

Spaces, places, bodies and things: sociomaterial perspectives on young children's literacy practices.

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Chapter 20

Spaces, Places, Bodies and Things: Sociomaterial Perspectives on Young Children's Literacy Practices

Cathy Burnett and Karen Daniels

Introduction

This chapter reflects the growing interest in using theories of space, materiality, and embodiment to challenge simplified conceptualisations of literacy. It explores different perspectives that have been used to consider the varied ways in which children, devices, texts, and sites assemble to construct one another. The chapter argues that it is helpful to consider a range of perspectives that conceptualise the inter-relatedness of social and material dimensions of literacies in different ways. Considering these relationships provides multiple perspectives on agency, and on how children are variously empowered (or not) by the things and people around them. Episodes from a year-long ethnographic study of one Reception class (for 4–5 year olds) (Daniels, 2018) are presented as a vignette to illustrate and explore these different perspectives which, we argue, provide a set of resources that educators can use to 'turn around' (Comber and Kamler, 2005), to look differently at children's literacies and generate new insights into how best to support young children. The chapter concludes with tasks designed to help readers use these perspectives to reflect on children's literacies in classrooms and beyond.

Keywords

literacies
sociomaterial
space
materiality
agency
affect

In classrooms, things (devices, tools, toys, surfaces, and so on) have always made their presence felt: slippery pools of paint, the greasy dust of ancient wax crayons in a drawer, the stumpiness of a pencil sharpened down to its nub, for example. More recently, digital devices have ushered in other feelings, textures, and smells: the beeping of a laptop when its battery

has nearly lost all its juice; the rush for an iPad on which a child took impromptu photos of their friend yesterday and which, if they're lucky, will still be there to revisit (Burnett, 2017); the tedious wait for a program to load; or the burn of frustration when an unsaved project is lost. When observing young children creating or interacting with and around texts, whether this is on or off-screen, and whether texts are storybooks, television shows or video games, it is clear that meaning-making has a material dimension. It involves handling stuff (maybe a book, a sheet of paper, a smartphone or yoghurt pot); moving or being still (huddled round a computer, or walking towards someone or something for example); and physical interactions with others.

Budach, Kell and Patrick (2015) identify three ways that objects have been thought about in relation to literacy. First, objects – such as books, documents and emails – enable meanings to move between locations: ‘objects stabilise meanings in context and carry meanings across time, space and scale’ (Budach et al., 2015, p. 392). Second, while objects may go unnoticed, they help structure our interactions in certain ways, as we slouch on a sofa chatting to a friend, for example, or stand at a desk waiting to check in for a plane journey. Third, objects help shape communicative practices: the ubiquitous mobile phone, for example, enables an ongoing ‘keeping in touch’ that would previously have been impossible. Studies of young children’s literacies have highlighted how objects – and the texts and text-making opportunities they mediate – get taken up in certain ways in particular locations as they mingle with places, bodies, and other things. Wohlwend (2014) for example described how children in one classroom drew on and re-worked characters and events from the *Disney Princess* franchise as they played. Similarly, and offering a personal perspective on such transcontextualisation, Mackey (2011) reflected on childhood memories of playing out events from popular 1950s cowboy shows outside her family home in St Johns, Newfoundland. For her, there was a disconnection between the worlds depicted in these stories and the world she knew. Yet the stories came alive in new ways when played out physically on the ground and in the cold climate of St Johns. Others have explored the affective (or felt) dimension of children’s encounters with artefacts. Pahl (2014) for example described children’s text-making using textiles as a sensory experience and reflected on how non-linguistic communicative practices are enmeshed in family life.

In this chapter, we explore why thinking about this material dimension of early literacy is important. We argue that attending to relationships between people and things can illuminate how children make meanings, what matters to them, what is enabling and what gets in the way. In doing so, we briefly summarise a number of ways in which literacy researchers have thought about relationships between literacy, space, bodies, and things, drawing on different theoretical perspectives that together might loosely be called sociomaterial (a term used to refer to studies that foreground relationships between the social and the material). It is worth emphasising here that the perspectives explored in this chapter are not the only ways in which researchers have thought about the sociomaterial, and also that the boundaries between perspectives are rather fuzzy (Fenwick and Landri, 2012). However, we distinguish between them in order to highlight different emphases in thinking about

relationships between spaces, places, bodies, and things, which in turn generate different insights for practitioners. In order to illustrate these subtle shifts in emphasis, we put each perspective to work in considering some classroom vignettes that occurred in one early years setting (originally cited in Daniels, 2015). We begin by describing these, partly for convenience's sake (as we refer to them in the sections that follow), but also to invite you – before you read our commentaries from different perspectives – to reflect on the questions they raise for you in thinking about early literacy, and to consider how *things* seemed significant to what happened. The vignettes are taken from a classroom study, and consequently much of our commentary focuses on classroom literacies, but the perspectives explored could equally be applied to literacies outside educational settings.

