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adventure**

DANIELS, Karen

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## **Cultural agents creating texts: a collaborative space adventure.**

*This paper discusses the ways in which young children collaboratively use narrative play and the available space and materials around them in order to exert cultural agency. The collaborative creation of texts is asserted as central to this expression of agency. By presenting an illustrative case study of a group of five year old boys as they engage in literacy practices and create a range of meaningful texts within an early years compulsory education setting, the ways in which agency is expressed through the collaborative venture of text creation is explored. Drawing from the work of Marsh(2005), Dyson (2003) Kress (1997, 2003) and Wells- Rowe (2010) an episode of self-initiated dramatic play, fuelled by the children's desire to engage in peer culture and make meanings collaboratively, is presented. This play episode spurs the creation of a range of hybridised texts which culminate in the production of a written narrative. Observations from this study are then used to add to a broader discussion which raises concerns about the current policy in England which views early writing development as a set of individual and pre-defined set of skills to be acquired, a view which could undervalue the experiences that children bring to early educational settings.*

*literacy practices    agency    early literacy development    early writing  
narrative*

## **Young children as cultural agents: innovative authors or early writers moving towards adult written forms?**

Corsaro (2005), working in the field of the New Sociology of Childhood, presents us with a constructivist model of childhood whereby the child is positioned as an agent who actively constructs the social world and their place in it. In this way, children are not merely internalising the society they are born into, but are acting on it and bringing about change. Corsaro (2005) recognises how children take part in *Interpretive Reproduction* as they innovatively and creatively participate in society by appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns

through their own peer cultures. This making sense of the world takes place through a process of 'appropriation, re-invention, and reproduction' (Corsaro, 2005, p18). In this way, Corsaro argues, children are not merely passive recipients of culture, but that they actively contribute to cultural production and change. Language is central to the symbolic system in which meanings are cast and re-cast, and this symbolic system encodes cultural structures and maintains and creates social realities. One of the ways in which young children's 'interpretive reproductions' and cultural agency are expressed, is through their emerging communicative practices and text creation. By exploring how young children create texts when engaging in collaborative meaning making then, we can gain a rich insight into the role of cultural agency in text creation. The role of agency and motivation in text creation has been observed in children as young as two years old. Wells-Rowe (2010) collected mark making profiles of two and three year old children and noted how they chose interactions, materials and activities based on their play interests and play behaviours (conceptual, creative, social, procedural) She noted that their approaches to writing appeared to be related to their broader interest orientations. Wells-Rowe summarised how personal interest is a facet of children's socially situated identities which are shaped by their personal histories of participation in literacy practices. Studies such as Wells-Rowe's remind us that even the youngest child can exert agency in text creation and that this is inextricably linked with their cultural experiences and play interests.

The increasing interest in the role of agency however, comes at a time of change in educational policy which can possibly militate against children's agency in early text creation. In national policy, young children's writing has historically been assessed against models of writing development which focus on how far these are like 'adult' writing forms. This 'emergent' view of literacy development often views children's authoring practices in terms of how far these reveal children's hypotheses of the 'correct' written form. There are currently a number of widely accepted models of writing development. An example focusing specifically on spelling development is *Gentry's* 1982 spelling model (Gentry, 1982) which defines children's writing development in relation to how their spelling becomes increasingly phonetic, eventually leading to conventional spelling patterns. This tracks children development from *Pre-communicative*, *Semi-Phonetic*, *Phonetic*, *Transitional*, and

finally, *Correct* stages of spelling. This model has been highly influential in marking progression across statutory assessment tools, such as National Curriculum Level Descriptions, and Foundation Stage Profile Points. For example, the specific area of Writing in the document Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (Dfe, 2012b) for children aged 40-60 months and for the Writing Early Learning Goal is consistent with Gentry's *Semi-Phonetic* stage of spelling development.

It would seem then, that a pedagogy which values the role of cultural agency in young children's authoring practices may not be consistent with current national policy and may not be guaranteed for all children in all settings. In this discussion, I present an individual case study taken from a larger ethnographic study that I carried out as an early years teacher in order to present an example of how young children assert cultural agency when engaging in collaborative meaning making, from narrative play, to written text. . Observing how children develop an understanding of, or 'take hold', of schooled literacies, and the ways in which children merge these with their own literacy practices through their peer interests and concerns, will be central focus of this discussion.

