

Encountering Literacies in Early Years Classrooms

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Chapter 2. Encountering Literacies in Early Years Classrooms

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Abstract

This chapter provides the reader with ways of understanding young children's literacy practices in early years settings. On entering school settings, children bring a range of experience of literacies from their home and community lives and the chapter foregrounds the practitioner/teacher role of building on what children know and can do, bridging home and school literacies. The chapter will consider the ways in which early literacy is conceptualised: as a social practice; as increasing confidence with literacy skills; and as an affective and embodied experience as children encounter the materials and practices of the early years classroom. The authors will describe how these ways of understanding literacy each provide valuable insights into the kinds of pedagogical practices that can support young children's early literacy practices

Introduction

This chapter provides the reader with perspectives on young children's literacy practices in early years settings. On entering school, children bring understandings of literacy from their home and community experiences and this chapter foregrounds the practitioner's/teacher's role of building on what children know and can do. The chapter considers the ways in which early literacy can be understood as a social practice; as involving multiple semiotic modes and materials; as increasing confidence with literacy skills; and as an embodied and affective experience. Drawing from the United Kingdom Literacy Association's 'Holistic View of Early Literacies' framework, this chapter will describe how these ways of understanding literacy each provide valuable insights into the kinds of teaching strategies that can support young children's early literacy practices.

Multiple perspectives on early literacies

The aim of this chapter is to take a broad look at what literacy is and how it can be understood in early years classrooms. In England, early literacy is very often thought of as gaining mastery of the alphabetic code through activities such as book sharing, phonics, name writing and letter formation. As discussed in Chapter 1, current education policy often shapes the kinds of teaching strategies that are taken up in classrooms. In the light of this, in this chapter we offer the framework 'Holistic Approaches to Early Literacy Education: Theory, Beliefs and Values, and Classroom Practices'. The framework was developed by Karen Daniels and Lucy Rodriguez-Leon, as part of their work as convenors Early Literacy in Education Special Interest Group in 2021, on behalf of the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA). The document was produced as a way of presenting some of the ways in which literacy can be theorised and understood. Our position was that each way of understanding early literacy shows us something different about literacy, and that these insights are important in developing a pedagogy for early literacy that is supportive of all children. This position also underpins this chapter and highlights the fundamental way in which language and literacy are understood in this book: any literate act is embedded within a range of meaning making practices, and therefore it should be understood as such.

The framework presents five distinct but overlapping ways that literacy can be theorised: as a social and cultural practice; as an embodied and affective experience; as a set of multimodal practices; as connected with play, including narrative play; and in written English, as mastery of the alphabetic code. This final theoretical perspective is consistent with the account of early literacy in current education policy in that it foregrounds the importance of individual skills that children may need to acquire to decode (read) and encode (write), such as phonic decoding, handwriting/ letter formation. Within the framework presented in this chapter, early literacy and children's pathways to this, are seen as including but also involving far more than mastery of the alphabetic code.

The framework itself (See Table 1, 'Holistic Approaches to Early Literacy Education: Theory, Beliefs and Values, and Classroom Practices') is set out so that it presents each theoretical 'category' in turn. Reading across from left to right, the document presents each theoretical perspective, then the beliefs and values about early literacy that we see as consistent with the theoretical perspective. In the final column, suggestions for pedagogical practices that align with the theoretical perspective are provided. The pedagogy and classroom practice column also acknowledges the ways in which early literacy pedagogy can radically shape children's understanding of what literacy is and what it can do. Indeed, young children need to see themselves as literate beings, who can create meanings through digital and non-digital texts and present these to the world in a meaningful way. A suitable pedagogy for early literacy therefore, requires a sensitive approach that recognises who children are and what they bring to their early literacy experiences.

What are 'schooled' literacies and why do we need to look more broadly?

Literacy can be thought of as a social and cultural practice that varies across time and place. (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984).

