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Children's Literature and the Early Years Learning Framework

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Abstract

This paper looks at the value of using children's literature to achieve the outcomes of the recently released Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The author makes a case for curriculum developers and higher education trainers of early childhood carers and educators to understand the value of using children's literature as a resource to achieve the outcomes of the EYLF. The author firstly looks at the background and key aims of the EYLF. The author examines research evidence of the uses of children's literature in values education and in the social, emotional and the psychological development of the child. The author also examines research that relates to challenges of poor and biased text selection as well as the impact of teacher attitudes on text selection and use. The paper concludes with a challenge to curriculum designers and higher education providers to consider these challenges in order to ensure that early childhood educators receive appropriate training and curriculum guidance to best achieve the outcomes of the EYLF.

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Abstract: This paper looks at the value of using children's literature to achieve the outcomes of the recently released Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The author makes a case for curriculum developers and higher education trainers of early childhood carers and educators to understand the value of using children's literature as a resource to achieve the outcomes of the EYLF. The author firstly looks at the background and key aims of the EYLF. The author examines research evidence of the uses of children's literature in values education and in the social, emotional and the psychological development of the child. The author also examines research that relates to challenges of poor and biased text selection as well as the impact of teacher attitudes on text selection and use. The paper concludes with a challenge to curriculum designers and higher education providers to consider these challenges in order to ensure that early childhood educators receive appropriate training and curriculum guidance to best achieve the outcomes of the EYLF.

Introduction

In this paper I argue that children's literature can be a vital resource for developing the social, emotional and psychological wellbeing of the child and for teaching values education. Based on a review of relevant literature and the policy document, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (2009). I make the case for improved methods of teaching in the use of children's literature in the early childhood setting, especially by linking planning and teaching to the aforementioned policy documents.

My interest in these documents and their implementation began in mid 2009 when I was engaged to write a book chapter on children's literature for an early childhood literacy textbook (Fellowes & Oakley, in press). In writing this chapter, I was struck by parallels between research findings on the effect of quality literature on the social, emotional and psychological development of the child and the outcomes stipulated in the EYLF. Given that the EYLF focuses on the aspects of the early childhood curriculum that are planned for by educators, I can see that, if trained well in selection and use of children's literature, early childhood educators could use quality children's books as a tool to meet the outcomes of the EYLF.

With the EYLF, the function of early childhood care will undergo a shift from that of providing primary care to the combined focus of providing primary care and early learning and development opportunities around a planned curriculum. As part of new government policy, by 2015 each childcare centre accommodating more than 25 children will be required to employ at least one university qualified teacher. Therefore, higher education providers of teacher training will be responsible for preparing a new cohort of teachers to work in child-care settings.

Furthermore, state education departments will need to develop curriculum and in-service training for early childhood carers and educators to assist them in the implementation of the EYLF. Given that every early learning centre has a stock of books and that reading to children is an essential daily practice, it is important that consideration is given by curriculum designers and those who train early childhood educators to ensure that the selection and use of these resources is done in such a way to support the outcomes and goals of the EYLF. My reading and associated research led me to identify two key factors that could present as challenges for educators to effectively use children's literature to achieve these goals:

1. the problem of bias and narrow perceptions portrayed in many commonly read children's books.
2. the biases that educators and carers themselves may hold which, unwittingly, could be conveyed to the children through the educators' selection and use of children's books.

In my argument I assert that the combined effect of these factors would be inadequately informed selection and use of children's literature, thereby modelling and reinforcing stereotypes and narrow perspectives of diversity, culture and families. It is vital that these potential negative influences are addressed and that educators are appropriately trained in the selection and use of children's books. Curriculum designers and early childhood educators need to be aware of: what constitutes quality literature; how to appropriately select inclusive quality literature; and how to use this literature to achieve the outcomes of the EYLF.

