

Talk by *CARMEN MOHAMED*

How do the experiences of children in the foundation stage link to literacy learning in later school?

In conclusion to this very informative day, our next challenge is to consider how we ensure that the research and best expert opinion that we have been debating today impacts on our children. The challenges facing ourselves and the practitioners we work with are not just about changing practice within the early years sector but about ensuring that all primary teachers and consultants understand how the experiences of children in the foundation stage link to the learning in years 4/ 5 and 6 and beyond. We may promote this stage of childhood as valuable in its own right but we must also help our colleagues to understand how it shapes every next stage.

There has been too much recent media attention on children's developing reading skills; much of it gender related especially around exam times, when the issues are really about teaching methods not learning techniques. Much of the Rose review outlined the different views and opinions of experts in the field and we can take elements of it to prove our own beliefs readily. I didn't really get the sense that the only important thing to come from the review was the delivery of more and faster phonics development, proving I think that it was just another expensive attempt to make teachers think that their opinion was valued and would inform the debate about the future of reading, in reality the future had been written ... phonetically, in case we didn't understand.

For me, the lasting impression of work needing to be done was around the importance of language and vocabulary to reading development. Surely with all the current issues around young children's lack of communication skills this would have been a more relevant way forward for the PNS? 'Communicating Matters' seems to have been devalued in favour of more phonics training. It would have been pertinent to allow the last batch of early phonics training, 'Playing with Sounds', to embed before practitioners were subjected to more training in this area. I would be surprised if it doesn't have a negative effect on how readily practitioners respond to consultant training: a different message at this stage when the last roll-out of training is still ringing in practitioners ears smacks of change for changes sake. Practitioners will begin to get the impression that we don't know what we're talking about if we don't take back control of the training programmes we deliver. What there is never time for is the support of practitioners to understand how all the elements of reading mesh together, and how they relate to child development as a whole. We have picked it apart so much it hardly makes sense any more, decontextualising more and more of children's learning and training without focusing on how to put it all back together for the benefit of children's learning. We need to focus on combined systems of learning and teaching.

Our first challenge to linking up the learning for practitioners is to help them accept that early reading skills are a vital part of the whole learning process. Even reading skills have a hierarchy of value and the really important ones – the ones that look too much like play – have been demoted to after work time. The debates we are having today are sadly and frustratingly not new. There was a time when infant teachers demanded the importance of role-play, of tongue twisters, of memory games and of hearing stories read.

As advisors, consultants and teachers we must support practitioners to understand the importance of role play in early reading alongside phonics. What is a book if not the telling or re-telling of a story or information? Children are no different from us, we only want to pick up a book if we can engage with it – a book full of scientific equations is not something I'd pick up in a hurry – I like a good story. That must be what phonics looks like to children. We seem to be going back to dull Janet and John and Gay Way books, how have we allowed a lone voice to dictate what happens next? Why are we allowing our children to be subjected to such a tedious experiences? Children want to enjoy a good story; they get a thrill from trying out voices and pretending to be the different characters. Isn't it bad enough that children are only allowed to select from one set of texts with one set of characters and only a book harder than the one they've just read? Many children develop and use effective reading strategies without very much explicit instruction; others need more help. Teachers should be concentrating on the children who need help rather than stifling the development of children who would otherwise do perfectly well, not only being capable of reading but also wanting to. We should be encouraging competent readers to read for pleasure.

We all agree that children need to understand how stories are told, to be familiar with the language, vocabulary and structure of a story to help with reading development. How this is presented to them is a crucial matter for our training and work with practitioners. Some of the best methods are out

there if we were more able to share good practice around. Children are routinely exposed to some excellent action songs and rhymes: no-one disputes the fact that these are essential early reading skills. Why then are they not encouraged to act out the sequence of a story? I can't tell you how many Three Bears' Cottages I've been into which are used purely as home corners by the children – they aren't encouraged to retell their story with different characters or different endings. I make a point when visiting settings of asking children to tell me their favourite story and have now ceased to be disappointed at how few can retell a simple familiar story in sequence: they are neither taught to nor given the opportunities to rehearse these stories. It is incumbent upon us to ensure practitioners understand the use of role play and actions in story telling and as a pre-reading activity.

