

FOURTH EDITION

# LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN THE EARLY YEARS 0-7



### © Marian Whitehead 2010

First published 1990 Reprinted 2002 Second edition published 1997 Reprinted 2003 Third edition published 2004 Reprinted 2005, 2006, 2007 This edition published 2010

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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd 33 Pekin Street #02-01 Far East Square Singapore 048763

### Library of Congress Control Number: 2009932917

### British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84920-007-3 ISBN 978-1-84920-008-0 (pbk)

Typeset by Dorwyn, Wells, Somerset Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall Printed on paper from sustainable resources



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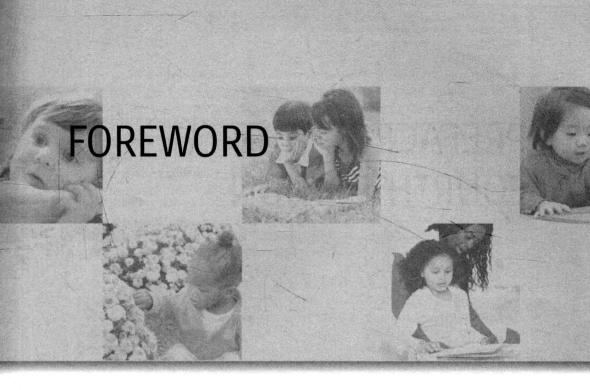
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Marian Whitehead was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Education at Goldsmiths College, University of London, with responsibility for organizing and teaching MA degrees in Language and Literature and Early Childhood Education. She has published extensively on literacy, literature and bilingualism and was for many years an editor of the journal *Early Years*. She now combines writing with language and early years consultancy work.



This beautifully written book is an example to all of us - authors, teachers and tutors as well as students - of how to present complex ideas so that they are both accessible and useful to readers. Marian Whitehead pulls off the feat of describing competing theories of language acquisition, and of the development of children's minds through verbal thinking, in ways which make 'human sense', aided by numerous examples of snatches of children's thinking, language and mark-making. Her examples ably demonstrate not only children's competence and creativity in communicating, from early infancy onwards, but their absolute intentionality. Having established the immense capacities of children for learning from their environment, and from their interactions with adults and peers, Whitehead applies this knowledge to the question of how we can provide environments which respect and build on the strengths and skills which children bring with them into their early group care settings. The story of children's astonishing efforts to communicate non-verbally, verbally and then through writing - as they develop from birth through to the early years of school should inspire everyone working with children to look again, and listen again, to the evidence of their own classrooms. No one reading this book, it is to be hoped, will ever again describe a child as 'not knowing how to talk' or 'not having a clue about print'. Instead, Whitehead demonstrates the logical thinking and problem-solving which can be seen to underpin children's utterances and their early interactions with print, if only adults pay proper attention. She shows, too, that children's own creativity in playing with sound and symbol can be the most productive basis for extending their learning in the classroom. This is a book to make readers feel wiser and stronger, and to inspire a respect for children's minds and potential which is grounded in solid theoretical argument.

Liz Brooker



It is 20 years since the first edition of this book and the number and quality of 'language and literacy in the early years' books continue to increase steadily. This sustained interest in communication and language and its crucial role in children's development is heartening and I am pleased that the first edition of this book was at the start of such a significant development.

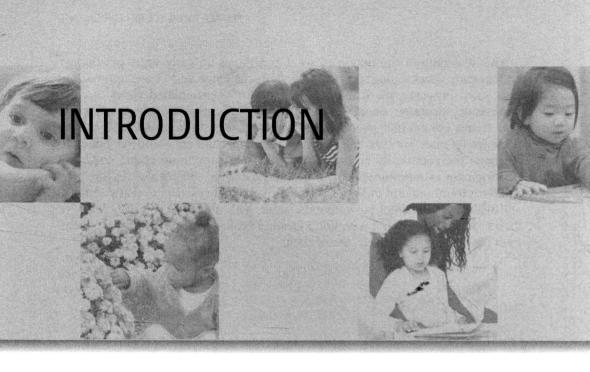
During the past 20 years research studies of communication, language, literacy and child development have continued to emerge and many of their insights are reflected in this fourth edition. But the greatest changes in the UK since this book was first published have occurred in the organization and regulation of early years care, education and schooling. The world of care and education has changed dramatically and is still going through many upheavals.

In England, as in the other countries and province of the UK, a statutory national framework for children from birth to 5 has been introduced. The ground-breaking English framework for supporting young children from birth to 3 in care and education settings (*Birth to Three Matters*, DfES and Sure Start Unit, 2002) has evolved into an Early Years Foundation Stage (birth to 5 years). A folksy passion for phonics has produced the officially sanctioned 'simple' approach to reading, which influences literacy work with the youngest children in group settings.

These curriculum frameworks and related training initiatives contain detailed requirements and guidelines for communication, language and literacy and make this book, with its emphasis on practitioner knowledge about language, more relevant than ever before – and in need of considerable modifications. It must also speak to a wider range of practitioners and early years settings, and cannot assume a readership of teachers working in schools.

