

Tell me something! Developing children's narrative skills in day nurseries

by Astrid Drick

		<p>KiTa Fachtexte is a collaboration between the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences, the FRÖBEL group, and the professional development initiative for early childhood professionals WiFF. The three partners champion further professionalisation in early childhood education in universities</p>

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ABSTRACT

Recounting or relating experiences, memories and stories is not only an important part of interpersonal communication. It is also essential for learning to read and write. Some children are not exposed to the necessary conditions in their environment for acquiring age-appropriate narrative skills prior to starting school. In order to break down barriers to education early enough, children's narrative skills should therefore be developed already at day nurseries. After a brief introduction to the basics of narratology, the following paper shows how this can be integrated into everyday life and in pre-structured play.

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1. Introduction

The recounting or relating of experiences, memories and stories in conversation with one or more listeners is a natural part of interpersonal communication that fulfils four functions. Narration is used for discourse, receiving/providing information, self-expression and psychological relief, for example. However, narration is also a skill that can be considered essential for success in education. Narration is where you depart from the current speech situation and create a linguistic sequence of actions beyond the communication situation. Language is removed from the context of the communication situation, it is “decontextualised”. This forms an essential foundation for literacy.

Narration or narrating as a key language skill

Empirical studies show that children who have well-developed oral narrative skills even before they start school also use these skills for producing written narratives and in this way master the switch from verbal communication to written communication without any problems (Ohlhus et.al.2006). There is further evidence that well-developed narrative skills also have a positive impact on mathematical performance (O'Neill et al. 2004).

However, not all children have the necessary conditions in their environment for acquiring the appropriate narrative skills before they start mainstream school. Measures for language acquisition in day nurseries should therefore not, as is currently common, concentrate on developing phonological, lexical and grammatical acquisition processes, but also include development of narrative skills. It is especially those children who do not have adequate support in developing these skills in their family that benefit most and have a greater chance of participating successfully in the school lesson subsequently.

Reading aloud and looking at picture books is often mentioned in this context as a format for interaction that is particularly suited to developing children's narrative skills. However, the extent to which this is useful or meaningful greatly depends on the interaction strategies used as a basis for the reading aloud situations (Wieler 1997). Letting children become narrators themselves therefore represents another option. This can, for example, be integrated into their daily routine or in pre-structured play where children with different resources have the opportunity to develop their narrative skills. Before I show how this can be done in the following pages, I will briefly explain in the next few sections the theoretical basis for narration that is key to developing narrative skills.

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2. Basics of narratology

2.1 *What is narration or narrating?*

When we talk of “narration”, we may mean a lot of things, which often leads to misunderstanding. In this case, it is not my intention to talk about literary narration but the everyday oral narration in conversation with one or more listeners. According to Ehlich (2007), the following distinctions can be made within everyday narration:

- Narration as what you say when you are talking about general things, past events or things that are not present. Narration becomes synonymous with linguistic activities such as “talking, communicating, describing” etc.
- Narration as the linguistic reproduction of a past event in the form of a story.

The second definition is the subject of the following discussion.

Narration as the structured rendering of a past event

Numerous models have been developed in linguistic narrative research to describe this specific form of narration in more detail (Boueke 1995, Hausendorf & Quasthoff 1996). This presents the essential characteristics of a story from different theoretical perspectives.

All the models establish the fact that a story has to follow a certain structure: It begins with an introductory or orientation phase where, for example, the place (of the events) and the people involved are introduced. This is followed by a period of complication, which can be determined by minimum conditions of unusualness or a disruption in the events that would normally be expected. Van Dijk (1980, p.141) calls this the “interestingness criterion”: “You can't tell a good enough story about breakfast, typing a letter or opening a door if nothing special happens.” Finally, in narration there is a phase in which the difficult situation is resolved and concluded (see Becker 2006, 37).

Boueke, D et.al. (1995) also stress the need to use linguistic and stylistic devices to make the narrative exciting, interesting and entertaining. By using adverbs such as “suddenly”, the narrator can convey that something unexpected is happening, for example. Evaluative adjectives such as nice/beautiful, funny etc. or direct speech can serve to emphasise the emotional aspect of the action or produce psychological proximity.

