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'Listening to my readers': Exploring the 'Personal literacies landscapes' of beginner readers

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Abstract

This study takes a more holistic look at reading support, to explore what else is happening in this teaching and learning context, beyond the acquisition of a more secure knowledge of decoding skills. Children are deemed in need of a reading support intervention when their literacy skills are assessed as being significantly below the levels expected by their school for their age, and these difficulties can often negatively impact both upon their confidence as a learner, and also upon their enjoyment of literacy activities in school. Confidence and enjoyment in literacy learning is tacitly presumed to re-emerge once these skills are gained, boosted by the intervention's focus on the cognitive technical decoding skills. This can often lead to less choice and agency in their reading activities than their peers enjoy. However, the findings of this study suggest that building in activities that promote enjoyment in literacy learning, confidence as a learner and a sense of agency do not detract from the cognitive gains, but seem to boost them. A key aspect of this is linking reading support activities to the literacy activities that the learner enjoys at home as well as in school. This is theorised as an individual's 'Personal Literacies Landscape': all the different texts that they have seen or heard, even if they cannot access them independently, that have contributed to their ways of being in the world.

Keywords

beginner readers, literacy, pupil agency, reading support

Introduction

This paper draws on a range of theoretical perspectives to study literacy support learning and teaching, to take fresh approaches to thinking about all the different forms of support that practitioners bring to helping children who find the beginning stages of learning to read particularly

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challenging. There are a range of literacy support programmes that are put in place in schools for children who have been identified as not making the progress expected by the school in their acquisition of early reading skills. These support programmes can range from the quite informal, with gentle reminders of reading strategies and skills within the context of some additional 1:1 reading time, to the very formal, with closely scripted, data driven interventions delivered by highly trained teaching assistants or specialist teachers. Although an emphasis on learning the links between letter shapes and sounds, and blending the sounds into words, is usually a very important aspect particularly of the early stages of reading support, this does not mean that the traditional, simple view of reading (see Harrison, 2010) inevitably prevails in this process, and that other, equally important, aspects are not also helping to develop reading competence.

Theoretical framework

In order to open up fresh perspectives on reading support, a theoretical framework that is not usually employed in this context was chosen. Both new materialist thinking, and consideration of social and affective elements, seemed suited to developing a more holistic understanding of children's reading development and self-confidence, and to generating new insights. Exploring positive flows of affect seemed important, as the negative emotional impact of reading difficulties has been explored by writers such as Burden (2005), but ways to reverse this less so. This theoretical framework, however, also brought challenges in terms of requiring a move away from more conventional views on what data consists of, and how it can be analysed.

These new perspectives on literacy learning are built upon work begun by Brian Street in the 1980s: his new thinking about literacy learning set in motion what became known as the New Literacies Studies movement. He highlighted the perspective that literacy activities were based in the desire to communicate, and thus were intrinsically social, and therefore also cultural, activities (e.g. Street, 1993, 1997). He also wrote about the significance of this view for schools: that the literacy activities featured in their curricula represented just a small part of the different possible ways in which their pupils engaged with literacy (Street, 1997). Beyond the school literacy curriculum, there were many diverse ways of engaging in literacy activities, leading to the term 'literacies' to include the full range, and this thinking was developed further by other scholars, including ideas about home literacies, affect and literacies, and the impact of 'new materialist' thinking.

Home literacies

Pahl (e.g. in Pahl, 2014a, 2014b; Pahl and Kelly, 2005) explored the ways in which children engaged in literacy activities at home, beyond those originating from their work in school. These could include religious activities, keeping in contact with family members who did not live locally, or activities related to playing with friends, and these may be in English and/or in other languages. With Rowsell (Pahl and Rowsell, 2012), she explored ways in which schools could build upon this literacy richness, although not specifically for reading support. Barton and Hamilton (2012) looked at how adults engaged in literacy activities across the whole of their daily living, and found that it encompassed a huge range, from everyday practicalities like writing lists, to building support for local causes. They emphasised how much emotions were involved when engaging with the less utilitarian literacy activities, writing about the 'ruling passions' that were often the motivating energy behind much of the reading and writing that the adults engaged in. In addition, Marsh (2010) pointed out how big a role digital versions played in home literacy, as people used the internet to access a wide range of different texts. This was in contrast to school, where literacy and IT were often seen as two separate aspects of the curriculum. Building on links between home and

school reading experiences is particularly important for those who find learning to read especially challenging, especially as extra practice and support at home can help boost skills.

