Multimodal Literacies in the Early Years

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WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH?

The research project Multimodal Literacies in the Early Years explored what learning to be ‘literate’ means for young children in today’s media-rich world. It was planned in response to public and professional debate about early literacy with the aim of contributing to understandings of the potential of new technologies for literacy learning within the purposes, practices and social context of early education in England.

In the current Foundation Stage curriculum, the approach to literacy presented is of an essentially solitary, print-based, linguistic accomplishment, and clear guidance is given regarding the development of traditional literacy skills, including mark-making, phonic awareness, familiarity with printed texts etc, whilst scant attention is paid to new technologies and the implications of their ubiquitous use in everyday literacy practices. This stands in contrast to a mounting body of research evidence which suggests that for today’s young children, learning to be literate involves acquiring a range of skills and practices in different media (Hall, Larson and Marsh, 2004) and that ‘individuals need new kinds of expertise, technical skills and understanding’ (ESRC, 2010) in contemporary society. Furthermore, there was a paucity of research into practitioners’ concerns about using new technologies in early years settings.
The overall aim of this project was therefore to contribute to practical and theoretical understandings of early literacy learning at the beginning of the 21st century, more specifically:

1. To produce grounded evidence of how young children developed literacy knowledge and skills as they engaged with different modes (such as speech, writing, gaze, gesture, images, music, layout) in a range of traditional and new media.

2. To identify what kinds of printed and electronic literacy resources three and four-year-old boys and girls from a range of social backgrounds engaged with at home and in one early education setting.

3. To explore how adult beliefs and practices about literacy at home and in early education impacted on the processes of children’s literacy learning with different media.

The project was undertaken in one Sure Start Children’s Centre nursery in the South of England, with case studies of ten children’s literacy practices at home and in the setting. A survey of all parents and staff in the setting was conducted regarding their beliefs and practices about early literacy and new technologies, supplemented by interviews with parents and staff. On a local level, the project made a positive impact on the setting’s planning for the more strategic use of new technologies. Wider distribution of the project findings to practitioners and policy makers are now planned.

WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES OR IMPACTS?

The review of documentation found that whilst the Early Years curriculum in England had begun to recognise literacy development as embedded in social practice, national and local policy-derived documentation continued to focus on cognitive approaches, and theorised guidance on supporting literacy learning with new technologies was notably absent.

In the nursery practice, there was a corresponding emphasis on the linear acquisition of traditional literacy skills, such as sharing stories, mark-making, phonics, rhyming etc, and staff supported children’s learning in joint shared attention episodes.

The nursery had diverse electronic resources, including computers, printers, tape recorders, digiblue cameras and
programmable toys. However, their use was only occasionally integrated into pedagogic planning or supported by practitioners, with the exception of provision for children with learning difficulties where computers were recognised as offering choice and control.

Most practitioners acknowledged the centrality of new technologies in the children’s future lives, but lacked confidence in their use, were uncertain about their pedagogic value and/or feared their potential harm to ‘childhood’. Some software and internet access to approved sites offered literacy-learning potential, but only those children who had developed computer skills at home accessed these, either alone or in collaborative participation frameworks with peers. These frameworks were characterised by motivated joint activity, where an ‘expert’ peer used talk and actions to direct less experienced peers, who usually responded with silent actions.

At home, young children experienced a range of everyday literacy practices with diverse media. Home ownership of mobile phones, TVs, satellite, computers and internet was widespread, although two families in the lowest income band (>£10,000 per annum) had no computer, with implications for social inclusion/equality. Whilst safeguarding against their over-use, most parents recognised the potential of new technologies for their children’s learning, but were less sure about how to support screen-based literacy activities. Some children were not allowed computer access at home, but did use mobile phones, TV/videos, and ‘smart’ toys which converged new and traditional technologies (e.g. talking books, interactive toys). We therefore found a ‘digital divide’ where some children in the nursery displayed strategic, meta-level (i.e. awareness of their learning) literacy knowledge with new technologies derived principally from participation in supported activity at home, whilst children with less experience only participated in low-level activities or did not use them at all.
Analysis of the children’s engagement with a range of media revealed that becoming ‘literate’ in today’s world involves mastery of diverse practices and technical skills, along with the ability to adapt, improvise, identify relevant features in static and dynamic texts and to navigate around them. It was clear that reading on-screen was profoundly different to reading print. It involved the use and interpretation of multiple modes (images, sounds, movement, layout, spoken and written language), which appeared in non-linear, hyperlinked formats with diverse possible pathways. We are developing a theorised framework for supporting literacy learning in diverse media through ‘collaborative multimodal dialogue’ (defined as the inter-subjective, multimodal meaning-making processes that occur through joint engagement in activity) to enable educators to help all children achieve their full potential as members of a society in which knowledge and communication in both traditional and new technologies are highly prized.