Strips: a series of vignettes from the classroom

Karen observed these moments one morning during her year-long ethnographic study of a Reception class of 26 four-to-five-year-olds in a primary school in northern England during which she examined children's emerging literacy practices throughout their first year of compulsory schooling (Daniels, 2018). Data collection involved field notes which were used as the basis for narrative accounts of what was taking place in the classroom. Specific episodes of self-initiated activity were filmed using a small hand-held camera in order to facilitate closer examination of the ways in which children's practices, as these emerged, both shaped and were shaped by the materials in the classroom, including time, space, and the children themselves.

The school supports children from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, including those of Portuguese, Zimbabwean, Pakistani and White British heritage. Provision was in line with that recommended in England's statutory curriculum for children aged 0–5, the 'Early Years Foundation Stage' (DFE, 2014). The classroom was arranged as a series of learning areas that included large, open-plan spaces that could be freely accessed by children for most of each day. Practitioners organised these areas in particular ways with the intention of supporting a range of statutory learning goals (working towards what is articulated in the Early Years Foundation State as 'statutory expectations')¹. Practitioner-led and directed activities were also carried out with small groups and individuals. These tended to focus predominantly on language and print-literacy activities such as name writing, sentence writing, letter formation, and early reading strategies (e.g., phonic decoding, identifying rhyme, and developing responses to texts). Through her study, Karen explored how children's activity transformed the material, spatial, and discursive practices of the setting. She

¹ The term 'statutory learning goals' is used in this chapter to refer to those learning goals that were driven by statutory expectations as specified in 'Early Years Foundation Stage' (DFE, 2014).

conducted fine-grained analysis of what children did, considering speech, gaze, action, and gesture, and mapping their movement around the classroom. In Vignette 1 we use images, field-notes, and video transcripts from Karen's fieldwork to introduce the series of episodes that we focus on in this chapter.

Vignette 1: Paper strips

Today the teacher has modelled sentence writing about The Three Little Pigs. The writing table is set up with small bricks and puppets for retelling the story, and there are also booklets with images from the story, to invite writing. I stand close by the writing table for some time and the teaching assistant invites a few children to come and write. I am a little surprised that the children are not that interested in the writing table resources. I move to observe in a different part of the classroom.

When I return, ten minutes later, I notice the children's intense interest in strips of card (see Figure 20.1 to get a sense of the size of the strips). I am intrigued. These are on the bookshelf near the writing table, neatly stacked. Joshua and Carl have taken these to the computer table and are copying the teacher's modelled sentence from the whiteboard onto the strips. I begin to take photographs and film the children's activity.

At this point, Louise, standing at the workshop bench, has cut two of the strips into small squares. She has written 'r' onto one of the strips and I stand nearby filming. She makes a pile of letters, writing on each one in turn, then places these in the pot to her right. Meanwhile, Kehinde has taken a paper strip and written letters onto this. She places tissue paper into the bottom of a yoghurt carton, seemingly creating a nest, and then places the paper strip into the top (see Figure 20.2). Lucy has spent time attaching carton lids to a large container. She shows me how you can lift the lids to reveal the letters below. She is excited to share her artefact (Figure 20.3) as is Grace (Figure 20.4). Grace shows her carton to other children, and comes over to show me. Carl and Joshua have written numerals, then letters onto the strips, copying the teacher's sentence from the whiteboard (Figure 20.5). Joshua takes this over and puts it on the writing table. He hovers for a while, looking to the teaching assistant, to the paper strips and then back again. Unnoticed by the teaching assistant who is helping a child to spell words, he then picks up the strips and puts them into his personal drawer.