Affect, agency and literacy learning

The role that affect plays in how children engage with literacy activities has been explored by scholars like Gail Boldt and Christian Ehret. Boldt (Leander and Boldt, 2013) described the contrast between how Lee, a Japanese American 10-year old boy, engages with reading activities in school and how she observed him intra-act with books at home. She wrote that Lee was classed in school as a struggling reader, who was reluctantly in receipt of reading interventions, and was resistant to taking part in school literacy activities, as he did not feel that he gained anything positive from them. At home, on the other hand, Boldt (Leander and Boldt, 2013) reported him starting to read independently at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning, and continue to be engaged in reading, or activities centred around his reading, for the next 12 hours, continuing when his friend Hunter arrived after lunch and joined in with him. Leander and Boldt (2013) highlighted how different from schooled literacy practices is the way in which Lee reads at home, most strikingly the intensity of affect between Lee and the Japanese Manga graphic novels, of which he says: 'I love this so much' (Leander and Boldt, 2013: 27), possibly in part because of their cultural resonances for him. Burnett and Merchant (2018a) built on the work of Bennett (2001) to think about enchantment and reading: how it can almost seem that a text has put a spell upon a reader and transported them to another world. They pointed out that this can as easily be a non-fiction as a fiction text, especially when accessed digitally, with the addition of sound and movement. Ehret (2018) focused on the role of affect in literacy in terms of teaching and learning relationships, emphasising the importance of becoming 'attuned' to a learner's emotional needs as well as learning needs, and building up a warm relationship as the foundation of learning. He too emphasised the role that learners' emotions play in prompting them to want to use their literacy skills to communicate with others, which contrasts with the much more technical focus of some reading interventions. However, these elements are much less likely to be considered in studies of reading support, the focus instead tending to be on measurable gains in skills.

New materialism and agency in literacy learning

The contribution that material resources play in literacy learning has been re-evaluated in the light of new thinking on the agency that objects can enact upon humans. Lenz Taguchi (2010) explored the way in which children's play and learning was influenced by the physical nature of resources, and in their exploration of the literacy learning that took place in the 'Writers' Studio', Kuby et al. (2016) described the ways in which working with a range of materials enriched the written and spoken texts the children produced. These intra-actions with material objects are not always predictable: Hackett (2021) commented that they can sometimes even be described as 'subversive', as they can influence the outcomes of teaching plans. The choice of resources can significantly increase or reduce autonomy for learners, which has been associated with higher levels of engagement, achievement, understanding and well-being across the curriculum (Martinek et al., 2016), and in reading specifically (Svrcek and Heidt, 2022). Much of the support provided for struggling learners can be viewed as reducing autonomy, as they are often provided with differentiated activities that have reduced options and more structure, in a bid to lessen the academic pressure and workload. However, there are strategies that can help to overcome these problems. Lenters (2019) argued for what she called 'differenciation', or allowing students to adapt the task themselves to a form that they found more engaging as well as manageable.

A resource that can increase pupil agency is a carefully chosen game to reinforce new literacy learning. This can be IT based, or games bought from educational suppliers, but they can also be small homemade lotto or matching pairs games, that can easily be photocopied onto card and sent home as well as played in school. Game-based learning has additional benefits, including boosting fine motor and social skills, and can also provide opportunities to transfer new learning into different contexts (Pavey, 2021). Not only do games provide additional practice in a palatable way, but they also provide a sense of autonomy in that the students can chose their own strategies, and additionally a boost to self-esteem, especially if they can win against their teacher or parent. Losing may also be beneficial, as the 'graceful failure' involved in not always winning games can help learners to be less concerned about making occasional mistakes in other aspects of learning (Plass et al., 2015).