When we think of early literacy in school settings, we often think of those kinds of materials and practices commonly associated with schooling and the classroom, such as pens, pencils, paper, decodable books, reading and sharing stories with children, teaching the alphabet and the sound symbol correspondences of the English alphabetic code. We may think about digital technologies and the use of computers, the interactive whiteboard, or iPads, and children's use of these in classroom settings. In other words, our own experiences of being a child in school, or as a teacher or researcher, will shape what we 'see' when we think of literacy. It is very likely that what comes to mind as we think about literacy, will be guided by education policy. Currently, dominant policy is very often presented in a way that aims to address 'low standards' in literacy attainment (See also Sharpe and Taplin, this volume). Due to early literacy, and in particular, early reading, being under the spotlight of policy makers in recent years, there has been a focus and increasing emphasis of teaching early literacy skills, often from an early age. For many children, early phonics activities start at age 3. Current policy often places emphasis on a narrow and limited set of literacy skills, and this can divert attention to any other ways that children can be seen as literate (see Daniels, 2019). This narrow focus can inadvertently lead to pedagogical practices that undervalue the home and community literacy experiences that children bring to the classroom.

In this and other chapters you will notice reference to the Rose Review of Early Reading (Rose, 2006) and the Simple View of Reading (SVoR) which has become the dominant model in framing understandings of how children learn to read. The SVoR suggests that reading comprehension is facilitated by two dimensions: word reading and language comprehension. The SVoR is a conceptual framework first presented by Gough and Tunmer (1978) suggesting that reading comprehension is facilitated by two dimensions: word reading and language comprehension. Increasingly, schooled literacies and the way in which literacy policy is delivered, has been defined by this conceptual framework.

As Street (1995) points out, language and literacy are always a matter of power relationships and there are always significant power relations between children's home literacy practices, and those associated with school which have greater influence and power. Looking more broadly at literacy involves reflecting on children's home experiences of language and literacy and the ways that these are shaped by cultural, linguistic, social and economic factors (Street, 2003). From an early age, children are far from passive recipients of literacies and children's broader literate lives often mean that they experience a range of literacy practices and therefore encounter 'varied and multiple literacies' as they move across settings (Pahl and Burnett, 2013, p3). These varied and multiple literacies may work very differently to the ways of being literate in school. Given that literacy practices across homes and communities and schools are diverse, we need to think carefully about the ways in which we support young children's journey into literacy. As Heath (1983) explained, practitioners should take time to understand a child's home and community experiences and language and literacy practices, to support school-based literacy learning.

It is important to acknowledge that young children experience literacy practices as part of their everyday life. On entering schools, they already know much about the world of literacy and how it operates – they are immersed in literacies. They will already have favourite books, TV shows, media characters, video games. They will see adults reading and writing in their daily lives, both digitally and using more traditional tools, such as pens and paper. Literacy is not something separate from their overall experience, and as children's understandings of literacy grow, they will also be building ideas about what literacy is, what it is for, who it is for, and what it can do. As early years teachers therefore, we are tasked with the job of understanding and building sensitively on what children bring from their home and community settings and supporting them into the literacies associated with schools and education.

The *Spotlight on Research* below from Wells Rowe and Neitzel illustrates how children's early encounters with literacy are shaped by their play interests.

Spotlight on Research

Wells Rowe & Carin Neitzel (2010) Interest and Agency in 2-and 3-Year-Old's Participation in Emergent Writing. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 45(2) pp. 169-195)

The role of agency and motivation in text creation has been observed in children as young as 2 years old. Wells Rowe and Neitzel (2010) collected mark making profiles of 2 and 3-year-old children and noted how they chose interactions, materials and activities and that these were guided by their play interests and play behaviours (conceptual, creative, social and procedural). The authors noticed that children's approaches to writing appeared to be related to broader play interests. The authors 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 and Neitzel's remind us that even the youngest children are guided by their cultural experiences and experiences of texts, and that this is expressed through their play, and the sorts of things they chose to do. By closely observing young children's activity in classrooms, we are better equipped to provide literacy experiences that build on their interests and experiences. Importantly, Wells Rowe and Neitzel's perspective positions young children as active agents in literacy and acknowledges what they bring to early literacy activities in classrooms. Sensitive adult scaffolding of early literacy is paramount, and this includes providing children with the right stimulus and materials to talk and make marks and representations about the things that matter to them.

Young Children's Multimodal Communication

Children's activity is often stimulated by their play interests, their interactions with other children, or the materials and resources in the classroom. When observing young children in classrooms, we may be drawn to those moments and activities where children are acting in ways that 'look' like literacy. Looking more closely it becomes apparent that these literacy events are in fact multimodal experiences (Daniels and Taylor, 2018). As children make meaning they may use movement such as eye contact, gesture, or larger bodily movements, and they may talk or make sounds as they manipulate materials and objects.