### **Cultural agents negotiating home and school literacy practices**

In order to draw a relationship between Corsaro's notion of the child as a cultural agent and the literacy practices they encounter, it is useful to draw upon the work of Brian Street. Street's (1984) conceptualisation of literacy as a social practice shows how literacy practices are culturally determined and that multiple literacies exist. Literacy is ideological, can never be separated from power relationships, and practices vary from one context to another (Street and Lefsten 2007) Young children's communicative practices are negotiated and learned through the child's language socialization in the 'local' contexts of their communities and when they move across contexts, such as from home to school, children may encounter a broadening range of literacies. The more powerful and dominant literacy of school is one which may vary significantly to the child's home language experiences. The dissonance between children's literacy practices and those of school has long been discussed. Heath(1983) noted that certain types of language socialisation are more compatible with school environments than others and that these impact, positively or negatively, on the child's reading development as they enter school. Twenty years

after Heath's work, Marsh (2003) examined home literacy practices of a group of 3 and 4 year-olds and investigated how far these were referred to in the school curriculum. Examination of the curriculum showed that practices which supported the 'bridging' of home and school literacy practices were not evident. Marsh noted how parents viewed that the literacy practices more associated with schooled literacies were brought by the child in to the home setting, rather than the other way round. Marsh (2003, p387) concluded that 'the interface between school and home literacy practices is more complex ... and leads to a range of hybrid practices'. This, for Marsh, reinforced the influence of the 'one way traffic' in that dominant schooled literacy practices were becoming integrated into home literacy practices, but that there was little integration of home literacy practices into the school setting. Providing children with the opportunities to negotiate the distance between home and school literacy practices then, may require pedagogy where children have some degree of opportunity to exercise their agency in text creation within the school setting. Dyson (2003) noted how when children do bring their cultural interests and literacy practices to the school setting, they 'remix' these with the schooled literacies and this process enables them to experience success with schooled literacies. In order to 'remix' literacies, certain affordances may need to be provided within the school setting. I discuss these below.

### **Cultural agency expressed through transmediation, narrative, space and available materials**

Collaborative participation in meaning making is central to the discussion here and this involves children being actively involved as they engage with peers, adults, cultures and the environment around them to create texts. This meaning making is guided by children's peer concerns and interests (Corsaro,2005) and is expressed through engagement with narrative play, the use of space and available materials, and the transmediation of texts from one sign system to another (Kress, 1997, 2003). Recent research has focused on how children use space and materials to create a multiplicity of texts and in this process, exert their identity. Marsh (2005) explored how media texts, artefacts and material objects are integrated into young children's communicative practices. Central to this is the notion of the motivated sign (Kress, 1997) where the texts children create carry their motivations. Kress (1997) describes

how when making meaning, children in the early years are predominantly guided by synaesthetic activities which draw upon all their senses and use visual, kinaesthetic, three dimensional and gestural modes. Kress (1997, 2003) describes the process of transmediation. This is where meaning formed in one communication system is recast in the context and expression of a new sign system. As a result of that meaning making, and the ability to re-cast meanings in different sign systems, the learner's resources for making meaning, and therefore acting in the world, are changed (Kress, 2010).

Collaborative narrative play is a common feature of children's play which is expressed syneasthetically. Nicolopoulou (1996, p204) asserts that children's narrative play supports narrative competence: 'If narratives are generated within the context of children's everyday social life, the implication is that socially embedded activity dramatically accelerates the development of children's narrative abilities'. This narrative competence not only provides children with the tools to shape meaning when taking part in collaborative play, but has also been cited as an important factor in the transmediation between sign systems. In this way then, it would appear that children are able to exert cultural agency through the manipulation and ordering of materials, space, and narrative play and that the re-casting of meanings from one sign system to another is considered as a valuable learning process in itself (Kress, 2010).

Sawyer and DeZutter (2007) further show how this narrative competence can support children in accessing the symbolic written code. The authors describe how symbolic transformation, metaplay and narrative competence support children's representational skills which are a pre-requisite of engaging in the symbolic representation involved in writing. Writing differs from speech and employs different linguistic structures. It makes greater cognitive demands (Myhill and Jones,2009), and thus it differs significantly from the syneasthetic literacy practices with which most children engage in with ease. The context of the play can significantly reduce these 'cognitive demands' and support the 'bridging' or transmediation of the syneasthetic to the stable and structured written form. It would appear from the discussion then, that the desire to express cultural agency drives children to collaboratively use available resources and space in order to create hybridised texts,

and that this transmediation between sign systems, may be supportive of the mastery of schooled literacies.