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2.2 Developing narrative skills

The preceding presentation demonstrated that narration is a very complex linguistic act requiring many sub-skills. In addition to general language and cognitive skills, narration or narrating requires the ability

- to reproduce the (at least minimally unusual) events in a structured way, i.e. following the typical structure of a story, in a clear and coherent sequence of events, based on the listener's knowledge.
- to embellish the story with certain linguistic and stylistic devices so that what's being recounted will be perceived as exciting, interesting or funny, e.g. using direct speech, adjectives etc.

If one also considers narration or narrating as a linguistic activity that is performed in conversation, a narrator also requires the ability

- to select and insert his narrative according to the topic of conversation and the conversation situation.

Narrative skills consist of three interlocking sub-skills

Various studies have examined how these narrative skills develop, i.e. in which chronological order they occur in the context of general language development. The focus of these studies is on the development of a child's ability to structure a narrative (e.g. Boueke 1995, Becker 2005).

Overall, the studies show similar acquisition patterns despite different methodological orientation. However, even if general trends and milestones can be defined in narrative development, children's narrative skills develop at different rates and in different forms. The narrative genre can also influence the narrative performance, as proven by Becker (2005) in her study. In the investigation she conducted, the children showed different narrative skills depending on whether they were supposed to produce a picture story, an adventure or fantasy story or a retelling. The following illustration can therefore only be considered as a guideline:

Individual development trajectories of narrative skills

Children demonstrate their first early forms of narration around their third birthday (Meng, 1991). Preschool children produce single fragmentary utterances that seem associative and not yet linked together. Children then verbalise narratives that are significantly longer and in which the events are strung together in their chronological sequence around their seventh birthday. The structural complexity of the narrative increases when they start school (Becker 2005). The children are gradually able to produce coherent narratives that have structural phases of introduction/orientation, complication and resolution that are typical of stories (see Becker 2011, 60). The development of linguistic devices that are necessary to make clear that it is a narrative (and not a report) graduates from an implicit, i.e. purely vocal marker in preschool children to an explicit marker of individual components of a narrative at primary school and secondary school age (Quasthoff 2009). The development of the ability to insert a narrative into a conversation to fit

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with its theme is closely related to the increase in skill at the linguistic device level and the ability to structure a story (see Ohlhus/Stude 2009, 45).

2.3. Mechanisms of acquisition: What brings about the development of narrative skills?

Models of narratives that children encounter in their everyday life in different forms are significant resources that support and encourage the acquisition of narrative skills at preschool age. In this context, recent research (e.g. Albers 2009, Drick 2015) also stresses the positive effects that interactions within the group of children can have on the development of general language skills and the development of narrative skills. Nevertheless, everyday conversations between children and adults in which the competent adult in their role as the child's listener supports him or her in the narration intuitively and in a way that is finely tuned to the child's stage of development. This may be seen as an essential mechanism in the acquisition of narrative skills. He or she asks questions to steer the child into expanding his or her story and asks for information when something is unclear. If the child confuses the sequence of his or her narrative, the adult provides the impetus to help to him or her continue and end the story correctly. He or she offers help with formulating the story and shows the child a model as to how he or she can verbalise his or her thoughts. However, all this linguistic support that the adult lends to the conversation is not with the intention of giving the child "narrative lessons" but purely intuitive to maintain the interaction with the child and to ensure understanding.

Everyday conversations between adults and children as a mechanism for narrative acquisition

Hausendorf & Quasthoff (1996) were able to show that these measures used by adults that they describe as DASS (Discourse Acquisition Support System) also support the acquisition of narrative skills in addition to ensuring understanding. Using questions, assumptions etc. which the adult interlocutor addresses to the child who is still limited in his or her narrative skills, he or she can learn implicitly what expectations competent speakers associate with a narrative. He or she can store this knowledge and increasingly implement it independently (Hausendorf & Quasthoff 1996).

The encouragement and support methods that adult caregivers use in everyday interactions to develop children's narrative skills differ enormously. This does not only apply to the family but also to institutional education. Nevertheless, children depend on the fact that in their environment "oral texts", as represented by narratives, occur sufficiently frequently. Language education that aims to contribute to breaking down educational barriers must therefore provide support for the acquisition of narrative skills to all children early enough (Drick 2015). This can be in the form of didactic support settings or integrated into the daily routine.

