TACTYC
Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators

OCCASIONAL PAPER 3: Early literacy: a broader vision

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Literacy lies at the heart of education and has been formally enshrined as a basic human right since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. For centuries, acquiring literacy has been associated with children needing to acquire knowledge about the alphabetic code in order to read and write, but broader understandings of what literacy is have developed over recent decades. Internationally, literacy is now defined as 'the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts' (UNESCO, 2013). It is recognised as the foundation for lifelong learning, and as 'fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one's health, one's income, and one's relationship with the world' (UNESCO, 2013). In this broader vision, literacy is a platform for individuals to develop their knowledge and to participate fully in society through diverse oral, written, printed and digital media.

With literacy hoisted as the standard in a global quest for social equality and economic well-being, embedding effective early literacy into education and social systems has become a comprehensive and central task for policy-makers, with international calls for early literacy education to transcend short-term political goals and to be planned independently of legislation periods (Stiftung Lesen, 2013). Within this broader vision for literacy, supporting children's early literacy learning is considered a task for the whole society, with responsibility no longer passed fully to families and education professionals, but extending into wider communities providing dynamic and stimulating literate environments. Parents and carers are valued as children's first literacy teachers, actively encouraging babies to learn about language and literacy as part of everyday communication, by talking to their children, responding to their first sounds, reciting rhymes, singing and reading aloud to them. Beyond the home, libraries have been singled out as playing a key role in ensuring equal access to rich early literacy resources, to story-telling and story listening experiences, and as being an essential component in the mission for universally high literacy levels (Krolak, 2005; Stiftung Lesen, 2013). Furthermore, the changing nature of literacy practices has been widely recognised in an increasingly digitised age of communication, where not all members of society have equal access to resources.

It is within the context of this international vision of the nature and social significance of literacy and also in the context of recent changes to the early years curriculum in England (DfE, 2012a) along with the introduction of the new Phonics Screening test for 6 and 7 year-olds in England, that I have been invited by TACTYC to contribute this paper about early literacy. My response is informed primarily by sociocultural theoretical interpretations of how children learn and by inter-disciplinary research illustrating the complexities and diversity of early literacy learning in contemporary society.

How do we learn literacy?

Debates over how children learn to read have raged for many years. Research in experimental psychology and linguistics, for example, has suggested that learning oral language is an innate characteristic of the human species (Chomsky, 1965) but that learning literacy is not. Hence, children need to be taught how to read through a linear process of letter-by-letter decoding, sounding out and word recognition, which can be supported through a phonics approach. This line of argument supports the explicit and systematic teaching of the alphabetic code as a fixed body of knowledge that is key to learning to read. Without wishing to over-simplify a long and complex history of research in this field, a significant number of empirical studies which have informed this view have used artificial texts to 'test' particular features of reading, and have attempted to 'factor out' variables in the readers, such as their moods, motivations for reading and previous experiences of literacy.

During the 1980s and 1990s, psycholinguistic research began to suggest that literacy learning is a more 'natural' process of problem-solving and meaning-building than the above phonics-led approach had implied. Emphasis shifted to 'reading for meaning' in texts with rich language and interesting story plots (see Hall, 2003). It was also recognised that phonics instruction is complicated in the English language, where the links between graphemes and phonemes are more complex than other languages (Seymour *et al*., 2003). So, while the importance of direct teaching of phonics was recognised, this came to be seen as insufficient to equip children with the complex skills they need to become effective readers and writers.

Around this time a comparatively new approach to literacy also emerged, influenced by sociocultural theories of learning. Sociocultural research began to evidence how literacy learning is rooted in everyday life and used in many different ways for many different purposes. This approach led to literacy being viewed not as a fixed set of skills but as different kinds of social practices, which varied across communities and cultures. Hence, the plural 'literacies' came to be used to describe the diverse ways children and adults engage in a range of literacy-related

practices (Street, 1984). Sociocultural research also revealed how young children develop early literacy as they go about their everyday lives, observing and imitating others whom they meet in their families, schools and wider communities (Roskos and Christie, 2001; Larson and Marsh, 2013). The term 'emergent literacy' became widely used to describe how literacy knowledge develops slowly over a long time as very young children experience purposeful literacy activity with more experienced others, such as writing a shopping list, talking about a favourite TV program and listening to stories. Emergent literacy research also showed how young children encounter many different kinds of literacies in diverse 'literacy eco-systems' (Kenner, 2005), which reflect the diversity of their social and cultural lives. Homes which previously were assumed by educators to lack literacy opportunities were found to be filled with rich resources which had not previously been acknowledged as effective or valuable. So, for example, Nieto (1999) reflects on how emergent literacy studies captured the richness of oral story-telling as part of her own childhood experiences of literacy as she grew up in the USA:

> *As a young child in a working-class family where no one had even graduated from high school, I do not remember any books or reading activities taking place in our apartment … but this does not mean that we had no experience with literacy. I remember sitting around our kitchen table listening to stories in Spanish … or tall tales of family exploits. I also recall my mother repeating the rhymes and riddles (in Spanish) that she herself had learned as a child and my aunt telling us scary stories (in English) in the dark.* (Nieto, 1999: 7)

Of course, literacy practices change over time and new practices emerge. In today's world, most young families' daily lives are characterised by the presence of multiple digital devices which are woven into the fabric of children's everyday experiences of literacy. From a very early age, young children endeavour to read meanings from different signs, symbols and images in printed and digital texts across diverse media. Studies of children's contemporary literacy development have challenged conventional print-based conceptualisations of literacy, and have proposed ways in which practitioners can support early literacy development across multiple media (Flewitt, 2013; Plowman *et al.,* 2010).