I will now draw upon a case study from an ethnographic project that I carried out as an early years teacher. This will exemplify the points made above further and also assert the role of cultural agency in the ways that children 'take hold' of available meaning making practices.

### **Methodology and the ethics of seeking children's perspectives on their experiences**

The case study presented in this paper is one example of a number of learning stories which were produced as part of an eight month long action research study. I carried out the study in order to evaluate the use of photographic learning stories with young children both in terms of how they supported children's learning and how they would support practitioners' understanding of how young children learn (Daniels, 2011). As an early years teacher of the children in the study at that time, I aimed to introduce photographic learning stories which would:

- Be an authentic and meaningful document to individual children and parents and reflect the child's day-to-day experiences
- Celebrate and make explicit the nature of early learning experiences and the unique approach of each child to their learning (Daniels, 2011, p303)

My interest in learning stories came from the work of Margaret Carr (2001) which drew upon photographic assessment tools developed in New Zealand. I was also interested in the work of Clarke and Moss (2001) which presents the Mosaic Approach. This approach involves interviewing practitioners and parents but also 'participatory tools' such as taking photographs, book making, tours of settings and map making. In the study I aimed to gain children's perspectives on their experiences through the use of photographs and this was consistent with observing children as cultural agents. Observing children's self-initiated play was also central

to the methodological approach. Sawyer et al (2007) state how children's improvisational play is a lens for play and literacy research. As sociodramatic play is a collaborative event where participants contribute to and build on each other's actions, observing what is taking place between the participants can provide a rich insight into children's cultural agency. Play is a situated social practice and observing improvisational play and literacy can help us to understand how children 'take hold' of literacy and create texts.

Corsaro (2005) recommends that children become research assistants and informants. The author states that peer culture concerns are a set of activities routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children generate and share when in interaction. Peer cultures are built up therefore by actions and negotiations by children. The photographs of children immersed in interaction and activity, and children's interpretations of them, provided a perspective on peer cultures. Parental and child consent was gained for the use of the photograph and work for both the original study and publication. The children are anonymised and the names in the story below are the ones chosen by the children for the purpose of the paper. No parent or child in the study expressed that they would not like to be included in the study.

### **Context of the case study**

The pupils attended a Foundation Stage Unit providing early education for children aged three to five in the north of England. There were approximately 110 children in the unit which was divided up into three classes which contained both part-time and full-time children. Each learning story was drawn from a series of photographs of children engaged in activity throughout the course of a day or morning. As the teacher I observed the children at intervals and took photographs of their activities. These photographs were then printed, and I discussed with the child what was happening in the photograph. I then added text to the photographs with the child in order to tell a 'story' of the child's activities which was then shared with the whole class and parents, then was placed in the classroom for children to access freely. Over the period of the study, I collected and evaluated thirty-five studies, and looked at three of these in detailed case studies in order to draw out emerging themes (Daniels, 2011)



The group of four boys featured in this paper provide an additional case study which illustrates young children's engagement with literacy practices. The photographs reproduced here were of a group of full-time children aged between four and five that often play together in a friendship group. The sequence of photographs in the case study recount a series of activities in which the children engaged in throughout the course of a morning. The practice across the Foundation Stage Unit where the study took place placed high priority on children's Communication, Language and Literacy development and Personal Social and Emotional Development which are Areas of Learning in England's Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. The children were immersed in a literate environment which provided opportunities to produce and respond to print in meaningful contexts which often drew upon the medium of play. Alongside this as the children's teacher, I was a model as a literacy user and often shared reading and writing experiences with children as part of my professional practice. The children took part in short and focused teacher-led sessions involving, for example, teaching the alphabetic code and phonics, shared writing, guided reading, and so experienced an 'orchestration' of literacy learning experiences and teaching strategies which combined both child-initiated and teacher-led opportunities.

