

Reading Nest

The Supportive Literacy Environment Handbook

Introduction

This book is for everyone who comes into contact with literacy – teachers, education managers, special education teachers, librarians. The book is also for parents since they are the first to support children’s literacy and create a learning environment.

Every one requires literacy: to communicate with the family, to study, research and store information, present their opinions, defend the truth and justice. Estonian people have valued the written word and education and been proud of their overall level of education for a long time. However, an international study in 2011-2012 revealed that 13% of the Estonian population only reach the first level or less in functional literacy, in other words, they are not able to read or write at the level required to successfully cope with life. The international research results show that people, who do not read in their free time, do not understand texts as well as those who voluntarily engage in reading.

Estonian schools allocate large amounts of time for teaching literature and grammar but many youngsters and adults do not like reading nor want to read. So where does the enjoyment of reading begin from? What does hating reading derive from? Both are rooted in earlier experience, gained at home, kindergarten and school. When people are asked to recall their first encounters with reading, these are always colourful – like a bubbling stream, green light shining through foliage and a stack of firewood smelling of resin. Or a cosy kitchen scene with the fire in the cooking range, granny’s voice and an apple cake baking in the oven. Negative experiences also have colour and taste – dusty classroom, smell of chalk and a task of writing a misspelt word over and over again. Or a fear of fast reading, sweaty palms and the teacher’s glare.

This book approaches literacy in a holistic manner by looking at the technicalities of literacy – connection between sounds and letters, writing of syllables, words and texts as well as what could be achieved through literacy. According to emergent literacy theory even very young children use written text primarily for communication – marking their own items, agreeing on rules, learning, playing, creating.

“Technical drawings” of literacy as a tool and the various functions of literacy (all the wonderful things that can be done with this tool), are brought together by an environment which supports literacy at kindergarten, school and home. This environment becomes special and motivating when a reading nest is created in it. Unique to Estonia, but also acclaimed in other countries, reading nests are integrated literacy centres, aspects of which are described in more detail in this book.

The authors hope that with a little help from this book we can attract more and more children to literacy and infect them with love for books in an enjoyable manner. All of us need literacy in everyday life, yet there is much more to it: a person for whom reading becomes a hobby, is able to travel in time and place, live several lives and learn from the experience of the others. Enjoyment of reading lasts throughout life and sustains the idea of life-long learning.

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Terminology explained

Literacy is, in its broadest meaning, the skill of reading and writing. Some authors distinguish reading as a skill to read letters, words and simpler texts, and literacy which presupposes higher level skills to use and create a variety of texts in different functions (see e.g. White & McCloskey 2003). Three types of literacy are described by the Dictionary of Education (Institute of the Estonian Language, 2014): formal, functional and recreational, or an ability to read, an ability to understand the text, and an ability to create purposeful texts. According to contemporary research literacy emerges holistically – already at the preschool age formal literacy develops simultaneously along with functional and recreational literacy. Therefore, it is of importance to offer young children opportunities for accessing written texts in a wide range of forms and functions.

The 21st century concept of literacy incorporates many aspects: reading decoding process, motivated and reflective reading behaviour, active creative imagination and understanding, but also an ability to possess technical devices, to cooperate when reading and writing, control several information flows simultaneously, initiate and analyse multimedia texts, indulge in enjoyable reading and assume ethical responsibility as a participant in a written communication environment. Today's literate person should be able to understand and create multi-modal texts on screens, that means, at the very least involving digital competences at the basic level. Texts also include drawings, graphs, numeric data etc., hence the concept of literacy today includes some arithmetic and processing of visual material (pictures, maps, videos).

Whether or not a person has obtained formal literacy seems simple: one either can or cannot read, can or cannot write. The level of skills is determined by the number of mistakes made. If it goes beyond a certain level, the text read or written is incomprehensible, in other words the skill is absent. Perfect flawless literacy is an ideal, aspired to by teachers and philologists, however today we rather talk about emergent literacy. This emerged in the 1960s (see e.g. Mary Clay 1967), and was scientifically proved by several studies in the 1980s. Emergent literacy considers literacy as a competence, elements of which begin forming in very young children (e.g. how to place a book correctly in front of them, find a price tag on a product, recognise the first letter of their name)) but development of which is a continuous process encompassing their entire life.

This book uses the term 'literacy environment'. Articles, books and research papers in English also use terms such as 'language rich environment', 'language and literacy rich environment', and 'print rich environment'. In principle they all mean the same – an environment which supports early literacy development in children.

Estonian Reading Association and the Reading Nest project

The Estonian Reading Association NGO was established in 1992 with the aim of facilitating the professional development of its membership which includes: teachers, librarians, students and university lecturers, authors and parents. The Association brings together people who, in

their professional capacity, work with literacy: teaching, researching and developing different aspects of reading and writing. The Association's website www.lugemisyhing.ee contains information on its activities and provides answers to many literacy-related questions.

The Reading Nest is one its most successful projects, one which has also found international recognition. The reading nest is a place created and furnished for purposeful reading activities, where children can in small groups, pairs or alone study and read books, play with the written word and create it in safe and comfortable surroundings. In essence, reading nests are activity centres and as centres for organising the learning environment they have gained a high profile in Estonia through the Hea Algu (Step by Step) pedagogical methodology. The value of centres lies not only in enabling work in small groups but also learning to make informed choices, which then facilitates the development of a number of 21st century competences – self-regulation, enterprise, readiness for life-long learning.

Each kindergarten or school classroom should have a reading nest, even where the rest of the environment is designed in a traditional manner. Throughout this book where the Reading Nest (capitalised) is used, it refers to the Association's project.

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What makes a nest a nest?

Each reading nest should evolve as a collaboration between teachers, children and parents and reflect its creators' views. New ideas keep being added when new nests are created and technological advances emerge as to how to furnish a nest or which activities to have; digital devices have already replaced tape and CD players for listening and creating one's own stories. This book contains some of the best ideas, yet the list cannot be comprehensive, the reading nest as an environment facilitating literacy is constantly evolving like the rest of the world.

Physical learning environment supporting literacy

Stand-alone reading nests

Furniture in a school or a kindergarten classroom is arranged so that it enables children to “slip into the nest”, and work alone, in a pair or a small group. Our schools and kindergartens often have activities in large groups, lots of noise and a learner does not have sufficient opportunity to experience competence, autonomy and coherence (while these are all essential components for the rise of autonomous motivation, see Ryan and Deci, 2008). If we want children to associate reading and writing with a feeling of security and positive emotions, a nest, which is truly cosy to get into, is an important prerequisite.

Furniture and furnishings that are soft, cosy, wholesome and age-appropriate. Thus a reading nest might have cushions, a sofa, an armchair, a rag rug, shelves, a table, chairs etc. Children can use various sources of light and do their reading on their own or with others.

The reading nest is comfortable in that it has different cosy spots in which to engage in reading - cushions, bean bags, rugs, big cuddly toys on whom to sit and read or which can be cuddled while reading. Children’s motivation for spending time in a reading nest can be increased by involving them in the furnishing process, e.g. if the nest has cushions, bookmarks, topic markers or other items made by them. Similarly it is reasonable to engage parents - a sofa or an armchair, which has been replaced during redecoration at a home, may be a valuable addition in a reading nest.

The role of physical environment in the development of literacy has been widely researched. It has been found that smaller, well-defined bookshelves and corners with books encourage children to communicate with each other on literacy and book topics and collaborate with peers. International assessment indicators also express the importance of dividing a room into activity centres. Based on these indicators literacy can be supported by fitting a reading centre and a writing centre. The first would be equipped with books which are varied, appropriate for age, number and interests of children, the latter would come with resources for writing (lettering samples, paper, pencils, worksheets, etc.). The reading nest is a centre with features of both the reading and writing centres, certainly, a classroom may contain two nests or centres – one for more relaxed reading and browsing books, and the other primarily for writing. Perhaps even a third one for performances and role plays, all dependent on children's interests, topics, condition of rooms. Various centres can further be added, removed or redesigned but there needs to be one main reading nest in the classroom.

Richness of the written word

The reading nest contains a variety of texts: books (fiction and non-fiction), periodicals, applied literature, manuscripts and books created by children.

In order for the younger reader to develop an interest in the written word, they need experience – to write on a wide range of very interesting topics. A reading nest in a crèche group room should not only have board books but real books too and different texts, for example infants take interest in fashion and technology catalogues, journals with animal photos, food recipes and so on. The choice of texts would increase over time, and thus a child with an interest in a particular topic (e.g. football or dinosaurs) can browse such books and the other way round as well – looking at a book on American indigenous cultures, Greek mythology or Estonian brooches might arouse interest in the respective topic. It is essential for a reading nest to have applied literature i.e. functional texts, e.g. questionnaires, recipes, tickets of fines, contracts, legal texts – which are of great interest to primary school pupils, but simpler versions can be used in preschool as well (e.g. shopping list, recipe, ticket, receipt, game rules, washing instructions, etc.). When a child is raised in the environment with lots of texts to explore, and if children are involved in creating texts used in that environment, their literacy develops much better than in children whose opportunities are scarcer. By text we mean children’s names in the learning environment (on chairs, cupboards) as well as all other texts in their environment (signs, posters, advertisements etc.), including texts in other languages, books and short reading texts in reading centres and lettering samples in writing centres. A range of texts should be used – hand-written, computer prints and mass produced texts and posters etc. Texts created by children should be deemed valuable, that also includes their first scribbles and writing attempts (both hand written and written on a computer).

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It should also be explained to parents that it is important for a child to write! Writing beautifully and correctly develops over time and reading skill plays a major role, as children who read a lot, will start writing better. However, learning to read for many children develops through writing - by exploring, inventing and testing their own systems. A kindergarten room should provide such opportunities, share the joy of discovery with children and boldly exhibit even the most basic and ill-spelled attempts at writing.

Even though the term “reading nest” refers to reading first, the focus actually is on the holistic development of literacy. A good nest also has devices for drawing and writing. As part of the reading nest or even as a separate centre each group/class should have a writing centre, which is equipped with the necessary resources enabling children to write their own stories and make books.

The more opportunities there are for motivating children to use their writing skills, the higher the number of children engaged in literacy activities will be. This way, through game-like activities, their motivation to engage with written word and their language skills keep improving.

The written word is attractive and accessible

Books/materials are accessible, age-appropriate, thematic, varied, interesting, at different levels of complexity.

An attractive display is the first stimulus enticing the child to open a book. Books can be made more accessible and attractive if a reading nest has a shelf like a display unit with a rich and varied selection of books, displayed with a front cover facing the child. This is important for creating the first impulse for reading and motivating children, encouraging them to open a new book, to turn over the pages and study it.

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Aestheticism means that books are clean and tidy, any damage to books is repaired carefully and this can successfully be done with children. If necessary, books are given wrapping paper, a worn book actually shows it is worth reading and read by many. The younger the children, the more important illustrations become. Teachers should not only rely on their taste when choosing illustrations, a range of illustration styles exist, and some, which from an adult's point of view are not 'pretty', might be extremely attractive and engaging for a child.

Games and resources to support literacy

The nest should also have audiobooks and audio texts,(CDs, MP3 player, digital reading pen or other form of digital systems), materials for writing and crafting (papers, pencils, crayons, scissors, paints, a paper hole punch, string, a staple punch, leftover materials etc.), reading and picture materials, reading games, board games and creative games (puppets, costumes etc.).

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Teacher's role in the reading nest

The physical and mental environments of the reading nest enable children's literacy and motivation to read and write to develop naturally, in accordance with their age and in a playful manner.

The primary designer of that environment is the teacher (or a parent at home), whose task it is to create a positive atmosphere. A good teacher knows how to develop children and is aware of various tips of how to raise interest in reading, suggests a range of books and texts for reading and is able to customise the learning process.

Teacher's tasks in the reading nest could include:

- design of the mental and physical environment and the whole of the literacy environment.
- facilitation of children's initiative, learning motivation and interest in reading and writing – the teacher should take sincere interest in each child's opinions, ideas and development, and accordingly, provide age-appropriate and interesting literacy experiences.
- pointing out and raising awareness of situations in which literacy is required.
- in daily situations the teacher has to note and employ situations where literacy is necessary, e.g. when children have questions, search for answers with them in handbooks, reference books or on the Internet, and gradually guide them to search for information independently. Similarly, study and enjoy literary texts with children and encourage them to find texts on their own – first by looking at them, then reading more and more. When a child makes letter-like scribbles on paper, it is the teacher's role to notice, recognise and acknowledge them.
- setting an example in literacy – the teacher should also be a good reader and writer, they could explore and read with children, take down children's important ideas and sentences and then read them back, and encourage the children to read such notes themselves. As soon as children show interest in writing such ideas themselves, they should be allowed to do it as best as they can, offering help and advice when required, yet wholeheartedly supporting emergent literacy (that is at first, by not drawing attention to potential mistakes at all).
- giving support to linguistic development of children – the teacher should, first and foremost, be a good listener, speaker, reader and writer, thus setting an example, and support speech development with a variety of devices - rewording, mimicking, body language, pictures, items, etc. The teacher should monitor children's responses to speech, both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. looking aside, or fidgeting), and create as many possibilities for all children for content-rich speaking, including the slower thinkers and the ones with a mother tongue other than Estonian.
- the teacher should support the development of children's metalanguage skills (language awareness) – to notice and to let children search for the language's "building blocks" during games, for example rhymes, words with the same first letter, words that do or do not include certain sounds, tenses (what is now and which was earlier?), words that sound similar (homophones), words with similar meaning (synonyms), words with opposite meanings (antonyms), words unknown to children (and to search for the meanings together) etc. The teacher should also ask children to find and sort letters, words with a particular first letter, words with or without a

particular letter, names, adjectives, verbs, punctuation marks, numbers, maths symbols, letters of another language (e.g. Cyrillic or logograms).

