

COMMUNICATION
& INTERACTION
IN THE EARLY YEARS

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Setting the scene



This chapter will:

- Discuss the development of the early years curriculum since 2000
- Give a broad overview of the Rose Review on literacy
- Reflect on the position of settings within the private sector
- Discuss the challenges of two year olds' language development

One of the things that separates us from the rest of the animal world is our ability to communicate through the written and spoken word, so it is understandable that these skills are high in the social and political policy and practice for early years.

Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage **and birth-to-three matters**

Since the introduction of the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (CGFS) in 2000 (DfES, 2000) early years development and practice has been high on the government agenda. Since the introduction of the CGFS various governments have looked at children's development to identify areas of learning where children are failing to make appropriate progress; especially when compared to international outcomes.

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Before we become embroiled in statistical data and political argument we need to look more closely at policy documentation that has evolved during the recent past.

The publication of the CGFS in 2000 left a gaping hole in early years documentation when it failed to address the learning and development needs of children under the age of three. As with previous publications and research the CGFS gave the impression that learning only takes place once a child has reached the age of three. Under the leadership of the great ambassador for early years, Lesley Abbott, this lack of guidance for under threes was addressed with the introduction of *Birth to Three Matters* (B23) (DfES, 2002). This document sought to give support to professionals working with very small children, recognising the amazing development that takes place before and after birth:

Babies come already designed, or programmed, to be deeply interested in the people and world in which they find themselves. They learn best by playing with things they find in their world, and above all by playing with the familiar people who love them. (David et al., 2003, p. 150)

With the arrival of B23 the learning needs of babies and very young children were becoming part of the early years agenda. Work on brain development (Gopnik, 1999) showed that even before birth babies are 'programmed' to learn and communicate. At last government policy was looking at a top-up rather than a top-down model of development, but if this longitudinal look at learning within human beings was to be consistent then the policy had to become unified. It was then that the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008, a, b,c) was introduced which for the first time looked at babies' and young children's learning and development from birth to five years of age. This document saw that babies and children do not develop according to static ages and stages of development but rather that children can reach stages at different times. This was recognised in the way in which the Curriculum Guidance (DCSF, 2008a, b) looked at overlapping age bands. The statutory framework stated that

Children are competent learners from birth and develop and learn in a wide variety of ways. All practitioners should, therefore, look carefully at the children in their care, consider their needs, their interests, and their stages of development and use all of this information to help plan a challenging and enjoyable experience across all the areas of Learning and Development. (DCSF, 2008c, p. 11)

Early Years Foundation Stage

The EYFS of 2008 was superseded by the revised EYFS in 2012 after the review, *The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning*, led by Clare Tickell (2011). This document was a slimmed down version of the original EYFS and to a certain extent introduced a different tone of voice from the coalition government, with the introduction of the concept of school readiness, where

The three prime areas reflect the key skills and capacities all children need to develop and learn effectively, and become ready for school. (DfE, 2012b, p. 6)

As children grow older and approach five, the balance should shift towards a more equal focus across all of the prime and specific areas, progressively adapting to a child's developing capabilities and interests, but always ensuring that any child whose progress in the prime areas gives cause for concern receives the support they need. (DfE, 2012b, p. 27)

The revised EYFS also offered non-statutory guidance for practitioners in the document *Development Matters* developed by Early Education (2012). The EYFS of 2012 was again revised for implementation in September 2014 though these revisions were largely related to childminders and safeguarding.

Once the policy documents were in place the government turned its attention to look more closely at why some children were failing to meet targets at later stages of their education.

Government reviews

Part of this deeper examination resulted in the reviews by Graham Allen and Ian Duncan-Smith, *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens* (2008); Frank Field, *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults* (2010); and Graham Allen, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (2011). In these reviews the issue of early identification was highlighted as a driver for improving some of the outcomes:

it is not surprising that Early Intervention to provide young children with what they need carries many positive effects that cascade through their future lives and into the lives of those around them. (Allen and Duncan-Smith, 2008, p. 67)

As a result of this cross-party research the government began to introduce funding for two year olds. Much in the same way that nursery education funding was introduced for three year olds, funding for two year olds was

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targeted at those children who were seen as disadvantaged. As with three year old funding, the new funding system, while essentially about raising the aspirations of disadvantaged two year olds was also about the political agenda of getting mothers back into the work place in an endeavour to break the cycle of children being raised in workless families.