Social semiotic theory had done much to draw early years educators' attention to children's play and meaning making as a series of complex multimodal orchestrations. Bomer (2003) and Rowe (2008) examined how young children's repertoires are shaped by the materials and resources that surround them in classroom contexts. Wohlwend's (2011) investigations into young children's multimodal play explored how young children draw on visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes, and how children readily integrating resources in their environment into their shared and imagined meanings. In this way, bodily movements with and around the material resources of classrooms are seen as significant in young children's emerging communicative repertoires.

In 'Before Writing' Kress (1997) explained how young children are primarily guided by synaesthetic activity; he describes the young child drawing a car, and how the child traces the movement of the wheels of the car. The child may talk about the picture they are drawing, in effect, they are combining multiple modes to communicate meaning such as gesture, hand movements, gaze, sounds, marks on the page, smiles, words. Very often, we focus on the text, or the words and sentences children produce, but when we look closely at what is taking place and marks are produced, what we see is a complex orchestration between the child's movements, gestures and words, the materials available to them, and other children in the setting, which are in turn all influenced by children's ideas, preferences and practices.

Literacy as play, including narrative play

There is a significant body of literature that examines the role of play in early learning and education and the field of literacy is no exception to this. Researchers have examined the role of multimodal play in providing a stimulus for early reading and writing and this has generated insights into the ways in which children innovatively weave literacies into their early play. Adults working alongside children in playful contexts, following children's lead, can support early literacy in a way that builds on children's interests and scaffolds their journey into early literacy.

Collaborative narrative play is a common feature of children's play, which is expressed through multiple modes (actions, gestures, use of materials, words). Nicolopoulou (1996, p204) suggested that children's narrative play supports narrative 'competence', or their storying practices. This takes place particularly when the narrative play occurs in the context of children's social relationships and reflects their concerns, interests and life experiences. Nicolopolou suggests that such play not only enables children to shape meaning when taking part in collaborative play, but it also facilitates their ability to shift meanings across different sign system as they manipulate and order materials and spaces. Sawyer and DeZutter (2007) propose that narrative competence supports children in accessing the symbolic written code of writing. Symbolic transformation, metaplay and narrative competence support children's representational skills, which are a prerequisite of engaging in the symbolic representation involved in early literacy.

Spotlight on Research

Anne Haas Dyson (2002) *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write: Popular Literacies in Childhood and School Cultures*. Teachers' College Press

Anne Dyson's carried out a series of ethnographic studies in the USA, working with children from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. She carried out close examinations of children's literacy practices in classrooms and described what children did in their day-to-day activity. Her work is pioneering in that it looked broadly at a range of meaning making practices that took place around literacies (playing, singing, action, drawing, talking, making), rather than only focusing on the written texts that children read and produced. Dyson proposed that children rely on their own cultural and social experiences to find a way into schooled literacies, and often draw on their unofficial worlds of football, popular music, video gaming and media characters, constructing identities for themselves. Children's interests became interwoven with play and written texts in what Dyson terms a 'symbolic mixing'. This 'symbolic mixing' provided the children with the potential for communicative flexibility and adaptability. For Dyson, this flexibility and adaptability in manipulating the affordances of the meaning making resources is paramount to literacy development.

Above, Dyson makes a number of points about how literacy might be understood: Firstly, becoming literate is an active process of making sense, and therefore children are not passive recipients in the process; Secondly, children's participation in literacy is facilitated when they are invited to bring their own interests and concerns into the classroom; Thirdly, literacy is not static, but it is constantly being produced, re-produced, re-imagined and re-purposed, by the children themselves. Pedagogical approaches that acknowledge these three things are more likely to be inclusive and supportive of young children's participation in literacy activity.