In the remainder of the paper, I begin by outlining the background and key elements of the EYLF. I then look at research evidence of the value of using children's literature in values education and in the social, emotional and psychological development of the child – noting how this links to the outcomes of the EYLF. Following this, I examine the challenges of appropriate text selection and, finally, the challenge of the educators' own attitudes.

Background to the EYLF

From the first of January 2012, all day care services and pre-schools in Australia will be assessed against the National Quality Standards released in 2009 by COAG (Council of Australian Governments) in order to be accredited to operate. This policy is based on the recognition that the early years of a child's life have a vital impact on the future social, emotional and psychological wellbeing of the child.

In December 2009, as the first phase of the implementation of the National Quality Standards (NQS), the Council of Australian Governments released *Belonging, Being and Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)*. This framework is aimed at early childhood educators. The key aim of the EYLF is: "to extend and enrich children's learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school." (2009, p. 3).

There are five principles of the EYLF to guide the curriculum:

1. Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
2. Partnerships
3. High Expectations and Equity
4. Respect for Diversity
5. Ongoing learning and reflective practice

The EYLF is aimed at developing the children's *Belonging, Being and Becoming*. To achieve this, the EYLF is arranged under five key outcomes (see table below). These outcomes are intended to guide the curriculum of the early childhood setting.

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
Key components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children feel safe, secure and supported. • Children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency. • Children develop knowledgeable and confident self identities. • Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.
Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
Key components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation. • Children respond to diversity with respect. • Children become aware of fairness. • Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment.
Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
Key components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing. • Children take increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing.
Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners
Key components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity. • Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating. • Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another. • Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials.
Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators
Key components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes. • Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts. • Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media. • Children begin to understand how symbols and patterns work. • Children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking.

Table One: Key components

In considering the guiding principles and the outcomes of the EYLF, I have identified that children's literature can and should be used as a valuable resource in achieving the outcomes stipulated the EYLF.

Using Children's Literature Strategically to Further the EYLF

All early childhood educators and most carers are aware of the importance of reading frequently to children in order to develop their love of language and learning and, especially, their literacy skills. However, there is an abundance of evidence that shows the value of using children's literature to achieve far more than the identified focus on language and literacy skills. I believe that the outcomes listed in the table above, as well as the overriding principles of the EYLF, can be enhanced through careful selection and use of children's literature. For example, the exploration of character traits of key characters in children's books can teach children about important qualities such as friendship, cooperation, perseverance, respect and honesty (Kara-Soteriou & Rose, 2008, p. 30). Furthermore, stories can act as

good role models for the behaviour of children and, therefore, contribute to their social and emotional development. These values correlate very closely with the desired outcomes of the EYLF shown in table 1.

In addition, literature can be used to extend children’s knowledge and understandings of culture, history, social awareness, and understanding.

Because storytellers.....shape human experience, perceptive readers are able ‘to find not only order but meaning in story’and ‘make sense of their own lives and reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own’ (Paterson 1995:182,301, in Saxby, 1997, p. 12)

All of these values echo the principles and outcomes of the EYLF. In the early childhood setting it is the educator who reads to the children; therefore, it is vital that these educators select and present stories in a way to assist children to achieve these outcomes.

The EYLF charges educators with the goal of providing a curriculum that respects and celebrates the diversity within and between families, cultures and communities. Principle 4: Respect for Diversity, specifically states: “Educators honour the histories, cultures, languages and traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families” (2009, p. 13). This brings an added responsibility for educators to select children’s literature that promotes this value. Tunnel and Jacobs (2008, in Morgan, 2009) emphasise the value of books that portray cultural diversity, and the impact that positive and considered use of such literature can have on future generations and their view of people from different cultural backgrounds.

In my book chapter on Children’s Literature I explored in greater depth the use of children’s literature to develop children’s understandings of diversity and tolerance. Books written from different cultural perspectives can enhance a child’s awareness of and appreciation for the diversity in their world, as well as affirming the cultural and family backgrounds of each child.