### ***The Case Study***

*I led the initial part of the day by providing the group of boys, Danyaal, Lee, Sam and Oscar, with a large piece of paper and asked them to design a spaceship. (Figure 1) I presented the idea of a spaceship as I knew that the children were interested in 'aliens' and space travel. At the time the boys were collectors of small alien-type figures which they often brought into the classroom. A high level of motivation and collaboration was observed as the group excitedly talked about the space ship design and began to draw.*

***Figure 1: Talking about the space ship design.***

**FIGURE 1 HERE**

**Figure 2: Drawing alien figures on the space ship.**

Oscar's interest in aliens was brought into the activity here. He filled the space ship design with numerous little green alien figures. Other members of the group see this and also draw aliens.

**FIGURE 2 HERE**

**Figure 3: The space ship design**

The alien ship plan was taken to the outdoor construction area and put onto the wall.

**FIGURES 3 AND 4 HERE**

**Figure 5 The spaceship has been built and it is time for take off.**

The group spent about half an hour building their spaceship, drawing on their experiences and talking about the features a spaceship should have, where they were going to journey to, and if there might be any aliens. They assigned meaning to objects, the old vacuum pipe has become part of the ships power source, the computer keyboard has become the ship's controls. The take-off of the spaceship was a much enjoyed event - repeated several times, the boys counting back and shouting 'Blast off!' to shrieks of excitement.

**FIGURE 5 HERE**

**Figure 6: An alien visitor.**

Oscar approached the ship slowly, holding onto his mask, waiting to be sighted. This created a moment of dramatic tension when the group stood looking at the alien, not speaking and deciding what to do. Danyall invited the alien onto the ship - none of the group members at this point knowing how the alien would respond. He chose to be a peaceful alien and sat on the ship in silence and was promptly questioned and then offered food by Danyall. After some time the mask was discarded.

**FIGURE 6 HERE**

**Figure 7 An alien chase.**

*One child picked up the abandoned alien mask and approached the ship, joining in temporarily with the play. Again there was a moment of tension but this time it resulted in an energetic alien chase which stopped and began again numerous times as the alien pursued, but intentionally never caught, members of the group.*

FIGURE 7 HERE

**Figure 8 Lee and Oscar searching for moon rocks.**

*The dramatic play here continued for well over 45 minutes with the children taking on various roles as astronauts/ aliens, imagining what they could see, and negotiating the action and events of the story. During the whole sequence of the dramatic play, members of the group moved away from the spaceship then returned to rejoin the group and the storyline. (some not observed – Figure 7 shows Lee and Oscar searching for moon rocks away from the spaceship)*

FIGURE 8 HERE

**Figure 9 Oscar and Sam create a space map.**

FIGURE 9 HERE

**Figure 10: Browsing books - Oscar.**

FIGURE 10 HERE

**Figure 11: Painting an alien- Sam.**

FIGURE 11 HERE

*On return to classroom the children began to engage with more 'permanent' representations which were strongly related to their play. Figure 11 shows Sam painting an alien.*

***Figures 12 and 13 show Danyaal and Lee writing. They both wrote the same sentence: 'Wons upon a tim a big rocit was going to go to spas.'***

FIGURES 12 and 13 HERE

*Figures 12 and 13: Lee and Danyall writing a story beginning.*

***Figure 14.*** Danyall's text.

### **Discussion: Observing cultural agency from narrative play to the written form**

The collective involvement of the children described in the case study, and the way they used the physical environment and resources to create meaning and explore texts, synaesthetic or in pictorial and written form, was evident. Through these communicative practices we can see that young children have exerted agency as they collaboratively innovated with texts.

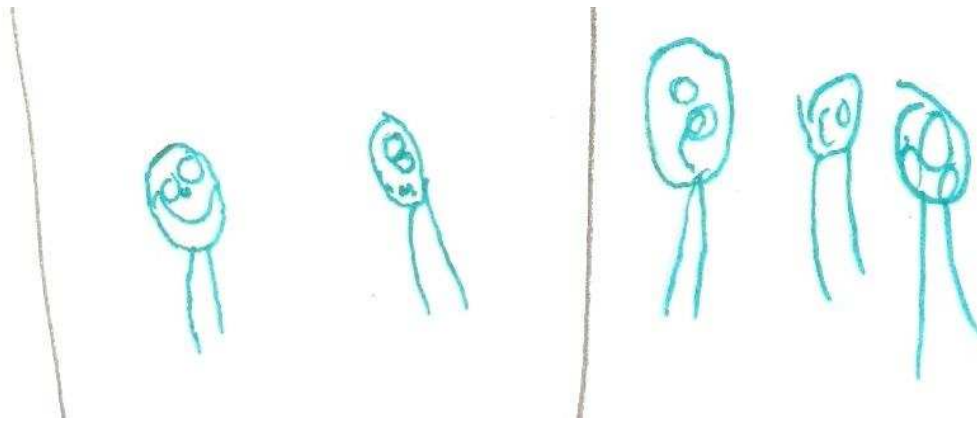
Synaesthetic activity shaped the direction of the play and this was influenced by children's experiences. The children drew upon their knowledge of narrative texts and likely events in space stories and this shaped some of their play: there were moments of tension, moments where characters needed to make decisions, events such as exploring an alien planet, looking for 'moon rocks', and incidents of meeting aliens. This knowledge may have come from games, films, books and stories from their home setting, but the playing out of events was firmly based and negotiated collaboratively around the children's shared experiences of related texts. Physical space and choice of movement was equally vital to these experiences as ideas were constructed, shared and then re-cast in different forms and sign systems. The space represented by a design or outline of the designed space ship (which was teacher-led) led to the child-initiated defining of physical space in the outdoor area as the