Approaching literacy as a process that begins at birth and is richly embedded in diverse social and cultural practices stands in stark contrast to the current political focus on phonics as presented in the revised *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE, 2012a and b). The current narrow focus on phonics is also out of tune with international conceptualisations of literacy learning as enabling individuals to participate fully in their community and wider society through diverse oral, written, printed and digital media. Whilst there is strong experimental research evidence that the systematic teaching of phonics plays a key role in early literacy, it has been identified as only one of several important aspects that need to be taught within a rich and varied curriculum (Erhi *et al*., 2001) and ideally within correspondingly rich family and community literacy environments (UNESCO, 2013). The political insistence on just one method for teaching reading, along with the introduction of phonics testing, will inevitably force the literacy curriculum away from these richer goals (for further discussion, see NELP, 2008; Dombey, 2010; Wyse and Goswami, 2008). Why then does synthetic phonics feature so prominently in the current political drive for improved literacy standards, as reflected in the revised *EYFS* (DfE, 2012a and b)?

Why focus on phonics?

There is no doubt that when young children learn to read they usually need guidance to support their understanding of the alphabetic basis of written language, including a working knowledge of spelling conventions and phoneme/grapheme correspondence, as part of an integrated approach to literacy. However, in England, the government enquiry into the teaching of early reading (Rose, 2009) reached a narrower conclusion. Rather than allowing the space for practitioners to use their experience, professional judgement and observation of pupil progress to decide upon an approach to the systematic teaching of phonics that was appropriate for their setting, the report promoted the exclusive use of synthetic phonics. Whilst the *Rose Review* now officially 'should not be considered to reflect current policy or guidance' (DfE, 2013a), its impact with regard to the teaching of synthetic phonics continues to be felt.

A model of literacy that focuses on a specific set of skills, such as phonics, is particularly useful for educational regimes that are driven by accountability and assessment, as it provides both the means and the justification for 'measuring' outcomes. It also offers a prescriptive approach to 'fixing' literacy, which in turn can be seen as justification for direct political intervention in the literacy curriculum (see Ellis and Moss, 2013). However, the current phonics-driven approach to early literacy learning has several weaknesses: it fails to take into account the complexities of early literacy development (particularly in English) and it recognises neither the diversity of individual children's motivations for learning nor the diversity of literacy practices that children encounter from birth in different communities and cultures.

So how can practitioners support early literacy?

With so many different strands of research offering different ideas about how children develop literacy knowledge and skills, it is small wonder that early years practitioners struggle to know how best to support the literacy development of children in their classrooms. In recent years, many researchers and teachers have adopted a balanced approach that recognises the strengths of different perspectives (Street and Lefstein, 2007; Wyse and Styles, 2007; Wyse and Parker, 2012). Along with considering the cognitive and individual aspects of learning to read and write, there has been a move to situate 'schooled' literacy within broader social and cultural contexts. This means that rather than imposing on children one 'correct' or standardised version of literacy, educators have built on the diversity of language and literacy knowledge and experiences that children bring with them to schools and nurseries.

Literacy learning as a complex process

There is now considerable agreement that learning to be literate is a complex process of making sense of many different signs and symbols which gain meaning from the social and cultural contexts in which they are used. Far from being a 'simple' process, reading 'is one of the most

complex achievements of the human brain' (Wyse and Goswami, 2008:706). Research has also shown that children learn best when they are interested in what they are learning, and that they are most engaged in literacy activities when these activities have a recognisable purpose with which they identify, and where there is a degree of choice and collaboration. In the following sections I present examples from my research into classroom-based practice, to indicate a few ways that early literacy development can be supported playfully and creatively with traditional and 'new' media.

Literacy learning as diverse and creative

Early years classrooms in England are usually attended by richly diverse cohorts of children from a range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and with a range of physical and learning abilities, who thrive on open and inclusive approaches to learning. Recently, I was part of an inter-disciplinary team investigating how children in nursery and primary education blend their home literacy practices with 'school' versions of literacy. In this study, we observed how a dramatised story-telling and story acting technique (Paley, 1990) was introduced into early years classrooms by MakeBelieve Arts (2013), a London-based theatre and education company (Cremin *et al.,* 2013). This creative programme, known as *The Helicopter Technique*, involves children telling their stories to an adult who scribes them verbatim without making any corrections to the child's choice of words. The stories are one (short) page long, so the process of story-telling and scribing takes only a few minutes. Later the same day, the tales are acted out by the story-teller and his or her peers on an improvised 'stage' in the classroom, which is marked out with masking tape with all the children and the teacher(s) sitting on the floor around this stage.

