

Exploring enabling literacy environments: Young children's spatial and material encounters in early years classrooms

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Exploring enabling literacy environments: Young children's spatial and material encounters in early years classrooms

This article upholds that young children are cultural agents (Corsaro,2005) who exact agency through their meaning making activity. This expression takes place as they draw upon their developing communicative and cultural practices and utilise available space, artefacts and materials.

By observing the ways in which the highly organized space of an early years classroom is taken-up by children aged 4 and 5, we can explore the ways in which young children's desire to express cultural agency drives them to draw upon space and materials in order to make meaning and examine the ways in which space and resources mediate such experiences. This article draws on use of three methods of observation to provide a close examination: the researcher's narrative account of events, a pictorial representation of provision areas, and close multimodal analysis of children's activity. In this way, current emerging and expansive notions of literacy are applied in order to provide the practitioner with tools to examine literacy development in open-ended ways.

These observations, it is suggested, can provoke pressing discussion that support understandings of early literacy as a collaborative and collective act that is intricately connected to children's cultural experiences, their lives and identities and importantly, is always mediated by the early years classroom spaces. By giving recognition to these things we are in a better position of expanding current dominant notions of literacy development and questioning taken-for-granted early years practices around literacy pedagogy.

Observing children as cultural agents

The challenge that children may experience in negotiating the 'distance' between home and school literacy practices (Heath, 1983) is still of major concern and one that has become an increasingly complex task in English education settings over recent years. This task is currently exacerbated by a number of competing messages which set at odds the value of play-based learning and the observation and measurement of progress in accordance with pre-determined outcomes (Wood, 2014). Author (2013) for example, discusses tensions experienced when observing children 'beyond' goals defined in the Early Years statutory and non-statutory frameworks while Basford and Bath (2014) highlight how practitioners receive contradictory messages as they try to balance accountability processes associated in relation to assessment to pre-determined goals with the varied learning needs of young children. In England's statutory curriculum, for example, the 'Early Years Foundation Stage' (DFE, 2012, DFE, 2014) children's progress is currently measured against pre-defined, incremental goals in the area of literacy. These goals are predominantly related to the individual child's development of print-based literacies. What is more, the goals are closely tied to accountability processes for schools and therefore, these are high stakes. Thus, in areas of high curricular focus such as early literacy, tightly framed and classified pedagogical approaches are developed (Bernstein, 1971). These in turn create pedagogical structures that will be directly experienced by young children in educational settings. In this article, and in contrast to predetermined print literacy goals, I observe, explore and discuss

expanded views of literacy development. In addition I assert that children's cultural agency is integral to their literacy development, and use close observations of children's activity to challenge current dominant notions of literacy development. In turn, I complicate taken-for-granted practices in literacy pedagogy.

Observing children as cultural agents

In order to recognize the experiences that children bring to their encounters with early learning, it is first vital to acknowledge that children are far from passive recipients of school literacies, or that only one 'literacy' exists. New literacy studies (Street, 1995, 2003) acknowledge literacy as an ideological and social practice where multiple literacies exist and that these literacies are embedded and contested in power relationships. Taking a social phenomenological perspective of agency and structure may provide a useful lens to consider the ways in which young children are experiencing the power relationships that interplay in the early years classroom. Groups and individuals can be seen to be negotiating their agency in the 'dynamic contexts of social relations' (Kostouli, 2009: 101). Agency in turn creates structures; Garfinkel (1967) describes how social actors maintain structures through their agency as they enact these daily, producing social structures through symbolic interactions. Giddens (1984) proposes that social actors operate within structures in which they are positioned, and that these structures exist only fleetingly via their substantiation by social actors as they carry on their daily routines. The early years setting is such a dynamic context where children and practitioners, and children and children, negotiate agency through their day-to-day routines and practices.

This paper looks at children's agency as expressed through their literacy practices.

There are various theoretical positions on agency and in this paper I draw from

Corsaro (2005), who demonstrates how children innovatively and creatively participate in society by appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns through their own peer cultures. Here, children can be seen to be doing more than merely internalising the adult world, but instead acting upon it and changing it in some way, creating their own peer cultures. Uprichard (2010) describes tensions in research studies which view children as competent and legitimate social actors when their views are only considered when sharing their 'own life worlds and not the social world that they nonetheless inhabit' (Uprichard, 2010, p5). In this study, the social world of the classroom is seen as a complex and dynamic one as children and adults both operate within the structures of the early years setting. This social world is dynamically shaped by both children and adults. Key to the ensuing exploration in this paper then, is to view and acknowledge children as cultural agents, and to explore the role of this agency in young children's literacy learning. I therefore look at how this agency is expressed, comes into being, or is manifest, in the early years classroom. By observing the extent to which children are agentic producers of social systems in particular contexts, and the ways in which this agency is expressed, we can aim to explore what happens as children's literacy practices meet those of other children and schooled literacies. In turn this may provide insights into the ways in which young children *take hold* of literacy practices within early education contexts.

