such as socialising with other parents while the presenter is talking or reading to the group, and in contemporary practice are expected to actively engage in early literacy sessions with their children (Albright et al., 2009).

Efforts to evaluate the success of early literacy sessions are also hampered by "variability in ages, inconsistencies in group size, individual attendance, and the fact that children may visit the library with someone other than their primary caregiver" (Campana, Mills, Capps, et al., 2016, p. 372). A session may be designed and advertised for 3-5-year-olds, yet libraries rarely exclude children outside the target age range from participating. A single session may include children who attend these sessions regularly but also children who attend only occasionally and even ones who have never before been in a library. Differences in the language, literacy, cultural background, knowledge and experiences among the participants also make it difficult to assess whether and how early literacy sessions contribute to children's learning.

Finally, session presenters are expected not just to engage children and their carers in language- and literacy-rich activities, but also to act as a 'teacher and coach', teaching and modelling for families how they can foster language and literacy learning beyond the library (Albright et al., 2009; Campana et al., 2016). This is a role many presenters are not comfortable with, partly because most lack qualifications in early childhood or language and literacy education, and partly because evidence-based recommendations on how to support early literacy draw on large-scale experimental

and quasi-experimental studies and/or research conducted in formal educational settings or home environments. Uncritically adopting such recommendations runs the risk of making early literacy sessions more didactic and school-like and unable to promote reading for pleasure, restricting the opportunities librarians have to provide a personalised service or address the early literacy needs of the diverse communities they serve, and undermining their professional judgement (Stooke & McKenzie, 2009, 2011).

Summary

Public libraries promote early literacy by:

- making the library a language- and literacy-rich environment with a wide variety of quality reading, audio-visual and multimedia resources
- acting as a 'media mentor and curator' for families keen to engage with online and electronic resources
- providing free early literacy programs that engage children and their carers in picture book reading, singing, talking, writing/craft activities
- educating families in how and why to support early language and literacy
- encouraging a love of reading

They also build a community of library patrons by:

- helping children become familiar with the library (layout, staff, resources)
- connecting books and the library to a child's everyday life
- encouraging children to socialise with other children and families
- strategies for connecting young families with community resources

To effectively promote early literacy, public libraries need to:

- critically evaluate the quality of new resource materials before including them in the children's collection
- develop strategies for reaching socio-economically disadvantaged families who would significantly benefit from library programs and resources
- support library staff to enhance their knowledge and qualifications in early childhood and early language and literacy education, so they can be more confident in their role as educators who design and model for families practices for promoting early language and literacy development.

Having outlined the aims, strengths and challenges that characterise children's services in public libraries, this review will now consider research on early language and literacy development and its implications for public libraries as a unique context for promoting early literacy.

3 Defining early literacy

Recent decades have witnessed a considerable expansion in the notion of literacy, so that literacy is now understood to extend beyond the ability to read and produce written language and encompass a plurality of skills in the use of different communication modes and media. This is evidenced in UNESCO's definition:

> *Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. (UNESCO Education Sector, 2004, p. 13)*

This definition draws attention to the significance of supporting literacy learning for individual and social prosperity, both across the lifespan and in context-sensitive ways.

UNESCO's definition is further interpreted in the Australian Literacy Educators' Association's declaration *Literacy in 21st century Australia,* through five overarching statements:

> • *Literacy is a powerful, wide-ranging life skill beyond traditional notions of talking, listening, reading and writing*
>
> • *Learning to be literate plays a central role in determining an individual's life choices and life chances*
>
> • *Meaning making is at the heart of all literate practices*
>
> • *Access by all learners to strong, effective, and lifelong literacy education is a key feature of a society committed to equity*
>
> • *Educators lead literacy but do not have sole responsibility in literacy education.*
>
> *(Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA), 2015)*

ALEA's declaration explicitly refers to talking and listening as well as reading and writing. Importantly for public libraries, it also emphasises that not only educators across the school years and subject areas but families, caregivers and communities, too, have responsibility to promote literacy. By analogy, both formal and informal contexts can provide valuable support for literacy learning.

Of particular significance for public libraries' efforts to support literacy for young children in the years prior to school is the definition of literacy in Australia's national early childhood curriculum document, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF):

> *Literacy is the capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms. Literacy incorporates a range of modes of communication including music, movement, dance, story telling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing. Contemporary texts include electronic and print based media. In an increasingly technological world, the ability to critically analyse texts is a key component of literacy. [...]*

> *Positive attitudes and competencies in literacy and numeracy are essential for children's successful learning. The foundations for these competencies are built in early childhood. (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009, p. 37)*

Alongside including the use of "language in all its forms" and communicating through a range of modes, that is, multimodally, this definition presents literacy as comprising capacity and competencies as well as attitudes and dispositions, and stresses that literacy foundations built in the early years are key for children's success in learning.

A major aim for public libraries in NSW (Djonov, Torr, & Pham, 2017) and worldwide (IFLA: Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section, 2003) is to promote in children, caregivers and their communities the attitudes and confidence required for success in literacy and learning: to foster a love of reading, books and knowledge by providing a welcoming learning environment. This is reflected in the definition of 'early literacy' in *Supercharged Storytimes: An early literacy planning and assessment guide* (Campana, Mills, & Ghoting, 2016) developed specifically for public libraries in the United States:

> *Early literacy is what children know about communication, language (verbal and nonverbal), reading, and writing before they can actually read and write. It encompasses all of a child's experiences with conversation, stories (oral and written), books, and print. Early literacy is not the teaching of reading. It refers to laying a strong foundation so that when children are taught to read, they are ready. (p. 5)*

Summary

Contemporary definitions of literacy have expanded significantly to acknowledge that:

- *language and literacy learning support each other* as literacy now includes talking and listening as well as reading and writing

- *literacy, like all communication, is multimodal,* and includes engagement not only with written text but also with music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama through print as well as electronic media

- *positive dispositions are key to success in language and literacy learning,* as they promote the confidence and attitudes that help children develop a love of reading, writing and other literacy practices

- *early literacy is the foundational experiences and knowledge that children build before children learn to read and write*

- *early literacy is the responsibility of many people* (families, educators, and communities)

- *both formal early childhood education settings and informal education contexts such as public libraries can support early language and literacy learning.*

4 Early literacy components

Public libraries are proactive in responding to rapid changes in the contemporary communication landscape and broadening notions of literacy. "Creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age" (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994), however, is a cornerstone of their manifesto and a key strategy for contributing to lifting foundational literacy skills in their communities. A strong understanding of the key components of learning to read and write will allow library staff working with young children and their families to support early literacy in ways that are both developmentally appropriate and optimally adapted to the unique affordances and challenges of public libraries as an informal educational context. This section reviews research on the competencies involved in conventional, skilled reading, the components of early literacy and their role in learning to read and write.

4.1 Competencies involved in conventional, skilled reading

As confirmed by the comprehensive review of the research literature presented in the *Report of the National Reading Panel* in the United States (NICHD, 2000) and the influential *Rose Report*, an independent review of the teaching of reading in the United Kingdom (Rose, 2006), reading written text relies on two simultaneous and interrelated processes – decoding and (linguistic/listening) comprehension – as proposed in Gough and Tunmer's (1986) influential model 'The Simple View of Reading'.

Decoding is the process of translating writing into speech, and in alphabetic languages such as English depends on:

- **phonemic awareness:** the ability to perceive the individual distinctive sounds that words contain, which is the most sophisticated level of phonological awareness; for example, understanding that the word 'ship' has three sounds (/ʃ/, /ɪ/ and /p/), and so does the word 'chop' (/tʃ/, /ɪ/ and /p/).

- **phonics:** knowledge of letter-sound correspondences, or understanding the relationship between letters and the sounds they represent. Phonics requires phonemic awareness and alphabet/letter knowledge, that is, knowing the letters of the alphabet, their names, and the sounds they can be used to represent. This includes knowing that sometimes a single sound can be represented by a combination of letters as is the case with the digraph 'sh' in 'ship' and 'ch' in 'chip', as well as knowing that the same letters can represent different sounds as in the case of 'chip' vs. 'chorus'.

- **fluency:** the ability to read "with speed, accuracy and with proper expression" (NICHD, 2000, p. 189), which involves increasingly automatic and accurate word recognition as well as comprehension skills.

Comprehension is the process of understanding and interpreting what is read, and depends on:

- **vocabulary:** the words a person knows and understands (receptive vocabulary) and uses (expressive vocabulary); vocabulary can be measured in terms of both ***breadth*** and ***depth,*** as well in terms of its **technicality** or **sophistication** (Pearson, Hiebert, & Kamil, 2007).

> **Breadth** refers to the number of words a person knows, at least at a surface level. **Depth** refers to how well a person knows each word – the sounds that make it up (phonemic structure); its spelling (orthography); its composition (morphology), including for instance how a word's structure reflects its grammatical function, for example when a noun is used in the plural (fox – foxes; child - children) or a verb in its past or continuous forms (try – tried – trying; go – went - going); its origin (etymology); and its meanings and contexts of use.
>
> **Technicality/sophistication** is a system for differentiating common words used in everyday, non-specialist contexts (e.g. 'cat', 'window', 'walk'), also known as Tier 1 words, from Tier 2 words, which are less common, associated with particular disciplines, technical fields or literary language (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Torr & Scott, 2006).

- **oral language:** the ability to combine words into larger, meaningful constructions, which involves an understanding of:

  - **grammar/syntax** – the ways words are arranged in meaningful messages, known as 'clauses', and realise basic speech functions such as statement (give information), question (request information), offer (give goods and services), or command (request goods and services)

  - '**genres**' or '**registers**', which are characterised by particular combinations of language choices that allow people to achieve particular communicative goals (for example: recounting a sequence of events; telling a story; giving information about, describing, defining or explaining concrete and abstract things and processes; persuading others) in different types of situational contexts.

- **background knowledge** – knowledge of the physical and biological world and our experiences in it as well as of social relationships, structures and attitudes; because such knowledge is essential for the ability to interpret and use words appropriately, it provides a foundation for vocabulary building.

The interdependence of these two processes – decoding and comprehension – has been well established. If decoding is too slow and difficult, readers cannot focus on the meaning of what they are reading: in other words, the speed/rate of fluency affects comprehension (Eason, Sabatini, Goldberg, Bruce, & Cutting, 2013; Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001; Silverman, Speece, Harring, & Ritchey, 2013). Fluent readers, who find decoding effortless, by contrast, can direct much more of their attention to interpreting the meaning of what they are reading (Hirsch, 2003). Oral language experiences allow children opportunities to develop their understanding not only of grammar, genres and registers, but also of phonology, the sound structure of language, and provide an essential support for phonemic awareness, which is required for learning phonics. The ability to read with 'proper expression', or the quality of prosody that characterises fluent reading, on the other hand, reflects a reader's comprehension (Fuchs et al., 2001), and vocabulary supports both comprehension and the accuracy and automaticity of decoding (Ouellette & Beers, 2010; Ouellette & Shaw, 2014; Silva & Cain, 2015). A study of the concurrent

influence of oral vocabulary on specific literacy skills in a sample of 60 Grade 4 students, for example, has shown that breadth of receptive vocabulary predicts decoding performance, expressive vocabulary breadth predicts word recognition, and the depth of vocabulary knowledge predicts reading comprehension (Ouellette, 2006). This interdependency between decoding and comprehension processes is captured in Scarborough's (2001) presentation of decoding/'word recognition' and comprehension as two large strands of interwoven competencies that gradually – as word recognition becomes increasingly automatic and comprehension increasingly strategic – come together to form a stronger, tighter 'rope' that represents skilled reading, which is defined as "the fluent execution and coordination of word recognition and text comprehension" (p. 98).

Summary

Skilled reading involves two simultaneous and inter-related processes: **decoding** and **comprehension**. This is reflected in the two phases of reading instruction and development:

> *(1) learning to read*, which focuses strongly on decoding and

> *(2) reading to learn*, where the focus shifts exclusively to comprehension.

- **Decoding** involves 'translating' writing into speech and depends on:
  - phonemic awareness (perceiving individual sounds in words)
  - phonics (knowledge of sound-letter correspondences)
  - fluency (the ability to read with speed, accuracy and expression)
- **Comprehension** involves understanding what is read and depends on:
  - vocabulary: can be divided into receptive vocabulary (words understood) and expressive vocabulary (words used)
  - oral language: refers to understanding grammar and genres
  - background knowledge about the physical and biological world, social relations, attitudes, social structures and so forth.

4.2   Reading development: from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'

The processes of decoding and comprehension also interact in complex ways in the two main phases of reading development: 'learning to read', which is the main focus of the first grades of primary school; and 'reading to learn', in which children are expected to engage increasingly from Grade 3 onwards, where the focus shifts considerably towards building knowledge in specific disciplines such as science, the humanities, and social sciences (Chall, 1983).