- planning of integrated and playful learning – materials and activities are linked to content-rich and interesting topics in order to enhance integrated learning. Where possible, children are offered games, ideas and tasks where they can make use of literacy and numeracy which is integrated with other learning topics. The teacher's attitude to their role is what hugely impacts the learning process – the teacher should not try to be the one only inputting knowledge, but rather an advisor and a fellow student, the creator of the learning environment and a collaborator.
- Mapping and giving feedback on children's literacy development – teachers set the focus on what the child already knows, or has acquired and what the child is already attempting to achieve. The focus never lies on mistakes or what a child is unable to do yet. Assessment and feedback are based on conversations and discussions (e.g. children's work) and other methods of active learning, which show what the children have been able to learn over a certain time period. The teacher makes time to sincerely recognise and acknowledge development, encourage and stimulate.
- Collaborative support to literacy development – adults (teachers, assistants, parents, support persons, speech therapists, language teachers etc.) all work in consultation, they have shared values and the main focus lies in maintaining children's motivation and comprehensive development of literacy.

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The following chapter handles all four aspects in more detail: physical and mental environments, activities and games in the nest and teacher's role.

In 2014, Anneli Laamann carried out a study on the literacy environment in Estonian kindergartens. Her master's paper "Literacy environment in a standard group and a group with a reading nest in a kindergarten" had a sample which included 15 groups in Tallinn, Tartu and Harju county. Eight of them had no reading nest and seven groups had a reading nest. In addition to observations, 15 teachers were interviewed, one per group.

The results showed that in groups with a reading nest the environment supporting literacy was better in several aspects as compared to standard groups. Books were better organised and displayed, special spots had been set up for working with books. Groups with a reading nest gained better results in the curriculum and learning environment in terms of textual richness and support given to literacy. The following sections describing aspects of literacy environment, present major outcomes of Laamann's study in parallel with international studies and views of other authors.

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Teachers often ask: what if children misspell words and other children see this, the latter may begin misspelling due to poor example? It should be noted that the written speech develops similarly to the verbal speech. Younger children often make mistakes – say 'calvary' instead on 'cavalry', or 'liibry' for 'library', get their plural forms wrong, e.g. 'yous', or err in forming the superlative, e.g. the bestest, etc. When a group comprises children with Estonian as a second language, one can hear even more intriguing phrases. Should the teacher then prevent children speaking out loud to stop others repeating their mistakes? Certainly not – on the contrary, children need more stimulation to speak more and more, provide them with

examples to formulate more complex forms, acknowledge children and gradually their speech becomes more accurate and understandable. The same applies to writing – the teacher can provide samples of key words, recognise children’s writing attempts, trying to decode their message and encouraging everyone to present their ideas in writing - exactly as well as they are able to at the time. Only practice makes perfect!

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What is an age-appropriate book e.g. for a seven-year-old? There are those who prefer simple nursery rhymes and those who can read Harry Potter, and many fall somewhere between these two with their level of skills and interests. The teacher can observe children – by bringing different books into the reading nest, and introducing them, and then they should monitor which children take interest in which books. Four-to-six-year old children sometimes show interest in scientific literature, e.g. they carefully study illustrated books on history, even though these are far too complicated for them, they can glean information from illustrations and drawings, and some can read text in captions.

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Games play an important role in reading nests, such as board games, role playing and speaking and language games. Therefore it is advisable to have a collection of items for playing and telling stories, e.g. paper, finger and hand puppets, there could be a screen or stage, dolls could include some well-known book or fairy tale characters, various stage props, for role games perhaps even costumes, wigs, or masks, and so on. All resources for drama and role play may be located in a drama centre, should the classroom have such. Which games and devices MUST be available? There is no clear and single answer to this. In the Estonian language a large number of learning materials for reading have been published in recent years (workbooks, primers, reading games, picture cards, etc.). Thus there is no lack of devices to aid learning to read and write and the teacher should select which of the many are best suited to their objectives. Many teachers actually make their own materials, such as games, worksheets, and so on, the following are also used: a composing spelling book, letter blocks, wall boards, modelling dough, magnetic board with letters, alphabet floor puzzle and kinetic sand.

One method, mentioned earlier, is the creation of a print-rich environment: children should have plenty of text samples to understand why and how reading is used, they should have possibilities to play with letters and words. “The environment is the third teacher” Loris Malaguzzi has said, the second teacher is peers – group or classmates. In role plays the other child is often the driving force taking their peers to reading or writing. Mostly that child’s skills surpass those of their classmates but their example and drive are catching and take other children along. Thus for example they lead the other children in playing a shop to design paper money, make books or engage in a reading game.

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Study topics

Texts and books alternate according to topics in the studies

A good learning environment should reflect issues which are topical in the learning process. For example if the topic is witches, the environment would have texts, photos, drawings, postcards, games, devices, thematic pictures created by children, schematic drawings, texts and so on related to witches and witchcraft.

As for books and other materials it is important to vary and circulate them, they change and alternate hand in hand with learning topics, diversity of texts and printed materials attracts children to the nest - to study new fascinating books, cards etc. A reading nest could also have some dear old picture and fairy tale books, which are always available, but certainly fiction, popular scientific and research texts should also be available. Craft and writing tools and games should also be re-circulated every now and then. It helps to make the nest more attractive, prevents cluttering and ensures a cosy and tidy environment. Where a classroom is organised in centres, each of them could have materials which inspire the use of reading and writing skills, for example signs, paper, pencils, headlines, logos, magazines, books, a board and chalks, child-originated texts, posters and other textual materials. Similarly, each centre should have books related to the theme, books are also changed according to (project) topic, for example the creative games centre has a hairdressing magazine to play a hair salon, a recipe book is found in the cooking centre, books on architecture in the building centre, a digital reading pen and a nature game and a globe in the nature centre, and so on. Texts, materials, games of all centres should be linked to an overall project topic. For example, a part of the group or classroom may become a doctor's surgery, space station or an art exhibition for a while, naturally with appropriate textual material, a surgery could have medical books on anatomy, 3D models of various organ systems, prescriptions, printed materials on illnesses and hygiene etc.

Reading nest is a reading nest

A reading nest is signed to show that it is a reading nest (logo).

To show that the cosy spot in the classroom is the reading nest, it should have a corresponding sign or label.

In Estonian, as in many languages, we can talk about word magic – each word carries a meaning and a story. The compound noun ‘reading nest’ brings together reading and nest and the opportunity for a child to see that sign on a daily basis while becoming involved in exciting literacy-themed games and activities, might create a positive link for life – that literacy is enjoyable, attractive, and safe.

Rules/agreements of the reading nest are on display

Rules/agreements of the reading nest are displayed and visible to everybody.

The reading nest should be part of a democratic classroom. Agreements are concluded with children, every now and then they are revised (at the start of a school year or when new pupils arrive), amended and specified as required.

These rules are on display, for younger children (at crèche, 18-36 months) there is a picture version too. This makes activities safer and more predictable, as a child knows that when they have chosen a book and leaf it, no one has the right to take it off them; when children bring books from home, these have to be shared with other children; a book is handled with care and clean hands; a digital reading pen is used either together (the sound is on), or alone (the sound comes through headphones) so as not to disturb other children who e.g. are reading or writing).

Each reading nest is unique, therefore rules are unique too. What matters is that the rules have been democratically agreed and displayed for everybody to see. It is a good idea to involve children in the writing of the rules, at first aided by the teacher, later on their own.

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The internationally used Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Tool (ELLCO) Pre-K describes environments in pre-school which largely resemble the criteria of the Reading Nest as ‘excellent’. It particularly points out that the room has on display many examples of written text (children’s works, posters, books made by children), which clearly present different aims of writing, for example children’s ideas regarding the weekly theme and that stories told by children are in the book centre, etc.

The ELLCO Pre-K instrument has been used by Denise Cunningham (2009) from Missouri State University, who has studied the classroom, physical environment and modes of study to find out the extent to which classrooms support the development of literacy. Her results showed a strong correlation between the quality of the literacy environment and the children’s level of literacy.

Our teachers assert that they deem the environment to be important or very important. Observation results, however, revealed that many kindergarten groups are text-poor. Most frequently letters and numbers are displayed, sometimes also days of the week, seasons and months. In some places one can see duty rotas and group rules.

Children's names appear on cupboards and towel hooks and in some groups, on chairs and beds. However, teachers are unable to value the importance of displaying child-originated texts, and other texts written within creative games and first writing attempts (Laamann, 2014).

Mental environment supporting literacy

The reading nest is not merely a nice place but first, a COSY place to settle down in. The emotion accompanying reading is what matters and hopefully remains with the child for the rest of their life.

Child-initiated and interest-based reading

The mental environment of the reading nest also encompasses a positive mood which entices them to get into the nest and an attractive selection of texts and books, which foster interest in reading.

The reading nest's founding concept was the creation of motivating reading environments for every child - a comfortable and safe place for a child to sit down and choose what to read or leaf through.

This notion has a solid scientific grounding. One of the most important issues in literacy is inciting interest in reading in the child and keeping it alive through adolescence and adulthood.

Suzanne Mol and Adriana Bus in their meta-study from 2011 compared data on reading in very different age groups from pre-school through to university. They ascertained that free reading (reading at one's own initiative outside formal studies) played an essential role in the development of literacy in readers of a range of ages. The more one reads, the better become vocabulary and understanding of text; this facilitates better academic progress in all other spheres of study as information is mostly presented in the form of written texts. This way a positive reading chain is created.

Figure

A contrasting tendency may also be observed: children (also youths and adults) who do not read voluntarily, fall further behind their reading peers in the development of literacy each year. Those who do not like reading experience how low level literacy skills prohibit them understanding the text read. Since reading is not enjoyable, it causes negative emotions rather and reduces interest and motivation even further causing a negative reading chain to occur.

Figure

In the light of these results it is important that the teacher creates opportunities for children to enjoy stress-free reading of material of their own choice. Children can freely select the difficulty level and content of texts, motivation comes first as do positive emotions with regard to reading. The teacher's role is to encourage parents to give every kind of support to children at home as well. Positive reading chains begin at the kindergarten and continue through all stages of education and life.

Would children, who do not discover enjoyment of reading at an early age, lag behind hopelessly, and never become good readers? Fortunately, this is not the case.

The study by Mol and Bus also suggests that when the so-called reluctant readers are eventually attracted to texts and they start reading in their spare time, their reading skills may take a big leap. Those, initially reluctant readers, may soon see how their vocabulary greatly improves as does ability to understand written texts; it might incite even bigger interest in reading and help traverse from the negative chain onto the positive reading chain.

Selection of books in the reading nest

Whether the nest be at school, kindergarten or home - its mental and emotional dimension is determined greatly by what it lends itself to, which books, texts and printed material are available. So many children's books are published today that teachers cannot possibly know them all, let alone reading or making informed choices. Quality of books is variable and they are certainly not cheap. Parents face similar issues – bookshelves and financial resources are not endless, and only truly good and educational books are intended to be bought

How many and which books to acquire for the reading nest largely depends on its physical space – how much room there is for bookshelves and other places for books, how high they are, how books and printed materials can be placed on them. Specialists deem it important to have a sufficient number of books (e.g. five titles per child) and that on the shelf they have their front cover facing the reader and are re-circulated from time to time. Even in a limited space some books should be displayed and brought to the child's attention by showing their front covers.

Where to obtain books?

One option is for the teacher to bring books from home that their own children have grown out of, though not every teacher would have the opportunity or desire to do this. It is thus advisable to forge good links with a local community or school library. Many kindergarten and school teachers take their children's groups to a library every couple of weeks and borrow something for everybody. The books are returned on the next visit and new ones are then borrowed. This way children learn at a young age how to behave at the library, independently select books and discuss with friends what and why to borrow. It is also important to gain the experience that we are as different as readers as are our skills and interests.

Some books, journals and other printed materials for common use can be brought from homes. In this case there are wonderful opportunities for parents to come and tell the class about their favourites, such parent examples are invaluable. With parents' consent children could bring their favourite books to the class as this is also a good opportunity to learn from each other.

How to choose reading materials?

When learning materials are selected age relevance usually comes as a priority, in other words texts and pictures which the child can follow, and current topics. It is worthwhile considering that the selection of books provided for free activities supports and gives stimuli for movement in the zone of proximal development. Children like to develop, experience new things, feel bigger. Free reading activities are just that, here one can check – can I do it yet? It is exciting to explore what is hidden behind this mysterious book cover.

Every class and group have their reading leaders, that is children who have started reading faster and more, as if ahead of their age. Their model may have a great impact on other children when reading leaders are reasonably employed. The reading nest should contain something for a child who is interested in greater imagination or more complex plots than other peers in general. For example in the kindergarten boredom with lyrical fairy tales (Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty) etc. is identified in 6 to 7-year olds (also girls!), and they can be fascinated by stories with a bit of spookiness and rough jokes, e.g. folk lore stories of the devil, ghosts and so on.

There is no rush to put aside simpler reading either. There are always children whose reading skills lag 2-3 years behind others. Some books of an exciting plot but little text could still be included in the nest's selection for 10-11 year old children. Every child should have a book which is like a friend patting on the shoulder: "You can read me and you understand everything just right."

Estonian didactics specialists recognise that children develop at vastly differing rates, whilst stages of development cannot be distinguished clearly, and sometimes the child slips unnoticed and smoothly from one skill level to another. Therefore it is important to allow children make choices as much as possible, as to which book to choose in terms of text and illustrations.

Books for very young children need variety in the format and visuals. Thick cardboard pages are handy for turning and small size makes them convenient to hold on the lap and in the hand. Lots of books are published with fancy touchy-feely details, holes and magnets, it is worth remembering though that such details do not necessarily guarantee an interesting book. With these books it is a parent or an older child who plays an enriching role, with whom the book is explored, experience is worded and discussions are had as to what is being touched and seen.

A crèche group should have books which support the child's linguistic and mental development: in the simplest case each page has one clearly recognisable item in the picture, e.g. a ball, teddy bear or bucket. The next step is books with detail-rich pictures on different themes – e.g. of a child's room, and along the margins single items would be depicted which can be found in the central picture. Such books foster vision and attention – the eye should move up and down, left and right in order to compare details. It is essential however that objects are depicted identifiably. Not every colourful picture book has this quality.

Of particular value are books for young children which encourage noticing and naming colours, comparing amounts and shapes and counting, thus serving a range of curricular purposes.

Picture books on well-known fairy tales are also good where sequencing of illustration enables recalling the story line and scaffolds retelling and acting. In this case it is not important to read the text closely but talking the plot through with the child.