Enabling environments: Time and space to explore and expand communicative repertoires

There is currently a pressing need to closely re-examine practices in early years literacy pedagogy. Recent research from a sociocultural perspective has begun to

pay attention to embodied, spatial, material and multimodal dimensions of literacy practices. These offer an opportunity to reconceptualise and expand our understandings of literacy development. Giving time, space and material resources to children in order that they can take hold of literacy practices and broaden their repertoires for meaning making is of importance. Marsh (2005) illustrates how young children integrate media texts, artefacts and material objects into their communicative practices. Dyson (2001, 2003, 2004, 2009) focuses on an exploration of the cultural resources that children bring to school through their lived experiences, clearly demonstrating how some children rely on non-academic social worlds in order to negotiate their ways into schooled literacies. These non-academic worlds are often expressed through synesthetic activities, such as those that children draw upon during play: Kress (1997) describes how when meaning making, children in the early years are predominantly guided by synesthetic activities which draw upon all their senses and use visual, kinesthetic, three dimensional and gestural modes.

Children's communicative practices involve transmediation, as children take meaning from one communication system and recast it in the context and expression of a new system (Kress, 1997, 2003). This lens of interpretation of young children's meaning making activity is essential to this study as it provides a view of literacy learning that is inextricably tied to the child's identity: 'as the child engages with meaning making engagement with an aspect of the world, their resources for making meaning and therefore, acting in the world, are changed - they are augmented' (Kress, 2010: 175). Furthermore, learning and development, and literacy learning, are intimately connected to the types of meaning making tools available, and a child's increasing mastery of these tools (Kress, 2010). It would certainly appear that the desire to express cultural agency drives children to collaboratively use available resources

and space in order to create hybridized texts, and that this transmediation between sign systems may be supportive in the mastery of schooled literacies (Author, 2014). Educational space has been recognized as highly significant. Burnett (2014), suggests that teachers' and learners' experience of space, the activities they engage in, and the discourses that pattern those activities all help to create the quality of those spaces. Space here is seen as socially produced by the people that inhabit that space. Early years practitioners organize space in very distinct and particular ways to facilitate children's literacy learning. Wells Rowe (2008), for example, examined the way this space is produced at a pre-school writing table. With a focus on the experiences of a group of two year-old children in an American pre-school, Wells Rowe (2008) closely observed the interactions between the children and their teachers. Examining the embodied and spatial features of child-to-child and adult to child interaction, Wells Rowe's study identified the ways in which children's understandings are 'socially constructed in joint social activity' (Wells Rowe 2008, p388). This study foregrounded the importance of the organised learning spaces and the materials provided for children, and the significance of the interactions that take place around particular writing events.

The work of Wohlwend (2008, 2011) and Husbye et al (2012) has been significant in contributing to emerging understandings of literacy development, with particular reference to the ways in which *play* shapes children's learning and facilitates participation. Wohlwend (2008) describes the visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning and the ways in which these are particularly significant to children as they 'directly explore the material world through multimodal play' (Wohlwend, 2008, p128). According to Wohlwend, this play enables children to draw on social

practices, explore the material qualities of images and objects, and construct social spaces multimodally (ie through talk, gaze, gesture, sound). This play not only shapes players' immediate worlds, but it has an effect on children's friendships and participation in peer cultures Wohlwend (2015). Similarly, Husbye et al (2012) looked at the ways in which young children author stories in classrooms.

Emphasising the role of collaborative storying in media production, Husbye et al (2012, p82) noted how children's pretence was contingent on the maintenance of a single narrative, with 'collectively understood but fluid meanings' (Husbye, 2012, p84). The authors noted how children's collaborative imaginative play became intertwined with their production of texts.

A further turn in understanding literacy practices is described by Leander and Boldt (2012). The authors focus on non-representational emergence and assign significance to the 'sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity' (Leander and Boldt, 2012, p22). This work draws our attention to the significance of literacy 'in the ongoing present' (Leander and Boldt, 2012, p22). They consider the significance of 'affective intensities' and see texts as artefacts of literacy practices rather than end points.

Such work sees literacy in relation to embodied and affective experiences and a series of ongoing and emerging encounters with space and materials. Wells Rowe (2010) asserts the need to create a more complex and multifocused view of literacy learning which considers the 'positioned, local, ideological, material and spatial nature of children's participation of literacy events' (Wells-Rowe, 2010, p142).

Similarly, Burnett (2011) identified that there is a need to recognize the multiplicity of influences that shape educational spaces. In this study, I explore the ways in which children's moment-by moment-activity contributes to the creation of the early years

classroom space and is in turn *shaped* by those spaces. By doing this I then revisit some taken for granted approaches to literacy pedagogy and problematize these.