Figure 20.1 Louise and the paper strips<graphic>2001_05147</graphic>

Figure 20.2 Kehinde's pot of letters<graphic>2002_05147</graphic>

Figure 20.3 Lucy lifts the flap letters<graphic>2003_05147</graphic>

Figure 20.4 Grace's carton<graphic>2004_05147</graphic>

Figure 20.5 Carl and Joshua's sentences on strips<graphic>2005_05147</graphic>

I quickly became fascinated by the children's interest in the paper strips and the way in which the practices of cutting and joining, which I had seen them enjoying many times, were being merged with the school literacy practice of writing letters. I commented on this to the teaching assistant, asking if the strips had been purposefully put there because the children liked them. She told me they were left over from Christmas, when the children had been using them to make paper chains, but that they were just the right size for practising letter formation. I was intrigued by the traces of different practices that seemed to be emerging through children's activity, and the way that these were shared by the group who quickly took up ideas and explored their potential.

We can see how the paper strips became different things as children re-purposed them. Originating as Christmas decorations, the teaching assistant saw their potential for helping shape the size and directionality of children's handwriting. Some children took up the strips as she intended but the strips (and the children) moved across the classroom as other uses emerged and these uses interlaced and interfaced with other interactions – with things and with each other.

Four perspectives on the materiality of young children's literacy practices

The episodes reported in Vignette 1 prompt interesting questions about how children were making sense of their surroundings, about the possibilities generated by different materials, and about how their actions related to other experiences and preferences. The next four sections describe studies that have approached such questions from slightly different starting points and use each perspective to reflect further on the 'strips' example. We have space here for only very brief introductions to each perspective, but we hope that these 'tasters' will spur the reader to investigate these studies – and underpinning theories – in more depth.

Schooling literate bodies

One way of examining material dimensions of children's literacies is to investigate how things – objects, furniture, and so on – mediate ways of being and behaving. Dixon (2011), for example, explored how children are 'schooled' in literacy classrooms and the kinds of 'literate human subjects' produced through literacy pedagogy. She drew on Foucault's (1977) ideas about discipline and power, seeing power not as owned by individuals or groups but circulating through what people do as they relate to the people and things around them. Things, therefore, help to uphold certain ways of being in, or knowing, the world. Dixon used this perspective to explore how schooling produced certain ways of being literate in five classrooms in post-Apartheid South Africa (for 4–5, 5–6, 7–8 and 8–9 year-olds). She identified four key sites within these classrooms: the carpet area, desk space, teachers' desk,

and reading corner, and explored how different embodied practices were legitimised or deemed transgressive within those sites. Children's bodies were positioned and classified in particular ways as they were sorted into classrooms and allocated to tables. They were permitted to use resources in some ways and not others, and assimilated schooled ways of placing, handling, and storing books, paper, pencils, worksheets, and so on. They were inducted into expectations for when to sit or stand, the direction of their gaze, the pitch and volume of their voices, and when and where to move or – increasingly as they grew older – stay still. Children's physical interactions with each other and the stuff of the classrooms were therefore often highly regulated in these settings, and this regulation produced certain ways of 'doing' literacy at school. While children did not always conform, literacy became a predominantly individualised activity that usually involved 'correct' responses. Ultimately, Dixon argued (2011), 'Space and time work to manage, regulate, and produce particular kinds of subjects because they are embedded in knowledge/power constructions' (p. 168).

The early years setting in which the 'strips' episodes of Vignette 1 occurred was far less regulated than Dixon's classrooms. Adults did not stop children from moving freely around the classroom and children could take objects with them as they travelled around the space. However, as the year progressed, unpredictable uses of classroom materials became less frequent and children's ways of doing literacy were increasingly aligned with school literacy practices. Even at the beginning of the year – when the 'strips' episodes occurred – objects contributed to the 'disciplining' of children's literacies. The writing table, for example, invited 'writing' that involved sitting and using tools and surfaces in certain embodied ways, and writing about certain sorts of things – in this case, a traditional tale, *The Three Little Pigs*. Indeed the strips themselves were initially repurposed to support work towards statutory goals. School policy was for children to learn cursive script, a policy informed by a perceived 'downward pressure' to meet statutory goals regarding handwriting higher up the school. The teaching assistant – seeing the potential to work towards these goals – noticed that the strips were just the 'right' size for practising letter formation and re-appropriated them as writing resources. Joshua and Carl took up this activity, copying the teachers' sentence. 'Good' writing here involved stillness, correctness, neatness, and reproduction. Perhaps Joshua placed his strip in his drawer because he sensed that, in class, his copied writing was something valued and therefore worth keeping, even if the teaching assistant did not comment when he showed it to her. Or perhaps he simply enjoyed the physical act of posting the strips, a sensory engagement we will return to later.