Reconsidering reading support as 'literacy-as-event'

'Literacy-as-event' is a phrase developed by Burnett and Merchant (2018b) in order to express their conception of literacy as including yet more still. They argued that literacies can include not just texts or verbally narrated stories, but also brief and constantly changing conversations and small interactions that happen around more structured literacy activities. Included in this are the social relationships that are taking place at the same time, and the emotions and affective flows (Stewart, 2007) that the participants are experiencing. This could also be seen as part of the process of 'attunement' (Boldt, 2019; Ehret, 2018) as a practitioner in a reading support context gets to know both the learning needs and the individual preferences of the learner(s), and grows to understand how best to give them agency while still focusing on their learning needs. While a good relationship is conventionally seen as a pleasant addition to a good learning environment, 'literacy-as-event' (Burnett and Merchant, 2018b) positions it instead at the heart of the learning process, providing the social context for encouraging communication in many different forms. Finding resources that appeal to struggling readers enough to overcome the negative emotions often associated with reading difficulties is also a crucial aspect of reading support, and the concept of 'literacy-as-event' (Burnett and Merchant, 2018b) also includes the role that material objects play in literacy learning.

Methodology

The core methodological framework for the study was education action research (Baumfield et al., 2008), as it was carried out by a researcher/practitioner looking primarily to improve their own practice. It followed the action research cycles of plan, act, review, plan that so closely mirror the teaching planning cycles, especially in the field of educational support teaching. However, the specific approach to action research followed was that proposed by McNiff and Whitehead (2010), which emphasised generating research questions that open up new possibilities, rather than focusing on measuring behavioural outcomes. In addition, McNiff and Whitehead (2010) wrote about the processes of deconstructing and decentring, co-creation of knowledge, practice as being continually evolving, and the importance of living out personal values in both practice and research, which seemed to fit well with the study's theoretical framework.

The key focus was on exploring in detail how a structured multi-sensory reading support intervention was adapted to meet the learning needs of three children aged between 5 and 7, all of whom had been assessed by their school as not meeting the expected levels for their ages in their reading skills. They attended the same primary school, in a semi-rural area of the United Kingdom,

which had fewer than average children who were in receipt of additional pupil premium funding, children who were multilingual, or those with additional needs. All the children were supported to develop their early literacy skills by working 1:1 or in pairs with the researcher/practitioner, over approximately two school terms, using a multisensory, structured literacy programme that is often recommended for children experiencing dyslexic-type difficulties. The fieldwork took place over two academic years, with two pupils participating in the first year, and one in the second.

The multisensory structured reading support programme at the heart of this study (Hickey, 2000) is one that is frequently used to support children with literacy difficulties. It is usually delivered over several months, or even longer, with the same teacher working with one child or a small group, enabling strong relationships to be built up, and children's interests and preferences known. While it follows a predetermined structure of learning one letter at a time, there is scope for practitioners to include some supplementary texts that can be fitted around individual learner's interests, to boost enjoyment, and to tailor activities to individual learners. It also involves more active, tactile approaches, for example using wooden letters to form words. Although lessons are usually an hour long, in this study it was adapted so that the sessions lasted 20–30 minutes, and took place three times a week, in timetable slots when school literacy interventions usually happened. Literacy skills were assessed before the intervention began, to check for and remedy gaps in existing knowledge, before moving onto new skills.

Ethical considerations

Three different aspects of ethical considerations were intertwined in this study. Firstly, the children's happiness while participating was considered, ensuring that they had given their informed consent to taking part, and knew that they could withdraw whenever they wished. A child-friendly consent form was designed to this end, and all the children signed this with a member of staff, rather than the researcher/practitioner, present. Their parents and carers also signed similar consent forms, as did any members of staff participating, and were assured that they too could withdraw at any point. A member of the school senior leadership team liaised regularly with the researcher/practitioner, to ensure that the children were all enjoying the intervention, and making progress with their skills.

Secondly, to protect confidentiality, names throughout are all pseudonyms, and any details that might help to identify the school have been obscured. Data was mainly paper-based, and stored securely away from the school site, and anonymised once the study was completed. Ethical approval was granted by the university the researcher/practitioner was studying with.

A third aspect was that the intervention that formed the focus of the study was delivered to the children by the researcher/practitioner on a voluntary basis, but taking on the role in class as one of the support staff, for the majority of the academic year (apart from the last couple of weeks of the summer term). This could be seen to have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the experience was in this way kept as normal as possible for the children, as it was very similar to school literacy interventions. The researcher/practitioner also acted as a class teaching assistant in the mornings, helping to create a good relationship with the children, and carrying out the intervention very much as it would be if it were part of everyday practice, rather than as purely 'research'. On the other hand, it could be argued that this mitigated some level of consent for the children, as it was thus harder for them to withdraw, and made the research aspects less explicit for the children. However, the researcher/practitioner took care to explain that they intended to write about the work they did together for other teachers to read, and hopefully learn more about helping other children with their reading, and all were happy with this.