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Reading nest is a reading nest

A reading nest is signed to show that it is a reading nest (logo).
To show that the cosy spot in the classroom is the reading nest, it should have a corresponding sign or label.

In Estonian, as in many languages, we can talk about word magic – each word carries a meaning and a story. The compound noun ‘reading nest’ brings together reading and nest and the opportunity for a child to see that sign on a daily basis while becoming involved in exciting literacy-themed games and activities, might create a positive link for life – that literacy is enjoyable, attractive, and safe.

Rules/agreements of the reading nest are on display

Rules/agreements of the reading nest are displayed and visible to everybody.
The reading nest should be part of a democratic classroom. Agreements are concluded with children, every now and then they are revised (at the start of a school year or when new pupils arrive), amended and specified as required. These rules are on display, for younger children (at crèche, 18-36 months) there is a picture version too. This makes activities safer and more predictable, as a child knows that when they have chosen a book and leaf it, no one has the right to take it off them; when children bring books from home, these have to be shared with other children; a book is handled with care and clean hands; a digital reading pen is used either together (the sound is on), or alone (the sound comes through headphones) so as not to disturb other children who e.g. are reading or writing).

Each reading nest is unique, therefore rules are unique too. What matters is that the rules have been democratically agreed and displayed for everybody to see. It is a good idea to involve children in the writing of the rules, at first aided by the teacher, later on their own.

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The internationally used Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Tool (ELLCO) Pre-K describes environments in pre-school which largely resemble the criteria of the Reading Nest as 'excellent'. It particularly points out that the room has on display many examples of written text (children's works, posters, books made by children), which clearly present different aims of writing, for example children's ideas regarding the weekly theme and that stories told by children are in the book centre, etc.

The ELLCO Pre-K instrument has been used by Denise Cunningham (2009) from Missouri State University, who has studied the classroom, physical environment and modes of study to find out the extent to which classrooms support the development of literacy. Her results showed a strong correlation between the quality of the literacy environment and the children's level of literacy.

Our teachers assert that they deem the environment to be important or very important. Observation results, however, revealed that many kindergarten groups are text-poor. Most frequently letters and numbers are displayed, sometimes also days of the week, seasons and months. In some places one can see duty rotas and group rules. Children's names appear on cupboards and towel hooks and in some groups, on chairs and beds. However, teachers are unable to value the importance of displaying child-originated texts, and other texts written within creative games and first writing attempts (Laamann, 2014).

Mental environment supporting literacy

The reading nest is not merely a nice place but first, a COSY place to settle down in. The emotion accompanying reading is what matters and hopefully remains with the child for the rest of their life.

Child-initiated and interest-based reading

The mental environment of the reading nest also encompasses a positive mood which entices them to get into the nest and an attractive selection of texts and books, which foster interest in reading.

The reading nest's founding concept was the creation of motivating reading environments for every child - a comfortable and safe place for a child to sit down and choose what to read or leaf through.

This notion has a solid scientific grounding. One of the most important issues in literacy is inciting interest in reading in the child and keeping it alive through adolescence and adulthood.

Suzanne Mol and Adriana Bus in their meta-study from 2011 compared data on reading in very different age groups from pre-school through to university. They ascertained that free reading (reading at one's own initiative outside formal studies) played an essential role in the development of literacy in readers of a range of ages. The more one reads, the better become vocabulary and understanding of text; this facilitates better academic progress in all other spheres of study as information is mostly presented in the form of written texts. This way a positive reading chain is created.

Figure

A contrasting tendency may also be observed: children (also youths and adults) who do not read voluntarily, fall further behind their reading peers in the development of literacy each year. Those who do not like reading experience how low level literacy skills prohibit them understanding the text read. Since reading is not enjoyable, it causes negative emotions rather and reduces interest and motivation even further causing a negative reading chain to occur.

Figure

In the light of these results it is important that the teacher creates opportunities for children to enjoy stress-free reading of material of their own choice. Children can freely select the difficulty level and content of texts, motivation comes first as do positive emotions with regard to reading. The teacher's role is to encourage parents to give every kind of support to children at home as well. Positive reading chains begin at the kindergarten and continue through all stages of education and life.

Would children, who do not discover enjoyment of reading at an early age, lag behind hopelessly, and never become good readers? Fortunately, this is not the case.

The study by Mol and Bus also suggests that when the so-called reluctant readers are eventually attracted to texts and they start reading in their spare time, their reading skills may take a big leap. Those, initially reluctant readers, may soon see how their vocabulary greatly improves as does ability to understand written texts; it might incite even bigger interest in reading and help traverse from the negative chain onto the positive reading chain.

Selection of books in the reading nest

Whether the nest be at school, kindergarten or home - its mental and emotional dimension is determined greatly by what it lends itself to, which books, texts and printed material are available. So many children's books are published today that teachers cannot possibly know them all, let alone reading or making informed choices. Quality of books is variable and they are certainly not cheap. Parents face similar issues – bookshelves and financial resources are not endless, and only truly good and educational books are intended to be bought

How many and which books to acquire for the reading nest largely depends on its physical space – how much room there is for bookshelves and other places for books, how high they are, how books and printed materials can be placed on them. Specialists deem it important to have a sufficient number of books (e.g. five titles per child) and that on the shelf they have their front cover facing the reader and are re-circulated from time to time. Even in a limited space some books should be displayed and brought to the child's attention by showing their front covers.

Where to obtain books?

One option is for the teacher to bring books from home that their own children have grown out of, though not every teacher would have the opportunity or desire to do this. It is thus advisable to forge good links with a local community or school library. Many kindergarten and school teachers take their children's groups to a library every couple of weeks and borrow something for everybody. The books are returned on the next visit and new ones are then borrowed. This way children learn at a young age how to behave at the library, independently select books and discuss with friends what and why to borrow. It is also important to gain the experience that we are as different as readers as are our skills and interests.

Some books, journals and other printed materials for common use can be brought from homes. In this case there are wonderful opportunities for parents to come and tell the class about their favourites, such parent examples are invaluable. With parents' consent children could bring their favourite books to the class as this is also a good opportunity to learn from each other.

How to choose reading materials?

When learning materials are selected age relevance usually comes as a priority, in other words texts and pictures which the child can follow, and current topics. It is worthwhile considering that the selection of books provided for free activities supports and gives stimuli for movement in the zone of proximal development. Children like to develop, experience new things, feel bigger. Free reading activities are just that, here one can check – can I do it yet? It is exciting to explore what is hidden behind this mysterious book cover.

Every class and group have their reading leaders, that is children who have started reading faster and more, as if ahead of their age. Their model may have a great impact on other children when reading leaders are reasonably employed. The reading nest should contain something for a child who is interested in greater imagination or more complex plots than other peers in general. For example in the kindergarten boredom with lyrical fairy tales (Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty) etc. is identified in 6 to 7-year olds (also girls!), and they can be fascinated by stories with a bit of spookiness and rough jokes, e.g. folk lore stories of the devil, ghosts and so on.

There is no rush to put aside simpler reading either. There are always children whose reading skills lag 2-3 years behind others. Some books of an exciting plot but little text could still be included in the nest's selection for 10-11 year old children. Every child should have a book which is like a friend patting on the shoulder: "You can read me and you understand everything just right."

Estonian didactics specialists recognise that children develop at vastly differing rates, whilst stages of development cannot be distinguished clearly, and sometimes the child slips unnoticed and smoothly from one skill level to another. Therefore it is important to allow children make choices as much as possible, as to which book to choose in terms of text and illustrations.

Books for very young children need variety in the format and visuals. Thick cardboard pages are handy for turning and small size makes them convenient to hold on the lap and in the hand. Lots of books are published with fancy touchy-feely details, holes and magnets, it is worth remembering though that such details do not necessarily guarantee an interesting book. With these books it is a parent or an older child who plays an enriching role, with whom the book is explored, experience is worded and discussions are had as to what is being touched and seen.

A crèche group should have books which support the child's linguistic and mental development: in the simplest case each page has one clearly recognisable item in the picture, e.g. a ball, teddy bear or bucket. The next step is books with detail-rich pictures on different themes – e.g. of a child's room, and along the margins single items would be depicted which can be found in the central picture. Such books foster vision and attention – the eye should move up and down, left and right in order to compare details. It is essential however that objects are depicted identifiably. Not every colourful picture book has this quality.

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Creation

Reading and writing offer opportunities for creative self-expression: note down one's thoughts, compose fairy tales, poems and songs, game rules, or user instructions for new inventions. Performance arts also fall under creation, such as reciting an existing or improvised text, performing a play, telling a joke, reading a thrilling story or lyrical poem to peers.

From the adult point of view it might seem that without primary literacy (no link yet between a letter and a sound, or perhaps does not know letters yet), literacy cannot be used creatively. Yet even a two-year-old can compose a poem, where 'writing' is more like waves in the sea. Creation does not exactly stand for high-level fiction; writing a schedule, game rules or food recipe might be as creative for a child as creating a poem, story or play.

Modern technology can be successfully employed for creating texts. A computer (even an old model, no longer used for work) enables very young children to type letters, while older children can acquire orthography with the help of a computer. The child can focus on creative writing because they know that the computer underlines misspelling in red and provides versions for correct spelling. It is important because many children would like to write an exciting story or a nice fairy tale but cannot pay equal attention to form and content simultaneously.

Multi-modality should also be born in mind, e.g. pictograms and illustrated text is easier and more interesting to create. Young children also want and can create non-linear text where words do not compose a sentence and sentences then become a story, but they are placed on a page using a different logic. For example a mind map can be created in pre-school when

starting a new topic, the teacher starts it and notes down children's ideas but soon enough some children can and want to add their ideas to the map.

Enjoyment, recharging 'batteries'

Self-actualisation, a desire to feel competent comes as an important need in young children too. An ability to read and write is enjoyable, it is fun to recognise your own or a friend's name, come up with rhymes and make new funny words. When adults acknowledge children's activities, it helps to improve self-confidence and motivation to work with the written word.

Reading enjoyment follows hearing enjoyment, very young children are able to enjoy listening to reading. This enables becoming acquainted with the more complex structure of written text and enriching vocabulary. Reading aloud, browsing and imitating reading and also independent reading are pleasant in suitable surroundings. Many like reading in bed, a comfortable armchair or on a bench in the park. Children prefer working with the written word in a comfortable setting in school and kindergarten alike. A safe and attractive environment may entice a child who has not learnt to value reading at home yet since it is easy to become attracted to reading when sitting on a soft cushion and browsing a book with beautiful pictures.

On top of everything else literacy enables people to cleanse and mend their souls. A particular type of therapy – bibliotherapy helps to recover from various mental and even physical issues with the help of suitable books. Books help through periods of hardship and problems and writing is similarly therapeutic. Writing your worries on the sand on the beach where water dissolves them, is also calming.

Keeping a diary or a public blog, composing poems for oneself or sharing them with peers are also activities which encourage development of reflection and analysis skills. Persons using them are better able to understand and recognise emotions and thoughts, can give meaning to life and enjoy it. With younger children pedagogical documentation can be used in the reflection stage, when children talk about their thoughts, the teacher records them on the phone or other digital devices and then writes them up. These thoughts are interesting to read later by both children and parents.

To enjoy literacy related activities one does not need to be an author or reader of high-level literature. Games with words and rhymes, counting out rhymes, inventing funny words or speaking in a funny syllabic language are all linked to recreative literacy. The more enjoyable literacy-related experiences children have, the more motivated they are to engage in reading. According to research it brings about success in academic achievements, as in our schools most subjects and learning are based on text.

One cannot exactly teach enjoying reading but enjoyable experiences may be had through working together and leading by example. The child who sees their parents and teachers reading and enjoying different texts (magazine in a comfortable armchair with a cup of coffee,

a thrilling book or collection of poetry in bed at night) is more likely to understand and use the recreative function of reading compared to a child who has little or no experience.

Teacher as an example

The teacher should set an example in reading and writing; they could explore and read with children, take down children's important ideas and sentences and then read them back, and encourage the children to read such notes themselves. As soon as children show interest in writing such ideas themselves, they should be allowed to do as best as they can, offering help and advice when required, yet wholeheartedly supporting emergent literacy (that is at first, by not drawing attention to potential mistakes at all). By observing what the teacher does or does not do, children can learn as much as through explicit teaching. The learning process should be guided in the way that the teacher sets an example as a leader. They should provide role models in active and careful listening, sincere acknowledgement and recognition of development, encouragement and inspiration, and a varied use of the written word.

In kindergarten and primary school the teacher is a Very Important Person. Parents would frequently hear, "But TEACHER said so". When said by the teacher, there is no further arguing about it. The teacher can make the reading nest a cosy place where they sometimes read books aloud - fairy tales, prose, poetry, reference books. Yet sometimes, the teacher might read or browse a book by themselves, soon a child or more would join to do the same, it is especially true with younger children. Sitting in teacher's lap would be a particularly nice place for reading a book.

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When a child makes letter-like scribbles on paper, it is the teacher's role to notice, recognise and acknowledge them thus making the child feel successful and encouraged to try again. Fairly young children are able to scribble something like I, O, M or N. When a young writer is allowed to use a keyboard, the outcome is fairly readable, though does not resemble any familiar language. By chance it might include existing words too. These could be for instance highlighted and the child will be proud for correctly spelling e.g. 'fish'. It is important to set an example in reading and writing outside the nest as well. Every time the teacher writes something or notes down children's queries or comments, they might inquire what was written and this is an opportunity to read out and further discuss the topic. Discussing documentation with children and in front of them helps both parties to recall where they got to in the studying process. For example the teacher checks the notes and says, "Last time you had a question how animals know when to fall asleep for winter" and the discussion continues from there. When the teacher reads in spare time (e.g. during children's afternoon bedtime, between classes or while children are engaged in a longer independent task), it creates interest. The children may ask, "What are you reading? What is this book about?" Sometimes the teacher might deliberately choose a book arousing interest in children and then read it out. Reading out catchy stories may 'infect' them with reading interest, children are keen to find out what happened next and begin reading the story independently.