A methodology for re-examining a site of diverse literacy practices

The data presented in this paper draws from the initial stages of a year-long ethnographic study examining the literacy practices of young children aged 4-5 in during their first year in school. Data collection involved weekly visits during which children's activity was observed, filmed and discussed with both children and with practitioners. Data in this article are drawn from two extended observations at settings which include a Children's Centre, providing early education and care for children from birth to five, and a Foundation class of 4-5 year olds, in a school setting that provides education for children aged 3 to 11. Both settings are in the north of England, and the school setting provides education in an area of considerable social and economic disadvantage. Provision in both settings is exemplary of that recommended in England's statutory curriculum for children aged 0-5, the 'Early Years Foundation Stage' (Dfe, 2012, Dfes, 2014). Areas of the classroom often include large, open plan classroom spaces that are freely accessed by children for the most part of the day. These areas are set up by practitioners in particular ways, and with the intention of supporting a range of statutory learning goals. Practitioner-led and directed activities are also carried out with small groups and individuals. These tend to focus predominantly on language and print-literacy activities such as name writing, sentence writing, letter formation and the development of early reading strategies, such as decoding of text, identifying rhyme, and developing response to texts.

Examining young children's use of space and resources in classroom contexts

As this study focuses on how meaning is made in the social world or the classroom, the study draws from the ontological field of phenomenological sociology. When considering agency and structure, Giddens (1984) warned against a purely phenomenological approach as this would not be sufficient. This is because social actors operate within the structures in which they are positioned. Therefore, I provide a rich description and use a combination of approaches to analyse data in order to identify how organized space and provision of resources appears to shape and influence children's activity. My intention is to examine both how organized space and provision of resources appear to both *shape* and *be shaped* by children's activity. For this reason, observations focus on child activity when there is little or no direct adult supervision, but where an adult has organized the space and resources in the area. Hand-written field notes were gathered, areas of the classroom were photographed, and episodes of children's activity were filmed using a hand-held camera. Whilst some filming was unobtrusive, much of this process involved the researcher talking to children whilst simultaneously filming their activity. This is consistent with viewing children as subjects who are citizens with voice and power, and thus aims to faithfully reproduce their voices (Pascal and Bertram, 2009). Negotiated ongoing consent (Flewitt, 2006) was observed closely; where filming was influencing children in any negative way, such as the child seeming nervous, it was immediately discontinued. Parental and school consent were gained for all participants involved.

In the next section I draw upon two extended episodes of play, the first in the Children's Centre, and the second in the school setting. These episodes have been selected from the data as they raise some interesting perspectives of how space and materials are taken up by children and they provide insights into the ways in which young children assign meaning to spaces and materials through their acts of agency. This in turn can enable us to look again at taken for granted practices in the early years classroom.

Three layers of analysis are used for each episode of play presented in this paper. The first layer draws from direct observation of events taking place, and takes the form of a narrative account of what is taking place from the researcher's perspective. A further rationale for this approach is that it enables the researcher to identify where children draw on particular texts in their play, and the ways that they innovate with these, drawing upon their ongoing interests, preferences and experiences. A second layer of analysis examines children's movement and activity over time in relation to the layout of the space, including such details as positioning of furniture and resources. I have called my comments on this such movement and activity representations of space and movement'. The third layer involves micro-analysis of short episodes of activity using multimodal discourse analysis, modified from that used by Taylor (2014). Taking a lead from Taylor, I recognize that 'communicative practices are constituted of multiple modes and that semiotic resources are equally powerful' (Taylor, 2014, p6). I attempt not to privilege speech in my observations but am equally aware that when I speak to children, I ask them to recast their meanings into speech, and thus change them in some way. Carrying out a multimodal transcription draws attention acutely to those movements, actions, gestures that are part of young children's communicative repertoires. The focus of this particular

paper is on children's use of classroom space and materials, as I wish to consider children's meaning making and agency in relation to these things. Therefore, in my analysis I am careful to note children's action and movement, that is, the ways that they manipulate objects in the available space, and the ways that they move their bodies in space. I also include 'gaze', in this case where children look directly towards particular spaces and materials, as this often reveals the focus of children's attention, and can show the focus of their *intentional* acts. It is hoped that these three layers examined in relation to each other and presented in the next section, provide a reasonable representation of what was taking place in each episode as children made meaning. As we will see, applying current emerging and expansive notions of literacy using these tools and this kind of analysis can provide some valuable insights into the ways in which children are experiencing and shaping their environments moment-by-moment and provide us with an opportunity to look again at early literacy pedagogy.

