



Beginning Literacy

A Visit to Siduskoli, Akureyri, Iceland
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While Sallie Harkness and Steve Bell were visiting Akureyri last autumn they had the opportunity to observe a 2nd grade class where Margret Baldvinsdottir and Sara Svanlaugsdottir (see photograph) were team teaching. “Beginning Literacy” is a fairly new literacy programme, available to schools since 2006 and developed as a special project by Rosa Eggertsdottir of Akureyri University.

Among the preconditions the following issues were of importance:

- The integration of speaking, listening, reading and writing is the basis for success in literacy.
- Simultaneous work is included with letter-sound relationship, fluency and comprehension. As a consequence, work with phonemic awareness, spelling, handwriting, vocabulary, syntax and grammar is not addressed separately.
- Vocabulary acquisition is important as it supports good comprehension.
- The rhythm in the study of literacy is from whole to parts and to whole again.
- Real books are used and their content addressed through discussions.
- All technical work comes from the material found in the quality text.
- Keywords from texts are used to represent most of the technical aspects of literacy study
- The more pupils engage in literacy related tasks, the more likely they are to become literate.

When children attend school for the first time, (In Iceland this is at the age of six or seven years) they bring different background knowledge and skills with regard to literacy. They all have some experience of written language in their environment. Some have already begun reading, others have some knowledge of letters and sounds, and then there are those who need to learn all the letters and their sounds.

- The teaching approach, “Beginning Literacy”, assumes that all children can be taught together, irrelevant of their initial status.
- Consequently, individualized needs of pupils are met through group work and paired work.
- It is taken for granted that the learning needs of all pupils are met in the classroom. When necessary, team teaching is encouraged.
- Lack of learning success is linked to inadequate teaching rather than assuming that the problem lies with the child.
- Pupils are taught skills and strategies that are likely to encourage them to become independent and skilled readers.
- The study of literacy needs to nurture creative thinking and expression.
- The study of literacy needs to be fun and encourage interaction.
- Teachers gather data about pupils’ progress during daily classroom work. Instead of correcting pupils and have them redo tasks, teachers plan new tasks where pupils get thorough guidance and opportunities to practice.

“Beginning Literacy” is developed in three stages. During the first stage pupils are exposed to a text of quality. In the second stage they deal with technical aspects of literacy. The third stage encourages pupils to express their own ideas, preferably linked to the vocabulary of the text they studied in the first phase. Technical work with print and sounds takes place within the vocabulary of the text introduced in stage one. As pupils’ skills and knowledge improve, their independency is encouraged. It is assumed that literacy lessons occur two to three times a day, every day of the week, at minimum 90 minutes per day. Across the three phases pupils are expected to read a lot. Peer support is emphasized resulting in much group work and paired work. Games and cards ensure interaction where pupils support each other. Pupils become active participants and the learning becomes fun. Teachers write formal plans for each week and keep detailed records of individual progress.

Rosa Eggertsdottir (Left) at Glendale Primary in 2005