For instance in Israel some first-year pupils (in Estonian context 6-7-year olds, about to start school) were read a story about monkey's adventures during the last 20 minutes of

the school day. It was a series of thin yet gripping books, targeted at a slightly older age group. To begin with, teachers were not particularly happy finding them too light-hearted. However, children liked them immensely and at the end of the experiment, the children who had been listening to monkey stories daily, had better vocabulary and retelling skills than the control group. In addition, many children had obtained the books of the series or read those of older siblings, which also improved their reading skill and increased their motivation to read ((Feitelson et al.).

Facilitating children's linguistic skills

The teacher should, first and foremost, be a good listener, speaker, reader and writer, thus setting an example, support speech development with a variety of devices – rewording, mimicking, body language, pictures, items, etc. The teacher should monitor children's responses to speech, including both verbal and non-verbal ones (e.g. looking aside, or fidgeting, and create as many possibilities for all children for content-rich speaking, including the slower thinkers and the ones with a mother tongue other than Estonian.

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The teacher should give full support to the development of written language from the beginning. For children the focus, though, is on what can be done with this (e.g. learn, write up information), the teacher always clearly presents the language side – starts with words, which are simpler to read and write to allow a feeling of success.

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- In the reading nest as in the rest of the room illustrations can be added to texts. The daily schedule can be written up in many ways. First, children look at the picture and 'read' – this is when we sing, or eat or go to bed, yet soon enough they develop an understanding of the text separately.
- Teachers can choose books with repeating text for the nest, so that the beginner reader could guess what comes next, for instance in Little Red Riding Hood there is the question "But granny. What big ..." . . and only the last word must be carefully read. The wolf then always says "All the better to" And again, only the verb changes.

Supporting children's meta-language skills (awareness of the language)

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Learning to read is accompanied by becoming aware of the language, grasping that a written text can be spelled out and a spoken text can be written up. This is where symbols are used to note language features – words, syllables or sounds. Human history has seen various alphabets, syllabary, or pictography. Depending on the writing system, a child needs to understand what words are and which symbols correspond to them, what syllables are and their corresponding symbols, what the sounds are and which letters are used.

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In emergent literacy an aspect sometimes overlooked is that knowledge about the language is just one aspect and how to use the language is equally important. Adults might think that first you need to learn letters, enunciation, spelling and elementary reading and only then move on to various texts, reading at first and then writing them. It might be quite different from a

child's perspective. The child may obtain knowledge about the use of language and text in parallel with language knowledge or even earlier, even a young child who does not know all letters yet, is able to compose news, invitations, complaints and poems. Even if the child does it all as part of play, through such activities they learn and perpetuate knowledge about functions of literacy.

There have been long discussions worldwide on how reading actually begins and how to best teach it. Today the view is that knowing the letters, understanding letter-sound connection and a rich vocabulary are all necessary. Children's literacy evolves differently - some begin with a letter, sound and syllable, and some begin with writing a few words and then arrive at letters and sounds. It is even possible to begin with a whole text, for example, if the child knows

CIIRd Egg? book in Estonian by heart, it is possible to start looking for words "EGG, MUM or In reality the learning, writing and reading of letters, sounds and words occurs simultaneously, it is not even reasonable to make a distinction between such skills formally. It is essential, though, to remember that the development of overall language competence and reading skills are closely connected, a child with a rich vocabulary is better able to comprehend and enjoy written text.

The more functions of literacy the child can perceive, the greater the motivation to become literate. Technical skills should be viewed together with reading motivation, otherwise the child learns to read but also develops the view that reading is unpleasant, complicated and boring. When there is the environment where reading and other literacy activities appear with positive feelings and success, these would gradually help the acquisition of technical skills too.

Supporting phonemic awareness

Awareness of phonemes means understanding sounds of a language and an ability to distinguish them in words. This ability can be fostered by playing and communicating with the child since birth.

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Evolution of the skills is not hierarchical, some children develop sense for rhyming sooner, others can distinguish sounds in the word. Acquisition of each skill is also gradual, e.g. in the beginning it is simpler to distinguish the vowel at the beginning of the word. Identifying sounds in the sound combinations may be difficult whether they occur at the beginning, middle or end of the word, in the case of foreign words even older pupils and adults may get them wrong.

One must bear in mind that literacy develops holistically. On the one hand spelling skills precede those of reading and writing, on the other hand written texts foster the development of enunciation. For instance a child knows the letters of their name for writing it and learns spelling through these letters.

Learning to know letters

It is sometimes thought that children should first learn to read and learning to write follows later. In reality development of various parts of literacy runs in parallel and some children learn to read via writing. Research by David K. Dickinson and Lori Lyman DiGisi (1998) showed that in classes where reading and writing were integrated, results of literacy tests were higher.

In the case of the Estonian language the following skills can be determined and similarly to phonemic awareness they are not strictly hierarchical:

- the concept that some symbols exist for reading;
- scribbling and 'reading' in pretence of letter-like forms;
- recognising singular letters (first letter of one's name, M for mummy);
- recognising one's name in full, recognising some other words (e.g. a brand name) in full;
- knowing and writing letters in one's name (also in a random order);
- recognising some well-known (capital) letters, an ability to name them by sound and letter name, ability to find a letter in text or on keyboard;
- a skill in writing some well-known letters understandably;
- knowledge of correct letter forms and how to write them;
- recognising all letters (including foreign ones);
- knowledge of lower-case letters (printed);
- knowing the alphabet;
- knowledge of different fonts and logotypes (block capitals, computer fonts, Gothic letters).

Validity of emergent literacy theory is implicit in this list, even in the case of such a seemingly simple skill as knowing the letters. There are four-year-olds who quite spontaneously learn to read books in block capitals, lowercase and even older books in Gothic lettering. This is while many adults have difficulty in recognising Gothic letters, especially in the absence of a context.

When facing this list many parents and teachers query: when is the right time? When should the child be able to write their name or know letters? When should letters be written correctly? Learning letters begins at a young age, in parallel with the acquisition of oral speech. There are two-year-olds who have an interest in letters and/or whose parents find this important, and such children know all the letters. Such a skill would not help to learn to read at three (each skill has its time), but even toddlers could be engaged in fun and playful ways from a young age (in crèche). Letters can be found in the surroundings or formed (from sand, snow, cones, bodies, etc).

Different children acquire literacy differently, but in addition to mental maturity an interest plays an essential role – when a child badly wants to do something, the teacher or parent is able to locate support and means (write out a text when the child wants to write a birthday card).

What increases learning motivation and interest in the written word is the feeling of being competent.

Children desire to use literacy from a young age, and pointing out that they are the author of some text, may be very important for them. In order to employ this function of literacy one does not need all the letters: there are children who know their name is written on a cupboard, and when writing their name is needed, would copy it using the sample.

Learning to read

The Estonian language's spelling and pronunciation are fairly close, therefore it is deemed reasonable to learn reading through sound analysis. Whether to begin by sounds and then move to shorter words or work with syllables in the meantime, is rather dependent on teaching traditions. Finnish has a similar writing system and when teaching reading more attention is paid to syllables; in Estonia too, many primers have been published where syllables are particularly marked. Learning to read using the whole word method and with rhymes and creating analogies via spelling is considered more important in languages where spelling considerably differs from pronunciation (e.g. English), but the approach has been used in Estonia too.

The following skills can be distinguished in the case of the Estonian language, not in a hierarchical order:

- exploring a book in every way (with the mouth too);
- turning over the pages;
- holding the book the right way up and turning over pages one by one;
- pretending reading;
- retelling using the pictures;
- recognising some letters, especially the first letter of one's name;
- recognising some whole words, that is one's name or friend's name, brand (Barbie, Coca-Cola), recognising a personally important word (animal);
- spelling out simple words (oh, oi, mom);
- spelling out;
- prescient reading;
- ability to read a simpler hypertext, use links;
- ability to comprehend the reading at the primary level;
- paying attention to sentences on the whole; ...
- an ability to read aloud clearly and correctly, using textual devices (e.g. understanding that a capital letter within a sentence refers to a place or personal name, using punctuation marks);
- an ability to understand and use texts of vastly different genres and fields (fairy tale, poem, recipe, timetable, textual task in maths, text in natural or social sciences or humanities, advertisement, game rules, agreement, legal act etc.);
- an ability to recognise, understand and use context and sub-text; (hidden meaning);
- an ability to recognise and use multi-modal texts (drawing, scheme, animation etc.);
- an ability to use dictionaries or other reference materials if needed.

Learning to write

First attempts at writing may be quite accidental when a child moves a pencil across paper or draws with a finger on sand, and achieves something like I or O. This is similar to learning to speak where the child tries making various sounds and finally gets something like ‘um-um’ which mother interprets as ‘yummy’, or ‘mom’ (“Yes, dear, mummy is here.”).

Early attempts at writing also need to be recognised and acknowledged by teachers and parents, using descriptive feedback, even if the scribbling is vaguely like a letter. For example say: “This is exactly like an O! And this is like an E from my point of view.” (that E has 5 horizontal lines, bears no relevance). Soon enough the child has more awareness in their attempts to write and adding text to games and drawings. This text should be acknowledged, even if it is illegible in the proper sense of the word, and the child could be asked to read out the words they have written. For example the child has drawn swimmers and next to them something in red lines. Mother wants to know if it is the red sea. And the child explains the red lines mean “Do not swim in deep water.”

Gradually the letters start resembling true letters. One of the first skills is to write the first letter of one’s name and then the entire name. Sometimes the child knows all the letters but in random order. Further they learn to write letters of the mother, father, sister, brother, dog until all letters become familiar as if learning without effort. It takes time to understand writing from left to right and before then, even spirals can be created. Frequently children request help from a peer or parent to write a particular word. Now teachers and parents can draw more attention to the shape of letters, starting points, direction of movement of a line and spaces between letters and words. Children are able to invent ways of drawing where the direction of movement is upwards but it does not hinder drawing a single letter, however, incorrect direction of movement would be difficult to rectify later.

M. K. Lerkkanen (2007) recommends the following principles:

- *Create an image – a fairy tale, poem or proverb related to the letter helps remember its shape, direction of drawing and placement on lines.*
- *Show example – draw a large model letter before your pupils.*
- *Pay attention to writing/drawing the shape of the letter: starting points, directions, rhythms; a letter may be drawn in the air, on the palm, board, paper and so on. Explore with children where a letter begins and stops.*
- *Use letter boards as memory prompts – large boards on classroom walls, small ones on desks.*
- *Practise every day – even short periods at home and school.*

To learn the correct directions in writing a letter is very important for kindergarten and primary school teachers. Previously it really mattered how to move a quill or fountain pen across paper in a particular direction to create a nice line and avoid smudging. Modern writing implements pose no such issues and actually there is no difference which way to make the lines. However, writing speed is better if the directions are correct and thus deserve attention. Considering the environment in which our children will be writing most of their text in the future, perhaps more attention should be paid to typing with ten fingers.

Similarly to writing, it is fine if a child types with one finger at the beginning. Typing with four fingers, for example, is no more tragic than drawing lines for letters from bottom to top. Conscious practice should be guided towards the acquisition of the fastest and most efficient way of writing, so that technical skills would not hinder or slow down communication via written text.

Learning to write correctly

Literacy is associated with writing correctly by many adults, including teachers. In the Estonian tradition someone who makes many spelling mistakes in a short sentence is considered illiterate rather than literate, however, the person may be aware of phonemes and phonemic analysis yet might have little experience in writing rules.

The following skills can be distinguished in learning orthography, the development of which resembles skills described above and is not in a hierarchical order:

- scribbling and ‘reading’ letters (letter-like forms), random writing of letter-like symbols (M, W, I, O);
- writing of some letters e.g. the first letter of one’s name (first, somewhat distorted and starting from a casual point);
- writing letters in one’s name, first in random, then in the correct order;
- copying – writing a copy of texts from the surroundings, this is possible without knowing all the letters;
- first writing attempts to note down familiar sounds /.../ /../
- ability to locate and press keys for letters on the keyboard or a screen of a digital device;
- ability to write a familiar letter correctly (A, I, O, T, N, M, S etc);
- ability to note down sounds, except for some combinations;
- ability to create a space between words (space bar on keyboard);
- ability to write most common block capitals;
- ability to use most common punctuation marks (full stop, exclamation mark);
- ability to write all block capitals, including foreign ones;
- paying attention to punctuation marks and initial letter writing;
- paying attention to different letters denoting the i-sound
- ability to use word processing on the computer;
- ability to recognise words and constructs where errors may often occur and if needed, check one’s work or find help;
- ability to use dictionaries (hard copy and electronic) and correction programs;
- paying attention to various symbols in texts (brackets, quotation marks, colon, semicolon);
- both conscious and subconscious acquisition of orthographic rules (specially pointed out at school, by reading a range of text and gathering rich input in visual memory).

When looking back at the list, it is evident that literacy cannot be identified by does/does not exist categories as learning the rules takes a lifetime. What is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ is reviewed every now and then, the desire to write correctly and an ability to use suitable devices to achieve this, should be above the knowledge of all rules.

Teachers and parents have a task to create a perception that orthography is not the most important aspect of literacy. An ability to write without mistakes (e.g. dictation) is required only in some situations such as school and exams. Children actually need the skill of writing texts in a wide range of genres and fields and most of us will need to write various texts in private or professional capacity: a letter, recipe, instructions, guidelines, advertisement, contract, and in our modern era also hypertext (e.g. private or company web page). Many jobs require skills in creating fiction (fairy tale, poem), research, teaching or reference texts in natural, social and humanitarian sciences, participate in composing regulations or legislation etc.

Planning integrated and playful learning

Materials and activities are linked to content-rich and interesting topics in order to enhance integrated learning. Where possible, children are offered games, ideas and tasks where they can make use of literacy and numeracy integrated with other topics for learning. Teachers' attitudes to their role is what hugely impacts the learning process - the teacher should not try to only input knowledge, but rather be an advisor and a fellow student, the creator of the learning environment and a collaborator.

The environment provides a framework for both planned learning and children's independent activities. According to the contemporary view they both constitute valuable components in school or kindergarten curricula. Systematic planning and valuing various functions of literacy across the entire educational institution considerably facilitates children's reading and writing skills development. Planning studies also includes appraisal of skills (without giving grades) in the course of which the teacher can establish what each child and the whole class are able to do, where help is needed, whether help can be given by peers or the teacher, what children's interests are etc. All of this should be taken into account when planning the teaching.