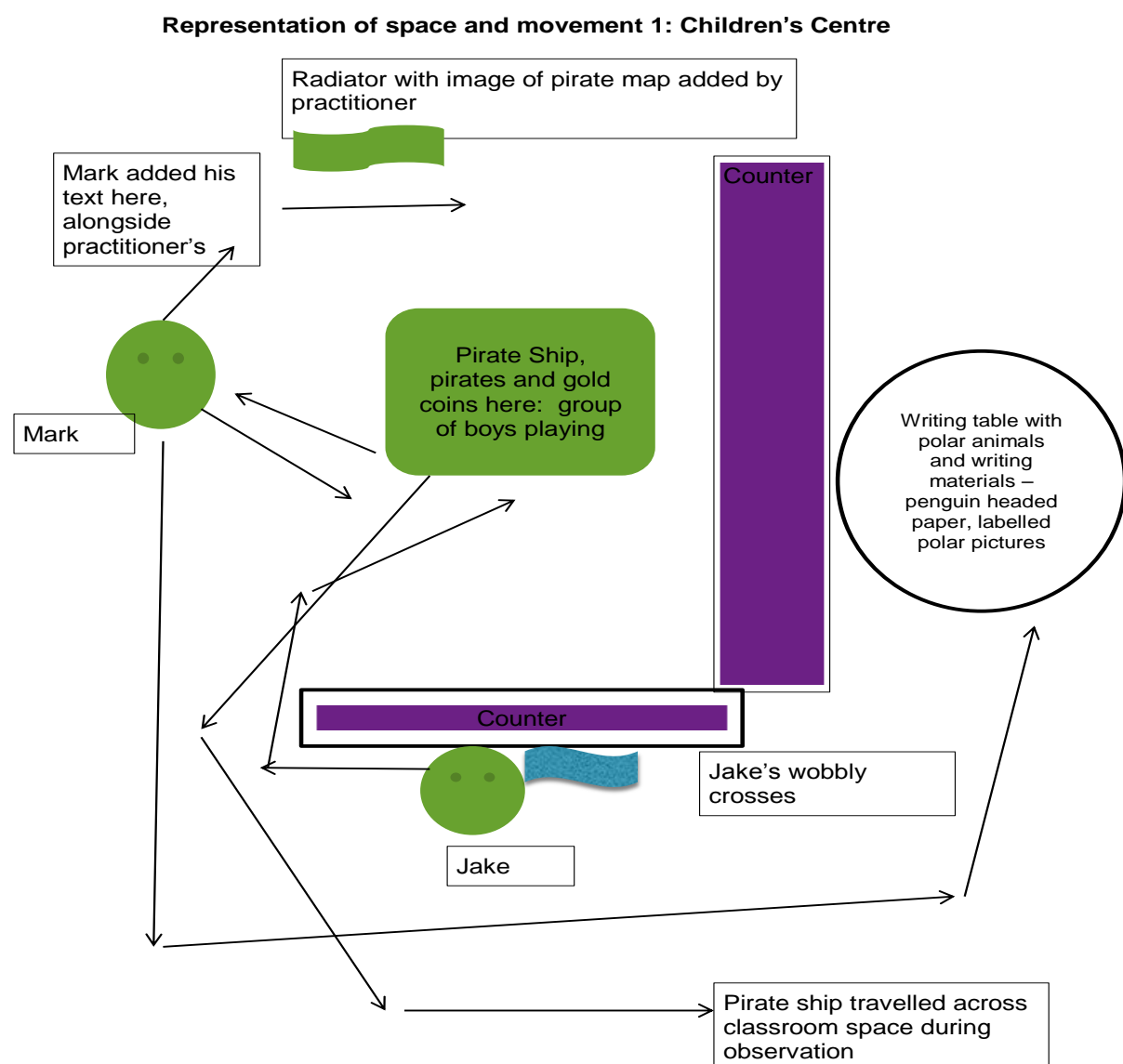
Episode 1: Pirates and penguins: a multiplicity of texts shifting across sites...

Mark and Jake

This first episode involves a group of boys playing with a model pirate boat and focuses attention on close analysis of two children who seemingly at times are on the periphery of the space where the play was taking place. We can see Jake in the centre of the photograph below (Figure 2. Pirate play) Mark is just visible, at the left-hand side of Jake. The representation of space and movement during the observation is mapped out below (See Figure 1).

In keeping with current recommended practice in early literacy in England, the practitioners had provided a sample treasure map (attached to a radiator), a pirate

ship and pirate figures, along with a selection of gold coins. To the right top corner there are sheets of paper with pirate pictures ready printed and clipboards in order to encourage early mark making. This area was clearly resourced to build on children's possible cultural interests in pirates, ships or perhaps adventure stories and to support children's play texts and mark-making. On first observation, before close analysis of the activity of Mark and Jake, the pirate ship appeared to be the 'centre' of the play.



(Insert Figure 2 Pirate Play about here)

I now focus on Mark and Jake in turn.

