Early literacy: a broader vision

Flewitt, Rosie (2013) Early literacy: a broader vision. Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators, n/a (n/a). ISSN n/a

Abstract

Literacy lies at the heart of education and has been formally enshrined as a basic human right since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. For centuries, acquiring literacy has been associated with children needing to acquire knowledge about the alphabetic code in order to read and write, but broader understandings of what literacy is have developed over recent decades. Internationally, literacy is now defined as ‘the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts’ (UNESCO, 2013). It is recognised as the foundation for lifelong learning, and as ‘fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one’s health, one’s income, and one’s relationship with the world’ (UNESCO, 2013). In this broader vision, literacy is a platform for individuals to develop their knowledge and to participate fully in society through diverse oral, written, printed and digital media.

Here, ‘literacy’ refers to broader learning and the mastery of information ‘to work within the knowledge (information) societies that will dominate the twenty-first century’ (OECD, 1997). In this view, literacy has a clear functional role within the context of a globalizing world. Earlier notions of a ‘great divide’ between oral and literate societies have given way to the concept of a ‘continuum’ of communication modes in different societies and an ongoing dynamic interaction between various media (Finnegan, 1988). Within a single society, a variety of modes of ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ exist. World Vision offers literacy programmes using a broad approach to education that encourages support for out-of-school youth and vulnerable adults. Emergent literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a child develops in relation to reading and writing throughout the early childhood period, starting at birth and before the onset of conventional reading and writing instruction (usually at school entry). Emergent literacy includes such aspects as oral language (both speaking and listening), understanding that print can carry meaning, as well as basic alphabet knowledge, and early phonological awareness. ii.