Cultural agency and the re-claiming of things

While Dixon explored how children were inducted into certain kinds of relationships with the material environment, others have highlighted how children improvise with the things available to them. In some ways such studies could be seen as privileging human agency, and might not be seen as fitting with the loose grouping associated with the *sociomaterial*. However we include examples of such studies here as they help point to other ways in which a focus on material dimensions of children's literacies may be useful to early childhood educators. Dyson (2003) described the cultural resources that children bring to school,

demonstrating how children rely on their social worlds in order to negotiate their ways into schooled literacies. Influenced by Dyson's work, Karen has explored how children work as cultural agents (Corsaro, 2005) drawing on cultural resources to transform available space, artefacts, and materials, and in turn shape the cultural practices of the classroom. In an analysis of collaborative play in an early years setting in England, for example, she described the play of a group of 4–5 year-old boys who shared an enthusiasm for space stories, as evidenced by the small alien figures they regularly 'smuggled' in from home (Daniels, 2014). The boys built a space-ship from old vacuum cleaner parts and a computer keyboard, role-played a rocket take-off, and encountered an alien which they chased. As they played, they took up available objects, recreating narratives that they knew from outside school. They produced a range of hybridised texts: a space map, paintings and so on, some of which were branded with pictures of the alien figures. Karen explored how this episode of self-initiated dramatic play was fuelled by children's desire to engage with peers and share ideas. In turn the process of playing and creating worked to uphold the boys' friendship. Objects and spaces provided them with semiotic and material resources which they took up in ways that allowed them to both participate in the classroom culture and help shape it, playing with others to establish what mattered there and the kinds of things that were possible.

Focusing on how children take up objects – whether in expected or unexpected ways – can provide insights into their interests and concerns and their growing repertoires for meaning-making. In the strips example of Vignette 1 we see how, instead of trying the *Three Little Pigs* writing activity, the children found ways of using the paper strips: collecting them in containers; making lift-the-flap toys; or sequestering them away. These activities were scattered across the classroom, involving individuals, pairs, and groups whose activity intersected, separated, and regrouped as they created, displayed, hid, or shared a range of artefacts. They shaped and assigned meanings to the strips, driven apparently by their enjoyment and growing confidence in using classroom tools such as scissors, glue, and tape to cut, re-shape, and join – but also by their interests, prior experience, and relationships with peers. How far, for example, did Lucy's artefact connect with an enthusiasm for lift-the-flap toys at home? How did the children's activities sit within existing and nascent friendships?

Thinking about children's use of objects in terms of cultural agency highlights how space and materials are claimed and re-claimed as they are assigned meaning by children. Children may appropriate their interests and peer concerns within classroom spaces, arguably shaping these spaces as they do so. They merge and hybridise texts, interests, and experiences, knowing that these meanings can be negotiated and are open to question and change. Such opportunities for improvisation, Daniels argues, are important; it is by improvising with the stuff around them – conventional literacy resources but other things too – that children expand their repertoires for acting and participating in the world.

Assembling literacies

While the previous section explored *children's* agency in taking up the things around them, shaping spaces, and expanding repertoires for meaning-making as they did so, this section

approaches agency as something that emerges in the *relationships between people and things*, and draws on some ideas associated with *actor–network theory* (sometimes referred to as ANT). Actor–network theory is hard to define as it has been developed and built upon by different theorists and researchers in diverse ways (for example, Latour, 2005; Law & Hassard, 1999; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). However, it has been very influential in encouraging researchers to focus on the sociomaterial, rather than just the social or sociocultural. At a basic level, it helps us think about the relationships between people, places, processes, and things that are significant in any event. It disrupts the idea of context as a fixed ‘static container’ (Burgess, 2010, p.19) and highlights how different meanings and purposes move across locations, and what happens as they do so. As Dezuanni (2015) explored, agency from this perspective, does not ‘belong’ to people, but is generated through interactions between people and things (and all the other ‘things’ being mediated by those people and things). Humans and things act on each other. Objects, therefore, are ‘mediators’ that influence what people do rather than ‘intermediaries’ that simply enable it (Latour, 2005; Gourlay, 2015). If we apply these ideas to early literacy, then it helps us see children’s activities or interactions with texts as existing within *actor–networks* or *assemblages* of diverse people, places, processes, and things.