Mark's evolving and shifting narratives

Researcher narrative observation: *Mark is playing alongside the group of 'pirates' who are engaged in play with the pirate ship. He has taken a piece of paper with an image of three penguins, from the writing table to the right of the area, drawn on this, and then blu-tacked it to the radiator alongside the teacher's model treasure map. He has spoken to one child in the area, from the group of boys playing with the pirate ship, who has not turned his attention to Mark's activity. The child is interested in Mark's map. Mark tells him it is a map for the penguins to find the treasure, gesturing which way they could go and pointing to the curvy line on his picture. Mark then begins adding to the picture with a pencil, telling the story of the penguins travelling around (quite frantically) trying to find the treasure. (See Figure 2: Mark's shifting narrative) This series of events for the penguins is told rapidly, with excitement, the pathway of the lost penguins being made by Mark with his pencil as they travel in his emerging narrative.*

(Insert Figure 3- Mark's Shifting Narrative about here)

After observing Mark for some time, I decided to talk to him about his mark-making and film his response. When looking at this more closely, I began to see how the construction of meaning was emerging moment by moment, as Mark was still, at this point, playing with the possibilities of the shifting scenario he had created. As I was talking to Mark, his gestures and facial expression, from the text, to me, and back, gave me the feeling that I was pressing him somehow, to fix the text in some way, by

talking about it. I did the very teacherly thing of drawing him to find a resolution to the penguins' plight. And Mark dutifully provided one..... 'They'll just grab the treasure and get the treasure off them!' (Multimodal transcript 1, 00:29) A fixed text, which served as a map, has now become a narrative text which relays a sequence of connected events. Mark has merged the images provided of the penguins on the mark making table, with the treasure map which the teacher had attached to the radiator, and created a narrative around penguins and lost treasure. Movement across the play space is important to him, as is the movement of the pencil in his emerging repertoires for meaning making. In Figure 2 and Multimodal transcript 1, 00:11. We can see how Mark frames the space his text 'holds' on the radiator, placing his hand and arm above it. He is careful not to cover it up. For Mark, print texts are as seemingly unfixed and fluid as his play texts.

(Insert Table 1: Multimodal transcription 1– Mark about here)

Jake's Treasure Takeover

Researcher narrative observation: *A little while later, Jake is the focus of my attention. Jake like Mark, is on the periphery of the group of boys playing with the pirate ship. Jake is leaning on the counter facing the group of boys. I start filming. On the counter close to him is one gold coin, and a piece of paper, and his right hand is placed over a model cannon. He is facing the pirate crew, head resting on his left hand, watching their activity. Under his left hand is a piece of paper. He repositions the cannon numerous times, 'BOOM!' He makes imaginary shots at the pirate ship. His eyes go to the cannon, to the boys and back again. He repositions the cannon and fires again....*

At this point, Jake has become aware of being filmed and so I decide to talk to him.

What have you got there? I ask.

'It's my treasure map' replies Jake. 'There's two treasures'. Jake turns the paper over carefully, as though he has been hiding the location of the treasure, and there are two large and wobbly crosses (Figure 5, Wobbly Crosses) on the paper.

'Where is the treasure? Have you got to go somewhere to find it?' Jake holds up the gold coin. 'Ah, you have already found it!' I say.

'I need to find one more'. Jake holds up one finger. He crawls across the floor, hovers near the pirate ship for a moment. When the other boys are not paying attention to him, he reaches into the pirate ship, takes a coin, then quickly returns to the counter, holding up two coins.

'I need one more' – Jake crawls back towards the pirate ship, waits until the boys are not looking at him, then reaches into the pirate ship and takes a coin. He returns with a flourish, as he 'cartwheels' back to the counter.

(Insert Figure 4 Jake's Treasure Takeover about here)

(Insert Figure 5 Wobbly Crosses about here)

In this short episode, Jake brought his cultural experiences into play, merging these with available space and resources. He knew about the activities of pirates, about the sneaking and stealing activities that they might typically play out in popular narratives. This activity also required some level of secrecy and plotting – Jake positioned himself behind the counter, and he avoided eye-contact with the children playing with the pirate ship (See Multimodal Transcript 2, 1:42).¹ looking away when

they saw him approaching so as not to reveal his plan. His cartwheel, which spanned the distance between the pirate ship and the counter, served as a personal celebration of his successful pirate mission!

(Insert Table 2: Multimodal Transcription 2, Jake about here)

Mark and Jake present as confident cultural agents in these episodes when they are observed carefully and individually. They draw upon their growing repertoires for meaning making in order to participate in the classroom activity, such as talk and gesture, and assign meaning to the space and materials around them. When we zoom back out to look at site of the play, what we can see is a complex series of interwoven interactions as the children take up a multiplicity of modes, which are in turn infused with and by their own and others' actions. These episodes show just a few short examples of the type of activity taking place, but they clearly indicate how space is taken up by children, and demonstrate that this meaning making is never solitary; the children were sometimes apart in the space, and sometimes together – but they constantly drew upon the meanings being played out by others, and upon the material and spatial possibilities of the classroom area in which they were playing, in order to play out their interests and concerns.