As a young teacher in a special school I learnt to put Makaton to many familiar rhymes, songs and stories and then continued to use this technique within my mainstream classrooms. If children can use some actions to go with the retelling of a story they remember the sequence much easier. You don't need to use Makaton, though wouldn't it be great if all children recognised it as a valued form of communication? The children could make up their own actions. Once they have the basics of the story structure, adjectives and connectives can be added or changed.

For more than a decade and a half now we have been separating 'the child' from the learning process on the say-so of secondary heads with ambitions for a political career but little teaching experience. We have always known better but just accept these changes as inevitable. Susan Isaacs in the early 1900s, warned of introducing children to reading and writing too early at the expense of play and fantasy. Her teachings were about the importance of learning from real life and the way in which children's emotional life shapes how they develop intellectually. She declared that "there was an extraordinary disproportion between the time and trouble put into teaching children to read and write at far too early an age. Children's most urgent need is freedom to grow and think".

Some groups of children are at particular risk from inappropriate emphasis on formal teaching, but when do practitioners have time to consider a child's well-being? Literacy has such high status and value for us that we don't have time to include all children in all teaching. The most common complaint I hear from teachers nowadays is the spread of abilities they are expected to teach. I don't really suppose the children have changed much but they sure don't fit into a neat package of week by week tuition! Brain research suggests that young children are active learners who bring together and consolidate a variety of experiences through play but we still have difficulty with the notion of play being a valuable way to learn in our system of education.

Too often now practitioners are taking learning out of context and dividing it up so that children can not make the links in their learning. In fact, I'm not convinced the adults always know why they are delivering some of the activities they do: they know it is a good activity for a 2, 3, 4 year old but they don't always have a good grasp of which area of development they are trying to promote. It isn't easy to see the potential impact of one learning experience across other areas of development. It is our greatest challenge to promote play as a genuine learning experience, not to justify choosing time whilst the teacher hears readers. To use terms such as practise, consolidate and rehearse learning when making active learning explicit to primary colleagues as well as early year's practitioners. I wonder how much difference Janet Moyles and Siân Adams would see in the sand play in early year's settings since the study on play? How many settings do you see using the sand and water as vital tools for retelling stories and practising instructional texts? How many children are still aimlessly pouring sand from one container to another?

I have seen far too many children being turned off reading on introduction to reading schemes. Though I have to admit they are slightly less stilted now than they were when I started teaching although that seems set to change. How much worse is this going to be when the story is secondary to the building up of a bank of sounds? Fortunately for me I began my career in East London where schemes had already been Cliff Mooned or ... put into book bands as we'd say now. Emergent reading with adults teaching the necessary next steps were part of the everyday programme. Unfortunately, the excellent and essential research underpinning the literacy strategy, like too many things these days, was lost in translation. Too much training without any time devoted to why there was a need for change, too much scripted delivery not enough linking up the learning for the practitioners. Using a scheme is a lazy way of teaching reading; they may well be effectively structured to develop progress in small manageable steps but what use is that to a five year old who says they can't read unless a book has Biff and Chip in it?

It is very difficult to convince early year's practitioners that listening to children read is not the same as teaching them to read. Very early on in my career, I noticed children using the scheme as a reading crutch but, worse than that, many teachers doing so too. Early in my Advisory teacher days I was suggesting to a group of co-ordinators the use of story books as a source for teaching reading to early readers and was confronted by a teacher asking me how on earth I could expect her to teach children reading if she didn't know which words the child had to learn next! With the lists of words from the strategy the teachers have one more crutch to hang on to, whereas reading experts will surely tell us that, with an effective reading environment, children will become familiar with the words in context. Instead of such better practice, we have a resurgence of the dreadful word tins from the 60s and 70s, flash cards, words out of context and now letters and sounds out of context. No doubt they will be introduced by a new set of worksheets. I have a sneaking suspicion that the reason we need children to be able to decode earlier is the need to read the mountain of worksheets we now call education. I could re-forest Brazil with the amount of worksheets that have come into my house in the last seven years from my twin girls.