Thinking about assemblages can be a productive way of thinking about what happens in classrooms and elsewhere as children make meanings. Merchant (2014), for example, focused on human/non-human relationships in his analysis of young children’s use of story apps in a nursery. He noted how, when children looked at interactive story books on iPads with adults, the apps ‘suggested’ or ‘offered’ things that the children took up (e.g. displaying a virtual ‘cover’ that promoted talk about the story) sometimes acting in unexpected ways (e.g., with a ‘connection lost’ warning message). The size and weight of tablets also presented challenges as children tried to hold them steady to navigate the apps. Thinking about assemblages also encourages us to look beyond what we can actually see, and think about the other relationships that are *folded in* to what we observe, for example, relationships between what we observe and other practices and routines. Merchant, for example, noted how adults shared story apps in much the same way as they might share storybooks (a well-established practice in the nursery). We might also consider relationships between what happened and things happening elsewhere, both for the children (at home and in the locality) and further afield, such as the funding and policy decisions that enabled the tablets to be there in the first place; or the manufacturing processes, commercial and aesthetic intentions manifest in the design, production, and marketing of tablets and apps (Nespor, 2012). A focus on assemblages encourages us to see children’s meaning-making at any moment as related in multiple ways to what is happening and has happened in other times and places, to political, economic, and environmental movements as well as the immediately apparent (Burnett and Merchant, 2017b). By seeing children and other things as ‘relationally linked with one another in webs’, we can see how ‘[t]hey make a difference to each other: they make each other be’ (Law and Mol, 2008, p.58).

In our episodes, for example, we can see how the writing table, writing tools, and classroom routines assemble with broader developments linked to testing, accountability, and policy to uphold certain ways of doing literacy (as fixed, bounded, individualised, and paper-based). While this is a relatively stable assemblage, things can also assemble in unexpected ways so that new possibilities emerge. As Law (2004) wrote, ‘assemblages, like actors, are *creative*. They have novel effects and they make new things’ (p.74). The strips (having already been disassembled from Christmas) changed from writing surfaces to other things as children took them away from the writing table and re-purposed them. The different assemblages of strips-children-furniture-resources-feelings-etc. generated different directions in the children’s play. Given this fluidity, it may be helpful to think in terms of ‘assemblings’ rather than ‘assemblages’ (Burnett and Merchant, 2017a), as it reminds us that things (human and non-human) are always in the process of enacting one another. When observing children making meanings in classrooms, therefore, we might ask the question, ‘what is assembling?’. This helps us to notice not just what we expect to see, but some of the more unexpected things that happen as resources intended for literacy assemble with other routines, policies, values, etc., – and *things*.

Thinking about affect

A focus on ‘what assembles’ highlights how children’s meaning-making emerges as they interact with what is around them, and as the things they encounter offer new possibilities that are taken up in the moment. In recent years there has been a growing interest in the affective dimension of this experience, in what is *felt* as people and things assemble together, and in what is generated as a result. Drawing on the ideas of theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Barad (2007), some literacy researchers have considered the affective dimension of what happens as children and objects interact, or have focused on what Barad calls ‘intra-activity’ (blurring distinctions between individual people and things). We might wonder for example how the nest of letters came into being. Was it perhaps to do with the texture and malleability of the card or tissue, the sound of scissors cutting through fibres, or the give of the nest as Kehinde fitted the strips inside?

Kuby, Rucker, Gutshall and Kirchhofer (2015) used such ideas to think about literacy provision within one 2nd grade classroom in the United States. The teacher regularly held writers’ workshops during which children chose what to produce and how to do so. Children could access materials such as tissue paper, pipe cleaners, and string as well as resources more typically associated with mark-making/writing activities (pens, paper, card, etc.). As a result, ‘writing projects’ ranged widely to include the making of puppets, football fields, and a life-sized giraffe, and ideas about ‘being a writer’ or ‘authorship’ expanded to involve diverse creative and exploratory activities. Kuby et al. (2015) described how creativity was propelled through ‘entangled becomings’ (p.404) generated as the children’s urge to make meanings tangled with the *stuff* around them. They highlighted the affective, sensory dimension of children’s relationships with materials and noted how, when given opportunities to work freely and follow new directions, the children improvised and ideas took flight.