At the same time, and in line with Allen's *Early Identification* review (2011), the two year old progress check was introduced as part of the revised EYFS of 2012; it is a review of child development, health and readiness for school at two to two-and-a-half years. Although the check was statutory the government gave settings the freedom to meet the requirements in their own way. Support was offered in the form of guidance developed by the National Children's Bureau (DfE, 2014c).

The framework stated that

This progress check must identify the child's strengths, and any areas where the child's progress is less than expected. If there are significant emerging concerns, or an identified special educational need or disability, practitioners should develop a targeted plan to support the child's future learning and development involving other professionals (for example, the provider's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) as appropriate. (DfE, 2012b, p. 10)

The check has to be completed when a child is between 24 and 36 months and is to be shared with parents. It is to report mainly on a child's progress within the three Prime Areas of Learning. The idea is that this report on a child's learning development is looked at along with the two year old health check which is carried out by health visitors when a child has reached their second birthday. In many local authorities there is a move for these two checks to be completed at the same time and in partnership so that parents have a complete picture of their child's development. For example, for the Health Visitor to conduct their checks in the setting so that there truly is a comprehensive overview of a child's emotional, physical and language development with all parties, parents, health and setting contributing. This is an ideal model but in practical terms this is sometimes strategically difficult. For example, parents do not necessarily send their children to settings in close proximity to their homes (Clare, 2012) and Health Visitors are constrained by authority areas.

The development of the Early Years Foundation Stage

The EYFS of 2012 also placed an emphasis on the 'Characteristics of Effective Learning', giving practitioners the opportunity to look at how

young children's emotional well-being impacts on their ability to develop a disposition for learning, as well as the individual ways in which children learn through their play.

Another change within the revised EYFS was that made to the areas of learning. In the original EYFS equal weighting was given to the following six areas of learning, and all were to be delivered through planned, purposeful play, with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities.

- **Personal Social and Emotional development (PSE)** including Dispositions and Attitudes, Positive Relationships, Self-care, Sense of Community
- **Communication Language and Literacy (CLL)** including Language for Communication, Language for Thinking, Linking Sounds and Letters, Reading, Writing, Handwriting
- **Problem Solving Reasoning and Numeracy (PSRN)** including Numbers as Labels and for Counting, Calculating, Shape, Space and Measures
- **Knowledge and Understanding of the World (KUW)** including Exploration and Investigation, Designing and Making, Information and Communications Technology, Time, Place, Communities
- **Physical Development (PD)** including Movement and Space, Health and Bodily Awareness, Using Equipment and Materials
- **Creative development (CD)** including Being Creative – Responding to Experiences, Expressing and Communicating Ideas, Exploring Media and Materials, Creating Music and Dance, Developing Imagination and Imaginative Play

In the revised edition some of the areas of learning were renamed and three of the areas were given predominance and became known as the Prime Areas of Learning, with the remainder known as the Specific Areas.

Prime Areas

- **Communication and Language (CL)** including
 - Communication Language
 - Listening and Attention
 - Speaking
- **Physical Development (PD)** including
 - Moving and Handling
 - Health and Self-care

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- **Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSE)** including
 - Self-confidence and Self-awareness
 - Managing Feelings and Behaviour
 - Making Relationships

Specific Areas

- **Literacy** including
 - Reading and Writing
- **Mathematics** including
 - Numbers
 - Shape, Space and Measures
- **Understanding the World** including
 - People and Communities
 - The World
 - Technology
- **Expressive Arts and Design** including
 - Exploring and Using Media and Materials
 - Being Imaginative

The establishment of the three Prime Areas of Learning recognised the impact that physical, personal, social and emotional, and language development has on the overall development of children. Without progress being made in these three areas of learning children are at a disadvantage.