space ship. The movement of the children to and from the space represented their journeys, explorations, and more chaotic alien chases. This representation and reformulation of meaning across sign systems is significant to these young children. They were defining the space for their collaborative dramatic play and anticipating events that might take place and the characters they may encounter. Objects were assigned significance and used as props to support meaning making: The old vacuum cleaner pipe became an intercom; a computer keyboard the ship's controls; and the old vacuum tools became instruments in order to move sand and look for rock samples from an alien planet (Oscar named these 'moon rocks').

### **Following the procession of little green aliens: a thread through each text**

In the case study, we can see how the dramatic role play activity based around the children's collective interest in aliens, fuelled the direction of the play. We can clearly see how the children negotiated and asserted their developing sense of agency through the texts they created, and that these drew upon their peer concerns. The small collectable 'alien' type figures 'smuggled' into the classroom on a daily basis by Oscar and Sam featured heavily in all the texts which were created and became the thread which related to children's peer concerns. The original spaceship design (Figure 3) was populated with a line of aliens and the alien was a central character in the dramatic play (Figures 4, 5 and 6) The Space Map (Figure 8) shows the spaceship's journey through space, and this was again populated by Sam with tiny alien figures. Other examples are Sam's painting (Figure 10) and the writing in Figure 13 which is accompanied by an illustration of a moon rocket with windows and a line of five green alien figures, in the centre, smiling. Figure 15 below provides a clearer illustration of the procession of little green aliens.

Figure 15 A procession of little green aliens



In this way we can see how children's engagement in literacy practices is strongly related to their engagement as a cultural agent in peer culture. Out of the four boys, Oscar, Sam and Danyall all populated their texts with the small two legged smiling figures. As the texts moved from one mode to another and one space to another, the children populated each text with aliens which appeared to become a thread which was central to the meanings being expressed. Relating this back to the work of Kress (1997) we can see in the vignette how children's syneasthetic literacy practices and mark making are fuelled by their cultural and play interests to create hybrid texts. The vignette shows how children are successfully and seamlessly pursuing passions and interests in their play, no doubt influenced by texts experienced at home and school, and are re-shaping and innovating with these, merging them with the available materials in the school setting.

Dyson (2003) found that children's engagement with cultural literacy practices and the 'mixing up' of these with schooled literacies, in turn supported the accommodation of these. This extended observation of collaborative text creation shows such an example. Through a series of transmediations between sign systems, the children produced the beginnings of a narrative written text (Figures 11, 12 and 13) The text is not complete or sustained but Lee and Danyall have bridged their play experiences with the written narrative form. They have selected a suitable

story aperture and exposition in which to frame their experience, introduced a setting and a key object from the story that makes the adventure possible – the space rocket. They are beginning to link their own play interests and passions with ways of expressing these through the complex written code.

