

Environmental Print in Early Literacy Development

Research into the nature of early literacy development has shown the importance of experiences before school of what Yetta Goodman called the 'roots of literacy' (Goodman, 1980). These roots include growing awareness of forms and functions of written language. Reading must grow from these 'roots' too and it is clear that when these roots are nourished (especially at home in the very early years), children have a good start in school literacy. When Goodman point out the importance of print in young children's environment she is, by implication, referring to their *home* environment:

“ I believe that the development of knowledge about print embedded in environmental settings is the beginning of reading development which in most cases goes unnoticed ”

(Goodman, 1986, p.7)

Environmental print can include the temporary print from digital technology, advertising posters, controls on household appliances, stickers, logos and designs on clothing, labels and shop signs, graffiti, and so on.

Goodman et al. (1978) and Hiebert (1981) discussed the place of environmental print in the early reading development of young children. They concluded that context based print such as shop signs or logos on household product packaging, is meaningful to children. In separate studies they show that young children draw meaning from familiar environmental symbols.

Smith (1976) suggested that reading begins the moment young children become aware of environmental print. Burke (1982) and Goodman (1980) illuminate the fact that for many children print awareness develops long before children go to school.

Yetta Goodman has written:

“ There is no question that there are many cueing systems which support and constrain the embedded print, colour, size, shape, pictorial cues, each in a system of its own, but to the child developing print awareness, a key discovery is that the print communicates a message when a child is asked how he know the box contains lego and he points to the print ”

(Goodman, 1980)

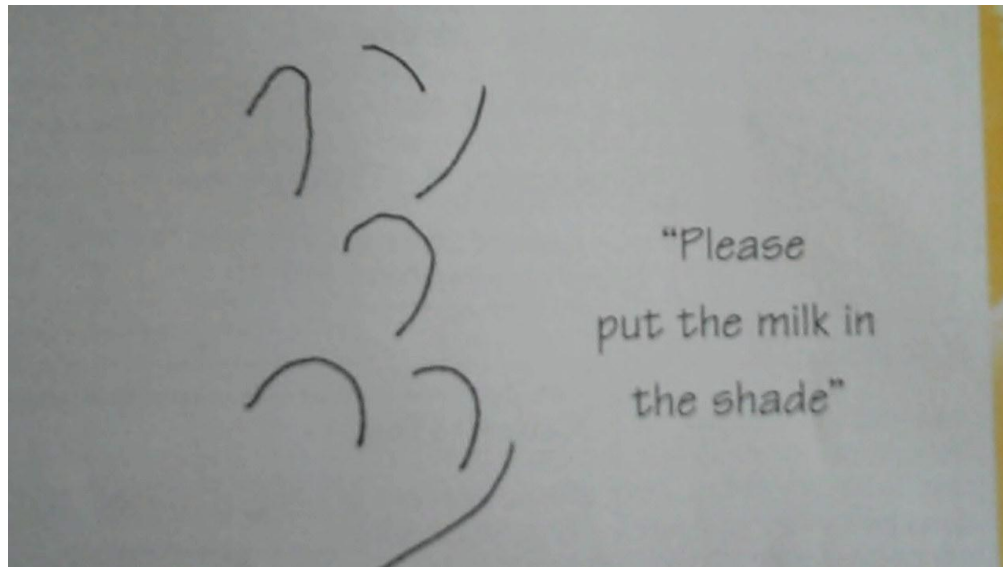
Goodall (1984) found four year olds were aware that print carried information but were often inaccurate in their interpretations, applying different strategies to interpret environmental print. They used the context to 'guess' the words and labels they were shown, e.g. recognising 'Weetabix' on the cereal packet was possible for most children, but recognising the handwritten word 'Weetabix' with no other context cues or clues was not. This points to the importance of context in early reading material and writing experiences.



In another study of children's approaches to environmental print Jones and Hendrickson (1970) suggested that often children recognise the form (gestalt) of a logo, but do not actually *read* the print.

So, when children make sense of environmental print, are they reading? How useful is it to include discussion of environmental print in early literacy development? How does it help children to become literate?

Environmental print can stimulate some writing – children often imitate the writing they see, such as notices of notes left for others. The note below as written by a 4 year old and says: ‘Please put the milk in the shade’.



Environmental print can stimulate talk about literacy as children ask questions such as *What does that say?* It can prompt children to identify letters in signs that also occur in other words that are important to them such as their own name.

Environmental print has a place in early literacy development and as children are immersed in this kind of reading material from birth this is hardly surprising. Nigel Hall (1987) gives a useful review of work done on environmental print and makes the point that print is part of children’s lives and relationships:

“ Children, from birth, are witnesses to both the existence of print and the relationship between print and people
(Hall, 1987) ”



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