This can be seen in the Prime Area of Communication and Language; the ability for children to communicate through the medium of speech is the basis for much of children's later holistic development. Without language acquisition children find it difficult to make progress in other 'academic' areas of learning.

When children begin to be able to talk with their peers and adults in an understandable way, then many of the frustrations that are often called the 'terrible twos' are alleviated. Such frustration can be seen again in older sections of our society where dementia causes much disturbance, as making oneself understood again becomes a problem. Children, to ease their frustrations, develop strategies to overcome this difficulty – developing ways to communicate through gesture.

Alternative communication systems

Many young children today are introduced to formal systems of signing such as Signalong (www.signalong.org.uk/methodology/index.htm), which is a sign-supported communication method introduced in 1992 for people with communication difficulties mostly associated with learning disabilities, autism and other special needs, and which is based on British Sign Language. This system appears to have some impact on the frustrations of young children that can often lead to behavioural issues.

Just as Signalong was developed to support children with learning difficulties so was the system of Picture Exchange Communication (PECS) which was developed in 1985 'as a unique augmentative/alternative communication intervention package for individuals with autism spectrum disorder and related developmental disabilities'.

PECS begins by teaching an individual to give a picture of a desired item to a 'communicative partner' who immediately honours the exchange as a request. The system goes on to teach discrimination of pictures and how to put them together in sentences. In the more advanced phases, individuals are taught to answer questions and to comment (www.pecs-unitedkingdom.com/pecs.php).

In order to encourage communication skills through other means than vocalisations a system called Baby Signing has been introduced, which has become very popular with parents who are interested in having more communication with their babies. I have worked with settings where this system of signing has been used very successfully but there are many who question its validity and worth, 'Although Baby Sign is gaining in popularity, there is a scarcity of research supporting its use. The research that has been conducted is conflicting' (Mueller et al., 2013).

Along with policy development within the curriculum the government have also seen the need to introduce 'packages' to support practitioners in delivering high quality interaction in their exchanges with children. One of the first of many such strategies was the *Communication Matters* (DfES, 2005) training which was an extended training for teachers and practitioners to help them look closely and challenge their ways of interacting with and encouraging language in young children. Through the use of video clips and practical tasks this training demonstrated how, as practitioners, we all tend to crowd children's talking spaces under the misapprehension that what we have to say is empowering children in their language, whereas in fact we are inhibiting the young child's ability to communicate because there is limited space within which to do this. As a local authority

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consultant I have delivered this training on many occasions and have found that it has benefitted practitioners and challenged them to rethink how they interact.

The Primary National Strategies also introduced a range of materials for practitioners to support children's language and communication development:

- Every Child a Talker (ECAT) (in 2009)
- Communication, Language and Literacy Development (CLLD) programme: Materials for practitioners (in 2008)
- Mark Making Matters: Young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development (in 2008)
- Inclusion Development Programme: Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs: Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage (in 2008)
- Supporting children learning English as an additional language: Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage (in 2007)
- Communication, Language and Literacy: Professional development resource (in 2007)

With all this guidance and support it is surprising that some of the statistical data from the OECD (2014) shows that children in the UK are not making the appropriate progress in their development in communication and, as a consequence, in their development in the associated areas of reading and writing. So with this plethora of information, why are we greeted by headlines showing that for our 15 year old children we are not making progress in reading and that the gap between the genders in the UK is larger than in other countries (OECD, 2014)? In his comments to the House of Commons, Michael Gove (Hansard, 2013) talked about what implications these results have for our youngest children, and what initiatives need to be put in place to change this situation. Along with the increased funding for disadvantaged two year olds to access early years education, in line with the recommendations of Field (2010) and Allen (2011), he also discussed one of the initiatives introduced by the coalition government as a driver for improvement:

In our drive to eliminate illiteracy, we have introduced a screening check at age six to make sure that every child is reading fluently. (Hansard, 2013)

Will this screening be a true reflection of where a child's literacy development is? What the phonics screening, introduced in 2012, does not do is assess whether children have a love of books and therefore want to read and see

the importance of understanding the written word. What it also does not do is assess or measure children's communication skills. Arguably, what the phonics screening does do is to challenge the professional ability of teachers to assess where children are and also put pressure on some of our youngest children to 'perform to the test'.

