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Parents as pedagogues for 0-3-year-olds' early literacy learning in digitally networked homes

Keywords

parents as pedagogues	0–3-year-olds	home literacy environment
digital literacies	home learning	early childhood literacy

Objectives

This paper is founded on the premise that most children growing up in contemporary homes in post-industrial countries take part in digitally-mediated literacy practices at home, using devices such as smartphones, tablets, digital TVs and computers to connect with distant family and friends, find information, play games and watch recorded or broadcast programmes. Media usage reports indicate marked year-on-year increases in the digital activity of children aged 3-15 years, including going online, which have sparked debates about children's safety and security in a digitally-mediated world (Chaudron, 2015; Livingstone et al., 2017). However, the digital activity of 0-3-olds remains under-researched and largely absent from public policy debates, possibly because this younger age range does not yet feature in 'society's digital imaginary' (Livingstone and Third, 2017: 660). Furthermore, the role that parents play as pedagogues has historically been under-valued. The Covid-19 pandemic offers a unique moment in time to re-value home as a vital learning space for young children, yet not all parents have the resources to offer equitable opportunities for children to learn about and with digital technologies. Key objectives of this paper are 1) to identify ways in which parents support children's contemporary literacy learning at home in digital and print media, and 2) to re-conceptualise the Home Literacy Environment (HLE) as a digitally networked space, where children connect directly with friends and family through diverse digital technologies as part of everyday family literacy practices.

Theoretical framework

This research problematizes the order and coherence implied by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2005) to investigate how children interact and intra-act with their bodies, others and technology in the micro-practices of everyday life, where different spheres of influence intersect and impact on their lives. Building on Neal and Neal's (2013) suggestion that the concentric circles of Bronfenbrenner's nested systems elide how the different spheres of influence impact on individuals' lives, this paper describes the digitally-negotiated networks that connect individual children directly or indirectly, transiently or constantly to wider society. A networked rather than nested metaphor offers an apt framework to map the nature of the contemporary HLE by foregrounding how affect is central to learning.

Methods of inquiry

This paper focuses on case studies of a one-year-old girl and two-year-old boy and their families in England, which formed part of an EU-wide study of eight girls and five boys aged between nine and 34 months, in England, Finland, Israel, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden (reference withheld). The study adopted the 'Day in the Life' (DITL) methodological approach (reference withheld), which follows ethnographic research principles and methods, using a combination of interviews, field notes and video recordings in a condensed time frame. Formal ethical approval was received from the host university, anonymised data were stored safely on password-protected digital systems, and reflective ethics steered the research. Parental consent was received for all participating children, and careful attention was paid to child mood during home visits, which ceased if participants seemed disturbed by our presence.

Pseudonyms are used in all reporting and explicit consent was given for specific images to be used in dissemination. Qualitative data analysis was iterative and enriched through the ongoing exchange of ideas between researchers and families, leading to the generation of inductive analytic themes (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2019).

Data sources & evidence
Data included audio recordings and transcripts of interviews and collaborative analysis with parents (total approx. 4 hours), approximately five hours of video recordings made in each child's home (total approx. 10 hours), as well as extensive field notes and researcher reflective diary. Both families were white British and spoke English at home, with all four parents in paid employment. No claims are made regarding diversity in this small sample, although diversity characterised the wider EU sample (reference withheld). Petra, aged 14 months, lived with her mother (part-time Special Needs Teacher) and father (self-employed musician and recently trained electrician) in a 2-bedroom apartment in an outer London suburb. Petra attended a childminder two days per week when both parents worked. Petra had just begun to walk independently, spoke some words clearly and communicated effectively through speech sounds, intonation, skilled use of gaze exchange, facial expression, and hand and body movement. Charlie, aged 32 months, lived with his mother (copywriter on maternity leave), father (ICT consultant) and younger brother, aged 7months, in a 3-bedroom terraced house in a rural village in South England. Charlie attended nursery two days a week. He was inquisitive, physically dextrous, able to concentrate for extended periods, and spoke with well-developed vocabulary, grammatical accuracy and reasoning.

Findings/Results
Although Petra's parents had described their home environment as 'low tech' and Charlie's parents had described their home as 'media rich', we found that both children had well-developed digital media networks through which they maintained intense affective relationships, and digital media were integrated into diverse aspects of both their home lives.

Technology ownership: All four parents in this study owned a Smartphone, a work computer or Mac, and each family had an internet-connected TV. Petra's family also had an iPad (mostly for viewing photos and family videos) and a broken digital radio. No technology had been purchased specifically for Charlie or Petra, other than one Xylophone app for Petra. Petra's parents had a well-reasoned strategy for using technology at home 'in small doses' but recognised its relevance for children's future lives. Charlie's parents encouraged him to use technology as part of their naturally-occurring, everyday family practices.