WHAT WAS THE INTERVENTION/TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS?

This study did not set out to intervene directly in teaching and learning processes, but to investigate a poorly
understood area of early learning with a view to informing practice and policy. The project did however have impact on a local level in terms of developing staff and parent awareness of the potential of new technologies for children’s early literacy development. In the early years setting, staff subsequently improved their strategic planning for the incorporation of diverse media in early education. In the children’s homes, parents showed increased confidence in their choices of new media resources and support of their children’s uses of new technologies.

Further practical outcomes for the early years sector and dissemination plans are currently being developed.

HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?

This small-scale project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It used an innovative methodology that combined ethnographic methods, informed by sociocultural theories of learning, with multimodal analysis to gain in-depth insights into the richness and diversity of nursery-aged children’s literacy learning with a range of media. Data collection methods included:

- A review of relevant national, regional and institutional documentation to situate participant understandings of early literacy within local and wider sociocultural contexts.
- A questionnaire distributed to all parents at one SureStart Children’s Centre nursery in the South of England. This explored home literacy practices, parental beliefs around literacy, ownership and uses of traditional and digital literacy resources (Total 41 responses: 54% response rate). A similar survey was given to all staff in the setting (Total 17 responses: 81% response rate).
- General observation of settings Preliminary observational visits were made to the children’s homes and literacy provision in the nursery was assessed using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Extension (ECERS-E).
- Video case studies of ten children (equal numbers of boys and girls from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds, with a spread of learning abilities and reported uses of printed and digital media). Video recordings were made of each child in Spring and Summer terms for up to 1 hour in the nursery and 1 hour at home. Observations were made of the children from a respectful distance without
interrupting or invading the natural flow of their play.  
(Total 30 hours video data)

- Semi-structured interviews with staff and parents were audio-recorded and transcribed. These explored themes emerging from the literacy review, questionnaire feedback and observational data. Unstructured interviews were noted in field notes. Child interviews constituted informal ‘chats’, sometimes using shared video viewings as a catalyst for discussion. (Total 12 hours interview data).

The resultant multi-media data set offered rich, complex and grounded evidence upon which we were able to build deep understandings of children’s early experiences of literacy in diverse media.

WHAT MIGHT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH BE FOR POLICY MAKERS/ PRACTITIONERS

To date the following implications for policy makers and practitioners have been identified:

- Professional development is needed for early years practitioners to increase their confidence and skills with new technologies, to integrate the strategic use of new media resources in a range of literacy learning activities and to enhance children’s literacy development in diverse media by supporting their learning effectively. This shared activity could include, for example, more shared enjoyment of new technologies as part of the literacy curriculum and greater use could be made of new media to document and share young children’s learning and to make stronger connections between children’s learning at home and in early education. The research also suggests that most parents would welcome and benefit from guidance on good practice in supporting their children’s use of new technologies, and exchanging views with early years educators.

- The Foundation Stage curriculum should be developed to recognise and value the role of new technologies as part of language and literacy learning, and to give more explicit guidance on supporting children’s critical and meta-level awareness of the purposes and uses of new technology and traditional literacy resources.
• Whilst some computer games offered the potential for valuable literacy learning experiences, particularly online sites such as CBeebies, many games were of low educational value. Parents and early education settings need more support in their choices of materials.

• Practitioners and parents would welcome and benefit from access to research evidence regarding the use of new technologies in early education, and from the opportunity to share experiences and resources. Local education advisors along with national coordination and online dissemination of research could be practicable options. Practitioners also need access to technical advisory support supplied on a local level.

• Ongoing work on this project includes continuing to unravel how ‘reading’ on-screen differs from reading traditional literacy texts, and developing a theorised framework for supporting literacy learning in diverse media through ‘collaborative multimodal dialogue’ to enable educators to help all children achieve their full potential as members of a society in which knowledge and communication in both traditional and new technologies are highly prized.
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Key Publications