Elizabeth Truss was right when she argued, 'It's about developing the language, communication and social skills so that children are ready to learn when they are at school', as well as pointing out that 'At the moment, there is an 18 month vocabulary gap between children on low incomes and children on high incomes when they arrive at school' (Truss, 2014). When the OECD discuss the curricula of countries they show that it is those countries that assess children shortly after they enter primary education where they see that the most focus is placed on literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2012). Their analysis states that, 'Literacy has also been consistently linked to improved school performance and achievement as well as higher productivity later in life' (OECD, 2012, p. 86). This view is supported by research and to a certain extent is unchallengeable, but for me it is how we go about this that is the most important factor.

The EYFS of 2012 looked at the holistic development of children, identifying Communication and Language as one of the Prime Areas, with Literacy (and its focus on reading and writing) as a specific area of learning and development. What perhaps needs to be considered is whether some of the changes in government language (for example, *Development Matters* (Early Education, 2012) changed to *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013b)), by inference suggest that it is the outcome rather than the process which is of greater importance. The OECD (2012) unpicks development and language to state that, 'Evidence suggests literacy should focus on improving vocabulary and listening skills; building knowledge of the alphabetic code; and introduce printing' (p. 86).

The Rose Review

In June 2005 Jim Rose was asked to head up a review on literacy. In his summary Rose comments on the importance of listening and speaking skills in the early years as he sees these along with reading and writing as the 'prime communication skills that are central to children's intellectual, social and emotional development' (Rose, 2006, p. 3). It was through the publication of this review that synthetic phonics was seen as the next step to build upon the achievements recorded as a result of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS), which advocated a structured teaching programme within

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the primary education system. For many in the teaching profession the NLS was seen as too constricting, giving teachers limited opportunities to develop their children's reading skills at a pace relevant to their individual development – something which is one of the core principles within early years pedagogy. Although generally the NLS was seen as successful.

The Rose review sought to build on it with the message that phonics should be introduced to children before they start compulsory statutory education, when it is deemed a child is ready to move on in their communication and language development (Rose, 2006, p. 3).

The concerns raised in the review about the standards of teaching and learning, especially in relation to boys as they progressed through the education system, and the subsequent analysis of data, led the government to see a need for children to have more phonic knowledge and skill.

The following case study gives an example of how a boy aged three is demonstrating signs that he is ready for the next level.

Case study



Oscar is three years old and is a competent speaker in both English and German. He has recently begun to demonstrate an interest in letters and what they mean. As with all children he makes connections with the letter shapes and sounds within his own experiences. So building on this interest, and through support from his parents, Oscar is able to recognise the initial sounds and letter shape of his own name. He is interested then in the shape and sounds of the names of those around him. This is evidenced by the local German shop called D&M which Oscar refers to as the Mummy and Daddy shop.

This brief picture of Oscar shows that he is perhaps ready to have his interest challenged, to have his learning scaffolded by a skilled and knowledgeable adult in a Vygotskian (1978) manner, to move his knowledge and understanding of letter shapes and sounds forwards.

Activity



Consider how as a practitioner you might extend Oscar's learning of letter shapes and sounds. This might include his exposure to and recognition of environmental print in its many forms.

Whilst acknowledging in the review teachers' comments about not having a 'one size fits all' model, Rose (2006) is adamant that phonics should be taught in short discrete daily sessions with pace, which entails working with a best fit for the majority of children. Rose does not, however, see that phonics is the whole picture but a part of the fuller picture, as this book will demonstrate.