So far in this chapter, we have seen children as active participants in the early literacy classroom, who may respond in many ways to the opportunities that are offered to them. We have also seen how the practitioner is crucial in facilitating children's participation. Our suggestion here is that children should be offered supportive and flexible pedagogical approaches to support them towards becoming literate. Ongoing classroom activity gives rise to child produced meanings, and by observing these closely we can learn about children's interests and to recognise what they can do. This puts us in a good position to be able to build on these interests to support early literacy. Popular culture characters, experienced through books, films and other digital media, are important to children's early literacy experiences. For many children, narrative play, or storying, is also significant in bridging more informal play literacies with the stable and structured literacies associated with early reading and writing (See Daniels, 2014).

Early literacy education needs to be guided by its learners, their unique backgrounds and needs. Children have rich and varied interests, and these are often shaped by cultural influences. The careful planning and delivery of books and stories, the types of genres experienced as a learner of English, can have considerable impact on the experience on children, and for many children, they may be learning English as an additional language (Kennedy et al., 2012).

Prompts for Critical Reflection

Jamila's experience as a child new to English

Below, Jamila talks about her own experience of being a child in school in England, whose first language was Punjabi, and how she made sense of early literacy in the classroom.

As a young child, new to English, I remember my first experiences of literacy in the classroom. It was the teacher reading a story book out aloud at the end of every day. The teacher read from a hand-sized book and shared some of the pages with illustrations with

the children. As a bilingual learner, I found the traditional tales that were read by the teacher fascinating. I had not come across anything so magical before, and the stories entranced me with their unexpectedness and distance from real life. After a while, I realised that there were repeated phrases in the story and as the children joined and chanted, I too learned these phrases and said them out aloud. I recall saying the phrases from The Three Little Pigs tale. I was unsure of what they meant, until one day the teacher decided to bring the story to life in the classroom, she picked a few children to enact the story. Suddenly, the story became alive for me. I could see what was meant by the 'Big Bad Wolf, huffing and puffing' and I could see the three little pigs teasing the wolf and not letting him into their houses 'not by the hair of my chinny chin chin!'. Being new to the English language, there were some aspects of traditional tales that I could not grasp. I understood talking wolves and giants living in castles in the clouds. But I could not understand, e.g., how a harp could sing. How can an object sing? I remember thinking this for a long time, even in nursery rhymes, such as 'Hey diddle diddle, how can the dish run away with a spoon?'

The ways in which children respond to early literacy experiences is a fascinating area of exploration, and Jamila's reflection above illustrates how children often strive to make sense and participate in what is offered to them.

After reading Jamila's story above, consider the following questions:

- What does Jamila's story tell you about her experience of learning English as an additional language in a literacy lesson?
- What are the key messages about the ways in which the teacher worked to facilitate participation and belonging? What other strategies could you suggest?
- Think about your own practice or your own research study. What teaching strategies do you use/ have you observed, that ensure that all children can take part and make sense of literacy?

In the *Case Study Focus* below, Early Years teacher Emma describes how she supports children in drawing on their funds of knowledge, recognising children's early attempts at graphic representation.

Case Study Focus

Emma teaching early writing

I remember one lesson in particular... my class of four and five-year-olds were very much enjoying our topic on 'pets' and I planned a shared writing activity. I explained to them that one pet in particular, a hamster, had been in the pet shop a while, and I asked the class if we might put up a poster that would encourage someone to buy him. After all, he had been in the shop for a while and was hoping someone might buy him soon. One child asked if the hamster was sad, and I asked why they thought that might be the case.

'He is hungry'

'He is missing his mummy'

'One of the other animals has bitten him!'

I asked them for ideas to write on the poster, that might make someone want to buy him.

'He has soft ears' said one child;

'He doesn't bite', said a second.

'He is very friendly' added another.

I broke the sentences into words, then the words into sounds, and we wrote the sentences together, re-reading them to make sure they made sense and we had spaces between words. From the carpeted area where we were seated, I stood up and took the shared writing to the pet shop and attached it to the classroom wall that formed a corner of the pet shop.

Throughout the morning, I sat in the pet shop area. Many of the children came to me and asked to make a poster. Some making random marks for which I supplied the written words to match their articulation. Others wrote phonetically plausible words to express their ideas. We attached each one of the posters to the wall once these were finished, and the authors went off to play elsewhere within the free flow of the classroom.

The next morning it wasn't long before one child noticed that the hamster had gone from the shop. The news quickly spread across the class, and I explained to them that someone had come and bought him and taken him home!