Home literacy practices: Most of Petra's and Charlie's observed early literacy activities at home were non-digital (e.g. reading books, drawing, painting, recreating the rhythms of music, categorising shapes and colours). Charlie was also beginning to help his mother read out loud (from familiar books, recipes and labels) and rehearsed rich vocabulary during the almost constant shared enactment of imaginary play narratives between himself and his mother throughout the day. Nonetheless, digital media were deeply integrated in both their home literacy lives.

Petra's observed digital literacy practices included: navigating (with her mother's help) access to her favourite TV programme using a remote controller; selecting and playing music with her father on his Smartphone; reading iPad symbols (with her father's help) to find and play with her xylophone app; navigating iPad symbols (with mother's help) to view photographs; and reading symbols on the washing machine to activate its touch-sensitive controls. Petra also interacted regularly with distant family who

lived far away by using her mother's Smartphone to make WhatsApp video calls with her paternal and maternal grandmothers, aunt and cousins. The mother reported:

> 'when we started using it, a few months ago she was very, very confused . . . Grandma is 2D on the little screen . . . but she is really used to it now and she chats away'

Video-recorded observations of Petra's 10-minute WhatsApp video call with her maternal grandmother (Gaga) and 9-minute call with her maternal aunt and cousins show that her digitally-mediated interactions with distant loved ones were rich with affection, spontaneity and laughter. Petra's mother, grandmother, aunt and older cousins skilfully supported triadic, playful interaction in distant-yet-present play exchanges. Although barely 14 months old, Petra had skills, knowledge and social understanding of how to communicate effectively via video calls, and how to share affection over distance. Petra waited patiently and expectantly for both calls to connect. She responded contingently to her interlocutors' prompts and her actions were performative, inclusive of nearby and distant adults and well-timed to provoke affection and laughter. She sometimes fixed meaning in words ('Heyo [name]'), or vocalisation (humming a tune), but more frequently in facial expression (smiles/pretend shock), action (blowing a kiss/dancing) or manipulating artefacts (showing toys/making her doll kiss the screen) 'in the three-dimensional multisemiotic world of objects' (Kress, 1997: 130) where there are no words, and often no need for words.

Similarly, Charlie and his family communicated regularly with distant family and friends. Observations included an eight-minute Skype call with Charlie's paternal grandparents on his mother's work laptop. This rich exchange demonstrated how Charlie overcame the complexities of sustaining simultaneous exchanges with physically present (his mother and younger brother) and online networks (distant grandparents). He often sought control of the parallel conversations by asserting and sustaining sociodramatic play which his grandparents joined in as they responded to cues offered through the material-discursive intra-actions of the technology, mother and child in the ebb and flow of the exchange. Data also included a highly skilled and playful WhatsApp video message that Charlie had made with his mother's help to send to a friend who had temporarily moved away. Additionally, Charlie often sought information online with his mother, e.g. consulting a weather app, looking up recipes for supper etc.

Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work
Although the sample size of this study is small, its ethnographic approach enabled deep and telling insights into very young children's digital literacy practices at home, revealing how parents can skilfully support their children's digital literacy knowledge and skills in ways that are embedded in everyday practices and are imbued with affect. Both children in this study were developing the skills and knowledge to communicate effectively and affectively when using digital technologies, and both were learning how to find information digitally (TV programmes using a remote; weather forecasts via an App). Both children were reading meaning from digital symbols, and both showed cultural and social understanding of digital literacy practices. Whilst 14-month-old Petra was moving from vocalisation and action towards expressing meaning through the mode of speech whilst also recognising digital symbols, 34-month-old Charlie was on the cusp of moving from his mastery of oral language to recognising words and symbols in books, packaging, labels and digital screens. He had also begun to understand, produce and share highly creative and complex media texts that were imbued with playfulness and deep affection. Both children's digital literacy activities were interwoven with affect, which anchored their material and virtual intra-actions with people, materials and spaces.

The study offers original insights into how parents can enact highly effective pedagogic strategies in the HLE by being responsive to children's interests and by including their children in purposeful practices

and interactions with near and distant loved ones. The study also illustrates how many children's everyday home literacy lives no longer unfold within a neatly nested microsystem or within the physical boundaries of their home. Rather, their lives connect directly and fluidly with diverse digitally mediated networks, which may include interactions with the wider macrosystems of cultural and ideological beliefs through popular culture, as well as affective relationships with distant friends and family. As part of these practices, when supported and encouraged by their parents, the young children in this study were becoming highly adept at wielding socially engrained patterns of semiosis that come about in everyday practices through the happenstance entanglements and intra-actions between bodies, materials and social spaces. The findings of this study offer a powerful counter-narrative to pessimistic discourses of digital technologies as threatening to young children's agency, learning and safety.

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