'Learning to read' is characterised by a strong focus on decoding. Reading instruction in the early primary grades is concerned primarily with building children's phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency, including the sight recognition of frequently used words. These are known as 'constrained skills', as they can be mastered completely, to a saturation point. Teaching these skills effectively requires explicit and systematic instruction (Adams, 1990), where teachers are "direct, precise and unambiguous" in presenting new content and do so in an orderly progression, in

the case of phonics, for example, following "a curriculum with a specific, sequential set of phonics elements" (Masmer & Griffith, 2005, p. 369). To support children in mastering these skills, teachers engage children in decoding texts with simple, familiar vocabulary, considerable repetition of words, and grammatical and other language constructions, which place relatively low demands on comprehension. A recent meta-analysis of reading interventions demonstrates that interventions targeting phonics and fluency have high success rates, yet cannot support non-targeted reading skills such as comprehension (Suggate, 2016).

At the time when most children's ability to rapidly and correctly read words at a glance improves, the focus – especially from the middle grades of primary school – shifts almost exclusively to reading in order to gain information and learn from texts in various content areas, i.e. **'reading to learn'** (Konza, Michael, & Fried, 2010; Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2012). These areas vary in the technical vocabulary they use but all employ abstract language – in many fields accompanied by technical images and visualisations – that represents complex processes and ideas (e.g. 'condensation', 'population growth', 'unemployment') in highly condensed ways, using concise textual forms (Derewianka & Jones, 2012; Rose & Martin, 2012; Snow, 2010).

From the middle grades of primary school, the focus of reading instruction and assessment shifts from decoding to comprehension. At this point, researchers have observed what Chall and colleagues (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990) termed the 'fourth-grade slump' – the phenomenon of students, typically from low-income backgrounds, whose results on reading tests in earlier grades have met or exceeded average standards, experiencing a significant drop in their reading test scores, which continue to decline further in higher grades (see also Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991b). Such results reflect poor reading comprehension, which indexes limited linguistic (or listening) comprehension and correlates strongly with low levels of vocabulary and background/domain knowledge (Hirsch, 2003). These types of skills and knowledge are 'unconstrained' – they have no ceiling and develop throughout one's life starting from birth. Unlike procedural skills such as phonics, the growth of comprehension skills is slow and incremental, that is, it requires multiple exposures to words and repeated immersion in rich experiences with language in various domains (Hirsch, 2003).

While reading tests only detect comprehension difficulties in the middle of primary school, differences in vocabulary, oral language and background knowledge emerge well before children begin school and formal reading instruction, and lead to an ever-widening gap in literacy as well as in academic achievement. A groundbreaking study by Hart and Risley (1995) in the United States compared the average amount and types of words that young children from 42 families with different socio-economic status – professional/middle-class, working-class, and welfare – heard in their home environment over a period of 2.5 years, from the time the children were 7-9 months (recording 1-hour observations per family per month, or 1,318 observations), and then tested the children's vocabulary at age 3. The children in welfare families heard half as many words per hour as working class children (616 vs. 1, 251), while children from professional families heard on average 2,153 words per hour, so that the gap in accumulated experience of language in the home environment was estimated to be as

large as 30 million words between children in welfare versus those in professional families by the time the children turn 4 (Hart & Risley, 2003). These differences were predictive of the children's performance not only on oral language skills and vocabulary tests at age 3 but also on vocabulary, language and reading comprehension tests when they were 9-to-10 years of age.

As the gap in children's language and literacy achievements emerges early in life, it reflects differences in their opportunities for learning: "infancy is a unique time of helplessness when nearly all of children's experience is mediated by adults in one-to-one interactions permeated with affect" (Hart & Riesley, 2003, p. 9). Given that these differences have cumulative and strong longitudinal effects, it is not surprising that interventions aimed at bridging gaps in reading comprehension require significant investment in time and effort yet have limited success (Konza et al., 2010). On the other hand, such interventions have positive effects on non-targeted skills such as phonemic awareness (Suggate, 2016). A recent study has also suggested that commencing formal reading instruction later, at 7 rather than 5 years of age, is associated with stronger reading comprehension skills and the disappearance, by age 11, of the initial advantage in skills such as letter-naming and fluency (reading words, non-words and passages) that children beginning reading instruction at age 5 possess (Suggate, Schaughency, & Reese, 2013).

These studies have significant implications for early literacy sessions at public libraries. Although these sessions aim to contribute to children's developing reading skills, they differ significantly from classrooms in formal educational settings. Children and their carers may start attending sessions such as 'Rhyme Time' and 'Storytime' at any point of the year and may or may not attend these sessions on a regular basis. Additionally, even when aimed at a certain age group such as infants, toddlers or 3-5-year-olds, these sessions are typically open to children outside the target age group. As effective phonics instruction requires an explicit and systematic approach, and constrained skills such as letter-knowledge are procedural and easier to teach and master later on, early literacy sessions should not give them too much time and effort: mentioning the importance of these skills and modelling some ways that carers can promote them in children should suffice. As disadvantage in rich linguistic and learning experiences in the early years is far more difficult to overcome later in life, libraries should channel most of their efforts to promote early literacy into designing such experiences and helping to build children's vocabulary, oral-language and background knowledge. To be able to do that effectively, library staff require a solid understanding of early language and literacy development as foundation for success in reading and writing.

Summary

Developmentally, 'Learning to read' is the main focus of the first grades of primary school, while 'reading to learn' gains significance in the middle years of primary school, where the focus shifts considerably towards building knowledge in specific disciplines such as science and the humanities.

Differences in early literacy skills emerge well before children begin school and many lead to an ever-widening gap (termed 'the 4th grade slump') when some children, typically from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience a drop in reading test scores. This drop reflects poor comprehension skills due to low levels of vocabulary and background knowledge.

Given the importance of reading comprehension for learning, public libraries could focus their programs on building oral language, vocabulary and background knowledge of the physical and biological world, social relations etc.

4.3 Early literacy: Foundations for success in reading and writing

There is significant evidence that the foundations for success in conventional reading and writing are laid from birth. This is encapsulated in the notion of 'emergent literacy', first proposed by Clay (1972) and developed as a focus of enquiry in Teale and Sulzby (1986), which refers to "the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are developmental precursors to [conventional] reading and writing" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 848). These include:

- phonological awareness
- alphabet/letter knowledge
- concepts of print
- oral language and vocabulary
- background knowledge
- print motivation.

The key idea behind an emergent or early literacy perspective is that literacy development starts early in life and is a continuum, with no boundary between 'pre-reading' or 'pre-literacy' and the conventional reading and writing development targeted by formal literacy instruction once children start school. This perspective also places equal emphasis on reading and writing, and posits that "reading, writing, and oral language develop concurrently and interdependently from an early age from children's exposure to interactions in the social contexts in which literacy is a component, and in the absence of formal instruction" (ibid., p. 849).

Phonological awareness is a strong predictor of reading achievement in the first year of school, and refers to the ability to identify, analyse and manipulate the auditory aspects of spoken language (Gillon, 2004; Goswami & Bryant, 1990;

National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Parrila, Kirby, & McQuarrie, 2004). At the broadest level, this includes an awareness of intonation, rhythm and rhyme, followed by the multilevel ability to break down words into smaller units of sound of different sizes: syllable, onset-rhyme, and phoneme.

1. A syllable is a sound unit that contains a single vowel sound, which may be preceded and followed by one or more consonants (for example, 'I' and 'bike' have one syllable each and 'chocolate' has three).

2. Each syllable can be further analysed into onset (any consonants that precede the vowel) and rime (the vowel and any sounds that follow it), and so 'dog' and 'log' have respectively /d/ and /l/ as onset and '-og' as their rime, and hence these two words rhyme.

3. The most sophisticated and difficult level of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness is the understanding that words can be broken down into individual sounds, phonemes (for instance, 'cat' has three phonemes, /k/, /æ/ and /t/, and 'car' in Standard Australian English has two, /k/ and /a:/). Phonemes are the smallest units of sound in a language that create a meaningful difference between words. For example, replacing the phoneme /d/ in 'dog' with /l/ creates a different word – 'log'. As a more sophisticated level of phonological awareness, and one that typically develops later, phonemic awareness has been found to be a stronger predictor of early reading achievement than onset-rime awareness is (Hulme et al., 2002).

Concepts of print, also referred to as 'print awareness' or 'print knowledge', is children's understanding of how print works, and has been acknowledged as an important precursor of learning to read and write in conventional terms (Clay, 1972; Adams, 1990; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). It includes understanding of **print functions** and **print conventions**:

*   knowing that print conveys a message, and is organised and serves different purposes in different contexts (for example, in street and shop signs, shopping lists, software menus, restaurant menus, postcards)

*   distinguishing print from images, and knowing that both can convey a message and can construct meaning together

*   book knowledge:

    o   books are read by turning the pages

    o   a book has a front and a back cover, pages, a title, author and/or illustrator

    o   books vary in their organisation according to their genre (for example, a storybook for young children typically has no page numbers and no table of contents, while an information book is more likely to have both as well as an index, headings, captions, etc.)

*   directionality: in English, a book is read from the front to back, a page from top to bottom, and each line of printed text from left to right

- differentiating between a word and a letter

- differentiating between letters and numbers

- understanding the functions of punctuation and capitalisation.

Print knowledge developed in the years prior to school has been shown to significantly predict early decoding (especially word recognition and learning about letter-sound correspondences) and reading comprehension, letter and name writing, and spelling (Cunningham, Perry, & Stanovich, 2001; Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006; Puranik, Lonigan, & Kim, 2011; Shatil, Share, & Levin, 2009), and even relate to overall later school achievement (Day & Day, 1984). Children develop print knowledge through a range of different experiences with print: in interactions with adults referencing environmental print such as street and shop signs and labels and other print on grocery items, toys, and other commercial products (Neumann, Hood, & Ford, 2013; Neumann, Hood, Ford, & Neumann, 2012); through experiences with a range of different types of print in which adults model book handling skills, directionality and other print conventions, and refer to or demonstrate its various functions; and through opportunities for using print and writing in play (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Pullen & Justice, 2003). When access to such resources and opportunities is limited, children are at risk of falling behind in their ability to understand print and early literacy development (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Levy et al., 2006; Nichols, Rupley, Rickelman, & Algozzine, 2004).

Alphabet knowledge, knowing the names of the letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds and visual representation in print, has been recognised as the strongest predictor – followed closely by phonemic awareness – of later achievement in decoding, comprehension and spelling (Adams, 1990; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1989; Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008; Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Such knowledge may support phonemic awareness: "Learning the names of the alphabetic letters and their associated common phonemes may help children understand the sound structure of words" (Gillon, 2004, p. 52). Learning the letters of the alphabet typically begins with children learning to recognise and write the first initial of their own names (Phillips, Piasta, Anthony, Lonigan, & Francis, 2012). Phonemic awareness and knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences help children understand the alphabetic principle, the idea that letters of the alphabet represent the sounds that are grouped together in words (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1989).

Oral language, which includes but is not limited to vocabulary, has been well established as a powerful predictor that has a pervasive, long-term influence on success in both literacy and learning. Language development at 3 years of age predicts reading ability at ages 10-11 and later learning achievement (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999; Dickinson et al., 2010; Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Muter, Hulme, Snowling, & Stevenson, 2004; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, & Kurland, 1995; Stacey A. Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Tabors & Snow, 2001), as does the language children experience through interactions in the home environment (Hart & Risley, 2003; Hart & Risley, 1995) and early childcare and education centres (Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson & Porche, 2011) in the years prior to school. There are, moreover, multiple and interdependent language abilities that

contribute to early and later literacy (Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003). Thus, for reading in particular, Dickinson et al. (2010) have argued that "language is the underlying factor influencing reading via a multitude of indirect pathways" (p. 306) and "is *unique* among precursor abilities in its pervasiveness for both early and later reading competencies and for the duration of its effectives on reading comprehension as code breaking turns into meaning making" (p. 308).

Vocabulary developed in the years prior to school is a key measure of oral language, which research has unequivocally demonstrated as a very strong, long-term predictor of reading comprehension and academic achievement up to 10 years later (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Elleman, Lindo, Morphy, & Compton, 2009; Sénéchal, Ouellette, & Rodney, 2006; Song et al., 2015). Vocabulary exerts considerable influence on other reading skills: variance in children's receptive vocabulary at the beginning of school can explain differences in their phonological awareness, or ability to analyse words into sound units, and listening comprehension in the first two years of school, and strongly predicts reading comprehension in Grade 4 (Sénéchal et al., 2006).

Beyond vocabulary alone, research has identified the oral language skills that promote achievement in literacy and learning. Collectively, these have been termed 'academic' , 'decontextualised', 'abstract', 'literate', or 'literacy- and learning-oriented' language (Massey, 2013; Snow, 1983, 2014; Torr, 2004; Van Kleeck, 2014). This type of language may employ abstract terms, or technical vocabulary, and grammatical constructions to represent knowledge through definitions, compositional hierarchies (for example, describing the body parts of an animal) and classification taxonomies (for example, 'animal' > 'mammal' > 'marsupial'). It is also associated with written, non-simultaneous communication. Unlike face-to-face interactions, where users can rely on the immediate, shared physical context and use gesture and facial expressions to make meaning (for example, pointing to objects instead of labelling them verbally), writing typically conveys information for a non-present audience, who are removed from the events and things it represents and may or may not share any background knowledge with the writer.