I often reflect on why this kind of session went well, and why it encouraged so many children to join in. For me, I think it is that it built on that group of children's interests and involved them as a group who could do something about something that mattered to them. They clearly cared about the hamster and what happened to it. But it also does something else- it shows children what writing is and what it can do, and that they can take part in this. They could all have a go. No child could fail, and they could all create their own messages at whatever stage they were at. They were learning about authorship and what it can do. On reflection, if we give children the right things to do, then they really can do them. We just need to give them the right kinds of literacy activities that will help them see themselves and find ways into literacy'.

The above case study example reflects the need to structure and support children's literacy experiences, while always being open to their own interpretations and responses.

Essentially, these reflections illustrate how children respond differently to classroom literacy activity, based on their cultural experiences, and the ways in which participation is an orchestration between the children and the teacher/practitioner, guiding them towards literacy.

Literacy as mastery of the alphabetic script

Written English draws on an alphabetic code, that is, it works from a system of 26 letters, combined in ways to produce approximately 44 phonemes, which make up the sounds of the English language, with some regional variations in pronunciation. Phonics is an abstract complex code, as the symbols (letters) themselves do not denote meaning but represent sounds in language. Many schools have adopted phonics schemes to teach children sound symbol relationships, and these involve a structured programme and teaching sequence. What is important is that as well as learning sound-symbol correspondences, young children are given the opportunity to draw on their phonic learning in meaningful reading and writing activities. In the extract below, Jamila recalls her early experiences of learning phonics as a child new to English, and how she was encouraged to segment sounds in words, but then lost the sense of meaning. Jamila explains how stories provided meaningful contexts for learning a second language.

Prompts for Critical Reflection

Jamila's experience of learning phonics

I remember my very early childhood literacy experience at a nursery in Bradford. I remember the adults saying short words such as cat and tap and looking at the printed

letters and repeating the words – wholly. But then, the teachers took away the concrete print of the letters and started to say single sounds, t-a-p and then expected me to repeat the sounds. They would say, tap, t-a-p, I would say tap. They would say, t-a-p, I struggled as the sounds they said floated away from me, I could only recall the final sound, I remember holding and hanging onto it, repeating it, p – but it was not what they wanted to hear. It would have been better to have the individual letters in front of me, making the abstract concept of the phoneme more concrete, enabling me to see the mapping between the temporal sequence of the phonemes in the spoken word and the spatial sequence of letters in the printed word (Johnston & Watson 2004). I could not retain all of the sounds in order, the individual sounds made no sense to me. I had not heard the individual sounds before, ever. So, I could say whole words, as they were spoken in everyday language. People said tap, wash your hands under the tap, open the tap, close the tap, get some water from the tap. That word made complete sense. They did not say, wash your hands under the t-a-p!

Although phonological awareness was a critical aspect of early literacy development for Jamila, having stories read to her for meaning helped her to make sense of the words (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). On reflection, synthetic phonics developed the phonological awareness skills needed by children who start school with little knowledge of the sounds in English spoken words (Johnston & Watson 2004). For learners like Jamilla, the spoken sounds in the new language were very different from the sounds spoken at home.

Read about Jamila’s experience above and consider the following questions:

- Jamila makes several comments about the challenges she experienced in learning to read as a child new to English. What are these challenges and why do they arise?
- What kinds of experiences enhanced Jamila’s experience of early literacy?
- Consider the cultural experiences and languages of the children you are working with as a researcher or teacher. How can you work to support them in making sense of learning a new language in literacy activity? (See also Smith and Sanders, this volume)
- How might your own linguistic experiences shape the kinds of practices that you engage in during literacy lessons?

Table 1. ‘Holistic Approaches to Early Literacy Education: Theory, Beliefs and Values, and Classroom Practices’ stresses the importance of a language rich environment including nursery rhymes, songs and poetry with rhythmic patterns, listening games and contextualised playful activities, to support early literacy learning. Indeed, Jamila’s account above reminds us that while phonics-based learning supports early literacy (encoding and decoding) ultimately, language and literacy is about making meaning and that it is essential that the teaching of literacy skills is only a small part of a meaningful literacy experience for all children, particularly those whose language and cultural experiences vary from those associated with schooled literacies.