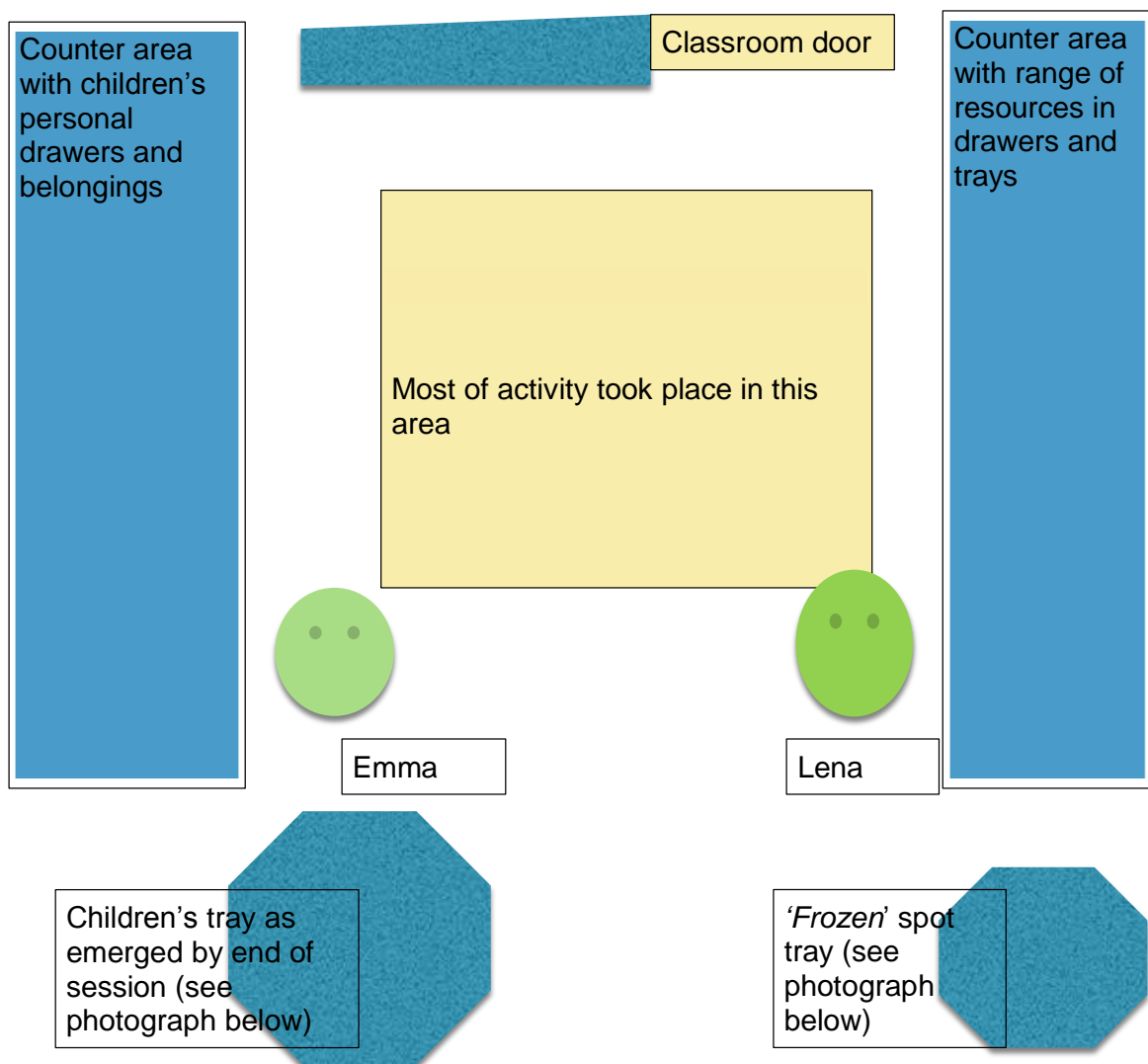
Episode 2: Exploring meanings and materials in a classroom space: Emma and Lena

This second series of observations took place in the school setting, and involves a group of girls exploring meanings through engaging with a range of materials in the classroom. The teacher had provided a space for play relating to the Disney film

'Frozen', aiming to encourage children to draw upon their cultural and media interests. The resources are placed in a tray, commonly referred to as a spot tray, thus a space in which to play is defined (See figure 7: *Frozen* spot tray)

In this instance, I present the Representation of Space and Movement diagram first in order to draw attention to how space is defined in the classroom setting. This episode of play took place over the course of a morning, so I then include narrative observations, followed by a close multimodal analysis of Lena's activity.

Representation of space and movement – School setting



(Insert Figure 7 : Frozen spot tray about here)

Researcher's narrative observation: *Today the practitioner has provided the children with a tray of resources, linked with the Disney film 'Frozen'. There are cut-out character pictures taped to wooden blocks. I am interested to see what the children make of this. Lena is the first to come to this area. She looks at the characters, stands them up, side-by-side and then tells me who they are. Another child comes over to see ...*

Some time later now, Lena has moved from the area, then back again a couple of times. She now moves to the counter of resources, and begins selecting large pieces of green tissue paper, plastic pots and scissors/ glue etc. I have noticed Lena's activity before, and she does seem to enjoy organizing spaces and defining them in her play.