Pre-school children primarily play while primary school pupils also enjoy playing and successfully learn through games. Therefore planning reading and writing activities should also allow space for games, and many of our teachers often use thematic reading games. It is also positive if children are encouraged to transfer topics from school activities into their own creative games.

Every topic has some information which is worth writing up and reading, to, for example, learn about animals or plants near home or a distant place.

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Integrated ...

Through role play children can learn what it is like to be a literate person in society. Adults can value and favour this by offering real experiences, for instance cooking together, going to the café or doctor, and then placing cookbooks or written messages in the creative centre, or stickers and pens for prescription writing in playing a doctor, menus in playing a café and so on.

Various research outcomes place value on the acquisition of literacy through playing. For example, Susan Neuman and Kathy Roskos analysed the use of writing materials

in creative games (post office, restaurant) with young children. Children frequently helped each other at writing, used writing in their games (e.g. wrote a bill in the restaurant), arranged and used writing for reminders (in writing, who follows whom in a queue).

Nigel Hall and Anne Robinson have studied texts created by children in role plays and established that it has been underestimated. For years play and writing have been looked at as two separate items - play is play and writing is study. The authors emphasise that play is not something extracurricular or a time filler between learning activities, play actually has an important role for the achievement of academic objectives.

In the French language education in Belgium Serge Terwagne, a researcher and educationalist presents a didactic approach of picture books in his "Lire, jouer, raconter des histoires," (2008) (To read, play and tell stories). Different methods can be used with a book or story from reading aloud to dramatisation and coming up with a new end to the story. Sometimes it takes 2-3 weeks to work with a book. Children choose books according to teacher's recommendations. When reading the book aloud the first time, the teacher has four glove puppets. Puppets are called "Butterfly of stories", 'Why?', 'Me instead of him', and 'I have experienced it'. After hearing the story children can choose a puppet to ask questions, tell what they would have done instead of the main character or share a similar personal story. The butterfly of stories introduces and presents the story. Next time after reading aloud the teacher and children play the story on a flannelgraph, with glove puppets or in another way. The storytelling is guided by children who recall events in the story together. At the third stage children form groups of three or four and each group plays one situation from the story. The rest try and guess which part it is. At the fourth stage sound is added to the picture by clapping, patting or using rhythm instruments. Usage of the book or story may be concluded by group work where children create a new ending and present it to others (Terwagne and Vanesse, 2008). This way all the senses are involved and the vocabulary, discussion skills, self-expression, performance skills, thinking, creativity, social skills and so on are all developed.

From the point of view of early literacy, it is vital for the kindergarten teacher to use a variety of activities and opportunities.

- *Texts in the environment: the teacher points out various texts in the surroundings, shows a line, reads out meaningful guidelines (e.g. SHOES MUST BE TAKEN OFF HERE). In the kindergarten group's premises texts appear on cupboards, walls and posters (e.g. WELCOME! etc).*
- *Learning of letters and sounds: the teacher integrates learning of sounds and letters in everyday activities, discussing children's names (whose name has an L-sound in it, will now ...).*
- *Creative games: first the teacher makes sure that paper and pencils are included in playing the doctor for writing a prescription, or playing the shop for writing a shopping list, etc. Soon enough children begin incorporating literacy in their games themselves, for*

instance playing school where they make workbooks and pupils' ID cards, or a travelling game would see passports and visas and various forms for filling in at the border. The creative games area would also have texts and books e.g. cookbook in the home game, opening hours' information, hair fashion magazines and a price list in the hairdresser's and so on.

- *Listening and discussing: there should be equipment for listening to an audio book. The teacher carries out various activities enhancing speech and literacy: finding rhymes, listening to sounds, making syllables, language games (tongue twisters), singing songs in different ways (sadly, cheerfully, quietly, loud), having a range of discussion topics (on holiday, my family), and use glove or finger puppets to illustrate activities.*
- *Writing: children write for various purposes or imitate writing (shopping list, menu). The teacher and children make signs, posters etc. for their rooms.*
- *Books: the teacher talks about books with children, points out the title, letters, words, uses poems frequently, counting out rhymes, short texts and stories. The teacher reads aloud for small groups every day.*
- *Listening games: a range of devices for making sounds, e.g. instruments, audio devices, sounds of the everyday life etc. Sounds can be made by clapping hands, knocking or patting. The teacher plays sound guessing games, for instance "Behind the screen" (adapted from Bruce and Spratt, 2011).*

In order to support emergent literacy efficiently, activities in small groups should be provided, and the learning process planned so that breaking into sub-groups is possible. The current national curricula of basic school and pre-school establishments of Estonia enable such planning, as themes, games and tasks of different subjects or fields may be divided between different centres. Everything related to literacy accompanies not only reading nest activities from an early age, but also games in other centres, such as board games often requiring accounts to be kept on paper, creative games need signs and texts etc. In school, assignments in all subject areas have written guidance and in group work the results are mostly presented in the written form (or notes are taken to give an oral presentation). Thus, language and speech activities in mother tongues in both the kindergarten and primary school may easily be integrated into the work of various centres, and the learning process becomes more meaningful, interesting and attractive. Having a reading nest as a specific literacy centre in a classroom does not mean the entire room should be divided into centres, although on the other hand, it might. Experiences gathered in Estonia and elsewhere show the benefits of such space arrangement. In order to support children's development in kindergarten and primary school efficiently, activities in small groups should be provided, and also the learning process planned so that breaking into sub-groups is possible. The physical environment of a classroom should enable targeted group activities in a defined space. Desks can be easily rearranged for group work (and this is often done) but the environment is more inspirational if defined spaces are more permanent. This often means allocating clear territories for learning, play and work in different fields (art, building, maths, literacy etc.). In Estonia this approach is familiar already from the Step-by-Step methodology (system of activity centres), today it is also seen in classrooms which use project learning methods, e.g. in those applying Reggio Emilia principles.

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Learning environments in kindergarten and school are quite different, as the first have more learning based on themes and arising from children's interests, and the group space is organised in activity centres. In several other countries we can see the same in school, which starts at the age of 4 or 5 but essentially closely resembles Estonian kindergarten, and the tendency continues through to school (in Estonian terms) and where 10-12-year-olds also work in activity centres. In Estonian schools the number of classrooms with activity centres is even lower than in kindergartens, but in the light of international studies such opportunities should be explored more widely and boldly. After the latest version of the national curriculum entered into force in 2011, the popularity of such centres is slowly rising. It is also facilitated by modern and easily movable modular furniture. Another reason is an improved flexibility within the curriculum; learning in small groups in centres is favoured by topic-centred teaching, and also by assessment procedures of the curriculum. Currently pupils may be given non-numerical personal feedback throughout the first and second school stages. Thus the current national curriculum of the basic school offers good opportunities for organising a classroom in the way which best supports literacy development.

Mapping and feeding back regarding the development of literacy

Teachers set the focus on what the child already knows, or has acquired and what the child is already attempting to achieve. The focus never lies on mistakes or what a child is unable to do yet. Assessment and feedback are based on conversations and discussions (e.g. children's works) and other methods of active learning, which show what the children have been able to learn in a certain time period. The teacher makes time to sincerely recognise and acknowledge development, encouragement and stimulation.

Apart from planning studies, guiding learning activities and creating (physical and mental) learning environment, the teacher also has to assess literacy development. All these roles are interconnected. Developing the environment, games and learning activities should match children's interests and level of development. This means that supporting literacy goes hand in hand with continuous collection of data (observation of a learner's activities and their works), analysis and use (further development of the learning environment, finding motivating games and tasks for children, giving feedback to parents, consulting specialists if necessary etc.).
Assessment is issuing grades?

If assessment is viewed as giving grades, assessment of literacy in kindergarten and primary school would not make sense. Estonian kindergartens do not use numeric grades. In some pre-school groups teachers sometimes give top grade of "5" (out of 5) for best works. They explain giving grades as a way of motivating capable children and encouraging others to make an effort (grades below 5 are normally not used in kindergartens). This practice has its weaknesses because children's literacy development rates vary considerably. What level is achieved by the age of 6 or 7 depends on what kind of environment was provided to these children at the age of 3, 4, and 5; how many books the child has at home and how accessible they are; which activities in literacy since their infancy have been undertaken by parents/family members. Children growing up in similar conditions, e.g. siblings, may be vastly different in acquiring literacy. Now, when the teacher acknowledges for instance those

whose worksheets are neat and well completed, letter shapes uniform and drawn with a steady hand, those “capable” children may be pleased, yet other children become labelled as “incapable”. This would reduce their motivation. Such children may already have motivation issues. Even if grades are not issued, children can see that some of them are faster, more skilful and successful. When a child is fluent at reading or writes neatly, a much better way of acknowledgement is asking him/her to read aloud to others, or write an advertisement for the spring party event or perform another important and real task.

What is going to happen when these children at very different levels of literacy start school? Then they need to be graded? Yes, certainly. By modern standards, assessment is not issuing grades but formative rather, in other words supportive assessment of learning. This type of assessment is a process where the core lies in data-based informed design of teaching. An even more important aspect is pupils’ active participation in the learning process. They can set their own goals (one child wants to write a letter to Santa Claus, another one learn to understand Mickey Mouse comics or read as well as daddy) and move towards the goal with teacher’s help, experience successes, get feedback and suggestions. When the teacher believes that every child deserves to grow into a reader and considers literacy a human right, then they value the personal development of every child and provide supportive feedback particular to each child. Such feedback is not given by numeric grades.

Children in the first stage of school would like to have grades but only ‘fives’ (top marks). Lower grades may lessen motivation, therefore, it is better not issue grades at all in primary school. Many schools in Estonia have abandoned numeric feedback in the first school stage. Should numeric grades still be in use in the first year and school management would not allow exemption, the teacher can still ensure on the basis of the current curriculum that pupils’ ‘fives’ were issued for genuine advancement. The teacher can set challenging learning goals for every pupil when assessing the pupil’s starting level. These may differ between children and in the same class one child’s target may be to fluently read a poem, while another pupil would read an entire collection of poems. When the child reckons the goal has been achieved, they present the result to the teacher. The teacher acknowledges advances, gives feedback and recommendations for further work and practice in case the goal has not quite been achieved yet and acknowledges the achievement, even with a ‘five’ if necessary. Thus all pupils have a chance to be recognised and experience success.

Assessment is counting mistakes?

Development of literacy may be assessed quite differently. For instance these four children at different ages - Mary, Jane, John and Tom, are described as follows:

Mary cannot read and write yet.
Jane can spell a little, cannot write yet.
John can read but the problem is reading too fast and too quietly. In writing he makes mistakes in noting plosive consonants’ degrees of quantity.
Tom has been able to read since the beginning of the first class but often cannot understand the text. He has issues with reading the set literature. He cannot write without mistakes and is weak in creating text.

Those assessments are based on the theory of deficiencies, where imperfect aspects are pointed out, or where mistakes occur.

Feedback and assessment in our schools often point out what has not been learned yet, mistakes. When we talk about emergent literacy, it would be more motivating for learners and their parents if feedback pointed out aspects where the child is doing well.

The children above may be described by another teacher like this:

Mary is very interested in books, she likes to browse various books in the reading nest in her free time. She carefully turns pages, one by one. Most frequently she looks at richly illustrated fairy tale books, photo books about nature and clothes and beauty products catalogues. Sometimes she 'reads' them quietly to herself, toys or friends. She recognises her name as a whole word and several other words, and she has carried to the table chairs of Anu, Christella and Katri-Elise. As for letters, she knows A, I and 'her letter' M. She enjoys rhyming games and counting out rhymes, can recognise and suggest rhyming words. In simpler words she distinguishes starting and end sounds and long sounds in the middle of the word, e.g. 'tool'. Using a sample, she can write her name well, has tried copying and does this with great dedication and beautifully for her age. She likes 'writing fairy tales', she knows the essential features of a fairy tale and she can use interesting figures of speech (attached is an example of her drawings with letter-like signs and teacher's transcript: "Once upon a time lived a princess who wanted flowers very much. She had lots of happy flowers. These bloomed and smelled. Then came a fancy prince on horseback and the flowers tasted well to the horse. They stayed there and got married and lived happily.")

Jane is mostly interested in different functional texts: her games include fascinating menus, rules for visiting the cinema (samples of her work are often accompanied with explanations as parts of the text cannot be understood without the context). She knows essential features of a few genres (a sample of her advertisement for a play, which has title, author, stage director, actors, starting time, ticket price and discount price for children/pensioners. Everything in her age-appropriate writing but all of it is recognisable). She takes interest in letters and sounds, enjoys playing games on sounds, e.g. filling the ship. She understands the principle of phonemic analysis and writing the words, she knows that sounds and letters are linked and carefully spells out letters. She is able to read shorter and simpler words of up to 4 letters and is happy about it. When she listens to slow pronunciation of words, she can 'put them together', when the speed is right for her, she can recognise longer words as well.

John reads fast and understands the text well, has a good imagination and rich vocabulary. He is also very empathetic and is able to identify with characters from different eras and places and understand the motivation behind their behaviour. He already has some ability for acting. His written texts stand out for their imaginative approach, he knows lots of interesting facts on topics which attract him (distant lands and peoples, space, machines, national cuisines and cooking).

Tom is fascinated by comics, photo and picture books and hypertext on screens in particular. Reading is a technical activity for him. He can read aloud well but to understand he requires support from pictures, friends, teacher or parents. He also takes great interest in music, computer games and exotic animals. He can read diagrams well and non-linear texts, e.g. mind maps. He is also able to create diagrams and is successful in group work where ideas

need to be put into a system. He is able to create cohesive and logical texts when using a mind map, picture series etc. as a guidance.

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Estonian children in kindergarten write relatively correctly compared to peers in some other countries. By the age of 6 or 7 it is considered age-appropriate if the child can hear sounds and realises which sound is longer in a word. It is also acceptable at this age that sometimes some letters are omitted and plosive consonants are spelled wrongly. This is appropriate in the entire first school stage (classes 1 to 3), and there are children who need to work on this even later in school. This should, however, not diminish enjoyment of reading or writing and as the volume of reading goes up, the number of errors would go down. Many class teachers and parents have noticed that as soon as the child starts reading longer books, their spelling improves remarkably.