What happens when children have grasped phonics? We will no longer have mistakes in writing such as *fihs*, or maybe someone clever will give us *phyti!* (*ph* (as in photo), *y* (as in myth), *ti* (as in tion). Seriously, children use phonics to great effect in their communications these days!

Training in reading doesn't often follow Pi Corbett's example of active engagement, shared chanting of a group story using hand actions and familiar sequencing developing to being able to write in paragraphs, use causal connectives, powerful adjectives and punctuate effectively. If children are engaging with stories, with pictures and texts in books are they reading? If they are able to retell a story in the language of books do they have Marie Clay's reading readiness?

When talking about early reading with colleagues many are ready and willing to agree with the research which has been well documented over the last few decades but always rush for their comfort blanket such as OfSTED or SAT's results in an attempt to avoid change. It is a brave Head who can take a high attaining school and begin to unpick the learning process. Delivering children holistic learning experiences, enabling lifelong learners is still not part of the British culture of education, creating problems for laying any foundations for learning, not just reading. The culture of following a step-by-step guide to learning means many of the adults working with young children have no knowledge of the learning process. It's as if teaching children is seen as a scientific process where every action results in the same outcome. Practitioners' have been handed prescriptive packages of if you do this on this day and follow the structure rigidly then your results will increase. No-one dares to take the risk and go back to following the learning process from one stage of development to another. It's also much easier to download planning and worksheets than to consider what each child needs to be tackling next in their learning. Whatever happened to starting with the child? How can a one style fits all approach begin with the child; how can every child matter; how are we ensuring no child is discriminated against or disadvantaged if we continue to restrict learning experiences and continue to train teachers that children don't matter as much as the curriculum? All children will be disadvantaged – the bright, able ones will be comatosed and those recently introduced to books, bewildered.

The latest area of child development training to which we have all been inducted is the linking of early movement to cognitive development and we now have to find ways to ensure practitioners are aware of how the stages of development from the early movement stages through holding up your own head and turning it from right to left, to crawling and walking, all have a vital part in the eventual enjoyment books. Many of us face the challenges of supporting practitioners working within the birth to five field and linking all that learning into the Primary Strategy for our primary colleagues. Instead of transition being complicated and difficult, if we all understood how each part fits together we would be able to overlap the learning process from one setting to the next. Surely this is the way forward? In Leicestershire, we developed a transition project which used school-based teachers as mentor teachers for the local pre-schools; they received professional development training for the role and were chosen because they already had positive, supportive links with the local pre-schools. Of the many benefits (which included building excellent partnerships with parents), was the development of literacy; the pre-schools no longer felt under pressure to provide reading scheme books and ensure the children knew the school's handwriting policy because the receiving teacher was able to invite them into her classroom and show how children's early reading was developed through role play (inside and out), story telling and a genuine love of books. She could then go with the leaders to plan similar learning experiences for the younger children and model the practice in the early years settings. Children (and parents) find the transition to school easier and are ready and able to build on the reading skills they have

acquired before they come to school, rather than being turned off because they have already that book at play group!

I still can't quite believe that in some of our schools children are not only having to finish reading every page of a book to a trustworthy adult but they then have to complete a workbook on the reading book before they get to move on to the next more difficult book. I genuinely believe many of our children are functioning in school way below the reading capability they perform at home, generally because the emphasis is on pleasure or quiet activity rather than pointless slog. Most schools are still retaining individual readers long after it is appropriate for the children's development. I have many conversations with teachers who disagree with this system, recognising that they are not supporting individual development but feel powerless to change school policy. Our effective debates with colleagues about appropriate stages of reading development will support these teachers in making appropriate choices for inclusive teaching practices. You must all have taught children who can decode brilliantly but have no idea what they are reading, children who use their sight more than their hearing to engage with books, as well as others who rely on hearing the sounds for there to be any meaning.

Our training and development strategies need to support practitioners in linking up the learning from fantasy play, retelling a story in a role play situation, chanting the rhythmical, repetitive refrains of some of our best loved books, nonsense rhymes and lovely words to get your tongue around. Picture books do much more than teach us to decode words – they help us to differentiate between the rhythm of spoken and story language and allow us to enter fantasy worlds, becoming different characters and exploring different ways of interpreting the world around us. They enable us to explore emotions and to see ourselves as part of the world; their pictures provide important messages to children about gender, disability and the whole range of diversity within our society.