After some time, this play is noticed by other children, who are starting to gather resources from the shelf, and they chat and talk about what they are making. Soon the whole floor area is covered by pieces of paper, large and small, from the counter on the right, to the counter on the left. I ask Lena what she is making... and film her response.

(Insert Figure 8 Lena and the Seaweeds sea about here)

(Insert Table 3 Multimodal Transcription – Lena about here)

Lena calls her arrangement of resources the 'seaweeds sea'. Other children around her begin to contribute by adding bits of paper to the arrangements on the floor.

Lena is clearly drawing on her past experiences and assigning the available space with meaning and artifacts significant to her own experiences and interests.

Researcher's narrative observation: *I leave the area for some time, then return to find that the teacher has provided the children with a second empty spot tray, and asked them to put their materials into the tray. The group of five or six children that have gathered in the area are now tipping their resources into the tray, then picking up other bits and pieces and 'dropping' them into the tray. (See figure 9 – Filling the spot tray) Emma takes a pencil, and begins to write her name in the tray, in a space on the tray that is surrounded by a series of stuck-on shiny stars (see figures 10-11) She then makes random letter shapes around her name. As she finishes, she points the pencil to the letter shapes and reads: 'Emma: This is for everyone's to play with'.*

(Insert Figure 9 Filling the spot tray – about here)

(Insert Figure 10 Emma writing in the spot tray – about here)

(Insert Figure 11 The Children's spot tray – about here)

(Insert Figure 12 Emma's writing – about here)

The above episodes, this time in a school setting, again demonstrate the fluid and shared meaning making that is taking place as children assign meanings to the spaces they move within and the materials they have to hand. The collaborative and shared nature of this endeavor is palpable. What are probably less visible in this second analysis than in the observations of Mark and Jake, are the ways in which the provided resources and areas influence the meanings that are made. Mark and Jake's activity focused on a particular type of adventure narrative, whereas Emma and Lena's activity seemed much more based in producing spaces and artefacts that were less inclined towards elaborate narrative plots. The introduction of the tray by

the practitioner in this episode makes it an intriguing one in itself. As the many artefacts that children were making were brought into one space, they seemed to change in some way. The tray became a receptacle for their play texts, and seemingly 'fixed' them. Emma wrote her name on these, as she might write her name on 'pieces of work' from the more practitioner-led activities. The fluid play became a classroom resource 'for everyone to play with'.

Discussion: Complicating the discourse of early literacy and taken for granted approaches.

By observing activity in the ways identified in the previous section, we can begin to think more closely about the ways in which young children's play is mediated in early years settings and question taken-for-granted pedagogical practices. We can also see beyond the current dominant notions of literacy development as the acquisition of a set of incremental and discrete skills. In the examples above, I deliberately draw upon episodes where children are to a large extent unsupervised by an adult, or where their activity receives very little intervention from adults beyond the organization of space and provision of resources. This is not to forget however, that this organization and choice of resources and classroom routines and practices, will all influence the ways in which these resources are taken up. In the analysed examples provided, children present as very skilled social actors who fluidly collaborate and integrate space, materials, artefacts and texts into their play. They appropriate their interests and peer concerns into the classroom space, consequently shaping the world they inhabit. They explore a multiplicity of texts across classroom areas, and move in and out of sequences of play in flexible spaces of the classroom, merging and hybridizing texts, interests and experiences as they

do so. They know that these meanings can be negotiated and are open to question and change, that they are fluid.

Space and materials in classrooms are clearly claimed and re-claimed as they are made meaningful or assigned meaning by both teachers and children as they go about their day-to-day activities. This claiming takes place through a complex interweaving of relationships between children as they engage in play. Practitioners play an immensely powerful part in this organization of space and materials which is often done in very particular ways. These ways relate closely to practitioners' conceptualisations of what literacy is and what it is for. This enacted pedagogy can both constrain and enable children's opportunity to express meaning, and thus constrain or facilitate their opportunity to explore and assert their cultural agency. Teachers express their pedagogical goals partly by the ways in which they organize and resource classroom space. Children in turn move around in those spaces and collaboratively assign them with a multiplicity of shifting meanings. Organisation of spaces in the episodes described here are more or less open to negotiation. Some uses of space are 'suggested': for example, the penguin image on the paper provided by the adult, the pot of pens on the writing table, the pirate ship and gold coins, and the tray of resources with a link to popular culture were no doubt successfully positioned and organized in a way to capture children's curiosity, gain their interest and prompt them to talk, play, mark make, and so on. What *is* taken up by the children is a point of interest. Some of these *suggested* uses of space and materials, clearly linked to pedagogical goals, are taken up by children. But more often, when examined closely, the meaning making that emerges through the use of space and materials often looks quite different. It is this *unexpected* or *novel* activity and the tracing of particular practices that emerge during this activity, that provide