Many children’s books subtly weave themes of building and maintaining relationships as well as exploring the joys and complexities of life. Well informed educators can use these books as a wonderful resource to build on young children’s understanding and development of their own sense of belonging, being and becoming. Educators, therefore, must ensure that their selection and use of literature encompasses these powerful learning and developmental opportunities, and by doing so, the outcomes of the EYLF. Table 2 shows concise links between the qualities children’s literature can develop and the related outcomes of the EYLF.

Relating the value of children’s literature to the EYLF Outcomes/components	
Children’s literature can develop:	Related EYLF Outcomes/key components:
social justice understandings	Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.
social viewpoints	Children respond to diversity with respect.
sense of wellbeing	Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing.
values and mores	Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.
personal qualities	Children become aware of fairness.
emotional intelligence	Children feel safe, secure and supported.
psychological and emotional healing	Children feel safe, secure and supported

Table 2: Relating values to components

The Challenge of Text Selection

As seen, the guiding principles of the EYLF highlight the importance of valuing and respecting the differing family structures, cultures, contexts and values of the children and families in the early childhood setting (Childhood Development Steering Committee, 2009). However, the current children's literature resources of many early childhood centres contain:

Negative or absent representation of females, people of color, non-Christian and non-western religions, and emic (inside) perspectives from people of lower socioeconomic status or people with disabilities. (Apol, 1998; Banks 1991; Boutte, 1999, Pace, 1992; Sims Bishop, 1991; in Boutte, Hopkins, & Waklatsi, 2008)

The effect of these disparities and uncritical reading of such literature can lead to:

...the possibility of stereotypes and attitudes that carry over into adulthood....the collective effect of such literature contributes to discrimination and limits global perspective for White children and children of colour alike. (Boutte, Hopkins, & Waklatsi, 2008, p. 944)

If the children's literature resources in an early learning setting are limited or contain a narrow selection of books, there is a danger that the reading and associated activities with these books could actually prove to be counterproductive to the outcomes of the EYLF. Uninformed resource selection could result in daily reading to children promoting values that are fundamentally at odds with the principles of the EYLF. In addition, educators themselves may unwittingly pass on their own biases through their own selection of texts.

Educators today face the challenge of preparing children to live in a society that is rapidly changing and where issues such as race, ethnicity, gender and social background impact on the benefits enjoyed by different groups (Boutte, Hopkins, & Waklatsi, 2008). Similarly, Principle 3 of the EYLF: High Expectations and Equity stresses that educators must recognise and respond to these barriers by "making curriculum decisions that promote inclusion and participation of all children....and...continually strive to find equitable and effective ways to ensure that all children have opportunities to achieve learning outcomes." (2009, p. 13)

It is vital for children to have access to a wide variety of children's literature because, for many children: "child care settings and schools may be the only venue where children can learn substantive information about the world and about world views beyond their own" (Boutte, Hopkins, & Waklatsi, 2008, p. 944).

Zeece and Stolzer (2002) encourage the creation of a literature safety zone in which well-chosen literature delivered through appropriate strategies can help children to "explore feelings and affirm notions of acceptance, safety and wellbeing.... sharing literature in this context...to help children feel happy and safe" (Zeece & Stolzer, 2002, p. 47). O'Neill (2010), too, draws attention to the advantages of using picture books as a "safe realm for exploration of values and traditional mores" and to "encourage children to reflect on new ways of being and thinking" (O'Neill, 2010, p. 41).

It is clear that children's literature can be used critically to enhance children's understandings, awareness and respect for diversity as well as developing their sense of Belonging, Being and Becoming. However, it is also clear that the selection of children's literature to this end must be critically and carefully carried out.

Teacher Attitudes – Another Challenge

In considering the need to address the selection and use of Children's Literature, it is important to also consider the attitudes of the educators themselves. Of particular importance are the potential biases of educators when selecting children's literature. To use children's

literature successfully as a resource to achieve the outcomes of the EYLF, educators need to firstly understand how their own attitudes may affect their selection of children's literature for their teaching.