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3. Developing children's narrative skills

In the previous sections I explained how important narration is for successful education processes, how narrative skills evolve and how this development can be encouraged. Based on these findings, ways to develop narration or narrating will be introduced in the following sections. Basically, there are two different ways of developing narrative skills: One way is for narrative development to be integrated into everyday life which may always be implemented regardless of the respective activity. Children should be supported in the development of their narrative skills within conversations that come about naturally and unplanned in the course of their everyday life. Specifically designed pre-structured play is another way of developing narrative skills.

3.1. *Developing narration or narrating that is integrated into everyday life*

In order to develop narrative skills in a way that is integrated into everyday life, professionals must have conversations with children in the many different situations encountered in the everyday life of the day nursery. They need to consider these as an opportunity to be used purposefully for the acquisition of narrative skills. It is therefore not about using special development programmes but first and foremost about the language behaviour of the adult so that the child succeeds in acquiring narrative skills in these everyday situations.

The professional's language behaviour as a key component of narrative development integrated into everyday life

However, having conversations represents a highly automated activity, the course of which one rarely thinks about. A differentiated analysis of one's own conversational behaviour in the interaction with children is therefore an essential prerequisite for having conversations that effectively support the child's acquisition of narrative skills. A reflection on individual conversational techniques can for example start from the question of how one can recognise children's narrative intentions at all.

While adults announce this quite early on e.g. by saying "Oh my goodness, I've got to tell you what happened to me yesterday", children at preschool age often don't manage to do this. In many cases, children, particularly younger ones, often only mention a singular event that is limited to one sentence (Meng 1991), such as for example, "Once I fell over", "I used to have a cat" or "my sister saw a hedgehog yesterday". Six-year-old children often use formulaic phrases "do you know what?" to establish communication with the professional. Whether the children are introducing a narrative with this remark or perhaps simply wanted to tell the adult something can therefore only be established if the listener shows his or her interest in continuing the conversation in some way, for example by asking questions. The following questions can also encourage differentiated analysis of one's own behaviour in interactions with children:

¹ This description is based on Jerome Bruner's (1987) term *Language Acquisition Support System* LASS.

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- How have I picked up on children's attempts to tell a narrative in everyday life? Did I have a longer conversation with the child where his or her topic was explored in more depth?
- How did I react to a child's attempts to tell a narrative if they were difficult to follow?
- Have I had other children participate in the individual child's attempts to tell a narrative?

Since children do not always establish communication with adults by themselves and tell them something on their own initiative, the question of how they can be encouraged to tell what's on their mind in everyday situations is no doubt also important. Recent research from the international and German arena (Farran et al. 2006, Drick 2015) gives evidence of the fact that children are more active linguistically and more often take the initiative to tell a narrative if they are assisted by professionals who often relate their own experiences.

Periods of transition such as waiting or tidying up can be used for creative narrative opportunities

The professional can tell the children of his or her own experiences during arts and crafts, dressing and undressing or tidying up, for example. The children can then be inspired to tell their own story with questions such as "Have you also had that experience?" This can kick off a "storytelling session".

The following excerpt from a conversation between an early childhood education professional and a five-year-old child with a migration background should give an insight into the ways in which children can be supported in developing their narrative skills in everyday life. The data comes from a longitudinal study, in which a concept for promoting narrative skills was developed and then tried in practice and assessed with four to seven-year-old children of different social and ethnic origin (Drick 2015). In this case, the professional skilfully makes use of the potential for language formation that tidying up provides. While the children tidy up the previously used playthings, she relates her experience with a flat bicycle tire, the cause of which the children suspect to be the bite of a rat. This obviously gives the five-year-old child the idea to relate his or her own experience with a rat.

Child: I saw a rat in my toilet!

As is typical for a child of this age, he or she establishes communication with the professional by only mentioning an event. He or she does not make any further remarks. The professional now reacts promptly: He or she signals their emotional involvement and encourages the child to immediately continue the story.