Assessment as basis for planning further activities

The learners' level and knowledge should not be assessed only for issuing grades. The primary goal of assessment is to establish a basis for informed planning of teacher's further activities. Secondly, to give feedback and recommendations for future development activities to children and parents in the most supportive and motivating manner as possible.

Adults observe children and get an idea what children's literacy-related skills are, which activities and games they find interesting, and which topics and how they want to continue working with these. For this kind of observation to be successful, the classroom needs a situation where children have freedom to engage in literacy and make choices. Research has shown that such a child-centred arrangement of learning is beneficial to the children's development and academic progress, especially in classes with higher academic achievements.

In both preschool and primary education it is important to monitor children's holistic development, which has many components. Lagging behind in one area may impact formation of skills in another, for instance poor fine motor skills hinder the development of writing and drawing skills. A child's inability and difficulty in holding a pencil and drawing lines might make all manual activity feel unpleasant. As fine motor skills advance, the teacher may see that child more often in the art centre drawing or cutting with scissors.

While observing a child in action and analysing the child's work, the teacher maps the current situation first. Mari is fairly good at writing texts related to assignments, age-appropriate dictation and homework and makes only a few mistakes; while in class her texts contain lots of mistakes, she swaps plosives, letter order, omits some sounds and so on. This is a strange contradiction but the teacher soon finds an explanation to it. She observes Mari's activity and notices that during the lesson she often peeps into her desk mate's work.

As soon as the teacher has realised the cause, their further choices become important but different teachers may suggest a different course of action. For example a teacher may think it

is a serious issue where the child cribs in the second year of school. They would move Mari to a single desk and make sure she could not see anybody else's work. They would invite Mari's parents to school and asks them to speak about honesty at home, and not to do their child's homework for her. Another teacher would also contact Mari's parents but with a different message, suggesting to the parents that their daughter considers good academic results very important, she is not confident when writing and therefore tries to look at her desk mate's work. The teacher might say something like: "I have told Mari that making no mistakes in writing is not important in the second year and these short dictations are done to help every child understand where they would need more practice. It seems, though, that Mari does not like making mistakes, therefore I suggest you emphasise at home as well that mistakes are a normal part of the learning process. Mari understands the basics of writing in the Estonian language, and is able to write letters corresponding to sounds. She has a good visual memory and I am glad to see that she likes being in the reading nest. To develop literacy, the home should encourage free reading (recommendations for setting up a reading nest at home follow). She should decide for herself what to read. When attending to the texts of her choice at least 20 minutes a day, she would soon memorise how words are written in Estonian."

The teacher may also approach the school's speech therapist – would mistakes at the beginning of the second year perhaps indicate reading difficulty? The speech therapist speaks to the girl and plays with her and finds out that the girl has a good sense of phonemes but in some cases cannot decide which letter to choose. Teacher's negative feedback has made her aware of something she cannot do, and she might say to herself: "and will never learn to do." The speech therapist may console Mari, her parents and the teacher that this is a concern which can be overcome with practising. The therapist also has a number of exciting games which help Mari understand the system of writing in Estonian.

When the teacher identifies an issue and tells the child and parents but does not indicate a solution, it is like a diagnosis without cure. There is little benefit giving feedback that John does not understand textual tasks in maths while something such as the following might be recommended:

"From time to time you should make mathematical stories with John at home – write up different numeric data and discuss what they show and which operations should be made then. The more practical the tasks are, the better: for example discuss what time a guest arrives and in how many hours; how much pocket money he gets; milk and bread cost a certain sum of money and he gets a different sum for shopping; how to share sweets/apples among friends etc. He needs personal experience that textual maths exercises are one of the best ways to write up everyday issues and riddles."

An experienced teacher is able to notice both achievement and deficiencies. The prime focus is on strengths and skills but the teacher also gives feedback and recommendations to the child and the parents for working on areas requiring enhancement. For instance, the class teacher in the previous chapter could tell John's and Tom's parents of all the strengths the boys have. Issues and mistakes are not to be denied, but instead of focusing on them, the teacher should make recommendations based on the strengths of a particular learner. The teacher might tell the parents:

John can read aloud fast as well and he is very proud of his speed, however speed is not the most important aspect in reading aloud. At home you should play acting or news reading, where the actor has to emphasise an essential message and idea of the text. John already has a budding actor in him; a newsreader also has to read at a good speed but also sufficiently clearly and loud. He should try “reading the news” on topics interesting for him, e.g. talk about distant lands and nations or host a cooking programme presenting a particular cuisine.

Reading is a technical activity for Tom. He can read aloud well but to understand he requires support from pictures (books with lots of pictures, comics), or from his parents. I suggest you read to him in the evening (it is recommended till the age of 12). Thus he can acquire words which are rare in oral speech and also gets used to more complex structures of written text. Tom takes a great interest in technology and exotic animals, at home he should also be offered texts on these topics (books, magazines, Internet articles). Tom is good at reading, and can create diagrams well and non-linear texts, e.g. mind maps. He could use them for creating his own texts, so he can easily check whether everything important has been noted down. Tom is also attracted to comics, this should be encouraged and he could create his own since he is good at drawing.

Even if children in the first year who still read like Mary and Jane in the previous example (and it happens), the teacher should point out to parents what can be seen in their emergent literacy, e.g. interest in texts, letters in a book and desire to draw letters on their own. The teacher might encourage parents that literacy may develop in leaps and bounds and it is important to retain and uphold interest and motivation and work with suitable texts.

Intermediate conclusions and school reports

What to write in the reports of children described previously? If the school uses numeric assessment and Mary, Jane, John and Tom were in the first year, the girls would probably receive “2” (negative grade) in their first ever report. This might impact their self-confidence and interest in reading for many years to come. The boys would receive “5” (top grade) in the first year, or in the second or third year they’d get “5” or “4” depending on the teacher’s assessment criteria. None of these figures give their parents any information on how to support literacy nor would the child understand what to do or change.

Today, descriptive feedback is often used at the end of a period and in annual summaries. If all these children were in the same class in the first year (it is possible, reading skills can differ greatly in the first year in our schools), feedback of the first trimester in the mother tongue might read as follows:

Mary, you have a great interest in books! You study and look at them regularly for long periods. You can write your name using a sample. You know some letters and learn more every day. I am sure you will know them all soon! (Given her reading skill the text is for parents to read aloud but targeted at the child. At first it is read to her by the parents but possibly she will read it herself soon and is happy that she has made a big step in her reading).

Jane, you can spell well. You recognise some longer words too. You can already read shorter words by yourself. It is admirable that you try to write different texts, practice makes perfect!”

For John: “You can read fast and understand the text well. You have a rich vocabulary and good imagination. When you read aloud to the others, imagine you’re an actor or newsreader, it makes you easier to follow.”

For Tom: “Your diagrams look great! Use them in writing too. You can read, find books, comics, and magazines which interest you. And keep reading - and you will become an even better reader!”

When these recommendations accompany suggestions made in appraisal reviews described above, one may presume that the reading motivation will be retained by these children and both the children and parents know what to do next for the child’s literacy improvement. ...

How to map the development of literacy?

We could talk about “assessment” but while it is too often associated with issuing grades, we use the term “mapping”. In preschool education another term is used – pedagogical documentation, which means visualisation of learning for the child, parents and teacher. It helps to show the process and child’s progress. Avoiding numeric grades and ranking of children and acknowledgement of each child’s course of development and activities allows shaping a motivating reading environment. This is extremely valuable. The child has courage to make further attempts if their first reading and writing attempts are noticed and recognised (verbally and e.g. exhibiting text samples in the classroom). A novice writer gets inspiration and courage for future texts, if in their text not only mistakes are pointed out but instead there is praise for having e.g. a title, diagram, interesting rhyme or comparison. When the child merely has to focus on technical skills, they may start fearing all literacy activities and develop prejudice towards the written word and reading on a wider scale.

To collect data on emergent literacy, all everyday situations and activities to do with writing and reading are suited where they are naturally linked to the study process: observation, conversation, analysis of work. There is no need for additional testing and checking.

Specialised assessment activities, e.g. dictations and reading checks, may cause stress and uncertainty. Schools traditionally use reading checks to assess whether a book was read and understood, however, it is not the best method in terms of reading motivation. This type of check values memorising details, like the task is to name the main character’s brothers or dogs. Formal assessment methods might tempt (older children particularly) to resort to dishonesty, as some children read short summaries instead of the book, or find a reading check task used by the teacher on the Internet and mechanically learn the answers by heart or prepare a cheat sheet.

Teachers who understand literacy and children’s development have been using much more engaging ways instead of reading checks. Various games, drama sketches, quizzes, creative

tasks (e.g. writing a new end to the book, creating illustrations, comics or animated cartoon) are both attractive and enable active participation. When skilfully used, these provide important information on how the entire group understood the book and also on the strengths and weaknesses of individual pupils.

Children learn differently and it is quite a challenge for teachers to locate a suitable method or means for each child to uphold their motivation and literacy.

Marti was a six-year-old boy whose parents sought advice from a specialist as a preparatory group teacher mentioned the boy does not cope in the group as he does not read yet. When the specialist met the boy and evaluated his reading skills (spelling, knowing letters, speech etc.), it was revealed that he knew five letters of his name. Some letter were mum's or dad's letters, the rest were unknown. He was able to hear the sounds and also spell a word sound by sound well. Thus the first goal for him to start reading was to learn letters. For doing so the teacher tried finding interesting memory links – which objects a letter resembles. He had a good imagination and by creating stories about letters, they were memorised in no time. The next stage was reading short words and syllables, but only through playing. The boy was interested in cobras and UFOs. An alien spaceship was then made from two disposable plates, into which he could insert labels with words. The spaceship was being filled while reading words and discussing whether aliens would like to take these objects with them or not. The game “Feed the cobra” contained lots of word labels where words described edible and non-edible items. The child read them and decided whether he would put them into the cobra's mouth on top of the box or not. Thus step by step and keeping up his motivation, giving him feasible and interesting tasks, reading was achieved. What suited him was a personal approach, working one-to-one, and keeping in mind the zone of proximal development: he was given tasks which he would have accomplished with difficulty on his own and managed well with some help from the specialist. The feeling of success and accounting for his interests and learning method kept up his motivation to learn.

Teachers and parents should know that sometimes the development of literacy may seem to regress. For instance, young Elisabet who learned to write her name correctly with the help of a mnemotechnical song, gave up the song at the age of five and started writing her name ELISAPET. The incorrect spelling was actually evidence of the evolving skill of sound analysis.

Development of reading skills is very personal and relies on various factors: how often children are exposed to written texts, at what age they learn to read, how interested the child is in reading, how much they read per day and like or dislike reading etc. The teacher can evaluate whether the goals for each pupil have been achieved, what else could be done to support and which the next goals are. Assessment should guide and encourage.

In the kindergarten a tool used for assessing a child's development is a development portfolio, and a portfolio at school. The portfolio is for keeping samples of writing: first attempts to write familiar letters or one's name; worksheets, texts created in games, letter writing practice sheets. Comparison of works from different periods enables the identification of advances. While first letters may be quite skewed and hardly legible, the hand becomes stronger and

steadier over time, lines are straighter and letters/words recognisable. At school the first texts may be rather disjunct and focus on less important details. Over time children learn different features of texts and their writing becomes easier to follow, more logical and enticing, orthography also develops. Children pick up on their development too when looking at their earlier work (“Look I wrote here TEECHER with two e-s”; “See, in the first class I wrote: This is my dad. He has a beard. He went fishing with Urmas. I wrote so funnily and did not say at all what dad’s name was. And is this most important that he has a beard? (Laughs.) And here you can’t understand who Urmas is! Now I can write much better!”).

Teachers at school and kindergarten and parents should involve children in giving feedback from the beginning – they can be very objective and smart. Self- and peer-reviewing can also be used, literature in English on formative assessment is widely available. The child who assesses their own literacy and sets their own goals, is more motivated, takes more responsibility in the learning process and is more likely to be ready for life-long learning, which is expected in today’s society. One should only be concerned if child’s literacy shows no change or development or it is remarkably below the expected level of the age group.

Provision of collaborative support to literacy

Adults (teachers, assistants, parents, support personnel, speech therapists, language teachers etc) all work in consultation, they have shared values and the main focus lies in maintaining children’s motivation and comprehensive development of literacy. Children’s literacy can develop in the safest and most comfortable of ways when teachers at school and kindergarten and parents collaborate. This book contains a chapter on setting up a reading nest at home, it is worth introducing this to parents. If a parent is interested in the topic, they would read the entire book, much of advice provided here can successfully be applied in a reading nest at home or in general, designing a home environment which supports literacy. Having the entire staff team of kindergarten group work for literacy is a rule rather than exception. Unfortunately, sometimes music and physical education teachers are overlooked. Primary school teachers can also successfully cooperate with these teachers, there are children who love singing and with the help of singing one can learn a lot about reading. For very young children songs can be “written” in pictures, write the simplest syllables e.g. LA-LA-LAL-LAL-LAA, in some songs a word can portray names of personas, e.g. have a dog’s picture and write “Rex is”. This “writing” is not only fun but also helps children more easily remember lyrics of songs and poems and understand the direction of reading and writing etc. With a PE teacher children can run along or orient along huge letters and compose huge words, form letters and words using their bodies etc. In schools cooperation with music and PE teachers can similarly take place. Many children enjoy singing and repeatedly read lyrics is more interesting than just reading a text again and again (rehearsing plays is also useful from this point of view). When children like a fast-paced song, then singing it improves reading speed and grasping the text quickly.

Reading aloud

Reading books aloud is an important activity enhancing literacy either at home, preschool and primary school. In several countries this has even been included in the curricula of respective school stages. Through listening to stories children learn about their structure, and realise that stories have an introduction, middle section and end. They also learn to understand and enjoy written language which has a more complex structure and richer vocabulary than the oral speech. Stories may be employed in the implementation of a curriculum and they also help prepare for real life situations such as the arrival of a new baby, a birthday etc. Children would also find out about culture and traditions of different nations as well as their own and needless to say, listening can be pure enjoyment.