the lens to understanding children's expanding repertoires for meaning making. For example, in the 'Frozen' episode, the reference to popular culture was largely ignored, and instead the children began creating artefacts with similar types of resources, selecting similar colours to those in the tray, such as the fish in Lena's 'seaweed sea'. This as we saw, was scattered across the area and involved individuals, pairs and groups, whose activity intersected, separated, and regrouped across different parts of the area of activity. The introduction of a tray, by the teacher, seemed to shift the focus of this play. By defining a 'space' or 'container' (which was probably just for practicality and safety) the activity changed. Resources were tipped and dropped into the tray. Emma wrote her name on this and re-defined it: 'This is for everyone to play with'. It became something more fixed, a classroom resource perhaps. In the case of the pirate theme and resources, this could suggest prompting children to engage with a very specific kind of narrative play which, in this instance, was taken up. The interweaving of meaning then, from children's experience and interests and their repertoires for meaning making, interplays with and is mediated by the space and resources provided.

The two episodes presented above involve children who had relatively free access to the provided resources and space in the classroom. Notions of literacy development as conceptualized in current policy bear little resemblance to what can be seen when we look more expansively and closely at young children's practices. This however is a complex problem when we look at how children are currently positioned in society and in education: Drawing on the work of James (1998, p209) Uprichard explains how childhood presents a 'structural category' in itself. In addition, children's literacy development is assessed in relation to how far it resembles adult written forms

(Author, 2014). In terms of literacy development then, children can be seen to be acting in a social world that is at any one time guided by adult conceptualisations of childhood, of curricular goals based on adult writing forms, and within classroom spaces that are highly regulated by adults. It is vital therefore that as adults we examine what children *do* in order that we can re-examine and expand how literacy development is conceptualized and understood. Current pedagogical practices associated with early literacy are predominantly focused on print literacies as outcomes for early literacy in England's Early Years Foundation Stage, prioritises children's progress against pre-determined outcomes, individually assessed and reported, solely with reference to a child's increasing mastery of print literacies. This may limit any recognition of the diversity of literacy practices that children often bring to their early education experiences and give little recognition of the role of cultural agency in literacy development. The focus on outcome-based assessment can distract practitioners from more nuanced and broader conceptualisation of literacy development, and in turn impact on their enacted pedagogy.

Burnett and Bailey (2014) remind us that examining practice differently can disrupt our taken for granted understandings. If we are to expand current notions of literacy development, not only do we need to look again at what children *do* with literacy, but we need to look closely at those practices associated with early literacy pedagogy. Observation of young children's learning and development is indeed fundamental to early years practice. But while much of this observation takes place in the complex cultural contexts of early years settings as children engage in collaborative activity, observations are often of individual children, and interpreted in terms of young children's individual competencies as defined by statutory curricula. If practitioners

are to go beyond these definitions of learning, then they need to see young children's meaning making as shared and fluid. Play and literacy can never be fully focused on an individual. The observations included in this paper show individual children's responses and meaning making, but these are intricately connected with a web of meanings, materials and interactions that weave a multiplicity of practices across home and school and across the setting between children. In England, the term 'child-initiated' activity is used. This term generally indicates a child's activity when they are not directed by an adult, and when they can select from the spaces and materials provided by the setting, moving from one space to another by their own choice. This kind of activity is key to the development of the Characteristics of Effective Learning (DF

E, 2012, p5). When practitioners set up areas or spaces for learning, very often these are organised with specific learning outcomes in mind, which will influence the type and nature of resources provided, and the arrangement of the furniture and so on. These ways of organising spaces impact on young children's play, and the notion of undirected play becomes problematic. Furthermore, as noted by Wood (2014) children's relationships can enable and constrain individual and group agency as children play. When considering the ways that the children in described above accessed the resources and spaces in the setting, these divisions of space seem artificial, particularly when children are moving from one space to the other, and back again, quite fluidly, this movement being integral to the process of meaning making. Jake and Mark appeared at times to be on the periphery of the play taking place – the pirate ship and the group of boys, forming the centre. But following closer analysis that takes into consideration children's movement within the available space, there is no 'central anchor' to the play. When considering the experiences

children brought to that play, moment-by-moment, divisions of space, location and time even become much more blurred, but essentially, when observed closely, they emerge as all the more significant 'ingredients' in a child's developing repertoire for meaning making . If we are to see children's cultural agency as significant to literacy development, and if we are to develop pedagogical practices to support all children, then we need to move rapidly away from narrow definitions of literacy development. We need to look again much more closely at what children do in order to develop broader conceptualisations of what early literacy looks like.

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Table 1 Multimodal Analysis Mark

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Table 3 Multimodal Analysis Lena

Diagrams:

Representation of Space 1

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