The data

The data for this study consisted of the researcher-practitioner's reflexive research diary (Altrichter and Holly, 2005) which was completed after every session, evaluated lesson plans, and semi-structured interviews with the children's class teachers half way through the intervention, and at its end. This data was analysed using writing as a means of inquiry, as outlined by Richardson and St Pierre (2005). Richardson and St Pierre (2005) argue that the notion of writing only taking place once ideas have been thought through clearly and logically belongs to the world of traditional quantitative data analysis, whereas qualitative data analysis often takes place in a more iterative, reflexive way, in which the writer's thoughts only become fully clarified as they are committed to paper. This method was particularly apt for this study not only because the data was very much writing based, but also because the data analysis was not completed in one go, but much more iteratively, as evaluations were completed, further reading was undertaken, and fresh insights appeared. This was especially pertinent in the second year of the fieldwork, when data analysis from the first year was carried out in tandem with the fieldwork and lesson evaluations in the second year.

As the theoretical framework was at the heart of this study was a broad one that included new materialist thinking and exploring flows of affect, Fox and Alldred's (2017) thinking about research assemblages was used in order to develop a broader perspective on what aspects of the intervention could be explored in this study. Fox and Alldred (2017) widened out what can be considered as the elements of a research context, to include not only people, behaviours, outputs and theories, but also, for example, emotions, social networks, bodily reactions and social expectations. As they think in terms of assemblages, this would then include exploring how these different elements all intra-act (Barad, 2007) with each other in many possible ways, including how physical resources can influence both social and cognitive aspects of teaching, and how much social and emotional factors are an integral part of learning success or failure. By widening the range of what 'data' might be considered to consist of, a space was made to look beyond the traditional focus in reading support on technical, cognitive aspects, to examine what else may be important.

The data has then been presented as vignettes (Skilling and Stylianides, 2019). For each child, there seemed to be one particular moment that encapsulated the fresh insights generated in the time spent working with them. These vignettes were identified and developed by using 'emergent listening' (Davies, 2014), which involves using more senses than just hearing, taking more conscious notice of body language and flows of affect (Stewart, 2007) which often form part of the information processed as part of the listening process. In addition, 'emergent listening' (Davies, 2014) focuses on striving to hear what a child is actually communicating, rather than filtering their words for certain pre-determined, adult-centric pieces of information. Listening in this way may result in a practitioner hearing things that they may not be expecting, or which might challenge their pre-conceived ideas, leading to them growing or changing in their practice, in an emergent process. These moments had been captured in rich detail in the research journal, and some are described in the next section, with a discussion of their significance.

Findings

The following vignettes are taken from the research diary, and chosen both for their affective intensity, and for their ability to illustrate moments that seemed significant in better understanding the relationship between school literacy learning activities, and that particular learner's wider connections to different literacies, which seemed to coincide within them.

Building upon affective flows to develop spaces for learner agency in combining home literacies with school reading support

Oscar had been a participant in the reading support intervention for a few months, and he was gradually gaining in skills and confidence as a reader. He appeared to remain very faithful to the approach he had learnt in phonics lessons of sounding out each letter before blending into a word, even if he already knew the word by sight, which made reading quite slow and disjointed for him. He would also not seem to notice if what he had read did not make sense. The following excerpt from the research diary took place one morning while walking down the corridor to return to Oscar's classroom:

> March 12th: Oscar surprised me today – he wanted to stop and look at a display in the corridor about endangered animals. I thought he had mispronounced 'penguin', but he said 'no, pangolin', and when I looked at the display again I saw a picture of a pangolin, which I had never heard of before! Had to google it when I got home!

This was a key moment that turned out to be, in hindsight, an example of what Davies (2014) described as 'letting go of my adult, teacherly self who presumes to already know and to know better', replacing this with learning to listen more carefully at a deeper level and thus experiencing a 'moment of grace when new possibilities open up' (Davies, 2014: 15). 'Emergent listening' (Davies, 2014) resulted in the realisation that Oscar had a great deal of knowledge about wild animals, and a passion for finding out even more about them, which he had not voiced in the busier world of the classroom before. This pivotal moment was not part of the lesson, just a conversation on the way back from the room where the reading support lesson had taken place, illustrating Burnett and Merchant's (2018b) concept of 'literacy-as-event', in which all forms of communication can be considered as part of literacies, including the fleeting and informal.