### **The Early Years curriculum and time, space and resources for cultural agency.**

In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), (Dfes,2008) and the more recent and revised Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DFE, 2012a, 2012b) promotes practice that combines teacher-led and child-initiated learning. One of the guiding principles of the statutory curriculum for children aged 0 to 5 is the 'Enabling Environment' which in part acknowledges the key role that the learning environment plays in supporting learning. Continuous provision is integral to practice recommended in the EYFS. The learning environment, to which the child has free access, is organised in such a way as to promote children's learning. The continuous provision within many early years settings provides children with the necessary time, space and resources to follow and develop their own lines of enquiry through self-initiated activity and by virtue of providing this, early years practitioners acknowledge that the role of the practitioner is to facilitate this enquiry. This approach to organising education in the Early Years offers much opportunity for practitioners to observe and consider the ways in which young children learn, interact and construct meaning as they engage with each other and the learning environment. By virtue of this, it does offer the space needed for children to bring their literacy practices into the educational setting, and potentially to create 'hybridised' versions of literacy. In the vignette for example, children were free to use space freely and move from one area of the outdoor/indoor areas as is usual during 'free-flow' time in early years settings. I had worked the previous week with the team of early years staff to plan possible learning opportunities for the children. Based on the interest in space and aliens, we had provided a minimum of resources: an alien mask, an old computer keyboard, piping and vacuum cleaner tools, for the children to use in their play. Other resources used by the children were readily to hand and freely accessed.

Whilst different educational settings and practitioners will have differing policies, pedagogies and conceptions of literacy, the vignette represents pedagogical

practices as represented by the EYFS. Recent policy is leaning towards the view that young children's successful master of reading and writing is predominantly related to the acquisition of a set of specific skills. This has been made increasingly apparent in the statutory screening of phonics decoding for all six year olds and the revised draft national curriculum which relies upon phonic decoding as the prime approach to the teaching of reading. Furthermore, the revised Statutory Framework and non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (2012a, 2012, b) in England omits a previous Early Learning Goal which required that children '*Write for a range of purposes, using the features of different forms*'. Whilst this goal posed challenges, its wording presents writing as a communicative act, which has an intended audience and purpose. Implicit in this is that the young author has the potential to 'act' on the world in some way and therefore to influence and exact agency on the world. The emphasis on the specific Area of Learning of *Literacy* for four and five year olds in the revised EYFS (2012) is on phonic decoding and spelling and of '*Writing simple sentences and captions*'. This could potentially promote a shift in practice which departs from a focus on writing as the creation of meaningful texts. Reliance on literacy instruction which focuses purely on a set of skills to be acquired loses sight of the rich experiences that children bring into the classroom may promote practice where time and space to explore and innovate with a multiplicity of texts may not be guaranteed. Such an approach would not recognise children as cultural agents with the capacity to act and contribute to the world.

## **Conclusion**

The children in the study drew upon their own interests and followed their own lines of enquiry. The levels of co-operation and collaboration were high and the children fluidly combined aspects of their popular culture interests with the available materials and space in the Foundation Stage provision. What was experienced was a community of literacy learners and users who successfully integrate their own passion and interests with the available tools and materials in the provision to both interact with meaningful texts and create their own in a range of forms. By being provided with the space, materials and time to explore this they are 'playing out' conceptions of literacy whilst simultaneously beginning to understand and acquire control of the written form more associated with the literacy of school. However,



there is a current emphasis on the measurement of individual literacy attainment through practices such as statutory testing in literacy in the education system in England. Street (2007) called for policy makers to shift the focus from how the 'impact' of literacy can be measured, to how local people 'take hold' of the communicative practices being introduced to them. When a child begins school their unique experience of literacy practices will inevitably meet the more 'fixed' schooled literacies. Observing and aiming to understand how children develop an understanding of schooled literacies, and the ways in which children merge these with their own literacy practices through their peer interests and concerns has been the central focus of this discussion.

Goodman and Martens (2007) describe how children participate in literacy practices with peers and adults in their communities and how when interacting with cultural figures and objects, they build up concepts and perceptions about literacy, what it does, and how it positively or negatively impacts their lives. If a narrow view of literacy is fully and completely defined by the statutory curriculum, and children are not given the time and space to explore and collaboratively create hybrid texts, they will become 'consumers' of the version of schooled literacies and their potential to participate in interpretive reproduction as cultural agents will be discouraged. A reproductive model of literacy education which overlooks the child will be experienced. Practice which predominantly views literacy development as the acquisition of a set of skills potentially runs the risk of undervaluing what children have to offer as cultural agents. Home and school literacies can vary immensely. The acquisition of written texts poses numerous challenges to children and what is clear is that motivation and engagement are required if children are to become successful creators of more permanent texts with the power to influence the world in which they live. A literacy pedagogy which values children as cultural agents who express this agency through their text creation may be required in order that children can negotiate their literacy practices with the more formalised school literacies.

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