P: Oh no, ugh that's gross! Tell me – what was there?

However, what follows is very difficult for the listener to understand:

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Child: Then I flushed it away by mistake, I wanted to do a wee, then I flushed it, it ran out straight away, came right up to our front door and then it ran out.

What the child is saying is very difficult to understand. However, despite the not very coherent presentation, the professional does not ask a clarifying question but a question that aims to further develop the event through direct speech.

P: Eww, and what did your mummy say?

Meng (1991) justifies the absence of clarifying questions in the case of problems of understanding in adult-child conversations by saying that listeners often refrain from addressing ambiguity when they believe that the child does not have the necessary language resources. It is also to be assumed that in this conversation the professional did not consider a question to be very promising. Instead he or she accepts the childlike utterance for what it is. The interaction is therefore not interrupted thanks to the sympathetic, acknowledging reaction of the professional. The child can perceive him/herself as a competent narrator despite the fact that what he or she says is difficult to understand and continues to test him/herself in this role. However, as is clear from the child's reaction, he/she does not manage to produce what is asked and expected:

C: It was outside, it won't come again.

The child obviously needs more help to answer the professional's question and continue the interaction. What is interesting is the professional's reaction. In order to maintain the conversation and therefore also what's being asked of the child, the professional now figuratively speaking builds the child a bridge where she makes an assumption about the mother's behaviour in the form of a question. It is therefore only an offer that may be accepted or rejected by the child. At the same time, the professional demonstrates how a thought can be verbalised.

P: I see, and your mum – did she not see the rat or what?

C: Yes, she did.

As the example shows, the "additional work" was worth it: confirming the child's testimony that his or her mother has seen the rat provides the professional with a new substantive foundation that helps them to pick up their initial question, aimed at finding out the details of the event.

P: and what did she say?

The child in turn gets another chance to talk, which he or she then does. At the same time, the professional gives him or her an implicit indication that he or she can add colour to his or her narrative by using direct speech.

C: She said, bring it out, then I said, I can't

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The following dialogue held three days later indicates that this conversation technique has had a possible effect on the child's acquisition. The child recounts the story of the rat again but in a different form. He or she does not now use direct speech at the professional's request but on his or her own initiative.

C: There was a rat in the toilet, I wanted to flush it away but it was right inside and then it said (child changes his or her voice): I am still here!!! [...].

In the example illustrated here, the early childhood education professional intuitively reacts to the child's as yet little differentiated utterances, without losing sight of his or her task as role model and supporter of language education. She manages to co-constructively produce a short story with the child in conversation and thus perform a linguistic act that does not take place in the here-and-now but detached from the situational context. The child thus develops skills in preparation for what's required at school, such as for example written language acquisition. The child experiences him or herself as a competent narrator in the interaction, someone who succeeds in establishing and maintaining communication with his or her environment using his or her (albeit still poor) narrative skills.

3.2. Developing narration or narrating in pre-structured situations

Following the natural method of acquiring narrative skills

In addition to the development of narrative skills that is integrated into everyday life, the acquisition of narrative skills can also be specifically supported in pre-structured play. In the following, a method is presented in abbreviated form that closely follows the natural acquisition of narrative skills and shows how children's narrative skills can be encouraged in staged conversations between the professional and the child. The conversations are performed as role plays. Initial trials of the concept as part of a dissertation project indicated the effectiveness of the procedure (Drick 2015). The target group for this procedure are children speaking one or more languages from the age of four.

Developing narrative skills in a conversation using the support setting "visit to the doctor's"

Before starting the instruction, the professional selects the participating children. The group size should not exceed four children.

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Given that children can benefit from the linguistic models of their peers, the professional should choose children of different ethnic and social origin, children with language developmental delays, but also children with language and narrative skills that have developed in an age-appropriate way.

This targeted composition of a peer group can make access to acquisition-developing interactions within the group of children much easier for children whose language skills are still limited.

The children meet with the professional in an extra room for a role play. The topic should be based on the children's world and experiences so that they have the necessary know-how to carry out the game. It should also be possible to easily integrate an "unusual event" into the game, providing a meaningful occasion for narration. The role play "visit to the doctor's" has proved to be successful for children from the age of four and may take on many different variations, such as a paediatrician or veterinarian.