Oral language interactions that promote success in later reading and writing as well as learning more generally create opportunities for children to develop the language they need to:

- name, describe, compare, classify and define concrete and abstract entities and processes
- recount and reminisce about past experiences
- outline future plans
- represent one's own and others' thoughts and feelings
- express degrees of probability and obligation
- explain, reason, draw inferences, and hypothesise.

Research has shown, for example, that children's definitional skill (Kurland & Snow, 1997), explanatory talk (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004), and understanding of sequences of events in narrative as well as the ability to recount them (Cain & Oakhill, 1996; Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000) support comprehension and overall literacy achievement.

Background knowledge is essential for achievement in literacy as well as learning (Neuman, 2001). As this aspect of cognitive development is difficult to measure and isolate from other emergent literacy skills (Kaefer, Neuman, & Pinkham, 2013), and as hands-on activities and code-related skills hold centre stage in efforts to engage young children and prepare them for school, this "most critical predictor of skilled reading – the ability to derive meaning from text" often remains overlooked in research and early childhood programs (Neuman, 2006, p. 34). A longitudinal study has demonstrated, however, that children identified as poor comprehenders at age 8, that is, children who had consistently met standards for reading accuracy and fluency but had poor comprehension scores at age 6, 7 and 8, had poor listening comprehension and associated (non-phonological) oral language scores at age 5 (Nation, Cocksey, Taylor, & Bishop, 2010).

Background knowledge is reflected in children's vocabulary and other oral language competencies, and both promotes and is accelerated by language learning (Kaefer & Neuman, 2013). Like vocabulary and oral language, it develops slowly and incrementally, and has significant implications for comprehension and later learning (Dickinson, 2011; Hirsch, 2003). Existent knowledge on a topic has been shown to support preschool children's comprehension and ability to comprehend a storybook on the same topic and learn new words from it (Kaefer, Neuman, & Pinkham, 2015).

Young children may develop some knowledge through direct experience: for example, by observing that people wear jackets and coats when the weather is cold. Knowledge in subject areas such as history and science or the arts necessitates access to resources such as books, online materials and music albums and experiences such as visits to the zoo, concerts, museum and art exhibitions, dance and swimming lessons. For young children, learning from these resources and experiences occurs through interactions about the information they provide with adults who are responsive to children's interests, experiences and current levels of knowledge and language development (see further Dickinson, 2011; Pinkham, Kaefer, & Neuman, 2012). This is why it is important that children have access both to a wide range of resources, including both stories and non-fiction books and other sources of information on different subjects, and to a supportive learning environment, characterised by linguistically rich interactions with more knowledgeable others.

As a result of "striking differences in material resources and in the quality of the home environment, as expressed by parents' interactions, their skills, habits, and styles" (Neuman, 2006, p. 32), preschool children from poor families typically start school with significantly more limited background knowledge compared to their more advantaged peers.

> Children from families with more financial and cultural resources differ
> from their less advantaged peers, though, not just in knowledge of these
> [procedural] early literacy skills but also in access to knowledge about

> topics related to the natural world (bugs, flowers, tidal pools), to astronomy (what shape the world is, why the sun sets), to current events (who the president is, what a mayor does, what a budget is), to history (why the Civil War was fought, who George Washington was), to human relations (how aunts and uncles are related to them, what divorce means). These differences are indexed by enormous social class differences in vocabulary and are produced by differential access to oral language interactions, exacerbated by differential access to engaging and language-rich books read aloud, both in the home and in early child care settings. (Murnane, Sawhill & Snow, 2012, p. 6)

If not addressed early – ideally in the first three years of life, the peak period for forming cognitive connections – the knowledge gap continues to widen, as existent knowledge provides a supportive framework for building new knowledge. For example, a child who is already familiar with the library environment is more likely to be able to focus on the various resources it offers (Neuman, 2006). Providing resources such as reading materials and access to new technologies alone is not sufficient, however. This is demonstrated in Neuman and Celano's (Neuman & Celano, 2012a, 2012b) decade-long enthnographic study of two public libraries in Philadelphia that provided equal access to resources for two socio-economically unequal communities. Unlike young children from the middle-income community, who accessed the resources purposefully, supported by the close, careful guidance of their parents, children from low-income families engaged with the resources briefly, reading and engaging less with the available resources, and without adult participation.

Print motivation

In addition to the cognitive competencies outlined above, a key predictor of success in learning to read and write and maintaining a high level of engagement in literacy practices is children's motivation to engage with print. To develop such motivation, according to Verhoeven and Snow (2001), children need:

- to see adults engage in, enjoy and thereby provide positive models of literate behaviours

- develop a love of and enthusiasm for reading and writing

- have access to relevant books and other literacy materials and to rich oral language interactions around these that are responsive to children's interests and developmentally appropriate

- the expectation that they would succeed in reading and writing.

While acknowledging the scarcity of effective instruments for measuring preschool-aged children's reading motivation (Saçkes, Işıtan, Avci, & Justice, 2016; Zheng, Schwanenflugel, & Rogers, 2016), researchers agree that reading motivation is 'multidimensional' (Baker & Scher, 2002; Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Saçkes et al., 2016; Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Its dimensions interact with each other in complex ways and include:

- the value assigned to and interest in literacy activities, where a distinction can be made between two types of motivation:
    - intrinsic: engaging in an activity for enjoyment or to satisfy a personal interest
    - extrinsic: performing a task in order to compete with others, gain external awards or recognition
- children's sense of competence in reading
- social motivation, or the possibilities and willingness children have to receive support from others when they (are learning to) read and write.

As Wigfield (2000) has argued, "it is therefore not appropriate to think of children as motivated or unmotivated, but rather as motivated in a variety of ways ... some more beneficial than others" (p. 142).

The complexity of reading motivation is borne out by studies of the ways its dimensions interact with each other and predict literacy outcomes as well as by research into the differences and shifts in children's reading motivation from preschool through to the end of primary school.

Both children's motivation and their early literacy outcomes are strongly predicted by the affective quality of the literacy practices in which young children participate at home, especially joint book reading, the quantity and quality of which reflect and contribute to parent-child attachment (Bus, 2001; Bus, Belsky, van Ijzendoom, & Crnic, 1997; Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1988; Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1992). Children who view reading and learning to read as a source of pleasure, for example, are more motivated to engage in it (Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, & Schmidt, 2000; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). Additionally, parents who involve their children in literacy activities for enjoyment tend to also be more responsive to children's self-initiated engagement with print and have children with higher reading motivation (Baker & Scher, 2002; Baker et al., 1997; Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro, 2006). By contrast, parents who report teaching particular skills as the main reason for reading with their children have children with lower levels of print motivation (Baker & Scher, 2002). A recent survey of 315 parents of preschool children has shown that parents who perceive their children as being interested in literacy activities usually also perceive them as having high levels of cognitive engagement, competence and (to a much lesser extent) also effort and persistence in such activities (Saçkes et al., 2016). The same study reveals that parents who hold positive beliefs about their children's interest, competence and cognitive engagement in storybook reading are also more likely to read, tell stories and sing songs to their children.

Research has also related aspects of children's motivation to their later reading skills. A study of 48 children showed that, while children with matching phonemic awareness and comprehension skills in preschool had no difference in their initial motivation levels, children whose skills continued to improve perceived themselves as competent readers and were more intrinsically motivated (concentrating on the task at hand rather than on their reading performance) and more willing to seek

support from others (Lepola, Salonen, & Vauras, 2000). Positive attitudes to reading and reading confidence were also significantly related to higher reading test performance scores in a group of 203 six-year-old children (McGeown et al., 2015). A larger, more recent study of 1053 second and third grade students has also revealed that intrinsic motivation leads to higher frequency of reading and promotes comprehension skills, while competition-based motivation has a direct negative effect on reading competence (Schiefele, Stutz, & Schaffner, 2016; Stutz, Schaffner, & Schiefele, 2016).

Finally, researchers have highlighted the potential and limitations of reading materials and programs for fostering reading motivation. Resources that do not reflect children's interests, underestimate their competence, or are too challenging have a detrimental effect on their reading motivation and subsequent achievement. Examples include materials such as reading scheme books (or basal readers) (Baker & Scher, 2002) and scripted literacy programs (Powell, McIntyre, & Rightmyer, 2006). While most children enter school eager to learn, the steady decline in students' motivation for reading over the primary school years has been attributed to the nature of school-based practices such as standardised testing, which offer students no choice and place value on competition and performance rather than enjoyment (Wigfield et al., 2016). As means of increasing children's print motivation and literacy competencies, researchers have recommended: independent leisure-time reading (Mol & Bus, 2011); engagement with high-quality literature, including storybooks as well as informational texts (Robertson & Reese, 2017), literature-based play and craft activities (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015a, 2015b); and literacy activities enabled through new interactive technologies, where children tend to exhibit considerable persistence (Kucirkova, Messer, Sheehy, & Fernández Panadero, 2014; Moody et al., 2010).

Summary

- Foundational early literacy skills, which are essential for learning to read and write, include: alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, concepts of print, oral language, background knowledge and print motivation.

- Research into emergent literacy has found that the strongest predictors of success in literacy (decoding, comprehension and spelling) are alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness, while concepts of print (print awareness) is a key precursor for learning to read. Children's motivation to engage with print (print motivation) is also an important predictor of success in learning to read and write.

- Oral language skills and background knowledge have a pervasive long-term impact on reading comprehension and academic achievement, yet are often overlooked in the beginning stages of reading instruction and very difficult to address.

- One essential contribution libraries could make to the development of children's literacy and lifelong academic success is to help expand their oral language skills, including vocabulary, and their knowledge of the world by providing access to wide ranging resources such as stories and non-fiction books as well as a supportive learning environment. The other is to understand that motivation is pivotal and that a love of books develops through access to both relevant books and the rich oral language interactions around these that are responsive to children's interests.

5   Oral language learning and literacy

As explained in Section 4, oral language skills are a powerful and early predictor of later achievement in literacy and learning, and both language and literacy development are influenced by various social factors. It is therefore important for people involved in designing and delivering early literacy programs to understand: (1) the key milestones in oral language development and the ways in which families and educators can support children to reach these milestones, which are presented in Section 5.1; and (2) the main factors that impact the language and literacy learning, which are the focus of Section 5.2. Research on the influence of these factors is reviewed in Section 5.2, which examines: the role of the home literacy environment and the family's social positioning; gender; English as an additional language (EAL); and having an Indigenous Australian background and speaking Standard Australian English as an additional dialect (EAD).

5.1   Language learning: a developmental continuum

Research has shown that both the quantity and qualities of the language addressed to young children are related to children's current and long-term language development, with implications for subsequent literacy achievement (Dickinson, 2011; Dickinson et al., 2010; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Dickinson & Snow, 1987;

Heath, 1983; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991a). It is through particular kinds of interactions with more mature speakers (parents, teachers, librarians) that children develop the early literacy knowledge, skills and attitudes, presented in Section 4, which are foundational to later literacy development.

Dickinson et al. (2010) note that "learning language is an entrenched, slowly acquired, and highly complex ability that includes multiple component skills and is related to semantic knowledge" (p. 307). This emphasis on semantic knowledge is significant. When learning their first language(s), children are fundamentally engaged in the process of "learning how to mean" (Halliday, 2004 [1975]). Of particular relevance to educators is Halliday's (2004 [1980]) insight that learning language at the same time involves learning more generally, including literacy learning and background knowledge about the world:

> There are three facets to language development: learning language, learning through language, and learning about language. In a sense, and from a child's point of view, these three are all the same thing. But in order to understand them properly, we need to consider them apart; this will enable us to see where each comes in the overall growth and development of a child. (Halliday, 2004 [1980], p. 308).

Another important contribution of Halliday's social semiotic theory of language and language development is the understanding that language has evolved to enable people to achieve their communicative needs in a range of different social contexts. The use of language, as one of the most dominant modes of communication, both reflects and shapes the social contexts in which it operates – their cultural as well as situational characteristics. This is captured in Halliday's model of the relationship between communication and social context (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1985), which is presented in Figure 1.

According to this model, in every act of communication people make meanings that *simultaneously* reflect and subtly shape three key contextual (or 'register') variables: field, tenor and mode.

- **Field** concerns:

  (1) the activities people are participating in a communicative situation

  (2) the subject matter of a communication and its degree of technicality or abstraction.