Young children’s digital literacy practices

The sections above highlight the significance of young children’s home and community experiences, how these shape their early literacy practices, and why considering these can support young children in taking-up schooled literacies. In this next section we consider how digital technologies have become part of young children’s everyday lives and therefore become part of their repertoire of meaning making and literacy practices. Young children are very often comfortable in using digital devices, such as smartphones and iPads to make meaning, and access these playfully and creatively in the home. Touch screen devices seem to hold appeal to pre-school children (Merchant, 2014) and many confidently engage in activities such as scanning family photographs, clicking on links to their favourite You Tube videos, and selecting iPad icons to access favourite games (see Burnett and Daniels, 2016). Children’s engagement with digital technologies illustrates how young children fluidly

integrate the ways of being and doing literacy from their experiences into their own repertoires. However, despite this, young children's engagement with digital devices is often positioned as being 'at odds' with the need to acquire schooled literacies.

Spotlight on Research

Daniels, K. (2017) Children's Engagement with iPads in Early Years Classrooms: Exploring Peer Cultures and Transforming Practices.

Daniels (2017) presents data collected from observations of 4 and 5-year-old children in an early years setting. Data collection involved filming children while they were taking part in continuous provision. Conducting a multimodal analysis of the children's activity with iPads drew close attention to children's communicative repertoires as they engaged with apps such as Hairy Letters © by Nessy Learning Limited, Toca Robot Lab by Toca Boca ©, and Lego Story Maker © by Lego.

Through close observation and analysis of film footage, Daniels noted how collaborative interaction around apps offered opportunities for creative engagement as children explored the possibilities of the apps. This engagement was often driven by their life experiences and cultural interests. The apps children accessed were very often designed to support existing print literacy goals, such as letter formation, or knowledge of phoneme grapheme correspondences. However, these goals were only part of what was realised as children collaboratively and creatively engaged with apps. Apps became a site for collaborative participation and friendships where new meaning making practices and peer cultures emerged. This iPad itself shaped the kinds of activity that took place, through its multimodal animations, its presence and shape, and the haptic skills needed to operate the device. Haptics were integrated into children's communicative repertoires and gestures, and these seemed to influence what was taking place and the kinds of meanings that emerged.

Literacy as embodied and affective

The final section in the Holistic Framework refers to an embodied understanding of early literacy. That is, literacy is not something that is purely related to thinking or cognition. Literacy is experienced by our whole bodies, through our sensations ongoing bodily movement and its relationship with meaning making. Although this relationship has been an area of exploration for over a decade (Wetherell 2012), it is still a relatively new area of study. Thinking about how mind and body and bodily experience are intricately connected with meaning making is of particular significance when supporting young children (Daniels, 2019). (See also Monkhouse and Smith, Chapter 11)

According to Thrift (2007) our experiences are not just related to our thoughts but are felt by our bodies as moments pass. Transitions across moments can be 'felt' by the body as a change in capacity, as non-conscious visceral experiences, or sensations of being able to act, move, or conversely, being not able to act. Affect, as defined by Massumi (2015), refers to the body's capacity to affect and be affected as it moves through the ever-changing material environment. The implication of this is that the physical environment- the furniture, resources, classrooms spaces and walls, the kinds of pedagogical approaches children experience, and the materials they have access to – paper, pens, scissors, glue, PC's and so on, are interrelated with our bodily experiences and all these things have a significant impact on the ways in which children experience literacies at school more broadly.

Much is written about the role of the practitioner or teacher in early literacy education. Less is written or understood about the interrelated impact of all the factors that influence children's early literacy experiences. In current policy, the adult is often seen as one who 'imparts' literacy to children. In contrast, understanding literacy as embodied and affective

suggests that the role of the adult involves being attuned to affective flows of movement and symbolic expression, and being responsive to these. This topic was of interest to Olsson (2012), who traced young children’s activity as practitioners followed children’s movements and interests. Olsson (2012) highlighted how this heightened practitioners’ understandings of children’s lines of inquiry and potential for learning in the here and now.