In this moment, Oscar moved from being the 'learner', whose pronunciation needed correcting, to being the 'expert', who could impart knowledge to others. This opened up the possibility that Oscar might have been struggling not so much from lack of ability, but from not being able to connect with the literacy curriculum. It gradually became clear that Oscar had a whole world of literacy enjoyment at home, based round his love of animals, and stories or information about them: his favourite book was 'The Jungle Story'. His literacy activities at home, which he shared with family members, seemed to be in different media, as he was acquiring levels of information from documentaries on the iPad, which he would not have been able to access in print. Finding more animal books to read, and talking with him about animals, seemed to help him to make more links between his home and school literacies, and as his literacy skills improved, so his confidence grew in his abilities to do other school activities. Serendipitously, the two came together in the school reading comprehension assessment task:

> March 26th: Oscar very confident on section about African animals – had to stop him writing everything he knew about all the animals so he had time to answer all the questions!

Being given a text to read that really interested him seemed to pay off, in terms of boosting Oscar's accuracy and comprehension skills just when it would be noticed the most, and his test results indicated that he made over a year of expected progress, in just a term and a half.

Adapting the material aspects of reading support to increase the agency of learners

Ava started Year 1 recognising only a handful of letters, and was not yet able to blend their sounds together to make words. The structured multisensory literacy programme (Hickey, 2000) seemed

ideal for her, as it focused on one letter at a time, adding it to those learnt already, to read and write phonetically regular words. This would also have potential to help reduce the anxiety that Ava seemed to feel when faced with literacy activities. As she did not seem to be finding the school reading scheme books very appealing, the reading intervention was adapted by adding little home-made books that focused on that day's learning. Ava said that she would like the books to be about things she had done at home, for example trips to the seaside; princesses, as she loved watching Disney stories at home on her iPad; and traditional tales like the Three Bears. Each book was just one folded A4 piece of paper, usually in Ava's favourite colour, pink. This meant that she could keep the little books at home, and she reported incorporating them into her play at home, plus additionally did not have the stress of trying to bring them back to school on the correct day for reading. Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2017) point to ways in which the physical attributes of resources impact upon their role in teaching and learning, and here it was the colour, 'princess' pink, combined with the disposability and foldability of a single sheet of paper that gave it its value in this situation. It could quickly be folded into a little book and filled with what was most useful to Ava's learning on that day, then could be popped into her bag and taken home to be used in any way that she liked, unlike school reading books that must be handled carefully and returned promptly.

As Ava loved colouring, the last few minutes of each lesson usually included this, often illustrating one of the pages in her little book, while talking about the topic for the next little book, or her news from home. The vignette below illustrates how much working with what is important to a learner helps to develop a good relationship with them:

> 26th March 2019: Ava had a lovely time colouring in the pictures in our homemade book – all in pink! . . . We had a lovely moment of companionable silence as we sat side by side at (the) desk – I was getting my coloured pencils ready sharpened for tomorrow and just thinking I would let her enjoy the colouring for a few minutes but we were united by a common bond of contentment.

This moment is reminiscent of Boldt's (2019) description of finding connection with a troubled young child as they wordlessly shovelled sand side by side. She calls this process 'attunement', in which the adult tunes into what is important and real for the child, instead of prioritising adult constructs and interpretations. Although it is possible to dismiss the role of enjoyment and good relationships as 'sugar coating' that make the 'real work' of learning to read more palatable, there did seem to be noticeable impact on reading accuracy and skills. After two terms of the reading support intervention, Ava knew all her letters, and was able to use this knowledge for decoding, alongside other skills like using context clues and checking for meaning, to read a school book independently for the first time. This progress was noticeable in the classroom too, as the following research journal entry indicates:

> 29th April 2019: Asked Ava's teacher later on for some feedback for the last term, and she said: 'The difference is huge – everyone says so'.

Working with pupil preferences in the social context of reading support

Although Ben never seemed to be approaching the point of not wanting to be part of the reading intervention study, which had been explained to him that he could do at any point, there were days when he grumbled relentlessly through lessons, which had to be planned with several short activities as he would often become 'bored' after a few minutes on each. The class teacher said that he had been very reluctant in the previous year to engage with reading support, resulting in a widening gap with his peers. However, there were also days when he was very positive and enthusiastic, and

it would be very hard to predict what would happen from day to day, as these consecutive research journal extracts describe:

> 28th March 2018: Ben read 'The Flying Elephan', with just a few words he needed help with – I nearly cried because it was such a leap from October! I asked him to pick a smiley face for how he feels when he reads now and he picked the biggest smile . . .. I took him back into class for a big fuss from the class teacher. I said I would not be in tomorrow as it was the last day of term *(and therefore not the normal timetable)*, but Ben looked sad and said he would still like to read.