  Field is reflected and shaped by the ideas we represent using language and other modes (ideational meaning), including the vocabulary and images we use and whether these are commonsense/everyday or technical/specialist.
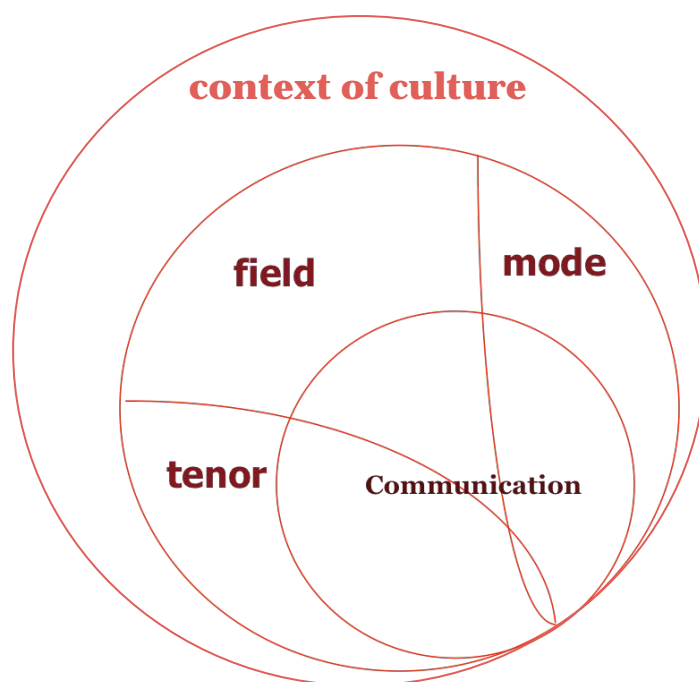
Figure 1. A model of the relationship between social context and communication

- **Tenor** includes:

  (1) the relationship between participants in the interaction, their closeness, frequency of contact and status of power, and the degree of formality of the situation

  (2) their feelings and attitudes towards each other and particular activities or subject matter.

  Tenor is reflected in and shaped by our use of evaluative language or terms we use to demonstrate social closeness or distance, solidarity or power (interpersonal meaning).

- **Mode** is the interaction between:

  (1) channel of communication and the type of feedback it affords

  (2) the relationship between the communication and its dependence on the immediate, physical context.

  Mode is a continuum, a matter of degrees: with face-to-face, one-to-one or small-group interactions, which typically feature spontaneous use of language, gesture and other communication modes and afford immediate and individualised aural and visual feedback, at one end; and more carefully planned written communication or one-to-many presentations, where opportunities for immediate and individualised feedback are heavily restricted or absent, at the other end.

  For language, this distinction is reflected in the difference between more spoken-like vs. more written-like language, and the ways we establish meaningful connections, or cohesion, within texts or interactions – as we do through turn-taking, conjunctions (e.g. 'and', 'but', 'because'), pronouns (e.g. 'she', 'it', 'you', 'I') - and coherence, the ways we present given/known vs. new

information and choose whether to refer to the surrounding physical context (textual meaning). As writing typically must be understood without reference to the physical context in which it is produced or received, written language requires stronger cohesion and internal coherence.

Cultural differences will be reflected in all three contextual variables. For example, a subject matter that is appropriate in one culture may be taboo in another, and relationships of closeness or respect within the family may be expressed in different ways that are more or less implicit for people who do not share the same cultural background. Educators can support growth in children's ability to communicate effectively in different contexts by constructing and inviting children to engage in diverse communicative situations (or different combinations of field, tenor and mode), for example through dramatic play that positions children as doctors or patients in a medical centre, or by selecting books and other texts that represent diverse situations and associated use of language and images.

Because it provides a language-based theory of learning and a model for considering how educators can create opportunities for supporting children's language and literacy development, Halliday's functional theory of language development and of language as a resource for making meaning (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) has been widely adopted by educational linguists and researchers (Derewianka & Jones, 2012; Harris, 2009; Hoyte, Degotardi, & Torr, 2015; Hoyte, Torr, & Degotardi, 2014, 2015; Hu, Torr, Degotardi, & Han, 2017; Painter, 1991 [1985], 2001; Rose & Martin, 2012; Torr, 2004; Torr & Pham, 2015).

An understanding of the relationship between language and literacy development can assist educators, including library staff, to provide pedagogically effective early literacy programs for young children. Table 2 presents a summary of the key milestones in children's language development in the first five years of life, and the ways in which educators can support children in reaching them.

Table 2. Key developmental phases in learning to talk, adapted from Halliday (1975/2003).

Phase	How child communicates	How educator can support this development
Prelinguistic: birth to 9 months	• Crying communicates pain, hunger or discomfort • Cooing, babbling and other sounds of satisfaction and contentment • Whole-body communication	Regularly establish eye contact and talk to infant one-to-one. Respond warmly and appropriately to infant's distress, enabling infant to experience a direct relationship between her or his vocalisation and educator's response. Engage in caretaking routines which follow a predictable sequence of events, thus facilitating face-to-face interactions against a backdrop of shared knowledge. Engage in turn-taking games, thus providing opportunities for infant to adopt and assign roles in an interaction. Sing songs and nursery rhymes, as the rhyme, rhythm and repetition facilitate the infant's awareness of speech patterns and different registers, and encourage participation.
Early "protowords": 9 – 18 months	Begins to develop a small invented repertoire of 'signs' (sound/meaning combinations) and use them systematically to serve one or more of the following functions in her or his life: • To obtain food or objects (the *instrumental* function) • To control the behaviour of others (the *regulatory* function) • To establish and maintain closeness with others (the *interactional* function) • To express their feelings (the *personal* function) • To play with sounds (the *imaginative* function), and • To ask for a name or label (the *heuristic* function)	*In addition to the above …* Engage in sustained interactions with infant in order to recognise the child's intended meanings and to respond appropriately. Engage in shared reading of picture books, using comments and questions to achieve shared meaning with child. Respond to child's attempts to communicate and use language to repeat and expand on child's meaning. Encourage and model pretend play.

Phase	How child communicates	How educator can support this development

Transition into linguistic communication: 12 months – 2 years	• Begins to use words and structures of the adult language(s), and gradually discontinues use of invented 'signs'
	
	• Sometimes finds it difficult to communicate her or his meanings, resulting in frustration
	
	• Begins to use language to refer to past experiences and to predict future events, such that language is no longer inextricably tied to the "here and now" context
	
	• Reorganises language such that it now serves one of two functions in child's life:
	
	  (1) To obtain goods and services (the *pragmatic* function), and
	
	  (2) To represent experience (the *mathetic* ("learning") function)
	
	• May produce strings of words which are semantically related (eg. 'dog …bark … run away')
	
	• May begin to produce grammatical structures
		In addition to the above …
		
		Use comments and questions to achieve shared meaning as often as possible.
		
		Use few directives, and provide reasons for directives.
		
		During shared reading, name and describe pictures and encourage child to participate too.
		
		Provide child with a choice of picture books of different genres, styles and content areas.
		
		Talk with child about previous shared experiences, and encourage predictions about future events.
		
		Encourage child to name entities in books and environment.

2 – 3 years: early mother tongue	• Uses adult-like vocabulary and grammatical structures (i.e. 'lexico-grammar') most of the time • Displays large increase in expressive and receptive vocabulary • Uses language to express simultaneously *both* speech function (interpersonal function) *and* representational content (ideational function), meaningfully across stretches of text (textual function) • With adult support, begins to produce different registers such as recounts, narratives, and explanations	*In addition to the above …* During shared reading, encourage discussion about word meanings and other features of the text such as plot sequence and characters' motivations. Relate features of the picture book to aspects of child's own life and experience. Engage in sustained one-to-one conversations based on child's interests, experiences and observations. Avoid negative directives as much as possible, and always give reasons for directives. Verbalise your own thinking and encourage children to explain their own views.

Phase	How child communicates	How educator can support this development
3 – 5 years: expanding repertoire	• Uses language to communicate with a range of adults and children • Is increasingly able to produce narratives, recounts and explanations with minimal adult support • Asks how and why questions about external phenomena, often in relation to content of picture books	*In addition to the above …* Provide a wide range of picture books of different styles and genres, and with different content. During shared reading, discuss meanings of unusual words and expressions. Use (meta)language ('word', 'title', 'author', 'story', 'illustrations', 'meaning', etc.) to talk about spoken and written texts. Explain the reasons behind your actions and ideas, and encourage child to do the same.

Summary

Key milestones in the language development of children include:

- **Birth to 9 months: pre-linguistic phase** – crying, cooing, babbling
- **9-18 months: early proto-words** – signs consisting of sound and/or gestures that children invent to interact with close others and fulfill broad communicative functions
- **12-24 months: transition to linguistic communication** – children begin to use words, and then string them together, and develop the ability to refer to past and future events
- **2-3 years: early mother tongue develops** – vocabulary expands and mastery of grammar increases; children develop the ability to engage in conversations and express different functions simultaneously
- **3-5 years: expanding linguistic repertoire** – children develop the ability to use more abstract language and communicate across different communicative contexts.

Caregivers and educators can promote children's language development by creating opportunities for children to experience and use language in a range of communicative contexts that vary in:

- **field:** the subject matter, participants and activities involved

- **tenor:** relationships between the participants, their feeling and attitudes

- **mode:** the channel of communication, the different communication modes it supports, and whether the language is more spoken-like or written-like.

Communicative contexts vary across cultures and communities.

5.2 Family and community influences on language and literacy

This section reviews research on the main social factors that impact the language and literacy development of children in Australia: their home literacy environment and family's social positioning; their gender; having English as an additional language (EAL); and belonging to an Indigenous Australian community and speaking Standard Australian English as an additional dialect (EAD).

5.2.1 Home literacy environment and social positioning

To be effective, the design, delivery and evaluation of a literacy program must consider the beliefs about literacy held by the parents in the community served by the library. This is because research has shown that parental, particularly maternal, beliefs about what literacy is, and how it is learnt, will shape the home literacy environment they create for their children (Bojczyk, Davis, & Rana, 2016; DeBaryshe, 1995; Lynch et al., 2006; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006), and this in turn will shape the expectations families and children have of early literacy sessions at the library.

The term *home literacy environment* refers to the literacy artefacts, events and activities available to children at home. Literacy *artifacts* may include picture books, magnetic alphabet letters, pencils or other writing implements and paper, and various digital resources such as interactive picture books or literacy-oriented electronic games. Literacy *events* include trips to the library and other outings, and seeing adults engaged in reading and writing during everyday activities. Literacy *activities* include adult-child reading, watching educational television programs for children, talking about books and stories, singing songs, pretend-reading, dramatic play, mark-making and "writing" cards and shopping lists, and looking for information on the Web. Research has found, for example, a positive correlation between the number of books children have at home, the frequency of library visits and especially the frequency of shared reading and children's vocabulary as well as motivation for reading (Sénéchal, 2006; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996; Sénéchal, Pagan, Lever, & Ouellette, 2008).

Studies have also revealed that literacy practices contribute differentially to specific aspects of early literacy. A recent meta-analysis of 15 longitudinal studies of home literacy practices across different cultures and languages has provided strong support for distinguishing '*meaning-oriented interactions*', especially adults reading books to and with children and discussing the meanings carried by print, from '*code-related interactions*,' which focus on features of print such as letters and the sounds they represent (Sénéchal, Whissell, & Bildfell, 2017). Specifically, it revealed that: the frequency of shared reading and other meaning-oriented practices is a predictor of children's vocabulary, oral language skills and motivation to read for pleasure well into primary school; unlike code-related practices, meaning-oriented ones do not predict children's code-related skills and knowledge, such as spelling or alphabet knowledge; and both types of interactions contribute to the development of phonemic awareness, which is a key predictor of success in learning to read. Echoing these findings, a study of 6050 English-speaking children has demonstrated the value of shared reading, showing that its frequency at age 2 predicts vocabulary in preschool,

which in turn contributes to preschoolers' proficiency in decoding skills (Kim, Im, & Kwon, 2015).

The nature of the home literacy environment created by parents is related to their beliefs about literacy. Studies have identified a contrast between two general perspectives: an emergent literacy, or comprehension-oriented, perspective; and a skills-based, primarily decoding-oriented, perspective (Baker & Scher, 2002; Lynch et al., 2006; Sénéchal, 2006; Sénéchal et al., 2017; Torr, 2008a). Parents who hold an emergent literacy perspective see literacy as entertaining, enjoyable and embedded in everyday life. They believe that emergent literacy is learnt through shared reading, experimentation and play. The emergent literacy perspective is associated with language and literacy development in several ways. For example, children whose early experiences with literacy have been enjoyable are more likely to be interested in reading and intrinsically motivated to read for pleasure (Baker & Scher, 2002; Baker et al., 1997). An emergent literacy perspective tends to be associated with high levels of parental literacy and high socioeconomic status (Baker et al., 1997; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Heath, 1983; Weigel et al., 2006).