Over time, the story-telling activity became a regular feature of classroom practice, so the children were soon familiar with its format and began to explore different stories and to re-work stories. The activity promoted literacy awareness and encouraged children to think actively about connections between thoughts, spoken words, marks on paper, the arrangement of text on the page and the transformations of spoken to written representation and back. This was a particularly rich programme for children to develop their self-expression, language and literacy. The regular repetition of the technique offered children multiple opportunities to develop descriptive language and narrative devices, and to incorporate ideas from different aspects of their lives.

Its inclusive approach meant it was effective for all children, including those with learning and/or behavioural challenges and those who were learning English as an additional language. Some children's stories focused on their home experiences, some on family or friendship more generally, others on popular culture or traditional tales, whilst others created unified stories that combined real characters and plots with imaginary worlds. Overall, this creative technique not only enhanced children's language and literacy through the telling of stories which had personal significance and through listening to others' stories, but it also contributed to their growing confidence and sense of self in the early years classroom.

Literacy learning as multimodal

Children's use of verbal language played a central role in *The Helicopter Technique*; we saw how the children also expressed themselves eloquently through silent modes of communication, such as gestures, postures, facial expression and movement. Multimodal literacy learning was also an aspect of a study I conducted with colleagues about education provision for young children with complex learning and physical difficulties (Flewitt *et al.*, 2009). One of the children we observed in this study was Mandy, a four-year-old girl with Angelman syndrome and epilepsy who could vocalise sounds and was just beginning to walk with support.

Mandy spent two mornings a week at a local preschool playgroup, where we observed many instances of exemplary inclusive practice. In this setting, Mandy was included in the full range of activities, including one-to-one, small group and whole group literacy activities. For example, in one whole group book reading session, the lead practitioner (Jackie) supported Mandy's participation in the social event of sharing a story through a combination of subtle yet highly effective strategies. Firstly, she ensured Mandy was sitting close to her in a highly supportive chair, which enabled Mandy both to see the book easily and to be included in the circle of listening children. As Jackie began to read, she frequently used pointing actions and her own gaze direction to signal to all the children, including Mandy, different parts of the book such as the book title, illustrations, the written words etc. Jackie also used her body orientation and gaze to gain and retain Mandy's attention, occasionally saying her name quietly, touching her arm gently to regain her attention, smiling at her reassuringly – always vigilant as she read to the whole group. When Mandy's gaze was fixed on the book and her interest clearly aroused, Jackie asked her questions, such as "Ooh cake, you like cake don't you?" When Mandy's attention strayed to a toy she was holding, Jackie leaned forward and gently took the toy from her hand, interpreting her lack of resistance and fixed gaze as a sign of acquiescence and congratulating her with a smile and whispered "Good girl" before returning to face the full circle of children.

These sensitively orchestrated actions lasted just a few seconds and were almost imperceptible in the whole group activity, yet they resulted in Mandy's attention being maintained on the book reading and to her silent responses being celebrated by adults and peers as valuable contributions to the activity. Overall, we found that when adults had high expectations of children's communicative development, and valued and mirrored their silent modes of expression, the children all responded enthusiastically and were included in a wide range of literacy activities.

The learning potential of new technologies

In another recent study, we investigated the potential of touch-screen technologies for early literacy. We lent iPads to a Children's Centre nursery (3-4 year olds), a primary school Reception class (4-5 year olds) and a Special School (7-18 year olds) and observed their use. The iPads were incorporated into practice differently within the three settings, reflecting their differing pedagogic approaches. Although staff had some concerns about the role of digital media in young children's lives, they found that well planned activities

increased children's motivation and concentration, and offered rich opportunities for early literacy, including collaborative interaction, independent learning, communication and creative work. Furthermore, staff welcomed the opportunities the iPad afforded to make links between children's home and school lives and to prepare children for a future where they would need high levels of technological competence and skills.

Concluding thoughts

Early literacy is a core component in the education of young children. The UNESCO (2013) vision for literacy is not simply of a mechanistic process of learning an alphabetic code and juggling with phonemic inconsistencies. Rather, early literacy is viewed as beginning at birth and unfolding in babies' everyday experiences, with family members as role models for language and communication within community networks of rich literacy practices. The evidence from research is that phonics teaching is important but not sufficient on its own to create fluent, motivated and critical readers. The current political insistence on the teaching and assessment of one particular approach to phonics is, therefore, out of kilter with research and with broader conceptualisations of literacy. Furthermore, the current lack of funding for public library facilities does not augur well for the emancipatory vision of literacy promoted internationally (Stiftung Lesen, 2013).

Young children expect to learn to read and write, and most need help to do so. Some make good progress while others experience disappointment – in themselves and in the social systems with which they are endeavouring to identify. With up to 50% of young children judged as 'failing' the 2012 Phonics Screening Check (DfE, 2013b), we might well ask ourselves what future we are building for the youngest members of our society.

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