During 2010 I attended a presentation by Professor Ingrid Johnston of the University of Alberta. She gave a presentation based on her joint paper: *Exploring Issues of National Identity, Ideology and Diversity in Contemporary Canadian Picture Books*, (Johnston, Bainbridge, & Shariff, in press). This paper documents a research project that arose out of the following challenges and initiatives:

Changing demographics in Canadian school classrooms, with increasing numbers of immigrant students and students of Aboriginal heritage, have encouraged Faculties of Education to develop initiatives to promote multicultural and diversity education in their teacher education programmes (Johnston, 2009)

This Research project involved pre-service teachers engaging with and responding to 70 picture books from a diverse range of cultural perspectives. It showed that, quite overwhelmingly, the pre-service teachers displayed the following beliefs/attitudes:

- *A liberal humanist notion of identity*: The pre-service teachers had very fixed views of identity firmly rooted in their own background. It seems they lacked an appreciation of the postmodern picture book and its ideology of the interplay of text, visual and reader to create multiple messages and readings.
- *Spatio-temporal identity*: Most of the pre-service teachers preferred a minority of the books that came from a familiar spatio-temporal background. They ignored the fact that most of the books showed differing perspectives and even challenged "ownership" of the very land they felt belonged to them.
- *A lack or negation of cultural identity*: Much of the focus of what is the Canadian national identity focused on what "Canada is not" rather than "what Canada is".
- *Resistance to difficult knowledge*: The pre-service teachers expressed discomfort and at times disagreement with the portrayal of "minority groups" as being or deserving their own sense of place as Canadians.
- *Fear of controversial issues*: Pre-service teachers expressed a resistance to the sense of diversity and, in terms of their future as teachers, a fear of tackling diversity within the classroom. This, itself, is linked to their wider experiences and beliefs of what they see to be acceptable within Canadian Society.

Similar issues with the Australian experience are examined by Anne Hickling-Hudson (2005) in her article: 'White', 'Ethnic' and 'Indigenous': pre-service teachers reflect on discourses of ethnicity in Australian culture. She conducted a research project in which pre-service teachers had to "reflect on and address questions of how they have been socialised to regard Anglo Australian, Indigenous and non-British migrant cultures in their society." The goal of her study was to: "lay the foundations for teachers to take further steps in their journey of embracing cultural diversity" (Hickling-Hudson, 2005 p. 340). Her findings were consistent with Johnston's. She identified that Australian pre-service teachers, too, face similar challenges in working within our multicultural classrooms.

The findings of these researchers imply that teachers' selection of books could be influenced, perhaps unwittingly, by biased attitudes, which would result in biased viewpoints being portrayed to the children. This, of course, would be counterproductive to the overriding goals of EYLF.

Concluding Thoughts

The Council of Australian Governments has taken a valuable step in developing and releasing the Early Years Learning Framework. The principles and aims for our young Australians are well considered and, if achieved, will stand future generations in good stead in our increasingly diverse and multicultural society.

However, the factors I have identified through this paper highlight some vital considerations and challenges for curriculum designers, and tertiary educators who train both pre-service teachers and childcare workers, and, those who have input into the operation of early learning and childcare settings.

In this paper I have cited strong evidence that children's literature, used judiciously, can achieve outcomes consistent with those of the EYLF. However, I have also noted evidence of the danger of poor literature selection and of teachers' own biases leading to a situation where negative stereotypes and prejudices could be portrayed and consolidated, which would be counterproductive to the outcomes of the EYLF and the principles underpinning them.

It is up to curriculum designers and those in higher education who prepare and train early childhood carers and educators to address these challenges.

Further Development

It is my intention to conduct further research and initiate a project aimed at planning curriculum resources and training for delivery to early childhood educators and carers to assist them to use children's literature to achieve the outcomes of the EYLF.

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