Parents who hold a skills-based perspective also value reading to their child, but believe that literacy consists of a distinct set of skills that are acquired through direct instruction and practice, with an emphasis on the rote learning of letters and numbers, flashcards, workbooks and stencils. A skills-based perspective tends to be associated with parents who have low levels of literacy, education and income, and thus lower socio-economic status (SES)(Baker et al., 1997; Fitzgerald et al., 1991; Heath, 1983; Weigel et al., 2006). It may also, however, also reflect cultural differences and the influence of traditional belief systems such as Confucianism (Li, 2015). Parents' beliefs about how literacy is learnt may affect their attitudes towards the literacy sessions offered by libraries.

These differences in parental beliefs are one example of a multifaceted association between socioeconomic status and children's language and literacy development, which has been documented in numerous research studies (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Hart & Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983; Hoff, 2003, 2006; Michaels, 2006; Snow et al., 1991b; Snow & Ucceli, 2009; S. A. Storch & Whitehurst, 2001; Van Kleeck, 2014). This relationship has far reaching effects on children's potential to succeed in formal schooling.

In many studies, maternal education is considered one of the main criteria determining socioeconomic status, along with paternal education, income, type of employment and language background, making it difficult to isolate the influence of maternal education alone (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Vernon-Feagans & Bratsch-Hines, 2013). Nevertheless, it has been found that maternal education is related to mothers' beliefs about what literacy is and how it is learnt (Fitzgerald et al., 1991; Lynch et al., 2006; Sonnenschein et al., 2000), which in turn shapes the extent to which they talk to their children and the kinds of literacy experiences they provide (Hoff, 2003). Hasan (1991; 2009 [1992]; 2009 [1993]), for example, found that higher SES mothers were more likely to use mental process verbs (*think, know, wonder*), reasoning talk (*because, if … then*) and decontextualised talk, compared with lower SES mothers; that is, these mothers were more likely to use discourse patterns that are literacy-oriented and particularly valued in school contexts. Torr (2004) found differences in the amount and type of maternal talk that mothers from

different educational backgrounds produced during shared reading with their four-year-old children. The early school-leaving mothers tended to read the book straight through, with little interaction, while the university-level mothers and their children engaged in extensive conversations about the text and pictures. Williams (2001) found similar differences between the amount and type of mother-child talk that occurred during shared reading, in relation to mothers' social positioning, a key feature of which was their educational status.

As Dickinson (2011) explains: "Between birth and school entrance, there is rapid growth of language and associated competencies essential to later literacy, and learning gaps associated with these competencies relate to social economic status" (p. 964). Research on home literacy environments, family beliefs and practices, and socioeconomic status provide libraries with information which can assist them to tailor their literacy programs to the communities they serve. Through modelling interactive reading with children and directly addressing mothers and other caregivers, librarians can interest and stimulate children, facilitate their understanding of literacy, and encourage parents to engage in emergent literacy practices at home.

5.2.2   Gender

Gender is the subject of many debates about improving literacy levels. Internationally, girls' literacy performance is consistently stronger than that of boys. In Australia, this gender gap is usually discussed with reference to the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results, where boys score lower than girls across tests on reading, writing, and language conventions in Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2011 to present). The gap, however, is apparent at school entry, too, with boys 1.7 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in the domains of communication as well as language and cognitive (school-based) skills (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). These results reflect not a neurobiological, or "natural", distinction between the sexes, but the powerful influence that social expectations of femininity and masculinity – and their interaction with factors such as SES and parental education levels – have on boys' and girls' as well as mothers' and fathers' differential engagement with literacy resources and practices (Alloway, 2007).

Research reveals that boys and girls differ in the content of the texts they choose to read and produce, and their motivation for and frequency of engaging in reading and writing. While broad findings that girls prefer fiction and boys non-fiction have been challenged (Alloway, 2007; Merga, 2017; Mohr, 2006), in general the discourses that boys appear to be attracted to and reproduce in their play and writing represent males as heroes and active participants, and girls and women as vulnerable and passive victims; girls, by contrast, are drawn to discourses that focus on emotions and relationships (Marsh, 2003; Millard & Bhojwani, 2012; Wohlwend, 2009). Coles and Hall (2002) argue that boys' lower motivation for and achievement in reading may be due to the inability of primary school curricula to cater to their reading preferences (Coles & Hall, 2002). A study that involved 232 10-year-olds (117 boys) in completing a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire revealed that the girls had better reading comprehension, higher reading frequency and more positive attitudes

towards reading, school and themselves as readers, but the difference between girls' and boys' reading ability was much smaller (Logan & Johnston, 2009). The study examined the relations between these factors too: the reading ability of boys as well as girls was associated with their reading frequency and competency beliefs, and for boys also with their attitudes to reading and school.

Reading preferences and attitudes, as well stereotypes of reading as a passive, and by association feminine, activity reflect broader ideas about femininity and masculinity (Alloway, 2007; Millard & Bhojwani, 2012; Nichols, 1994, 2002). Children are socialised into these ideas through popular culture and media (Millard & Bhojwani, 2012) as well as everyday interactions with their parents and teachers. For example, in-depth analyses of the interactions between 24 mothers (12 from low and 12 from high SES families) and their 3-4-year-old children (12 boys and 12 girls) in the mid-to-late 1980s showed that these mothers tended to describe their role as carers and educators of their children as not important (not labour) and themselves as 'silly', 'forgetful' and needing help and emotional support (Cloran, 1989; Hasan, 1996). Parents' and teachers' gendered views also correlate with children's attitudes towards and achievement in reading. A study of 31 5-year-old children in South Australia showed that, although girls' attitudes to reading were more positive overall, both boys and girls were likely to have lower attitudes if their parents held gendered views about literacy (e.g. "girls are naturally good at reading", "boys are more likely to experience difficulties in language and literacy") (Ozturk, Hill, & Yates, 2016). Wolter, Braun and Hannover (2015) have demonstrated that preschool teachers' attitudes about gender roles in general (e.g. "Both boys and girls should help with household chores") correlate with children's reading motivation and literacy achievement: teachers' traditional gender role attitudes in preschool have a negative impact on boys' reading motivation, which negatively impacts boys' reading development in the first year of school.

Gender equity views are thus crucial for promoting success in literacy for all children. To foster such views, rather than avoid materials with gender-bias, educators are encouraged to draw on children's familiarity with popular culture and engage them in identifying and questioning gender stereotypes, thereby promoting critical literacy (Alloway, 2007; Millard & Bhojwani, 2012). Another strategy for debunking the myth that reading and writing are not masculine activities is to engage fathers and male educators in young children's literacy learning from birth.

Studies of fathers and early literacy show that fathers can have a unique, direct contribution to children's language and literacy development, and that this potential often remains untapped. One reason is that fathers' style of communication, which is typically less responsive to children's initiations and features more frequent requests for clarification and use of new, unfamiliar vocabulary, prepares children for communication with people outside their family (see reviews in Fagan, Iglesias, & Kaufman, 2016; Varghese & Wachen, 2016). However, fathers have been shown to engage less frequently than mothers in literacy activities with their children, offer less guidance in children's reading choices, and know less about how to support early literacy (see review in Palm, 2013). This trend is stronger among fathers with lower levels of education and those less involved in childcare tasks (Duursma & Pan, 2011; Palm, 2013; Varghese & Wachen, 2016).

Research has pointed to several barriers to father involvement in home literacy practices: full-time employment; residency status; negative experiences of reading, literacy and school; and, most importantly, experiences of literacy practices and programs as feminised domains, dominated by mothers and female educators (Palm, 2013; Saracho, 2007). Fathers' motivations for engaging in early literacy also vary. While most focus on building children's reading skills or enjoyment and bonding, others emphasise fulfilling social expectations and reproducing practices from their own childhood (Swain, Cara, & Mallows, 2017). Fathers from ethnic minorities may also view shared reading as a way to help their children overcome the negative effects of poverty and racism on success at school (Ortiz, 2004). These findings suggest that gender interacts with many other factors in determining father involvement in early literacy, as it does in shaping children's literacy performance (Alloway, 2007; Morgan, Nutbrown, & Hannon, 2009).

In seeking to engage fathers in early literacy programs, public libraries must develop strategies that harness fathers' motivations for involvement in early literacy and help them overcome the barriers. Such programs may also change gendered attitudes and behaviours through strategies such as using books that feature positive representations of fathers, employing males as storytime presenters, and organising visits by authors or storytellers that may appeal to fathers and boys (Saracho, 2007).

5.2.3   Children learning English as an Additional Language (EAL)

According to the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), one fifth (21.5%) of Australian children starting school have a language background other than English (LBOTE) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). Among these, the overwhelming majority of those who are not proficient in English (94%) are vulnerable in one or more developmental domains (physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge). This contrasts starkly with the number of children classified as developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains among children with LBOTE who *are* proficient in English (27.8%) and children who only speak English (20.4%).

Bilingualism – developing or having a certain level of proficiency in two or more languages – is a complex phenomenon. Researchers classify bilingualism as **'early infant'/ 'simultaneous'** when a child begins learning two or more languages side by side from birth or soon after, and as **'sequential'/ 'successive'** when an additional language is learned after three years of age, which is often due to immigrating or starting (pre)school where the dominant language differs from one's home language/s (Pinter, 2011). Cases where a new language is developed while proficiency in the language or languages previously learned is maintained or extended are examples of '**additive bilingualism**', and a person with the ability to use different languages equally well across a range of different contexts can be described as a '**balanced bilingual**'; this contrasts with **'subtractive bilingualism'**, where proficiency in one language is gained at the expense of that in another (Pinter, 2011). Replacing the use of home and community languages (e.g. traditional Indigenous Australian languages) with the dominant language used in

government, legal, educational and many other contexts in a given society results in **language loss** (Fillmore, 1991, 2000).

Being bilingual has many benefits:

- cognitive and health benefits (increased attention; higher skills in abstract representation; stronger awareness of language use and thinking skills; attention; memory; and executive function), because using two or more languages is a cognitively demanding activity (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Barac & Bialystok, 2012; Bialystok, 2011; Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Marian & Shook, 2012; Valian, 2014);

- social and emotional benefits such as the ability to communicate and establish close relations with important others in one's community and beyond, learn about different cultures and their values, and so on (Da & Welch, 2016; Fielding, 2015; Fillmore, 1991; Seo, 2017; Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002); and

- economic benefits, as it is associated with enhanced employment opportunities (Callahan & Gándara, 2014).

Promoting early language and literacy in a multilingual and multicultural society such as Australia, where English is the dominant language, involves two key challenges, supporting children to (1) learn English as an additional language (EAL) as well as (2) maintain their use and development of home or community languages.

To effectively support children in learning English as an additional (or 'second') language, educators need to have knowledge of common periods that children learning a second language experience (Macrory, 2006; Restrepo & Dubasik, 2008; Tabors & Snow, 2001). These include:

1. **Silent period:** child does not yet use English, and does not interact with others but is observing them silently, and may non-verbally express negative emotions (sadness, anger, frustration)

2. **Early English language learning:** child begins to use formulaic expressions ('Hello', 'Good-bye', 'Thank you') or telegraphic speech ('Pack away', 'Go home') in English

3. **Productive English:** child begins to use make statements and ask questions in English, although they may be ungrammatical or limited in vocabulary

4. **Fluent English:** child uses fluent English, although minor grammar and word choice problems may persist.

It is important to understand that children learning EAL are a very diverse group, and their success in learning English depends on multiple, interacting factors: their level of proficiency in their home, dominant or first language (L1) and L1's similarity to English; background knowledge and experiences; preschool attendance; socio-cultural and socio-economic background; and home literacy environment and family attitudes to English and other languages, literacy and learning in general (Hammer, Jia, & Uchikoshi, 2011; Hu, Torr, & Whiteman, 2014; Paez, Bock, & Pizzo, 2011). For example, strong proficiency in Spanish has been found to promote Latino children's gains in learning English in the United States (Hammer et al., 2011; Pizzo & Páez, 2017), and attendance of formal childcare with an educational preschool program to

increase proficiency in English for bilingual children in Australia, when compared to more informal childcare (O'Connor, O'Connor, Kvalsvig, & Goldfeld, 2014). Learning EAL is also enhanced through children's participation in shared reading at home, regardless of whether children experience that in their home language or English (Roberts, 2008).

Alongside such variability, research has revealed that interventions designed to improve the academic outcomes of children learning EAL must focus especially on English vocabulary and oral language skills, as it is on language and listening comprehension tests, rather than tests of more constrained early literacy skills, that young children learning English tend to perform poorly (Paez et al., 2011). In an Australian study where such children received a language-focused intervention in the first year of school, this intervention was found to allow these children to achieve the same literacy and numeracy outcomes as their monolingual peers at ages 10-11 (Dennaoui et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2017).