As a relatively new field of inquiry in early years literacy research, thinking about affect focuses our attention to what is taking place ‘in the moment’, and how we and the children are experiencing this. How we respond as teachers of literacy as literacy is taking place is critical. So much of our work as early literacy teachers can become focused on where we want children to be, and the list of hierarchical skills we wish them to acquire. Thinking about what literacy ‘feels like’, and its affective flows in our classrooms, and how young children are experiencing literacy as it takes place, can help us to navigate our work. As stated in Chapter 1, the ways in which we respond to young children’s literacy practices will shape what they think literacy is, what it is for and ultimately, whether it is for them.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, we have looked at a number of perspectives on literacy. Indeed, literacy is at once an embodied, affective, social, cultural phenomenon that is shared with children through their family, community experiences, and those that take place in schools. Very often we understand literacy in simple terms of phonics teaching, letter formation and book reading. This is an important part, but not the only part of early literacy that we need to focus on.

Many young children experience digitally mediated literacies (See also Bailey and Monkhouse, Borland and Daniels, this volume) and participate in digitally mediated environments, often moving fluidly across digital and print forms of literacy.

Early literacy encounters should respect the diverse literacies that are in circulation in broader society and recognise children’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Supporting children’s home languages and cultures supports inclusivity and can ensure that children feel valued. Early literacy is always a negotiation between the child and the practitioner/ adult and facilitating participation through this negotiation is an essential goal of the early years teacher.

Figure 1. Holistic Approaches to Early Literacy Education: Theory, Beliefs and Values, and Classroom Practices (Literacy in Education Special Interest Group, UKLA, 2020)

Literacy is a complicated, multidimensional phenomenon that is inseparable from language, communication, and other social practices. There is no single all-encompassing theory that can fully explain the complexities of early literacy learning (Kress, 2003). The ways in which literacy is understood, or theorised shapes educators’ beliefs and values which, in turn, shapes enactments of literacy curricula and classroom practices. This infographic illustrates the theories, beliefs and values, and the classroom practices that underpin broad, balanced and inclusive approaches to literacy education in the early years.

<p>Theoretical Principles Literacy and early literacy learning can be theorised in multiple ways.</p>	<p>Belief and Values The ways in which we theorise literacy underpins our beliefs and values about literacy pedagogy.</p>	<p>Pedagogy and Classroom Practice Early literacy pedagogy and classroom practice radically shapes children's understandings of what literacy is, who it is for and their literate identities.</p>
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<p>Literacy (alongside language) can be thought of as a social and cultural practice that varies across time and place. (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984).</p>	<p>This theoretical viewpoint underpins the notion that there are multiple emerging and evolving literacies in use in society and that cultural and linguistic diversity is a feature of contemporary society. On entering educational settings, young children bring knowledge and lived experience of a diverse range of texts and literacy practices, shaped by their home and community experiences.</p> <p>It is important to recognise that the languages and literacies that children encounter in one context may not occur in another. These include commercial and environmental print and digitally mediated literacies.</p>	<p>Broad, rich and contextualised classroom practices enable children to make meaning, relationships and identities through creating and consuming meaningful text. This approach to pedagogy;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges, celebrates and builds upon children’s existing linguistic repertoires and literacies, such as knowledge of commercial logos, picture books, digital technology and apps, cultural texts (e.g. greetings cards), comics, catalogues, popular culture texts, or instant messaging. • Values and provides texts in children’s home languages and represents diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. • Enables children to draw upon their ‘funds of knowledge’ by providing time, space and a wide range of resources and diverse texts, such as books and other media (including digital technology) that have personal significance and resonate with their wider home and community experiences. • Celebrates and legitimises children’s early attempts at graphic representation and writing on paper or screen, acknowledging that children’s text in non-conventional form can ‘say’ and ‘mean’ what the author intended. • Includes practitioner modelling of a broad range of authentic literacy practices, such as reading aloud, writing notes and lists and thinking out loud when using a search engine or composing a text.
<p>Literacy can be conceptualised as an embodied and affective experience (Hackett, 2014; Gonzales Rey, 2008, Olsson, 2009)</p>	<p>This theoretical proposition further underscores that literacy is far more than simply a set of skills to be learnt. Young children’s early encounters with literacies and texts can be experienced through movement, feeling and sensation. The nature of children’s early experiences with text shapes their understanding of literacy, and of themselves and others as users of literacy.</p>	<p>Sensitive classroom practices recognise the inseparability of cognition and emotion and of mind and body. This approach to pedagogy;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes practices, texts, symbols and stories which resonate personally with children to enhance active engagement. • Recognises and capitalises on children’s interests and preferences when introducing new ideas, knowledge and skills. • Provides open-ended resources and opportunities for a diverse range of play, giving children time and space to explore, express and develop their thoughts and ideas. • Involves careful observation of children’s activity with literacy, noticing their responses (e.g. intrigue, surprise, anxiety,