Although this review focuses upon phonic work, it is very important to understand what the rest of the picture looks like and requires. For example, nurturing positive attitudes to literacy and the skills associated with them, across the curriculum, is crucially important as is developing spoken language, building vocabulary, grammar, comprehension and facility with ICT. (Rose, 2006, p. 16)

So what were the recommendations with regard to synthetic phonics? Perhaps a good starting point is to define what is meant by this term:

- grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
- to apply the highly important skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes in order, all through a word to read it
- to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell
- that blending and segmenting are reversible processes (Rose, 2006, p. 20)

Rose saw that once programmes were adopted they were diminished if implemented with a mix-and-match approach. He identified the following as the most salient features of any system and the manner in which it should be taught:

1. Fast paced
2. Careful and consistent
3. Well planned
4. Multi-sensory
5. Based on sound assessment and tracking across all four strands of literacy
6. Teaching letter names as well as sounds
7. Good enunciation of the sounds by the teacher
8. The use of 'real books' to complement and strengthen a programme

With regard to the pedagogy and practice of the early years Rose supported the practice of embedding children's early literacy skills of communication within the EYFS, stating that the skills needed for future phonics work should be deeply rooted in the environment and across all areas of learning as part

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of a language-rich curriculum. (This concept will be further explored throughout this book, looking at the ways in which the environment and the curriculum can ensure that children have the skills necessary for phonic work when they enter full time education.) This was meant to alleviate fears that teaching within the early years would become formalised and that children would be introduced to phonics at too early a stage of their development.

The Rose Review was the precursor to how reading and writing and the necessary skills for children to become effective readers and writers have now become embedded within the curriculum. One of the offshoots from this review was the introduction of *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007) and the *Every Child a Talker* (DCSF, 2008b) programme which will be discussed in the following chapters in relation to the relevant ages and stages of development.

The workforce

Much of our focus so far has been on the government policy agenda, which is as it should be, for in order to know where we are going we have to know where we have come from. Government is the driver of policy which affects us all; it has long been agreed that early years is the foundation on which to build the future generations and there has been much criticism of the workforce and its ability to deliver high quality teaching and learning when its level of qualifications is so low. Nutbrown (DfE, 2012a) sought to address this issue in the government commissioned review of the early years work force, but as her reaction to the government response to her findings demonstrates, not all of her recommendations were taken forward:

Why? Because, as they say, 'the devil is in the detail' ... As I read beyond the headlines of the government proposals I realised that most of my recommendations had in effect been rejected. (Nutbrown, 2013, p. 2)

If Rose (2006) was talking about improving some of the low quality of teaching in the primary system, where all teachers are graduates, to deliver high quality practice, then surely this is something which still has to be addressed in the private sector where pay and conditions do not encourage the recruitment of graduate practitioners. Since the concept of an early years curriculum came into being there has been an upward trend in the quality and level of training but this still does not apply across the board.

When looking at the training of teachers and practitioners in relation to supporting the development of children's communication and language skills then it is apposite to look at the evaluations of specific programmes

that have set out to do this. In the I CAN Early Talk (ET) programme the evaluation included the impact on the training of all those involved; parents, children and practitioners. When looking at practitioners working within Children's Centres the report stated that there were

indications of a professional learning community forming around speech, language and communication (SLC), as ET and other initiatives were embedded. The formation of these communities supported a much deeper understanding of, and reflection on, SLC by practitioners. (Whitmarsh et al., 2011, p. 3)

The evaluation of this programme demonstrated that the upskilling of practitioners and teachers had a positive impact on children's communication and language.

Macrory (2010) discusses the vital importance of practitioners having a sound knowledge and understanding of the ways in which children acquire language. In his conclusion he goes so far as to suggest that

If we really want to develop children's language, and to understand the part played by adults, other children and social contexts in their language development, then we should be arguing for an expert in language development in every early years setting. (Macrory, 2010, p. 39)

If teachers and practitioners are important, more so are the input and support of parents. In the early years sector we glibly talk about parents being 'a child's first educator' but how much attention do we pay to this?

Questions for reflection

1. How do you ensure that what parents tell you about their child's cognitive development feeds into the child's assessments?
2. How do we truly build up partnerships where parents are valued?
3. How do we empower parents so that they can challenge children's communication skills?
4. How do we inform parents about best practice?
5. How do we dispel parental focus on reading to the detriment of the skills needed prior to learning how to read?