Strategies for supporting young children's learning of EAL include: consistency in routines and the use of non-verbal resources, as these can help these children become familiar with a given context and interpret the language used in it; explicit teaching of new words and word-learning strategies; and providing authentic, varied and rich language and literacy experiences in both formal early childhood education settings and home and community contexts (Castro, Espinosa, & Paez, 2011; Gillanders & Castro, 2011; Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013; Nemeth & Erdosi, 2012; Paez et al., 2011; Pizzo & Páez, 2017; Tabors & Snow, 2001). Educators must also build knowledge about the socio-cultural models of literacy and learning that children are exposed to at home, so they can educate and encourage parents to engage children in practices that extend children's background knowledge and ability to make meaning, which parents tend to focus on in activities they perceive as fun/play-oriented, and not just in practices they perceive as school-oriented such as learning the alphabet, numbers and colours, which typically involve copying and repetition (Hammer et al., 2011; Paez et al., 2011; Paratore, Krol-Sinclair, Paez, & Paratore-Bock, 2010).

Like success in learning EAL, children's maintenance or loss of their home languages depends on numerous factors. A longitudinal study of 4252 bilingual Australian children from birth through to school entry (Verdon, McLeod, & Winsler, 2014) has revealed that home language maintenance rates are higher: in certain language groups (with higher rates in Arabic-speaking compared to Italian-speaking children); when children live with grandparents speaking the home language; among children who attend family-based, rather than centre-based, care; when both parents use the home language, and are first- or second-generation migrants. The study also found that parental beliefs about the value of home language maintenance play a role too, and may relate to cultural migration patterns and plans to return to one's country of origin after living and working in Australia. The parents of children who maintained their home language more frequently reported a perception that their children's early childhood centres provided inadequate support for home language maintenance. The findings of this large-scale study thus point to the need for early childhood education and care settings and community and government organisations to provide more support for home language maintenance as well as to educate families and early childhood centre staff about the many benefits of raising bilingual children.

5.2.4   Indigenous Children in Australia and English as an Additional Dialect (EAD)

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (2009) introduced strategies for reducing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' results in literacy and numeracy by 2018. Yet, children from Australian Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to have the highest representation rate in the indexes of developmental vulnerability (21%) and risk (16.7%) in the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). This is particularly evident in the domain of language and cognitive skills where Indigenous children are almost four times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable compared to non-Indigenous children (20.2% compared 5.7%), despite decline in the proportion of Indigenous children with developmental vulnerability in this domain, from 28.6% in 2009 to 22.4% in 2012 and then 21% in 2015 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016).

There are many factors that contribute to the educational disadvantage Indigenous children experience. These include (1) distal factors such as poverty, poor health, parental education levels, and socio-cultural history, and (2) proximal factors which are directly related to education and literacy, such as children's cognitive and communication skills and experiences with language and learning (Bremner & Scull, 2016; Dunn, 2001; Maher & Bellen, 2015; Prior, 2013; Webb & Williams, 2018). Poverty and poor health can diminish access to literacy resources and the ability of families to engage their children in and prioritise literacy practices. As mobility is common in Indigenous Australian cultures, so too is the sharing of (literacy) resources (Kitson & Bowes, 2010), with implications for book-gifting programs and similar literacy interventions. The prevalence of specific health conditions such as otitis media (middle ear infection) and hearing loss in Indigenous communities can hinder children's developing ability to discriminate patterns of speech sounds (i.e. their phonological and phonemic awareness), which is essential in learning to read, as well as their capacity to engage in and enjoy interactions with peers and educators and overall self-esteem (Dunn, 2001; Partington & Galloway, 2005; Timms, Williams, Stokes, & Kane, 2014). Such experiences often lead to disengagement from formal educational settings and mistrust towards authorities, compounded by Indigenous peoples' history of being colonised and denied equal treatment and respect for their linguistic and cultural richness (Dunn, 2001; Kitson & Bowes, 2010); this perpetuate the cycle of educational and social disadvantage in Indigenous communities.

These distal factors interact with children's language, literacy and learning experiences and achievements: high maternal education is positively related to Indigenous children's English vocabulary levels and growth, in contrast to high numbers of children in the family (Short, Eadie, Descallar, Comino, & Kemp, 2017), and school absenteeism as related to low phonological processing and early literacy skills (Ehrich et al., 2010). When interviewed on their beliefs about literacy, Indigenous mothers with tertiary education expressed views of literacy activities as a source of enjoyment and learning through interaction, while early school-leaving mothers' focus was on specific literacy skills developed through rote learning and repetition, and these views are likely to be reflected in the nature of the literacy experiences they provide for their children (Torr, 2008a). Both understanding of these distal factors and knowledge of Indigenous children's experiences with

language, literacy and learning are therefore required in order to support early language and literacy in Indigenous communities.

Multilingualism is the norm in ATSI communities, even though only half of the 250 traditional Indigenous Australian languages that the first European settlers encountered still exist, and only 13 of those are learned and used by new generations, with the rest considered endangered (Marmion, Obata, & Tory, 2014). A recent longitudinal study of language learning and maintenance among 580 young ATSI children shows that one in five speak an Indigenous language, 99% speak Aboriginal English and/or Standard Australian English, and 4% use or are learning other languages, including sign language (Verdon & McLeod, 2015). The study shows that children whose primary carers speak an Indigenous language and who live in remote communities are most likely to speak an Indigenous language, typically code-switching between it and English. A related study (McLeod, Verdon, & Bennetts Kneebone, 2014) shows that a third of ATSI families wanted their children to learn an Indigenous language, and that, overall, Indigenous children tend to have rich home literacy experiences, including story telling (as expected in traditionally oral cultures) and book reading. These experiences also promote bilingualism: among 86 children who spoke an Indigenous language with median age of 37 months, oral story telling was shown to significantly predict their Indigenous vocabulary, while access to books and parent-child book reading was associated with better English vocabulary development in a sample of 573 Indigenous children of similar age (Farrant, Shepherd, Walker, & Pearson, 2014).

While the acceptance, maintenance and revitalisation of Indigenous language is an important goal, to succeed in school, children need skills in the official language of education and government, which is associated with those with power in Australian society – Standard Australian English (SAE) (Partington & Galloway, 2005; Prior, 2013). Many Indigenous children start school with limited or no proficiency in SAE as they have grown up in communities that use Indigenous Australian languages and/or Aboriginal dialects of English, collectively referred to as 'Aboriginal English' (AE). The history of AE and its differences from SAE reflect the experiences and values of the communities that use these dialects. As Eades (1993, 2013) explains, AE's emergence can be traced back to Indigenous people's use of ***pidgin***, a simplified language developed to communicate in situations of contact with the colonisers, and its growth into a ***creole***, "a language which develops when a pidgin expands its structures and functions to become the first language of speakers" (Eades, 2013, p. 80). AE dialects differ from SAE in systematic ways and across all levels of language structure and use, as the examples in Table 3 illustrate.

Table 3. Some differences between Aboriginal English dialects and Standard Australian English (based on Eades, 1993, 2013).

Types of differences	Aboriginal English (AE)	Standard Australian English (SAE)
Phonology	*'Enry's at* *p* or *b ('We had a bight.')* *t* or *d*	*Henry's hat* *f* or *v ('We had a fight.')* *th*
Grammar	*I can't see that man car.* *Where Tom house?* *'e ('E down in Brisbane.)* *brang* *I haven't seen no one.*	*I can't see the man's car.* *Where is Tom's house?* *he/she* *brought* *I haven't seen anyone*
Words and their meanings	*lift* *buliman/gandjibal* *deadly* *mother*	*steal* *policeman* *really good, awesome* *mother* or *mother's sister*
Language use	Information is elicited indirectly, by sharing information. Silence is a sign of respect.	Information is elicited by direct questions. Silence is interpreted as lack of knowledge, shyness, dishonesty.

Awareness of differences between AE and SAE, and the value systems they reflect, is as essential for supporting Indigenous children to learn SAE, develop early literacy skills, and transition into school as it is for successful communication with Indigenous children and families (Bremner & Scull, 2016; Dunn, 2001; Harrison & Sellwood, 2016; Maher & Bellen, 2015; Partington & Galloway, 2005; Prior, 2013; Simpson, Munns, & Clancy, 1999; Webb & Williams, 2018). For example, the grapho-phonic correspondence between the letter 'H' and the sound /h/ may be elusive for children if /h/ is not pronounced in words such as 'hat' or 'his' in their primary dialect. The use of terms such as 'uncle', 'aunty' and 'mother' to refer to people who may not be related by blood to a child but are significant to and respected by the child's family, on the other hand, reflects a much broader notion of 'family' and communal responsibility for child-rearing in Indigenous communities (Kitson & Bowes, 2010). Indigenous children may also interpret direct questions, which are commonly used by educators in mainstream classrooms to test children's knowledge (i.e. as pseudo questions) rather than to genuinely request for information, as 'shaming' questions (Eades, 1993; Simpson et al., 1999).

Research has identified several principles for effective educational programs for Indigenous children and their families (Barton & Barton, 2017; Bremner & Scull, 2016; Harrison & Sellwood, 2016; Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Maher & Bellen, 2015; Partington & Galloway, 2005; D. Rose, 2015). These include:

- creating opportunities for Indigenous languages, AE and SAE to be used side by side, in ways that make children aware of the differences between them

- educating children about differences between their home culture and the patterns of interaction and behaviour expected in formal educational settings

- integrating Aboriginal cultures into the programs through storytelling, song, dance and other art forms

- engaging Indigenous Elders and the community into processes of designing, delivering and evaluating the programs, and thereby integrating Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing

- selecting or creating picture books that reflect not only the cultural heritage but also the everyday experiences of Indigenous children and their families, and involve the local Indigenous community in that process.

Of these strategies, many studies place strong emphasis on storytelling, due to its potential to promote vocabulary grown in Indigenous languages, the significance of Dreamtime narratives and related art to Indigenous Australian cultures and identities, and its capacity to provide them with meaningful and engaging contexts for developing basic decoding skills. Australian public libraries have a key advantage in addressing social disadvantage related to early language and literacy in Indigenous communities, as they are seen as a non-threatening environment by Aboriginal people and tend to have strong connections with the communities they serve (Allen, 2010; Barratt-Pugh, Anderson, & North, 2013; Barratt-Pugh, Kilgallon, & Statkus, 2009; Barratt-Pugh & Maloney, 2015; Shepherd, 2009).

Summary

There are four key factors that educators must consider when seeking to promote the language and literacy development of children in Australia.

1. **Home literacy environment and social positioning**

The home literacy environment includes:

(1) the **quantity** and **quality of the language interactions with adults** that children experience, and

(2) the **literacy artefacts, events and activities** available to children at home.

Parental beliefs about what literacy is and how it is learned strongly shape the home literacy environment they provide for their children. These beliefs fall into two main perspectives:

(1) 'emergent literacy', where literacy is viewed as enjoyable, embedded in everyday life and learnt through shared reading

(2) 'skills-based literacy', where literacy is viewed as consisting of distinct skills with emphasis on rote learning, flashcards and workbooks.

Research has shown that emergent literacy perspectives are associated with higher parental education levels and family socio-economic status, while skills-based perspectives are associated with lower parental education levels, literacy and lower socio-economic status.

2. **Gender**

Gender equity initiatives are needed to promote literacy success for all children by questioning stereotypes, actively engaging fathers in young children's literacy development, employing male presenters for early literacy sessions and showcasing stories/books with positive representations of fatherhood and masculinity.

3. **Children speaking English as an additional language (EAL)**

Promoting the early language and literacy of children for whom English is an additional language involves supporting them to learn English and to maintain their community language(s). Learning EAL is enhanced by: shared reading at home, regardless of the language used; explicit teaching of new words; provision of a variety of authentic, language-rich experiences in early childhood education settings, home and community contexts; and use of non-verbal resources and routines to promote comprehension.

4. **Indigenous Australian children and English as an additional dialect**

Effective educational programs for Indigenous children include: integrating Aboriginal cultures into various programs through storytelling, art, dance; engaging Elders and the community in processes of program design, delivery and evaluation; and selecting picture books that reflect Indigenous cultural heritage and the everyday experiences of Indigenous children. Many public libraries have a strong connection with the Indigenous communities they serve, and this gives them an advantage in addressing social disadvantage related to early language and literacy learning in Indigenous communities.

6 Public libraries as early literacy environments

Becoming literate involves participation in a range of social activities involving reading, writing, singing, and craft-/art-making. Language interactions with others are central to all these activities and crucial for literacy and learning. These social practices and interactions with other people such as parents and carers, family members, and professionals such as librarians lay the path to becoming a proficient reader and writer, and being able to engage in reading or writing as a solitary, independent activity later on.

Public libraries promote early language and literacy in the communities they serve in various ways. These include book-gifting programs for disadvantaged families, information sessions about language and literacy development for parents and early childhood educators, and collaborating with health services and other organisations in order to support 'hard-to-reach' members of the community. Providing a welcoming, comfortable space and free access to diverse reading materials, and early literacy sessions for children and their caregivers, however, are at the heart of public library services for children and families. Early literacy sessions, or storytimes, typically incorporate activities such as singing and reciting nursery rhymes, reading, storytelling and craft in which children and their caregivers engage together. Sharing the experience of attending and participating in storytime sessions allows carers to build on it by re-reading or talking about the books read during the session, revisiting a session's theme, or using the craft object made at the session as a stimulus for literacy-oriented conversations about aspects of their storytime experience, including the storytime session and the library itself. This section reviews research into the ways that the design of children's sections in public libraries and the activities of singing and reciting nursery rhymes, reading, storytelling and craft support early language and literacy development.