Luckily for me, I have never been obliged to use reading schemes as a teacher and have had many opportunities to observe children blossom as readers who delight in both text and pictures, all being able to read paper backs by Year 2. Teaching strategies for emergent learning is a complex method to train but a much more rewarding job; using assessment for learning effectively is the key to unlocking learning. This style of supporting child development was all I knew when I became a mother and obviously stuck to these principles, though my learning revelation came when my own children began to learn to play the piano. I shied away from traditional teaching methods for the same reasons – they seemed to be barking at print 'play ccc' – opting instead for Suzuki method. This system teaches children by ear; they are encouraged to hear the music then play it. As I followed their learning for a couple of years, it became clear that the children quite naturally turned to the symbols on the page and could follow them. Once the teacher began to encourage their sight reading, they not only could pick out the notes but were able to use the punctuation effectively – they instinctively seemed to know when to pause, get louder, faster etc. The squiggles and symbols meant something but they had never had to struggle through the tedium of daily slog. Hearing pauses for punctuation, changing speed and volume for emphasis came quite naturally; they played for pleasure! If only their reading development at school had been so pleasurable! Most of our talented musicians will have been nurtured in this way through their learning, not sent back to complete book one several times.

Many of our colleagues will tell us that more and more children are coming into settings with speech delay and movement difficulties. The problems stem from the changes in society, we're told, and front facing buggies and pre-school T.V. along with a lack of extended family support. Speaking and listening skills are inextricably linked to reading skills – the more stories we hear, the more familiar we are with stories and instructional texts, the better we know how to tackle them ourselves. According to the charity 'I CAN', children with impoverished speech and language skills often suffer low academic achievement. More than half of all children start school without the communication skills to learn and make friends. When working with practitioners in the earliest stages of child development we need to help them to consider how children hear phonemes when all they see is a symbol on paper. How can they hear a sentence or make sense of paragraphs if all their learning is based on letter by letter decoding? Why aren't they encouraged to play 'I Spy' with phonemes instead of letter names? Pointing to a bear or duck on a page and saying 'Ted' or quack is a valuable way of learning to decode symbols when you're only one. This engagement with the symbols soon leads to talking about what is happening in the pictures and then telling stories about the characters in the pictures. These natural developments lead children to enjoy books and shouldn't be allowed to be devalued when there is an ever-increasing emphasis on letters.

There are now worrying trends to spend inordinate amounts of the primary school day on increasing levels of reading and writing. We are in danger of developing young people with little knowledge, skills or conceptual understanding. Then we have separate moves towards creativity, sports, education outside the classroom and, guess what? Another primary review driven by one of the original *Three Wise Men* who gave us fourteen folders and a Eurocentric prescriptive diet of knowledge! We've done it their way for long enough – we need to reclaim the right to nurture our children into lifelong learning, and that means keeping it all together.

Teachers of GCSE are now becoming concerned that there is no need to read a full book, students can get by reading only extracts of exams texts. I would strongly suggest that 100% of the adults in this room spend a considerable amount of time reading for pleasure and some of that was nurtured by the way we were encouraged to read and introduced to the excitement and escapism that books offer. Text is a way of putting down the familiar stories for future generations. Mind you, I was a little disappointed to get a sour face when I mentioned to a Year 6 teacher, that my 10 year old daughter loved *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – “There's nothing better than a few fairies and a bit of toilet humour to get a youngster into Shakespeare”, says I, all chirpy. I was soon put in my place, confirming that reading was not supposed to be pleasurable! Those of you working in higher education will be able to testify that separating each element of English into components that are never put back together for students doesn't make us a more literate society. In fact students can have difficulty writing in sentences and still obtain a good second class degree.

So as a whole educational community we need to work together to discuss the relationships between what happens in the Early Years and the sorts of students we want to take over our industries and take our country into a global market. **Children need to be given the power to work things out for themselves and teacher's need to take back the power to help them to do it.**

Carmen Mohammed,
Early Years/Primary Consultant,
carmenmohamed@hotmail.co.uk