Choosing play materials

A table on which there is a telephone and different writing materials, such as for example a pad for writing out recipes and index cards, on which patients' personal details can be noted, serves as the central focal point for the game. The professional can use this to encourage children to engage in activities where what they produce resembles written language e.g. letter-like characters such as scribbles. This develops the children's literacy skills. What is further needed are toys that are in line with the theme, such as a doctor's kit and possibly stuffed animals.

Children usually find very realistic toys for different themes in their environment. This can be very helpful in many situations, but on the other hand offers little incentive to reinterpret objects for play purposes in order to develop the child's understanding of symbols.

Professionals should therefore also provide material that does not fit the current play theme and then show the children for what purposes it can still be used. A children's iron for example can thus be reinterpreted as a telephone.

Stools should be placed in the immediate vicinity of this "place of narration" so that there is a "waiting room" that can also be equipped with written language material such as for example newspapers. When the room has been prepared, the roles are distributed.

In the first round of the game, the adult assumes the role of the doctor to demonstrate to the children how the game works. One child is the doctor's assistant,

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the other children are the patients. In the next few rounds of the game, the roles should then be switched. The children have repeated opportunities to try out different roles, depending on their linguistic and cognitive resources. Children with German as a second language or children with a language developmental delay who do not yet want to take part in the game as the person who narrates can play a receptive role in the conversation as patients in the waiting room or just act as a doctor's assistant first of all.

Studies on the acquisition of narrative skills (e.g. Ohlhus/Stude 2009, Drick 2015) have shown that children benefit from the language models of their peers or the adult professional if they have experienced linguistic forms, motifs and narrative structures initially only receptively in their role as listener.

Verbal routines as a framework for acquiring narrative skills

The conversation between professional and child:

When all the roles have been distributed, the conversation begins. The professional in his or her role as the doctor first of all asks the name, place of residence etc. of the child in his or her role as the patient. Then he or she asks what the patient's concern is, e.g. "Where does it hurt, Teddy?". If the child then answers, for example, "Here, on my arm", the professional then asks a question that encourages the child to tell him or her what event led to the discomfort, e.g. "What happened?" or "How did that happen?"

The conversation between the professional and the child should proceed according to a pattern that is always consistent. This results in stable, clearly structured, reliable formats where the children are repeatedly confronted with communicative requests that remain almost the same. This helps them to anticipate what is happening and very soon understand the significance of the communicative tasks that are demanded of them. These verbal routines provide children with German as a second language or children with a language delay valuable assistance in their acquisition of narrative skills (Drick 2015).

The child is now in the role of the narrator. The story is produced interactively, i.e. the professional helps the child to tell his or her story, supporting him or her linguistically and in an intuitive way according to the child's stage of development. As is the case with natural acquisition of narrative skills, the child can acquire implicit knowledge about the construction and linguistic shape of narratives in these conversations by means of the language support of the competent interlocutor. He or she can store this information and use it independently in other narratives.

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The conversation can proceed as in the following made-up example:

Example: T (professional), C (child)

T: Where does it hurt?

C: Here on my arm

T: Oh, what happened?

C: I fell off a horse.

T: Oh dear! How did that happen?

C: It was going too fast.

T: Oh, and then?

C: Then there was a fence.

T: And then what happened?

C: It ran into it and I fell off and landed on my head.

T: Oh God, that must have really hurt. What about the horse?

Was it also hurt?

C: Yes, it was ...

During the conversation, the other children are given the opportunity of taking part in the stories of their peers in a receptive way. When the narrative is finished, the patient is treated. Then it's: "Next please!"

An excerpt from an authentic conversation below is presented to further illustrate the situation. The data comes from a dissertation project (Drick 2015). "Visit to the vet's" is being played. In addition to the professional, two children who are almost five years old and who are learning German as a second language are also taking part. Tom (To) is the patient, whose shark is ill, Lena (Le) is the vet's assistant, the adult is the vet (P).

P: Where does the shark hurt?

To: His teeth are hurting.

P: He has toothache.