6.1 Space

The importance of children's sections in public libraries is reflected in the increase of allocation of floor space to these sections (Feinberg & Keller, 2010). The children's section needs to cater for often large groups of children and their carers as well as a diverse range of activities, from browsing the collection and quiet interaction with books to group singing and dancing. In guidelines on how libraries can meet these goals, three space design factors feature prominently: flexibility, ergonomics and scale (Bon, Cranfield, & Latimer, 2012; Brown, 2002; Feinberg & Keller, 2010; Feinberg, Kucher, & Feldman, 1998; Lesneski, 2012; State Library of New South Wales, 2012). Another important factor is a section's organisation: for example, whether the children's section will be assigned one discrete space or a number of smaller spaces woven throughout the library (Feinberg & Keller, 2010).

Designers of library spaces must also consider 'adjacency', that is, which spaces and functions will sit beside one another as well as how furniture and equipment within a discrete space will be arranged (Brown, 2002; Feinberg & Keller, 2010). The children's section must be: easily accessible from library's entrance, yet located safely away from the exit to avoid children running out of the library; close to rest rooms for children and caregivers; and away from quiet reading areas (Brown, 2002; Nichols,

2011). Within the children's section, adjacencies can create a comfortable and safe environment for infants and their parents, encourage active toddler exploration, and provide access to materials on the shelves or in containers, and storage areas needed for storytime resources such as puppets, musical instruments and craft materials (Bon et al., 2012; Knoll, 2014). Importantly, if the children's space is to reflect the fundamental philosophy of community service (Rankin, 2016), consideration needs to be given to the presence and placement of library staff and their work stations, for example beside the children's area (so that staff are accessible for interaction with children and caregivers) or spatially removed from such opportunities (for example, on another level of the building).

The design of library spaces for children must reflect "the importance of connecting children to books" (Feinberg & Keller 2010, p. 22) and inspire learning. A trend that addresses this challenge is 'creatively designed' or 'thematic' spaces (Bayliss, 2013). Inspired by museums, these are interpretive environments such as tree houses or hot air balloons believed to "promote user involvement and enhance the experience of learning" (State Library of New South Wales, 2012, p. 77) by creating a sense of 'playfulness and fun' (Exley cited in Bayliss, 2013). This emphasis on 'playfulness' is also evident in the move towards a 'new breed of literacy-packed play spaces', with built-in activities and technologies, such as sentence-makers, soundboards or commercial phonics programs, designed to support the development of specific literacy skills (Bayliss, 2013, p. 1; Knoll 2014).

However, ensuring that children's engagement results in benefits for early language development, literacy and learning (including learning to use the library and access age-appropriate materials) relies on children's interactions with their caregivers and library staff, as Becker's (2012) and Neuman and Celano's (2012a; 2012b) ethnographic studies of children in public libraries illustrate. It is therefore important that public libraries are designed so as to encourage interactions between children, their caregivers and library staff, before, during, and after as well as beyond early literacy sessions. Focusing on creating opportunities for such interactions is also important when libraries hold early literacy sessions as outreach events outside the library, in shopping centres, parks and other community hubs.

6.2   Singing and nursery rhymes

The singing and reciting of nursery rhymes is a staple of early literacy sessions, especially those for infants and toddlers (Thomas, 2008). One of the key ways singing and reciting nursery rhymes helps language and early literacy development is by helping children learn the rhythmic and melodic patterns of spoken language. Speech is highly rhythmic and has a regular beat, and this quality is particularly strong in nursery rhymes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004): "And when the rhymes have been set to music, and are sung, the same patterns are reinforced over and over again" (ibid., p.16). So as children chant these rhymes, they are not just reciting words, they are also learning the rhythmic and melodic patterns, the intonation, of the English language, which plays a crucial role in the meanings we make when we speak (Halliday, 1985).

Nursery rhymes, finger plays and (action) songs have been show to support vocabulary learning, communication and listening skills in children as well (Frasher, 2014; D. J. Harris, 2011), including in young English language learners (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). Beyond introducing children to new words, some of which are literary and uncommon in everyday conversations (e.g. 'Mary, Mary quite *contrary*'), singing nursery rhymes can help develop turn-taking and other interaction skills (through call and response songs), understanding of characters and emotions, and awareness of common relations between words and word patterns, or collocation (for example, part-part relations in 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes') (Parlakian & Lerner, 2010).

There is also evidence that singing and nursery rhymes promote early literacy skills and predict later reading success (Bryant, Bradley, Maclean, & Crossland, 2009; Dunst, Meter, & Hamby, 2011; Maclean, Bryant, & Bradley, 1987; Richards, 2010; Wiggins, 2007). They are of particular importance to children's developing phonological and phonemic awareness, that is, their ability to distinguish sound patterns in spoken language such as intonation, rhythm and rhyme, and to break down words into smaller units of sound (syllables, onset-rhyme, and phonemes) (Harper, 2011; Yopp & Yopp, 2009). While nursery rhymes rely on rhyming words (e.g. fiddle-diddle) and emphasise syllables through their rhythm, the physical act of singing involves "segmenting and blending phonemes on the breath" (O'Herron & Siebenaler 2007, p. 17).

To optimise the benefits of nursery rhymes and singing for language and literacy development, when reciting nursery rhymes and/or singing with children, adults should pronounce words clearly so as to articulate the phonemes, the smallest sound units in language (O'Herron & Siebenaler, 2007). Children first learn language by ***listening*** to the speech, sounds and prosody of their caregivers, which they later imitate. Research has shown that 5-month-old babies can discriminate sounds in three-syllable utterances as well as imitate pitch contours and vowels (Papoušek, 1994). It is thus important for presenters of early literacy sessions to clearly articulate the speech sounds in songs and nursery rhymes.

Sharing in musical activities such as clapping/tapping promotes attachment by connecting people to one another (Hill-Clarke & Robinson, 2004). Attachment is fostered by singing in tune with the group, as each child needs to blend vocally with others rather than competing with them (O'Herron & Siebenaler 2007). Such attachment then has the capacity to open the way to the building of a community.

6.3 Reading

The reading of picture books is a central activity in early literacy sessions at public libraries. In early literacy sessions, *reading* typically involves an educator or presenter reading the written text aloud while simultaneously holding the book in such a way that a group of children can see the visual images. Some sessions may also include a segment where children and their caregivers read picture books together. This practice provides children with the opportunity to see how books are handled and pages are turned, to listen to the patterns of written language read aloud, and to be entertained by or engage with the narrative or other text type and the pictures within the book.

A large body of research has established the undeniable value of reading in the years prior to school for children's later literacy and learning achievements (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Saracho, 2017; Van Kleeck, Stahl, & Bauer, 2003; Wasik, Hindman, & Snell, 2016). Reading to young children promotes positive attitudes towards literacy, and can support the development of both decoding skills and comprehension skills (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Saracho, 2017).

The benefits of shared reading in supporting young children's literacy and learning are a product not just of its quantity (frequency and duration) but also, and primarily, of its quality (Bojczyk et al., 2016; Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Fletcher & Reese, 2005) (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011). Libraries can help children and their families engage in quality reading in two main ways: (i) provide access to a diverse range of developmentally appropriate reading materials and quality children's literature (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008; Hoffman, Teale, & Junko, 2015); and (ii) encourage families to value reading for enjoyment and engage in dialogic reading where both adult and child actively discuss the texts they read together and their connections to other texts and experiences (Whitehurst et al., 1988).

Indeed, research has shown that it is not just reading per se but the ***discussion*** surrounding the reading which is most facilitative of children's emerging literacy understandings and affective experiences (Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008; Snow, 1994; Vander Woude, Van Kleeck, & Vander Veen, 2009). The term *shared reading* refers to the book-focused interactions between an adult and one or more children who cannot yet read and write in conventional terms. Shared reading is different from *guided reading*, which is associated with early intervention studies where an educator interacts with a child in prescribed ways (Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992). The term *shared reading* is preferred to *joint reading* or *read-alouds*, as it foregrounds the fact that both adult and child participate in, and contribute to, the surrounding book-sharing conversation.

Existing knowledge of the benefits of shared reading for children's literacy and learning is based mainly on studies of mother-child interactions (Bus et al., 1995; C. M. Edwards, 2014). These studies suggest that quality shared reading interactions engage children in using literacy- and learning-oriented (or decontextualised) language, that is, language that can be understood without reference to the immediate physical context, and can support learning as it enables adults and children to label, compare, classify, reason and hypothesise (Torr, 2004) as well as to refer to one's life experiences and to other texts (Torr, 2007). According to Schickedanz and Collins (2013), the adult assumes two roles during shared reading:

> First, he [sic] provides comprehensible input to help the child understand the book by commenting about the text and illustrations to fill in background knowledge, make connections to the child's life, and label and explain unknown objects and concepts. Second, he [sic] promotes the child's expressive language by welcoming the child's comments and questions and by asking questions, too. (p. 32)

The primary function of the adult's talk during shared reading is therefore to facilitate the child's understanding of the meanings in the book using comments and questions.

Questioning seeks to focus children's attention on key aspects of the text and to encourage them to respond through speech, sound or gestures. Hasan (1991) described adults' questions in interactions with children from the perspective of the child as respondent:

- ***Polar (yes/no) questions*** seek a confirmation or denial. Two examples are '*Can you see the little mouse?*' and *'Do you think he's hungry?'*.

- ***Specify questions (who, where, when, what)*** ask children to provide a name or label for an entity or event; for example, '*Where is the mouse hiding?' or 'What is the mouse eating?'*.

- ***Explain questions* (*how, why*)** seek a verbal explanation, prediction or hypothesis, and encourage extended responses; for instance, '*Why do seals sleep like that?'*.

When questioning is used as a strategy to enhance children's comprehension of a text, it will obviously vary according to the age, experiences, and linguistic competencies of the child (see Table 2). Explain questions are particularly important for helping preschool children to develop the ability to go "beyond information that is directly provided in a text to fill in information needed to understand the text or to elaborate on the information given" (Van Kleeck, 2008, p. 628), that is, to go beyond literal comprehension and engage in inferencing.

Parents and educators can also support children's understanding of the meanings in picture books through animated voice quality, gestures and props such as puppets and musical instruments (May, 2011; McGee & Schickedanz, 2007; Rao, Newlin-Haus, & Ehrhardt, 2016). Re-reading familiar books is also important for children's ability to make meaning and especially to learn new words from it (Wasik et al., 2016).

Children's participation during shared reading is important. Their responses and questions provide the adult reader with valuable information about how children understand the meaning of the text and what features are most engaging to them. Children's interpretations of pictures are often idiosyncratic and differ from those of adults (Torr, 2007, 2008b; Torr & Scott, 2006). Babies and toddlers, who may not yet interact verbally, can participate by responding physically to the rhythm and repetition in the text (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013).

There is also emerging evidence to suggesting that qualities of picture books (e.g. their genre and use of language and images) affect children's and adults' use of literacy-oriented language during shared reading (Nyhout & O'Neill, 2013; Robertson & Reese, 2017; Saracho, 2017; Torr, 2007; Torr & Clugston, 1999; Torr & Scott, 2006).

As most of these findings are from studies of one-to-one shared reading interactions, their implications for reading to a group of young children require careful consideration. According to Schickedanz and Collins (2013), group reading presents a range of challenges, which are summarised below.

- **Seating:** All children need to be able to see the educator/adult-reader and the book's illustrations, and this is why children typically sit on the floor while the educator sits on a chair. This arrangement is less likely to

encourage individual children to approach the educator and the book and engage in other disruptive behaviours.

- **Book format:** Using big books as well as books with clear illustrations can also help ensure all children can see the book, although this also involves the risk of distracting their attention away from the presenter's speech.

- **Book introductions:** To ensure all children in the group understand the key meanings in a text, clear book introductions are essential. The educator needs to start by introducing the book's title, author and illustrator and some of the key ideas/topics and associated vocabulary. For a story book, these ideas may include the setting, main characters and central problem.

- **Multimodality of presentation:** The educator's use of voice quality (volume, pitch, and pace), clear articulation, gestures, gaze, props and other resources for meaning-making is key to a successful whole-group reading.

- **Diversity of children's knowledge:** Children vary in their experiences and background knowledge, and their oral language and visual literacy skills, and consequently in their ability to interpret different ideas presented in a book. At the same time, a group session necessarily needs to limit opportunities for individual children to ask for clarification and disrupt the book reading presentation, and children who need such clarifications the most may in any case be unwilling to voice their question. This is why educators need to be aware of the possible challenges that children may face in understanding key concepts in a book such as relations between events and the emotions of characters in a narrative, and to carefully plan how and when to use comprehension asides, to explain key vocabulary and refer to the illustrations or use other resources (props, gesture, voice quality) to support children's understanding of the meanings in the text being read.