As an Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) moderator for local authorities since the profile became statutory, I have over the years seen the concern of some teachers about the levels of language that children come into either nursery or reception class with; and this is true across the spectrum,

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from settings where there was social deprivation to those where the children were of professional parents. However, when I ask specifically why practitioners think there has been a downward trend in the levels of language when children first enter school the answers I receive are varied and in some cases very surprising. In the deprived areas, there were issues around children who were coming in with no English, and around those who had had no experiences outside of the home from which to develop their social communication. With the children from professional families, suggested causes included being cared for by au pairs, whose personal aim is to work whilst learning English for themselves, and that children had limited human interaction because they spent too much time using digital media in one form or another.

If these are the issues, then throughout this book we need to ask ourselves not only how we can change this, but what do practitioners and teachers do the world over, for example, to empower children to become bilingual and to engage with printed as well as digital media?

In the ever-changing world of education there have been many who have expressed concerns about the way in which there is a top-down pressure on early years. This was evidenced in the Cambridge Review Report (Alexander, 2009) when it discussed the early starting age for schooling in the UK and argued that

too formal too soon can be dangerously counterproductive. In 14 of the 15 countries that scored higher than England in a major study of reading and literacy in 2006, children did not enter school until they were six or seven. And more children read for pleasure in most of those countries than do so in England. (p. 16)

This report challenged the education system that we have today as being too formal whilst recognising that

there can be no doubt whatsoever that literacy and numeracy are fundamental to primary education. But we must be able to extend their scope beyond reading, writing and arithmetic and to ask what, in the 21st century, is truly 'basic' to young children's education. (p. 18)

The issues surrounding the use of technology and how it can possibly support children's communication and literacy development will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

Much of the policy documentation around communication discussed so far has involved the maintained education system and is linked to children's

reading and writing development, but in this book I am keen to explore what language development means for our very youngest children. In the next chapter we will look closely at how language develops from birth; but before we move out of the policy we need to look at how well prepared private day care provision is to meet the communication needs of the children in their care. Many settings today employ graduates but, as Nutbrown (DfE, 2012a) states, there are not enough of them. In her review for the government she states that evidence

shows that highly qualified teams of early years practitioners are more effective in developing children's communication, language and literacy, reasoning, thinking and mathematical skills. (p. 15)

So why then are the graduates who work in the private sector still not given the same recognition as that given to those who have *qualified teacher status* (QTS)? The numbers of graduates in the private sector are still low, due to poor pay and working conditions, and therefore much of the work done with our very youngest children is carried out by non-graduates. This is not to denigrate the professionalism of those working in the early years nor the wealth of high quality experience that exists, but it is to say that adults working with young children need to know and have confidence in how they communicate and interact. Both Rose (2006) and Nutbrown (DfE, 2012a) recognised the need for high quality teachers and practitioners to support young children's language development, so it is imperative that the private sector focuses its attention on upskilling its workers so that they all give children quality communication and interaction.

The scene is now set for how we in the UK are striving to improve the levels of literacy of children; we will be looking at the ways in which the skills needed to become a proficient reader can be grounded in early years pedagogy, thus ensuring that the principles, practices and beliefs of early years philosophy and ethos are not compromised into a formal, structured way of learning that is too much too soon.

Questions for reflection

Considering the plethora of policy documentation since 2000 surrounding the early years sector, reflect on how you adhere to your personal and professional principles, values and beliefs when it comes to babies' and young children's communication.

Further reading

- Alexander, R. (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Although the findings from the Cambridge Review did not find their place within government policy this is an interesting and sometimes controversial look at the UK primary curriculum.

- Rose, J. (2006) *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading: Final Report*. Nottingham: DfES.

The Rose Review is an important document because of its influence on the way in which synthetic phonics has established its position within the teaching of reading within the UK primary education system.

- Mueller, V., Sepulveda, A. and Rodriguez, S. (2014) 'The effects of Baby Sign training on child development', *Early Child Development and Care*, 184: 1178–91.

In a contentious area of communication this article looks at the use of Baby Signing through a study of nine families with children ranging in age from six months to two years and five months who participated in a Baby Sign workshop. The data discussed suggests that the Baby Sign training had a significant, positive impact on the overall development of the children.