In the learning process reading aloud may have these stages:

- To arouse interest, the teacher would first present the book and show its front and back cover, talk about the title, author and illustrator. Discussion follows on who the character(s) might be and what the book is about.
- The children's age and their ability to concentrate determines whether pictures are shown during or after reading, and also if children are involved in reading. For instance children could read out direct speech, rhymes and so on.
- The teacher prepares the discussion: younger children could discuss the main character, such as Why do you like him? What would you do differently? Has it happened to you too? and so on. This discussion can also be arranged as pair or group work.

Research has shown that when the teacher reads aloud daily and the meaning of the story and words are discussed, children's vocabulary grows remarkably along with skills in analysis, reasoning, writing, understanding texts and shared knowledge is created.

Visualisation should be used with preschool children and those with a different first language, such as drawings, illustrations, photos, puppets and other props. These would also help maintain concentration during the reading, and are useful when retelling the story later and arranging events in a sequence. For further visualisation in the case of a picture book, more important pictures could be copied, cut out (and also laminated) and displayed on a magnetic board. Illustrations could be drawn on a board during reading by the teacher or children while the story's characters could also be made as puppets and used in retelling later; the teacher might also find suitable toys, like three bears in different sizes.

A wonderful tool is using a story sack: a bag with a drawstring contains e.g. a book, one or more characters, other props, audio recording of the story, a topic-related book, games etc. (Mukherji & O'Dea 2000).

A study on the literacy environment carried out in Estonia showed that all kindergarten teachers interviewed read a bedtime story before an afternoon nap. In addition poems or literary texts are included in learning activities 1-3 times a week. There was one teacher who read a poem or story every day during the morning gathering and other's read during the free time at children's request, they have a reading nest or a book corner for this activity. A

bedtime story is selected according to children's wishes, teacher's preferences, books brought by children themselves or a well-known classical story is chosen. Literary pieces for reading are selected to match the weekly theme, educational content, or to introduce new children's literature or due to richness of vocabulary. After bedtime stories there is no analysis or long discussion because of the different purpose of this reading. According to all interviewees reading is otherwise always followed by analysis or conversation. Questions are often prepared beforehand but sometimes spontaneous discussions develop. A few teachers mentioned that they never plan a conversation and instead wait to see where children get to on their own. Two teachers set a task before the conversation to motivate and engage children better.

Retelling, role plays, setting to stage

Teachers often use retelling after reading out a new or familiar story, this helps to understand the structure – beginning, theme development and end, and this facilitates memory development – event sequence, characters etc. It also helps with vocabulary acquisition and children remember interesting phrases or characters' names. Telling the story to others fosters self-expression: what tone of voice your character uses (threatening, cunning, angry, friendly), which words and sentences they use.

Setting stories to stage is similarly valuable as it benefits both memory and imagination.

Drama allows children to:

- identify with characters, empathise;
- express thoughts and feelings creatively;
- develop social skills;
- realise and work through ideas and experiences.

Vocabulary development

Development of vocabulary is not implicitly a reading activity yet it requires full attention because the scope of vocabulary and knowledge are central to understanding the text. Reading aloud can best expand vocabulary when teachers ask open questions during and after reading, explain words in the context, expand meaning of words after the reading and give opportunities for discussions. At least 2 to 3 words a day should be handled and research has shown that reading and discussing related words are the best method for enhancing infants' vocabulary.

For the development of speech and thinking, the texts which challenge children to think and discuss are beneficial. Thus children's development gains considerably when the teacher not only reads fairy tales and fiction but also other texts, such as on animals, space, sport and technology. It may be attractive to explore advertisements, game rules and so on together. A good text inspires thinking, searching for cause and effect, discussion on meanings of words and comparison of characters and events in the story with one's own life. In conversations

children share their thoughts and experiences, debate and deliberate, pick up other children's ideas and see things from a different point of view.

Games with rhyming, counting out rhymes

The Estonian kindergarten teachers also mentioned in their interviews that in addition to reading a bedtime story they use hand and clapping games and counting out games daily or a few times a week: during the morning gathering, language and speech activities, free time etc. Researchers have studied the effect of rhyming games and counting out rhymes on the evolution of language awareness and speech in children. Similarly sounding words which are repeated again and again (often with rhythmic movements or clapping, e.g. patty cake, patty cake), create and strengthen synapses in the brain's language production area, the word becomes familiar and is added to a vocabulary pool. Playing with a pair of words which differ by one sound e.g. CAT-MAT or PITTER-PATTER, helps learning to distinguish sounds and words, which prepares for phonological awareness. Several study results indicate that the use of counting out rhymes, rhyming games and poems sustains future development of spelling and reading: children who love singing and playing word games by e.g. swapping first letters in words and inventing rhyming words, often improve their perception and awareness of phonemes.

Storycrafting

Storycrafting is a notion invented by Finnish researchers studying child's language and culture and used by Monika Riihelä, Liisa Karlsson and their colleagues to denote a particular work method with the goal to create a safe and inspiring situation for a child to narrate a story. Thus storycrafting is establishing a favourable situation for storytelling. At the heart of storycrafting is giving the child security that their story matters, the adult is entirely dedicated to the child from start to finish of the story, values the teller by writing their story up, trusts choices made by the speaker and respects the rights of the author (child).

Creators of the method consider it a general means for promoting man's identity and communication. "This method can be used at any time and anywhere and anybody's stories can be written if they only wish to tell something. Listening to and writing up old people's stories has also found keen support. Adults might use it mutually, and arrange situations for listening to each other. Facilitating storytelling and writing them up is a method tested in practice and considered useful, which in addition to other aspects also fosters equal dialogues and allows people to find time for themselves." ("Lapset kertovat ja toimivat"). This collection, however, focuses on preschool and primary education, and thus we focus on communicating with children.

Storycrafting is not a didactic technique used once or a few times, it is a way of working or a communication practice where a child can at any time approach an adult to whom they are accustomed to telling stories to, and this adult opens up to the child, adapts to the child's level to note the stories down. Differences arising from cultural background and traditions of

upbringing should be born in mind here. There are countries, nations and educational institutions where a child's desire for self-expression and ability are traditionally treated with respect, where child's potential is believed in and the child is not, so to speak, trained to learn the correct answers. An education specialist who follows the principle 'I teach – you learn' and then checks what was acquired, does not have much use for storycrafting.

In the Estonian experience, children might not say much in the first instance, some only make one utterance. Trust in the adult appears when a confident link is created and the storytelling situation is experienced several times. When the teacher (trainee, researcher etc.) approaches a child with the aim of collecting material, the child may see through this intention and in a way, oblige the adult.

Storycrafting has four stages:

1. tell me your story;
2. I write it up exactly as told;
3. when finished, I'll read your story back to you;
4. if you wish, you can change or correct it.

The child has the right to tell the story as they wish, without guidance or correction. The beauty of the activity lies in that the child feels confidence in himself and that what he says is important. The importance is further emphasised by writing the story up. This enables the child to see the connection between the speech and writing. Children are enchanted by seeing how words they uttered turn into graphic characters on paper or a computer screen.

Children usually remember well what they said and when the adult reads the story in the third stage, they will be told immediately where mistakes have occurred. In most cases, the story is not changed much, children specify something, give a name to a main character or similar.

When storycrafting as a didactic method is introduced, the child's copyright as a storyteller is stressed. Permission must be obtained from the child for showing or publishing the story and the child's name should be included in the story. It also needs to be remembered that carrying out research concerning children and personal data protection may differ from country to country. Finnish researchers find it important to publish the child's full name, in Estonian student papers it is advised that real names are to be replaced by codes or pseudonyms. The scribe and collector of children's stories should be aware of the issue and explain what for and how the collected materials would be used.

Storycrafting may entirely rely on the child (tells whatever they want to at that moment), or have a thematic focus (a story on a particular theme is requested). Storycrafting may be collective, in a pair or group, so that children take turns to speak. When introducing storycrafting, everybody in a children's group should get an opportunity to speak and they can see how it is written. Inventors of the method remind its users: "The method is based on two principal questions that the scribe should ask if they want to improve their listening skills. These are: 1) what will I teach and give to children (wards, old people etc.) when I meet them?, and 2) can I accept the other person's present or story, and show gratitude?" More information on storycrafting can be found on the University of Helsinki webpage:

(http://www.edu.helsinki.fi/lapsetkertovat/lapset/Sadutus/sadutus_viroksi.htm) and materials collected from Estonian children “Children’s story basket“ is found at:
http://www.edu.helsinki.fi/lapsetkertovat/Sadutus/EESTI_Laste_jutusalv.10.07.pdf.

Readers with little skills in the reading nest

Kadi Lukanenok, Kadi Künnapuu, Mari Täht

A reading nest is a wonderful environment for all children, irrespective of their development level or difficulties. This chapter discusses reading difficulty and its risks. Reading difficulty is not the only issue though, that may occur in children. The reading nest may also benefit children with speech and language disorders, hyperactive children, children with autistic traits, children whose development considerably lags behind and many other children with special needs. When such children learn to read and read later, it is characterised by being slow, making a lot of mistakes, learning slowly and forgetting quickly. In the following paragraph we have called them children with little skills. Gifted children should also be able to find interesting activities in the reading nest.

When you design and plan a reading nest, bear in mind all children in the group or class. Procure and present books, games and other materials which consider the overall average level of the group but also below and above it. Good texts and picture can be adapted to simpler levels, and similarly be more complex.

Movement and motion help focus attention and follow the storyline. For many children it appears difficult to follow the story if there are no pictures, an interesting item or only one picture describes a long passage. For visualisation and fostering imagination use pictures of characters, toys, glove or finger puppets, pictures of items in the story, serial pictures etc. Movement holds attention, deters tiredness and makes it easier to complete planned activities.

All children want to be with other children, gain experiences together and share them later. The reading nest is ideally suited to undertake common interests, finding answers to questions and asking new ones. Interests and questions at different levels can enrich and expand the child's world.

Some ideas and guidelines for the inclusion of children with little reading experience and interest in reading in the activities of a reading nest

- Plan your activities at different levels enabling attractive engagement for all children.
- Engage all senses:
 - Read and explain, children with low language and speaking skills might not know the meaning of the words. Explain, elaborate, open the meaning of words which are unfamiliar. For instance: "The room grew dark." add an explanation: "The room grew dark and they could not see well".
 - Read and show, point out and indicate, move a hand, picture or toy for attracting attention. Make sure that children can see that item well enough and sufficiently long. If pictures change very quickly they are difficult if not impossible to perceive.
 - Show and allow touching and playing with real items related to the story. Children with special needs also benefit from motion-related opportunities. Handling real objects is useful and helps to understand the story being listened to. For instance when listening to a cooking story, wearing an apron and holding a ladle specifies the role and facilitates understanding it, should it not be clear by listening only.
- Children with reading or speech difficulty can achieve more when working in a group as opposed to doing the same activity alone. Allow children in pairs or as a group to say something, read and answer questions. This way a child with little skills also feels that they have done something splendid with the others, and their participation mattered to everybody.
- Divide children into groups, change groups regularly. Children of similar level could work in a group one day, on another occasion children in a group should be of different levels. This way you can avoid low-level children consistently clustering together, and children with little skills can experience that they are able to achieve high results.

- An adult should sit somewhere near the reading nest to quickly respond if necessary. Giving hints and working with the child (using their hand to show, move or write) are efficient methods for “keeping the child on track”. Together you can count scores on a dice, count steps on a board game while holding child’s hand and the game piece, place domino tiles etc.
- A game could have tasks which are 1-2 steps easier or more complex to suit different levels. When most children can point out letters on cards based on their knowledge, children with little skills might only be able to recognise letters (Show me the O). More advanced children may be interested in finding words with similar letters. Even more advanced children could have a task with one more component (Find the words which contain O. Find the words which end in U. Name food dishes which contain A).
- Difficulty level can be altered by adding or removing cards in reading games. In a domino game children usually have e.g. 3 cards, but those with little skills could have 1-2 cards.
- Games often require choosing something (direction of movement, a game piece, cards etc.). For some children making decisions may be complicated and slow, in this case telling what to do may be feasible: move this way, pick one card from here and the second from there, look at the picture on the left etc.
- Information on the notice board in the reading nest on books or games for the day (week) helps create a vision of what is to come and thus prepares children. Children who cannot bear fast changes thus develop a sense of security, and over time and with lots of positive experiences start expecting and become curious about intended reading activities.
- The reading nest could have a “pen friend”, in other words an imaginary character who reads, and does things and monitors what children do, and gives feedback by sending letters, new games and books, or recommending them and giving ideas for new activities. Teachers mostly perform the “pen friend’s” role for younger children, older children are able to choose and create the “pen friend” and operate on its behalf. There are certainly some parents who would like to become such a “pen friend”. Recognition by a “pen friend” might encourage a child with little skills to further operate in the nest, and it proves them the value of their engagement.
A child with reading difficulty may find support in a “pen friend” who also has some difficulty with reading. They could discuss what to do next and offer mutual support and encouragement.
- A creative and free mind is a welcome character in every reading nest enabling all children to enjoy reading.□

Reading difficulties

The teacher is normally the first to notice features of a potential reading difficulty, they work with many children and compared to parents it is easier for them to spot particular features in children’s literacy. In some cases those features may indicate reading and writing difficulties.

What are reading and writing difficulties?

Difficulties in reading manifest in slow reading with lots of mistakes in words and sentences and incorrectly understanding the text read. In writing mistakes may occur in sound combinations, orthography and sound analysis (‘tal’ vs ‘tall’; ‘rap’ vs ‘wrap’; ‘bear’ vs ‘bare’).

The term ‘dyslexia’ is used alongside reading difficulty in professional literature. It stands for a particular reading difficulty which cannot be explained by low intellectual ability, unsuitable schooling or socio-economic deprivation. Practitioners consider that specific and non-specific reading difficulties often intertwine and their distinction is complicated due to absent

opportunities for complex brain investigations. Hence many countries have abandoned attempts to distinguish them in practical education and an overarching term 'reading difficulties' is applied.

What causes difficulties in reading and writing?