- **Discussion:** To allow all children to engage with the reading of the book, educators need to very carefully plan their discussion questions and leave time for discussion *after* the book has been read. Educators should also avoid the following *'discussion pitfalls'*:
    - asking children to retell a story
    - letting a child's tangential comment interrupt the reading or change the direction of the discussion
    - asking only *yes/no* or only literal (*what, where, when, who)*, low-level comprehension questions
    - using only pseudo-questions designed just to test the children's knowledge, and replacing genuine discussion with a 'question and answer' session
    - asking children to relate a story or some other ideas to their own personal experience
    - relying on generic, open-ended questions (e.g. *Why do you think that's a great story?*)

o supplying the correct answers and not allowing enough time for children themselves to consider and use information provided in the text to respond to discussion questions.

These challenges are arguably even more prominent for library staff involved in planning and presenting early literacy sessions, as they do not typically know in advance how many children and adults will attend each session, what knowledge and experiences they have, and whether and how they will participate in the session (see Table 1). Careful selection of reading materials and planning of how these will be presented are therefore of crucial importance. Many picture books, for example, have a repetitive rhyming structure which enables children to join in the reading with the presenter, thus gaining experience as "readers" themselves, long before they can decode print. Through picture books, children can gain access to high quality visual and verbal art, with the presenter serving as knowledgeable guide and companion through shared reading. As opportunities for extended discussions are limited in storytime sessions at public libraries, compared to childcare settings and especially to shared reading at home, presenters need to carefully select when and how to use, and model for caregivers, the types of questioning and commenting that can support children's language learning and comprehension.

6.4 Storytelling

To promote early literacy and learning, some public libraries incorporate storytelling into storytime. Storytelling involves a story and its telling or performance (Roney, 2008). The term 'story' typically refers to a narrative, a type of story that aims to entertain by introducing characters who take a series of steps to resolve a problem (Rothery, 1994). Telling a story involves a teller, an audience, vocalisation or signing, and possibly the use of props (musical, pictorial and/or other objects). The teller, who in a library storytime is the session presenter, thus employs a range of modes - language, facial expressions, gaze, intonation, gesture, bodily movement, physical proximity and various artefacts such as puppets or felt board – and thus communicates with the audience multimodally (Flewitt, 2017). Although the shared reading of picture books is multimodal as well, there is one key difference: storytelling removes the book, and places the focus on the story, with its problem and unfolding sequence of events (Berkowitz, 2011). Storytelling thus overcomes some of the logistic difficulties of shared reading such as holding a book so that all children can see the pictures and print (Berkowitz, 2011).

Storytelling, like the shared reading of narrative picture books, can support children in developing narrative oral language skills, the ability to recount events and stories; and narrative skills are an important predictor of later literacy achievement across different SES and ethnic backgrounds (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015; Jordan et al., 2000; Snow et al., 1995; Tabors, Roach, & Snow, 2001). Stories can also support children to develop their 'narrative literacy' (Nodelman, 2002), by promoting understanding of: (1) narrative structure, and the role each stage in a narrative plays in creating and engaging the audience; (2) events and experiences in the story and the characters' feelings and relationships; and (3) broader social and cultural themes such as 'friendship', 'kindness' and related social values (Zhang, Djonov, & Torr, 2016b).

A key advantage of storytelling is that the characters in the story 'come to life': the embodied performance allows children to 'see' how characters look, move and sound. This helps children to "develop awareness of and sensitivity to character's attitudes" (Berkowitz 2011, p. 37), and engage with the Evaluation component typically woven through the Complication stage of a narrative (Labov, 1972; Rothery, 1990; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997). The Evaluation functions to share a character's thoughts and feelings, and thus to intensify suspense and build the unfolding problem in the story to a crisis point. The ability to use evaluation to highlight the significance of events in a story at age 5 is predictive of children's reading comprehension at age 8 (Griffin et al., 2004).

Research has shown that understanding of sequences of events in narratives and the ability to recount them support reading comprehension and overall literacy achievement (Cain & Oakhill, 1996; Jordan et al., 2000). Children with an understanding of narrative structure are also able to listen, anticipate and predict how a story would unfold, which are important comprehension strategies. During storytelling, such ability is evident when the children cover their ears in anticipation of a loud noise or listen for repetitive refrains or other cues inviting their participation in the telling of the story.

The main value of stories lies in their transhistorical and transcultural nature: "All people in all cultures weave their experiences into stories; they use language to shape and share their understandings" (Ewing, Callow, & Rushton, 2016, p. 136). Oral storytelling is a precursor of reading and writing across cultures (McKeough et al., 2008). In fact, a study of 33 African American mothers' literacy-oriented interactions with their preschool children found that the mothers, regardless of their SES, were more likely to use decontextualised language in storytelling compared to in shared reading or skills-focused interactions (Curenton, Craig, & Flanigan, 2008). Oral storytelling is particularly valuable for promoting early language and literacy in communities from strong oral culture traditions such as those of the first Australians (see Section 5.2.4), and thus an important resource for early literacy sessions at public libraries.

6.5 Craft

Craft activities are included in most storytime sessions at public libraries, especially those for preschool-aged children. The value of craft for literacy learning, however, is often under-appreciated, despite research showing that story-themed craft making can help provide the building blocks for long-term positive literacy outcomes (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015a, 2015b).

Craft activities with a strong connection to the storytime theme/s can encourage caregivers to ask open-ended questions and focus comments addressed to their children directly on the messages conveyed and language used in the storytime session (Johnston, Ivey, & Faulkner, 2011). This can support children to make connections between the stories, craft activity and their own life experiences, develop deeper responses, and problem solve in ways that are meaningful to them (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015a, 2015b; Johnston et al., 2011).

While the term craft often implies a set product outcome, the nature of library craft should support multiple entry points, shared decision making and freedom of expression, and remain largely open ended (Hopkins, 2013). Skilfully including developmentally appropriate step-by-step instructions in the craft-making process can also support active listening and problem solving (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015b; Hopkins, 2013). At the same time, maintaining flexibility within this approach respects children as diverse learners, and supports their active and enthusiastic participation, whilst fostering a positive attitude towards literacy learning (Dooley & Matthews, 2009; C. P. Edwards et al., 2014; Hopkins, 2013; Rönkkö & Aerila, 2013). Encouraging children and their carers to be immersed in the process of creating, rather than the development of a set product, allows for a focus on story-based discussions, and successfully opens "the door to the world of literature for everyone" (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015a, p. 355; Hopkins, 2013; Rönkkö & Aerila, 2013; Johnston et al., 2011).

To appreciate the value of craft making as an extension of library storytime sessions, it is useful to identify individual learning opportunities and how they support children's early literacy competencies. The benefits can be addressed within two broad categories. Firstly, the physical craft construction supports the development of strength and control in children's arms, hands and fingers, and these fine motor skills are important when learning to write (Hopkins, 2013; Huffman & Fortenberry, 2011; National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2008). Indeed, while diverse and developmentally appropriate craft activities, which intentionally foster children's fine motor development prior to formal schooling, strongly and consistently predict later literacy success, the concentration and persistence children need to successfully engage in the craft-making process predict positive academic outcomes (Grissmer, Grimm, Aiyer, Murrah, & Steele, 2010).

Secondly, shared craft activities are a valuable context for children's oral language and vocabulary development. Quality interactions with caregivers or educators during craft activities encourage children to draw on and enhance their own understanding of the world, their personal experiences and relationships (Dooley & Matthews, 2009). The benefits of active meaning making, rather than a direct focus on skills such as decoding, have been found to better support children's "emergent comprehension" and literacy development (Dooley & Matthews, 2009, p. 269). Engaging children in meaningful exchanges about the literature a craft activity is based on allows caregivers to introduce new words in context and extend children's vocabulary (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015a; Edwards et al., 2014). Craft activities are thus one means for public libraries to fulfil their role in actively connecting children and their caregivers and promoting early language and literacy development (ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee, 2015 [2011]).

Craft experiences also provide children with their own voice and enable them to make their thoughts, interests, and obstacles visible (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015a), which can promote motivation to engage in literacy experiences both at and beyond the public library. At the same time, they offer storytime presenters opportunities to closely observe children's engagement – expressed through facial movements, gestures, oral language and creative expression – and gather valuable information that can inform the design and delivery of future early literacy experiences (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015a; Dooley & Matthews, 2009; Grissmer et al., 2010). Story-themed craft making, in

particular, supports library staff to work in partnership with families and take a play-based approach to learning, which is recommended by the Commonwealth of Australia's Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009).

Summary

Public libraries play an important role in promoting early literacy in the communities they service by providing:

- welcoming and comfortable spaces for learning
- free access to diverse reading materials that are both high quality and developmentally appropriate
- early literacy sessions (e.g. Storytime) designed to support early language and literacy development, and to promote positive attitudes towards books, reading and public libraries themselves.

Early literacy sessions at public libraries include many activities that research has shown to have benefits for children's language and literacy development:

- **Singing and nursery rhymes** can help develop children's phonological and phonemic awareness and vocabulary, and create a sense of belonging to a community.
- **Shared picture book reading** allows children: to hear patterns of written language read aloud, while viewing the illustrations and print on the page; to engage with captivating topics or stories presented in picture books; and to discuss and better understand the ideas picture books construct through language and images with adults. In these ways shared reading can support all aspects of early language and literacy development.
- **Oral storytelling**, a cross-cultural precursor of literacy, is especially important for communities with strong oral language traditions such as the first Australians, and provides strong support for children's oral language and narrative skills.
- **Craft activities** can support active listening and problem solving, and reinforce storytime themes (e.g. friendship) by engaging children in meaningful exchanges, as well as developing their fine motor skills.

All these activities and early literacy sessions as a whole are rich opportunities for exposure to **a range of experiences and fields within the culture** and **oral-language interactions** with adults, which can support children in building background knowledge and skills in using literacy- and learning-oriented language.

7   Conclusion

The importance of early language and literacy has been widely acknowledged in contemporary research, which has shown that the foundations for success in reading and writing are laid from birth. This review has examined literature on library services for children and on early language and literacy development with a view to highlighting how such research can inform public libraries in developing effective initiatives for promoting early literacy in the communities they serve.

Public libraries have the unique capacity to promote and support early language and literacy by:

- providing a welcoming learning environment for all children and their families, inclusive of differences in age, gender, ethnicity, class and cultural background

- offering free, year-round access to a diverse range of books (fiction and non-fiction) and other resources (toys, multimedia, and electronic), and drawing on research in children's language, literacy and learning to critically evaluate new resources before including them in the children's collection

- promoting a love of reading, books and knowledge in young children and their families

- helping to build reading habits in children from an early age by encouraging the borrowing of age-appropriate children's books and other materials, and in this way enabling children and their families to be part of a community of readers and library users

- developing a positive disposition to early language and literacy learning not only through access to literacy resources but also through language-rich interactions that respond to, encourage and enhance children's knowledge and interests; such interactions are essential for empowering children and their families to access and engage with the meanings in the literacy resources that libraries offer

- hosting information sessions for parents on why and how families should support early language and literacy development from birth

- developing strategies to help reach socio-economically disadvantaged communities who would benefit enormously from library resources and programs that encourage families to engage their children in emergent literacy practices at home.

Research also provides evidence of the potential of the free early literacy sessions for babies, toddlers and preschool-aged children that most public libraries provide to promote early language, literacy and learning. The value of these sessions extends beyond the engaging activities they incorporate, such as singing and reciting nursery rhymes, shared reading of picture books, oral storytelling and making craft/art. Their main value lies in the opportunities they can create for children to gain exposure to diverse experiences and fields of knowledge and to participate in literacy- and learning-oriented interactions with adults. Language-rich interactions with adults are

an invaluable resource for supporting children to develop key foundations for success in reading and writing such as: the depth and breadth of their receptive and expressive vocabulary (for example, by explicitly teaching children new words in context and using non-verbal resources to promote comprehension); background knowledge of the physical, biological and social world (for example, learning about colours, seasons and traditional customs); and proficiency in using decontextualised, more abstract or specialised language (for example, using the word 'car transporter' rather than the more everyday 'truck'). These sessions also help children to become familiar with the library, and offer adults a chance to engage children in talking about books, thus helping make books and reading part of the everyday lives of children.

Finally, there is a strong need for public libraries to support all staff involved in the resourcing, design, delivery and evaluation of children's services to:

- enhance their knowledge and qualifications in early childhood and early language and literacy, so that they can be confident in their role as educators, designing and modelling practices such as shared reading that promote early language and literacy development for all families

- adopt a research-informed understanding of the relationship between language, literacy, learning and social context

- foster literacy practices that are both developmentally appropriate and extend beyond the teaching of phonics (sound-letter correspondences), as research has clearly shown how important the quality and quantity of language-rich experiences, and background knowledge, are to later reading success.

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