This widening of the notion of what constitutes an early years practitioner and an early years setting can be a liberating challenge and I have approached it as such. However, the dangers of settling for oversimplified views of communication, language, literacy and early years education are still in evidence. This fourth edition still rejects quick-fix approaches to language and narrow prescriptive rules for teaching it - and teaching children - and continues to celebrate the complexity and the joy involved in supporting young children's development as innovative communicators, speakers, writers and readers. The call for a fourth edition indicates that early years practitioners in many settings, and with many different backgrounds, agree with me about the complexity of their task and approach it with undiminished professionalism and commitment. I am proud to count myself one of them.

> Marian Whitehead Norwich July 2009



The focus of this book is on children from birth to 7 and particularly on those attending a wide range of early years group settings providing care and education. In the terminology of the current legislation for England, this covers the communication, language and literacy curriculum for the Early Years Foundation Stage (birth to 5) and Years 1 and 2 of the National Curriculum. However, the early years of learning and education are not restricted to group settings and schools, and books about this stage must also focus on children's informal learning and experiences in homes and communities. Furthermore, no worthwhile study of communication, language and literacy should be restricted by the narrow legislation for England.

Communication, language and literacy are areas of study that continue to produce new research findings and stimulating theories, and certainly justify regular review and reappraisal. Early communication and language learning are often seen as patterns or 'models' for a great range of human learning strategies and achievements. Language and literacy demonstrate the complex interweaving of the personal and the public, the private and the social, the idiosyncratic and the conventional, that characterizes all learning. Communication and language also affect the whole of care and education for, even when they are not the particular focus of planned provision and activities, they are the means and the channel for teaching and learning.

The role of the early years practitioner involves looking at the theories put forward by linguists, reviewing some of the trends in linguistic research and making informed decisions about their possible implications for practice. Practitioners have to be their own researchers in their own settings, their own

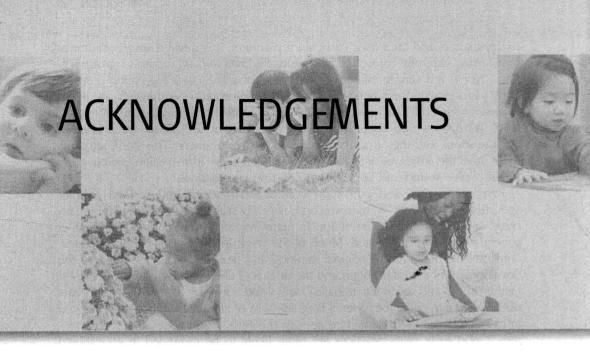
policy-makers and their own curriculum planners. It is never a simple matter of transferring carefully controlled laboratory findings to busy, complex group settings. Nor is it a simple matter of doing whatever the latest legislation dictates. Early years practitioners need the appropriate information and insights to begin to answer such difficult questions as: 'What is educational linguistics?' 'What use is it?' 'What do we do about the claims of the researcher?' These are practitioners' questions and they must be answered by practitioners. This book attempts to outline the kinds of knowledge about language from which practitioners might evolve sound and appropriate educational practices.

Early years care and education continues to be an undervalued area of specialism threatened by narrow curriculum control, economizing and bureaucracy, but its particular contribution to many research areas and to education in general should be recognized. Much of the work in early years care and education has been a source of original thinking and flexible practices. Studies of the development of the infant brain and the origins of children's later achievements in mathematical and scientific thinking, logic and topology began in early years research. In particular, the roots of language and of literacy have been investigated in research based in kindergarten, nursery and early years classes in several countries. Good early years practices are more likely to be grounded in educational theories, passionate commitment and rigorous research than in pragmatic responses to political, economic and social pressures.

Part I of this book describes contemporary approaches to the study of communication and language. Chapter 1 is an introduction to modern linguistics and Chapter 2 outlines sociolinguistic approaches in some detail. Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with language and thought and the acquisition of language in infancy. Chapter 5 relates the topics of the first four chapters to the early years practitioner's planning and provision for the language curriculum.

Part II of the book focuses on literacy and sets the scene with a chapter on narrative and stories (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 discusses books and literature and the part they play in early literacy learning, particularly reading. Chapter 8 explores the development of writing in the early years. Chapter 9 is similar to Chapter 5 in that it brings together the topics of the preceding three chapters and relates them to the early years practitioner's planning and provision for literacy development.

Each chapter ends with a list of key terms that reflects the language and the concepts of the topic and extensive lists of further reading. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8 contain specific learning and teaching suggestions for the practitioner, but Chapters 5 and 9 omit these because they are entirely focused on the professional implications of Parts I and II of the book.



My warmest thanks go to the children, staff and families of Earlham Early Years Centre, Norwich, and St John's Roman Catholic Infant School, Norwich, for many of the photographs and examples of good practice in this new edition. Special thanks and love to my daughters and grandchildren for their photographs and inspiration.



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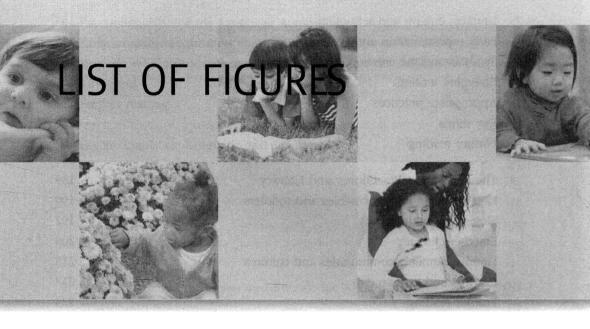
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# LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