We can perhaps see something similar in the strips example. What was it about the strips that appealed – their size, shape, colour, smoothness, pliability perhaps? In any case, they enabled multiple possibilities; the children moved between different activities (copy-writing, strip collecting, artefact making) as they played. Together the children and the strips *became* different things. Rather than categorising some of these activities as ‘literacy’ and some not, Kuby et al. argue that we should expand our ideas of literacy to include the wide range of creative activities in which children engage, and encourage movement between these. Studies such as Kuby et al.’s prompt us to think about the significance of affect (or feeling) when children and materials are together in classrooms, and how affect can drive creativity, sometimes in unexpected ways.

Multiple ways of thinking about space, places, bodies and things

Having considered some ways in which literacy practices have been thought about as sociomaterial, this section explores why it is useful to adopt *multiple* ways of investigating, seeing, and understanding relationships between spaces, places, bodies and things. It is worth emphasising here that the four perspectives described above are not discrete and do not provide a comprehensive account of the sociomaterial in early literacy. As explored in the introduction there are other ways of thinking about relationships between spaces, places, bodies and things (e.g., see Fenwick and Edwards, 2011). Moreover, our brief summaries cannot do justice to the studies described or to the complex theoretical perspectives that underpin them. However, they do provide different starting points, some focusing on details, and some seeing interactions in relation to broader social, economic and political developments that play out in what children do. They also approach the notion of agency differently. They all, to some extent, encourage us to see early literacies in relation to things, and to see children’s literacies as always embodied and entangled with affect and multiple experiences. They invite us to ask questions not just about what children can do well and need to do next, but *what they are doing*, what this suggests about *what matters* to them and to others, and how far our provision *makes space* for them to explore new possibilities. Table 20.1 lists some of these questions; questions that we have addressed in our discussion of the strips example, but also those that would also be applicable when thinking about literacies and early years settings more generally. With regards to the ‘key questions’ of each perspective – as stated earlier, distinctions between perspectives are fuzzy and questions do not fall as neatly into categories as the table might suggest.

Table 20.1 *Four perspectives on the materiality of young children’s literacy practices*

Perspective	Key question(s) ²	Question(s) for educators
<i>Schooling</i>	Which ways of knowing or being	How do children and teachers interact with

² As stated earlier, distinctions between perspectives are fuzzy; questions do not fall as neatly into categories as this table suggests.

<i>literate bodies</i>	are upheld by the things around us?	and around furniture and resources? What role do furniture and resources play in the kind of literacy that is valued here? (How) are children's interactions with each other and things regulated?
<i>Cultural agency</i>	How do children take up the potential for doing/making/making meaning that things offer?	How do children take up what is offered to them? What does this suggest about their social and cultural worlds? And about what literacy means to them? How might educators support children in drawing upon these social and cultural worlds? Which affordances (or possibilities) do available things offer?
<i>Assembling literacies</i>	How do things, people, ideas, policies, texts, etc. assemble together? And what is produced as this happens?	In what different ways do children, teachers and things assemble? How do social, economic, commercial, and political moves play out in what children do? What happens as things assemble in different ways? Which assemblages appear to be relatively stable and why? What happens as people and things assemble in unexpected ways?
<i>Thinking about affect</i>	How do people and things generate one another?	Which new possibilities emerge as children play? How might we build on these? (How) does affect seem to drive, and be generated through, what happens? How might we challenge our own conceptualisations of 'literacy' in light of what children do with each other and the stuff around them?

Implications for early years practitioners

Children's learning opportunities in schools have strong influences upon their life chances but participation in school life is not the same for all children. Children bring a wealth of linguistic, cultural, and material experiences from their home and community backgrounds. Such experiences shape their identities, and their sense of who they are and what they can be. Home and community experiences may be overlooked in the drive to reach statutory literacy goals and this may impact negatively on young children's learning in school. Giving children time, space, and other material resources to explore, opens up opportunities for children to share what they know and can do in the classroom. For the practitioner, observing young children's activity can help them make decisions about how they can work with children to further their literacy learning. Paying attention to the material dimensions of children's early literacies can make an important contribution here.