Le: Yes, maybe he had a lot of sweets. If you have eaten too many sweets, then he has really bad toothache.

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P: Is that right?

To: Yes.

P: How did that happen then?

To: He...he...I was out at work and then he climbed the fence and then he ate all the sweets.

P: Oh no, what kind of sweets were they?

To: Chocolate.

P: Biscuits, chocolate, boiled sweets, all in one go, and when you came back, what happened then?

To: Then he hid, and then he...I looked for him, and then I looked...and then I looked in the kitchen...nothing...there was nothing left.

P: My God, that's terrible.

(...).

In this conversation, the professional gives the child help with producing his narrative and therefore support in the decontextualised use of language. However, it's not just the professional that contributes to the successful execution of the narrative interaction but also the contribution that the other child Lena gives to the conversation. From her childhood experience of the world, she guesses the cause of the toothache and provides her peer Tom with an age-appropriate, easily imitated model, which Tom immediately uses as a basis for producing his narrative. This recourse to the child model enables him to have a "smooth" entry into the narrative interaction and therefore the chance to benefit from its acquisition functionality.

4. Summary

The child's narrative skill plays a key role in achieving successful interpersonal communication and success in school education. It is now well understood how the skill develops that is needed to render a past event, which is in some way unusual, in a structured and understandable way. Studies show a development sequence that takes place in stages, beginning in the third year of someone's life and that takes on different speeds and different forms. The language behaviour of adult caregivers in everyday interactions with the child can be considered as an essential mechanism that encourages narrative development. However, there may be substantial variations with regard to the effects of this language support on the child's development. Consequently, not all children are exposed to conditions in their environment that support them in the age-appropriate development of narrative skills. Children's narrative skills should therefore be sufficiently encouraged

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in the day nurseries to enable social participation and open up educational opportunities. Opportunities for this may be found both in a form that is integrated into everyday life as well as in pre-structured situations. For the development of narrative skills to succeed, it first and foremost depends on the linguistic competence of the professional, as mentioned above.

It can therefore be useful to consciously reflect on one's own linguistic actions in conversations with children in interaction training in order to expand the individual repertoire of appropriate possible answers. The acquired knowledge can then be used as a basis e.g. for showing parents/legal guardians how they can encourage the narrative skills of their children at home. A lively discussion with parents can then develop – with the common goal of encouraging the narrative skills of children in the best way possible.

5. Questions and further information

5.1 Questions and tasks for working on the text



TASK 1:

Compare narration integrated into everyday life with the development of narration in pre-structured situations: What advantages or disadvantages do you see in these approaches? Consider the different learning dispositions of children (e.g. German as a second language) and, if possible, the situation at your own facility.



TASK 2:

Note the different situations that you have found conducive to narration in practice. What were the characteristics of these situations? Which children took part in this? Discuss this with your colleagues.



QUESTION 1:

How have you been involved in children's games (e.g. non-simulation games, role play, constructive play) to date? Did you actively take part or did you observe the game or their play from the sidelines? Give a reason for your actions. If you do not yet have any practical experience: What methods do you know that are suitable for encouraging learning processes in children's play or games?



QUESTION 2:

Question for self-reflection: When you think of your own experiences with communication: What linguistic expressions in your environment do you see as conducive or not conducive to narration?

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Tell me something! Developing children's narrative skills in day nurseries
by Astrid Drick

5.3 Glossary

Implicit learning Implicit learning is the unconscious appropriation of knowledge and skills. The knowledge acquired is difficult to put into words. The opposite is explicit learning i.e. conscious, direct learning e.g. of rules.

Literacy The term is Anglo-American and there is no adequate translation in the German language. In research, literacy is now understood as a concept involving childhood experiences of the culture of books, narratives, rhymes and writing. Engaging with letters and symbols in early childhood prior to starting school is an important requirement for written language acquisition.

KiTa Fachtexte is a collaboration between the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences, the FRÖBEL group, and the professional development initiative for early childhood professionals WiFF. KiTa Fachtexte wants to support lecturers and students at universities and professionals in day care centres and day nurseries by providing the latest specialist texts for study and practice. All specialist texts are available at: www.kita-fachtexte.de

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