Holistic Approaches to Early Literacy Education: Theory, Beliefs and Values, and Classroom Practices

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, shape enactments of literacy curricula and classroom practices. This paper illustrates the theories, beliefs and values, and the classroom practices that underpin broad, balanced and inclusive approaches to literacy education in the early years.

Theoretical Principles	Belief and Values	Pedagogy and Classroom Practice
Literacy and early literacy learning can be theorised in multiple ways.	The ways in which we theorise literacy underpins our beliefs and values about literacy pedagogy.	Early literacy pedagogy and classroom practice radically shape children's understandings of what literacy is, who it is for and their literate identities.
Literacy (alongside language) can be thought of as a social and cultural practice that varies across time and place. (Barton and Hamilton, 2000, pp. 7 – 14.; Street, 1984).	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. It is important to recognise that the languages and literacies that children encounter in one context may not	Broad, rich and contextualised classroom practices enable children to make meaning, relationships and identities through creating and consuming meaningful text. This approach to pedagogy: • 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.

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	occur in another. These include commercial and environmental print and digitally mediated literacies.	• 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.
Literacy can be conceptualised as an embodied and affective experience (Hackett, 2014; Gonzales Rey, 2008, pp. 137 – 154, Olsson, 2009).	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.	Sensitive classroom practices recognise the inseparability of cognition and emotion and of mind and body. This approach to pedagogy: • 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, excitement) and sensitively building on their lines of inquiry. • 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).

Language and literacies can be understood as multimodal practices (Kress, 2010).	Early communication combines words, facial expression, intonation, movement, gesture and posture. These are all resources that children draw on to communicate meaning. Young children's contemporary literacy practices often involve multimodal texts, comprising alphabetic script, still or moving image, distinctive fonts, and increasingly, emoticons. Under Article 12, UNCRC, children have a right to be heard. Recognising their emerging multimodal language and literacy repertoires constitutes their right.	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: • 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.

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).	Opportunity for collaborative, imaginary play enables children to co-construct and represent narrative based on their experiences of lived events, TV, film and books, their cultural interests and concerns, and their imaginations.	Opportunity for free flow peer play using open-ended resources provides and promotes opportunity for narrative play to spontaneously evolve. This approach to pedagogy:
		
		• Incorporates open-ended resources that promote collaborative play and imagination, including:
		  ▸ 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.

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).

It is important to note that this is not the case for all languages; many bilingual and multilingual children may be experiencing different systems.

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.

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:

- 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.

Through these activities young children come to understand that speech is made up of combinations of individual sounds.

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).

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