The writing system of a language is the basis for researching reading difficulty and its causes. The Estonian language has a system in which pronunciation and writing are fairly consistently compliant. Therefore learning to read in Estonian is largely based on the ability to spell and analyse sounds.

Causes of reading difficulties include biological (genetic changes and particulars of the brain and its operation) and related cognitive reasons: deviations in vision and hearing, difficulty in dividing speech into sounds, sequencing sounds in speech and writing, difficulty in developing sound-letter relationships, that is learning letters, low volume of short-term memory. Literature often refers to social causes or reduced access to written texts/culture of writing and/or unsuitable schooling. Neither teachers nor parents can control biological causes but social causes can be effectively tackled both in school and at home, e.g. designing the physical and mental environments which support literacy, encourage children's literacy and promote their motivation.

A low socio-economic level in a family is considered a risk factor of reading difficulties, in other words poverty and poor educational attainment. Educational institutions have an essential role to play in supporting age relevant development of literacy in children from at-risk families. Creating and stimulating interest in reading at an early age in the case of complicated family circumstances may help to avoid future learning difficulties, dropping out of school and adverse effects on the labour market.

Markers of risk of reading difficulty in preschool age

Markers related to speech

- delayed speech;
- difficulty in remembering words and syllables/sounds and recalling them;
- confusing similarly sounding words (cure-pure, loom-boom);
- difficulties in getting the length of vowels and consonants right (important in the Estonian language for it determines the meaning of some words/utterances);
- difficulties in sequencing words in a sentence;
- difficulties in the perception of rhythm and learning poems by heart;
- difficulties in uttering and correcting words (calvary-cavalry, asking-aksing);
- difficulties in learning sounds and letters, all sounds which sound similar and letters which appear similar are mixed up (M-N, U-O, K-P, P-T);
- difficulties in learning and using temporal and spatial notions (left-right, up-down, front-back, yesterday-today-tomorrow);

Features related to movement and play

- difficulty/clumsiness in self-care – most obvious when visual control is poor or absent-combing hair at the back of the head, putting on a scarf, doing buttons up under the chin, activities in front of the mirror are also complicated;
- clumsiness in manual activity (painting, cutting with scissors, tearing paper, making a whole shape out of details, handling tools). Making mosaics and patterns informs of skills needed to sequence parts of a whole (correctness) and hand and eye coordination and fine motor skills (precision);
- clumsiness in complicated/complex movements and learning them (cycling, pumping legs on a swing to build up momentum, throwing a ball while running);
- particularities in realising temporal and spatial relationships in free and motion games (e.g. how to throw and catch a ball, making balls of snow and then a snowman, moving large objects and sequencing them). Placing shapes and, in particular, letters and writing letters is a challenge due to deficient spatial perception.

Markers of reading and writing difficulties at school age

Oral speech

- continued difficulties in uttering long complicated words (spaghetti-sgabhatti);
- distinguishing sounds (ornament-ornament);
- confusing words (cabbage-baggage, boiler-broiler);
- using simple sentences;
- learning letters is slow and difficult.

Reading

- the reading skill emerges and evolves in a slow and cumbersome way;
- reading is slow, with errors and has no expression;
- reading by guessing (longer words);
- losing track when reading, may use their finger to keep track for a long time or use a bookmark for this purpose;
- difficulties in understanding written instructions;
- understanding the text read aloud by somebody else is better than understanding the text they read out themselves;
- avoiding reading aloud;
- remarkable difference between oral speech and reading.

Writing

- difficulties in uttering a word sound by sound (spelling);
- no consistency in handwriting, upper and lower case letters jumbled up, distorted letters and parts of letters are disproportionate;
- letters of similar shape continue to be confused;

- speaking while writing, later whispering;
- lots of orthographic mistakes, often changeable, i.e. one word may be written in several ways (tall-dall-toll etc.);
- difficulties in composing longer sentences and texts;
- difficulties in learning and observing language rules;
- difficulties in learning foreign languages;
- remarkable difference between oral speech and reading.

Cognitive skills

- difficulties in perceiving a whole and its parts;
- difficulties in perceiving, reconstructing and creating sequences and sizes (forming a line of animals by their size, reconstructing an event sequence in fairy tales);
- difficulties in the perception of direction (e.g. left-right, up-down, front-back, before-after, yesterday-today-tomorrow);
- difficulties in perceiving temporal and spatial relationships;
- difficulties in learning facts and recalling them quickly;
- limited scope of short-term memory, difficulties in remembering names of people and places, learning poems and drama roles;
- difficulties in processing, storing and using verbal information;
- difficulties in doing several things at a time, e.g. listening and writing during a lesson; listening to instructions while walking (from classroom to canteen);
- difficulties in perceiving rhythm of movement and motion;
- frequently clumsy, stumbles a lot;
- poor balance and a poor ability to perform several actions or movements at the same time (get dressed and listen to what is being said; walk on the stairs and speak);
- difficulties in the cooperation of two hands (hold a bottle in one hand and unscrew the top with the other hand; tie shoelaces; button and zip up);
- do actions without seeing (eye control) (comb hair at the back of the head, tidy a collar).

Organisational skills

- difficulties in creating and keeping order (e.g. packing a school bag, finding items for a particular task and placing them on the desk);
- confusing dates, times, names;
- difficulties in making changes to previously made or agreed plans;
- difficulties in completing assignments and keeping to deadlines;
- acquisition of suitable learning strategies may take a long time;
- visual props may prove helpful: lists, schedules, schemes, tables etc. but how to use them needs to be specifically explained and taught.

One should also bear in mind that no child has all the above features simultaneously and remarkably clearly manifested. How deeply and consistently these features manifest is important, that is difficulties are detectable over long time. It is very important to notice the

child's strengths and develop them further, foster the lagging skills through these strengths and lay a foundation to learning a profession. Research has shown that children with reading difficulties are predominantly visual thinkers and they probably have excellent imagination, creativity and resourcefulness, good analytical and problem-solving skills, highly developed initiative and adaptiveness and have a technical acumen.

Who should recognise and handle reading difficulties?

The key word to recognising reading difficulty is cooperation. When a parent, or kindergarten, preschool or primary school teacher notices any indications there may be reading and/or writing difficulties, it would be reasonable to note down observations, append samples of child's written work where possible and contact a speech therapist or special education teacher who can then identify which skills require further development. These specialists also involve other specialists for further investigations if necessary. The speech therapist and special education teacher counsel parents and teachers regarding further teaching methods. If necessary, special tuition starts with a speech therapist, special education teacher or remedial teacher, in a group or one-to-one lesson.

In Estonia there are no specially developed assessment tools for identifying reading difficulty. Any difficulty a child has with reading is assessed during everyday work by analysing their mistakes and determining whether and which assistance the child should receive. When the teacher needs assistance in analysing mistakes or choosing assistive methods, consulting a special education teacher or remedial teacher is appropriate.

How could a child with reading and writing difficulties be helped?

Practice makes perfect! The reading material should allow for the feeling of success, that is be feasible in terms of sound composition, form and length of words and sentences (for a poor reader up to 4 words in a sentence), yet as meaningful and interesting as possible. To make reading easier, graphic benchmarks and visualisation can be used (pictures, diagrams, schemes). In case of greater difficulties all tuition needs adapted, including simplified texts and reading together and reading aloud.

Consistent cooperation between home and school is important as is appropriate recognition of a child's successes. The teacher needs to create a trusting relationship so that parents can provide the necessary support at home too. For a child it is important to retain self-confidence to make further advances.

Counselling parents

Specialists advise starting to work with reading literally from birth and there are plenty of parents who look at books with babies, read and tell. Letters are learned in the surrounding environment in a natural way (blocks, books, labels, headlines) and the child usually begins to

read before starting school (at the age of 7 years in Estonia). They have an interest in reading which is essential for adopting a reading skill. It only becomes complicated when the child for some reason does not read well and does not want to read and here is where parents might make mistakes which certainly do not foster an interest in reading. Some parents start dutifully training the child but they are motivated by a fear that the child might face problems at school. Reading needs practice but in the course of training the child reads out of fear or expects an award and they only comply with the adult's orders. The child who reads reluctantly probably will lose interest in reading, the reading skill suffers and the child is not likely to read on their own. The opposite is also true – a child who has safely and in the company of their parents enjoyed the magic of books, is likely to continue reading and is able to enjoy it.

There are also many parents who while placing their trust in the educational system expect that the kindergarten and school will teach everything children need. When issues arise, such parents express dissatisfaction, and query why teachers who are specialists cannot make their child read. Parents may also be confused as to when the child should be able to read or whether reading only constitutes story books or if comics and texts on the Internet also count. In this case the teacher can provide information that children read everywhere and that books are just one source of information, and reading other types of texts (subtitles, texts in comics or on the web) are also reading which supports the development of reading skills.

Teachers would certainly wish to have cooperative parents, ready to make an effort for their children. Cooperation should however work with all families: all children are enrolled in kindergarten or school and parents are not expected to have knowledge in teaching or communication. A few parents can be difficult, distant, spiteful or pretentious. The only way to truly support the child is to be kind to the entire family. The teacher must be professional - in communication, counselling and listening, one who also understands what their own beliefs, attitudes and resources are. Counselling is not merely giving advice, it is total attention, presence, listening without judgement, and acceptance. Every person needs eye contact, a smile, warm tone of voice and courage to make mistakes. As adults we can set examples about interpersonal relationships to our children.

When teachers meet parents, they could ask how the parents learnt to read and how they expect it to be achieved at school; explore what their biggest fears are in relation to their child's learning to read, and to assure that children learn to read at school too and the teacher offers support to ensure that all children, at their own speed, attain fluent reading skills. It is important to identify what the parents' beliefs of capability are – if the parent presupposes that their child is a poor reader and it is an inherited condition which cannot be remedied, then such a belief is either verbally or non-verbally communicated to the child as well. Children tend to believe their parents: if my parent thinks I am hopeless, there is not much point in my making an effort.

One might get an impression that modern parents are extremely knowledgeable and demanding, it may however disguise uncertainty and a need for a genuine contact. The parents require information. Teachers should present methods that they use in the class (reading aloud, book adverts, visits to a library etc.) and explain what is expected of home,

e.g. making sure the child reads suitable texts every day. The parents are top experts on their child and they should know what that child's interests are in order to select suitable texts and books. Emerging interest in reading can arouse interest in other fields.

As parents may associate reading checks with negative feelings which they may transfer to the child, they need an explanation of how evaluations of reading skills are made these days. The word 'check' should be avoided where possible. The teacher's objective is not so much checking if a book has been read but rather support reading. Group work may be used where children have to stage a play, make a poster, an advert, presentation, poem, rap song etc. This type of creative activity reduces tension in children and increases interest in reading in those who are reluctant readers.

Parents should be asked to analyse the proportion of reading books in hard copy and using a computer. It is important to listen to their account without judgement and with acceptance, since only in the situation of trust might one discuss the importance of playing outdoors, communicating with other children and reading books besides sitting at the computer. Children are not very good at regulating their media consumption, overconsumption may cause hyperactivity and anxiety. The younger the child, the more difficult it is for them to process information, which in turn causes problems in focussing and creating links.

The path to learning to read is natural for our children and adults around them can make the path smoother or bumpier. Cooperation between family and teacher can be amazing and encouraging and the happier the adults are, the happier is the child.

Authors

Maili Liinev (née Vesiko) is a special education teacher and counsellor. She is the initiator and long-term leader of the Reading Nest project. In her master's thesis, supervised by Meeli Pandis, the then president of the Estonian Reading Association, she studied the impact of the Reading Nest project on children. Later on Maili became the Association's president for many years. In 2014 she supervised a study on the outcomes of the Reading Nest project in schools.

Anneli Laamann is a kindergarten teacher. She has published a book on reading games in Estonian ("Mängides lugema" (Learning to read through play); ILO, 2008), and a set of letter games (Koolibri, 2015). In her master's thesis she investigated the environment which supports literacy and compared kindergartens with and without reading nests. Her objective was, from the very beginning, to write a paper for the benefit of all practitioners, thus this collection contains a number of references to her study. In 2008-2012 Anneli was the Reading Nest project manager for North Estonia. Kaja Kivisikk is an experienced class teacher (primary school), mentor and trainer, she has published a book ("Mängud Lugemispessa" (Games for the reading nest); Koolibri, 2016). In 2008-2012 she was the Reading Nest project manager for South Estonia.

Mare Mürsepp, PhD, is an author of books for children, children's literature critic and class teacher. She has been involved in the Association's and Reading Nest's activities from the start, she trained the first mentors on the topics of setting up, operating and furnishing reading nests. Mare has authored innovative primers and integrated learning materials for the first school stage. She has published an exciting book on learning to read and related stories and memories ("Laps on hakanud lugema" (The child is reading), National Examination and Qualification Centre, 1998). Jaana Koger is a senior teacher and methodologist at Tartu private kindergarten Terake. She has created a reading environment in her classroom, which sets an example in all aspects also in terms of international standards. She has done scrupulous pedagogical documentation of children working in this environment and her photos are a valuable addition to this book. Jaana and her colleagues have set up a reading nest which deserves the highest recognition; she is also a founder of the Estonian Reggio Emilia Association.

Kadi Lukanenok and Kadi Künnapuu are speech therapists, Mari Täht is a special education teacher and counsellor. They co-wrote the chapter on reading difficulties, and how to recognise and overcome them. Kadi Lukanenok has been a Lecturer in Special Education at Tallinn University for many years, and been involved in the Reading Nest project from the start, she trained the first mentors on how to recognise children's reading difficulties. Kadi has published a number of educational materials on how to support literacy, such as exercises on sounds and speech development, and reading games. Kadi Künnapuu has been similarly involved in the Reading Nest project from its beginning; she also designed its logo. Kadi has published a book "S sõna alguses" (S at the beginning of the word, Studium, 2007). Maria Jürimäe holds an MA in Estonian philology and in her master's thesis she studied the role of phonemic awareness in learning to read. Maria authored the book on methods of

teaching reading (Künnimees, 2003) and supervised Anneli Laamann's master's thesis. At the Centre of Educational Innovation of the University of Tartu she works on planning studies, and provides support to schools and kindergartens on the implementation of curricula, incl. creating a learning environment.