> 29th March 2018: Went in just for reading activities time, but no hug from Ben today unlike earlier in the week. Ben said that he did not want to read – quite a surprise after the day before! The class teacher threw the invitation open to everyone, and I was relieved to see that everybody else's hands shot up. Ben looked quite surprised at their enthusiasm, then put his hand up too. The teacher chose Ben and asked him to choose a friend to read with him too: they read a 'yellow' reading book between them.

Two factors seemed to result in Ben feeling a little more positive: beginning to work in a pair with another learner who was at a similar place with his reading, instead of 1:1, and using reading and spelling games as much as possible to practice new letter knowledge and phonics skills. Ben seemed to really enjoy games with a strategy element, and was particularly happy when he could play as a team with his colleague and win the game.

Discussion

Developing the concept of 'Personal Literacies Landscapes'

Although all three children were receiving a reading support intervention because they were encountering challenges in managing to access texts independently, this did not mean that texts are not already important to them. Indeed, the opposite seemed more true: all three seemed to have strong emotional connections with texts that were personally significant for them. This resonates with the thinking about home literacies outlined earlier, that most children will arrive at school with rich experiences of different forms of literacies. These could take the form of story books read before bedtime or through the day (Hall et al., 2018) but they could also include animated stories in cartoons or in children's television programmes, non-fiction texts about interests such as dinosaurs (Alexander and Jarman, 2018), traditional tales and folk stories, nursery rhymes and action songs, religious texts or cards and letters sent by family members. Young children have been shown to access texts in many different ways: toddlers and nursey age children often use digital devices (Flewitt and Clark, 2020). Some of these texts may well be what Esteban-Guitart (2016) describes as 'funds of identity': texts, artefacts, interests and activities on which an individual's sense of themselves is built. Esteban-Guitart (2016) emphasises the pedagogical benefits of making links between a child's 'funds of identity' (Esteban-Guitart, 2016) and their learning, as this can help to contextualise and secure new knowledge and skills for them. It can also help to form a 'third space' (Levy, 2008), to bridge between a child's home literacies and school literacies for those who are less engaged with the school literacy curriculum.

These findings led to the development of a term that seemed to best describe each individual's unique relationship with the literacies they have encountered, the children's individual emotional responses to different aspects of literacy learning, and how these literacies have contributed to them being who they are: 'Personal Literacies Landscapes'. The analogy of a landscape seemed apt because it encapsulates not only the many different features that can be contained in a geographical area, but also the fact that these features are also linked to others beyond the immediate boundaries,

whether by road, rail or sea. It chimes with Scollon and Scollon's (2003) suggestion that the language present in the environment can be seen as constituting a linguistic landscape, and additionally with Hargreaves's (2000) concept of emotional landscapes. The concept of 'Personal Literacies Landscapes' seemed to illustrate not only how many different ways literacies are experienced by an individual, but also how often this is done in ways that link them to others, and to the 'thing power' (Bennett, 2010) of physical objects, as part of the process. It may also represent a different way to think about 'reading identity', as it broadens out the role of reading in more aspect's of a reader's sense of identity. Brandt's (2001) writes:

> What people are able to do with their reading or writing in any time or place – as well as what others do to them with reading and writing – contribute to their sense of identity, normality, possibility. (Brandt, 2001: 11)

Using 'emergent listening' (Davies, 2014) helped the researcher/practitioner to find out more aspects of each learner's 'Personal Literacies Landscape' in order to give pupils more agency while at the same time matching their learning even more closely to their individual needs, not only in terms of the reading skills content, but also the materiality of the resources and the affective flows within the lessons:

Oscar's 'Personal Literacies Landscape' could be viewed as being richly populated with animal stories in various forms, both fictional and real-life, as he watched the life and death dramas unfold in wild life documentaries in his iPad. These stories seemed not only to have the emotional impact of excitement and enjoyment, but were part of his family bonds, as this interest was shared at home. Helping him to see how school reading activities could not only link with these interests by finding reading books about animals, as well as books to help him develop his knowledge further, seemed to prompt him to read for meaning and with much more enjoyment. The opportunity to share his knowledge and interests in class also boosted his self-confidence, not only in his reading but across the curriculum.