First, it highlights the powerful role practitioners play in organising space and materials and how this reflects and reinforces particular conceptualisations of what literacy is and what it is for. It suggests we need to ensure that children have the time, space, and resources to

explore and expand their communicative repertoires as they interact in different ways with the people and things around them. At the same time, children often use available materials in unexpected ways, and this brings us to our second point. As well as observing children's interactions with each other and analysing what children create or produce, it is useful to observe how children interact with the *things* around them and the kinds of spaces and possibilities produced as they do so. It helps us to see how children's literacy practices relate to sensory pleasures, prior experiences, ongoing preferences, and emerging possibilities. Reflecting on relationships between spaces, places, bodies and things helps us to take a broader look at what literacy is, or is becoming, for young children and to see children's text production in relation to a range of other activities and purposes.

If we can understand better what literacy means to children, and what engages, excites or sustains their interest, then we are better placed to think about how to support. Focusing on spaces, places, bodies and things can alert us to emerging possibilities generated as children interact with the things around them. Many early years educators are committed to supporting learning by responding flexibly to what children do in the moment. However, in many countries a standards agenda has prompted an emphasis on planning for children to meet predetermined goals. Looking at interactions between children and the stuff around them can reveal other things that children are doing and learning – sometimes in spite of such expectations. It can highlight the importance of enabling children to follow new directions arising through play, and, as practitioners, of working with the unexpected and improvised. It suggests educators need to be always alert to what is being generated, and to their own role in what happens.

Focusing on spaces, places, bodies and things illuminates multiple ways in which children's literacies play out in the moment, but also traces how children's literacy practices are entangled with what happens in other times and spaces. It highlights how what happens in classrooms needs to be understood in relation to children's lives elsewhere, but also to activity in multiple spheres: political, commercial, industrial, and so on. Children's literacies need to be understood, as Comber (2016) argued, in relation to a material analysis of the locality, the nation state and beyond. A sociomaterial perspective therefore also raises questions about the ethical implications of working with the stuff that is taken for granted in classrooms, and any possible association with social injustice or environmental degradation. Taking such relationships seriously certainly challenges the easy conclusions about literacy arrived at through statistical analyses of children's attainment or engagement. It supports the need for a critical pedagogy and stretches the boundaries of what we should, as literacy educators, be concerned with.

Conclusion

This chapter has reflected a growing interest in thinking about early literacy in relation to materiality, in helping us think about what literacy involves, about what supports it, and about what gets in the way. It has summarised research from four overlapping perspectives

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and used these to explore the varied ways in which children, devices, texts, and sites assemble to construct one another. The chapter has argued that, when seeking to gain insights into children's literacy practices, it is helpful to consider different ways of conceptualising the inter-relatedness of the social and material. Together, these provide insights into children's agency, how literacy is enmeshed with other practices, and how children are variously empowered (or not) by the things and people around them. These multiple perspectives we argue, provide a set of resources that educators can use to 'turn around' (Comber & Kamler, 2005) to look differently at children's literacies and understand better how they may best support them.

Further Reading

Burnett, C. (2015). (Im)materialising Literacies. In K. Pahl & J. Rowsell (Eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Literacy Studies* (pp. 520–531). London: Routledge.

This anthology explores multiple ways in which relationships between children, things and literacies have been approached.

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Reflection questions and follow-up activities

1. Map the furniture and resources in a classroom or early years setting. Observe how the teacher expects children to use the space. How are these expectations conveyed? What does the organisation and use of furniture suggest about what counts in literacy?
2. Observe one or more children as they move about a classroom. How do they 'take up' furniture and resources? Do they do this in expected or unexpected ways? Which new possibilities for meaning-making are opened up – or closed down – as they do so? What do their actions and interactions suggest about how they see literacy, or about their repertoires for making meaning? What appears to be enabling and what gets in the way? Observe what happens as new items are introduced or as things are rearranged (by children or adults).
3. Use the questions in Table 20.1 to reflect on literacy provision within an early years setting you know well. Can you identify other questions that might be relevant in thinking about relationships between spaces, places, bodies and things in early literacy?

4. The examples in this chapter focus predominantly on literacies in classroom settings. Consider how relationships between children and things may be significant to how children 'do' literacy and to what literacy 'becomes' in other settings, e.g., as children play on an iPad at home, or as families use a mobile phone when out and about.

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