		<p>excitement) and sensitively building on their lines of inquiry.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognises that fostering children's need, desire or will to read influences their skill to read – and vice versa • Develops children's positive dispositions towards learning (for example, creativity, curiosity, cooperation, concentration, playfulness and wanting to communicate)
<p>Language and literacies can be understood as multimodal practices (Kress, 2010)</p>	<p>Early communication combines words, facial expression, intonation, movement, gesture and posture. These are all resources that children draw on to communicate meaning.</p> <p>Young children's contemporary literacy practices often involve multimodal texts, comprising alphabetic script, still or moving image, distinctive fonts, and increasingly, emoticons.</p> <p>Under Article 12, UNCRC, children have a right to be heard. Recognising their emerging multimodal language and literacy repertoires constitutes their right</p>	<p>Print and media rich classroom environments include a wide range of accessible, multimodal texts and resources that encourage children to share their thinking and ideas in diverse ways. This approach to pedagogy;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blend signs, symbols and images with alphabetic script in the environment. • Encourages children to use illustration in picture books to tell, adapt and reimagine narratives. • Includes relevant real-world texts such as cookbooks, maps, comics, alongside apps and websites based on popular culture or TV programmes that enable children to draw upon, express and share their detailed knowledge. • Encourages children to create multimodal texts to express their ideas and thoughts and to connect with others. These include story making apps, collage, models, role play and enactments in addition to more conventional drawing and early writing.

<p>Early literacy practices emerge in children’s play. Narrative is a driver of children’s meaning making, which in turn supports symbolic representation needed for reading and writing (Wohlwend, 2008; Engel, 2005)</p>	<p>Opportunity for collaborative, imaginary play enables children to co-construct and represent narrative based on their experiences of lived events, experiences of tv, film and books, their cultural interests and concerns, and their imaginations.</p>	<p>Opportunity for free flow peer play using open-ended resources provides and promotes opportunity for narrative play to spontaneously evolve. This approach to pedagogy;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporates open-ended resources that promote collaborative play and imagination, including; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Upcycled materials such as cardboard boxes and fabric ○ Role-play props including dressing up clothes and hats ○ Resources that represent ethnic and cultural diversity ○ Small world play resources such as figures, model farm animals or dinosaurs. ○ Superhero play props • Values resources and rich opportunity for children to record and retell their narratives, either on paper, through re-enactments or digitally.
<p>In English, Welsh and other European languages, the relationship between spoken language and the conventional alphabetic script in which it is represented is mostly phonographic (speech sounds are represented by letters and letter combinations) (Goswami and Bryant, 2016)</p> <p>It is important to note that this is not the case for all languages; many bilingual and multilingual children may be experiencing different systems.</p>	<p>In English (and other phonographic systems), learning the letter / sound correspondence of commonly used single-letter graphemes, digraphs and trigraphs enables children to decode and encode unfamiliar words. This is a highly useful strategy when used in combination with language knowledge, contextual knowledge and whole word recognition.</p>	<p>Prior to phonics teaching, many children benefit from developing phonological awareness, that is, an ability to discriminate between the speech sounds that are used in their language. Rather than explicit teaching, phonological awareness should be encouraged through an approach to pedagogy that includes;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a language rich environment • nursery rhymes, songs and poetry with rhythmic patterns that breaks down the flow of speech • listening games • music and percussion instruments • Contextual, playful activities that encourage children to identify and produce rhyming words and alliterative phrases and to blend and segment individual phonemes in words. <p>Through these activities young children come to understand that speech is made up of combinations of individual sounds.</p> <p>When appropriate, some explicit phonics instruction may be beneficial for the majority of children. Research evidence shows that this enables children to make better progress than unsystematic or no phonics instruction (Torgerson et al., 2019). It is crucial that systematic phonics teaching is both phonetically and phonically accurate, and also pedagogically sound (Brooks et al., 2019).</p>

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