For Ava too, finding ways to connect with her home literacies seemed helpful. Working with her 'Personal Literacies Landscape' was a way to both to find literacy learning activities that would appeal to her, and also to develop a warm relationship, that would work towards overcoming her anxieties after struggling with literacy learning for so long. It meant putting aside, in this instance, reservations about gender stereotypes and quality of texts, and focusing instead on the enchantment that Ava felt when watching Disney princesses. Smith (2021) made a very detailed argument for regarding children's play as a form of literacy, would seem particularly true of acting out stories and scenarios with dolls. Ava's favourite toys at home were her dolls, including some Disney characters, and she talked about playing with them with her cousin and older sister, adding in social and affective elements to her enjoyment of the stories, and also possibly building associations for her between literacy activities and warm social connections.

Working with Ben seemed to become much more productive by taking his 'no' (Truman et al., 2020) as a prompt to explore the possible causes of his mixed emotions about learning to read, and ways to work through them. The introduction of reading games gave Ben a opportunity to make choices in what cards he played when, an element of chance in which card was next added fun, and being able to be victorious over a grown up was a confidence booster. This suggested that reading support was likely to have become for Ben a part of his Personal Literacy Landscape in which it was associated with fewer choices. Struggling readers often have literacy activities simplified as a way to meet their needs, and have extra adult support which also entails closer supervision, limiting the autonomy which Svrcek and Heidt (2022) point out is an important factor in supporting reading. This resonates with a study by Laursen and Fabrin's (2013) which explored the extent to which teachers' views on the importance and uses of literacy skills were not necessarily shared by

their pupils, who had instead different priorities. The materiality of the games, especially the elements which added an element of luck, and the 3D nature that meant that they could be held and moved around, took reading away from the 2D contexts that Ben had come to be wary of, and boosted his links between literacy activities and enjoyment.

Conclusion

Taking a theoretical perspective that focused on the role of material objects and affective flows in reading support teaching helped to illuminate how much more was happening in this context alongside the development of letter-sound knowledge and other reading skills. It also helped to shed light on how the intervention was adapted by giving space for each learner to have some agency in its construction, and the benefits this brought to the learners. This was indicated by feedback from the class teacher that the children's confidence across the curriculum had increased 'tenfold', suggesting that having their interests and preferences heard, and then incorporated into their learning activities, had a beneficial effect on their self-esteem as well as their learning. Another contributing factor could be argued to be the removal of barriers that hindered them from expressing what Kuby and Crawford (2018) described as their 'literacy desirings': what they believe to be the innate desire of humans to connect with others through the use of spoken and written words, drawings and symbols. While many children seem able to connect productively with class literacy activities, for those that do not, often due to a widening gap in skills levels, bridges can be built from working with personal interests that do prompt their 'literacy desirings' to develop skills that make accessing class activities much easier, and then often more appealing.

Although the concept of 'Personal Literacies Landscapes' has been developed in this very small-scale study, working with children of the same age, and in the same learning context, it would seem to have potential in other areas of literacy teaching and learning, particularly when there are indications that a learner might be at risk of, or are showing signs of, becoming disengaged from standard curricula. By highlighting ways to make literacy learning more relevant to individual learners, it would also seem to have potential to boost the confidence of those who find literacy learning particularly challenging, both by making them feel heard as an individual, in a manner similar to the unconditional positive regard in counselling (Wilkins, 2000) and also by giving them some autonomy in their own learning. These could then go on to boost skills levels as motivation increases.

Ethical guidelines

This study was completed as part of a PhD course at Manchester Metropolitan University, and was afforded ethics clearance according to the University ethics guidelines.

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Author biography

Gillian Mary Smith has worked in a variety of roles in Early Years education and also in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities support, over several decades. She is a Specialist Dyslexia teacher and qualified SENDCo-rdinator, with a special interest in supporting children in the first stages of learning to read, especially when they are finding this particularly challenging. The importance of nurturing self-confidence as a learner, and supporting a child's emotional well-being, as part of helping them overcome additional barriers to learning, has always been a keystone to her support teaching philosophy.