



Literacy in Early Education

Literacy and early literacy learning can be theorised in different ways.

- Literacy can be thought of as a social and cultural practice that varies across time and place.
- Encounters with literacies and texts are embodied and affective experiences.
- Early communication is multimodal, combining words, facial expression, intonation, movement, gesture and posture.
- Early literacy practices are deeply related to children's play.
- Narrative can drive children's meaning making, which in turn supports symbolic representation needed for reading and writing.
- English is an alphabetic code and appropriate instruction can support the development of phonological awareness and phonic decoding and encoding of print.

UKLA views literacy as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon; there is no single all-encompassing theory can fully explain early literacy learning. UKLA recognises that early literacy education is partly about mastery of the alphabetic code; equally, the organisation values the exploratory and creative ways in which children incorporate literacy into their play, everyday experiences and developing communicative repertoires. From birth, young children are immersed in the multiple and diverse communicative practices of their homes and communities, often including those that are print- and digitally-based. Early years teachers and practitioners support young children's journeys into literacy by building on these early home experiences.

Recognising literacy as more than a set of skills to be learnt requires practitioners to work sensitively with young children, attend to their interests, scaffold their early representations and engagement with text, and provide a classroom environment in which all children can participate, explore, and initiate ideas.

The ways in which literacy is understood or theorised shapes practitioners' beliefs and values. In turn, values and beliefs about what literacy is, shapes pedagogy and classroom practices and children's understandings of what literacy is and who it is for, impacting on their personal literate identities. This UKLA Viewpoints paper discusses some of the theories, beliefs and values, and the classroom practices that underpin broad, balanced and inclusive approaches to literacy education in the early years.

Literacy as social and cultural practice

There are multiple emerging and evolving literacies in use in society. On entering educational settings, young children bring knowledge and lived experience of a diverse range of texts and literacy practices. It is important to recognise that the languages and literacies children encounter in one context differ from those that occur in another, including commercial and environmental print or digitally mediated literacies. Broad, rich and contextualised classroom practices enable children to make meaning, relationships and identities through their engagement with meaningful texts.

Literacy as embodied and affective experience

Young children's early encounters with literacies and texts are experienced with 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.

Language and literacies as multimodal practices

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. 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.

Early literacy emerging in children's imaginative play

Opportunity for collaborative, imaginary play enables children to co-construct narratives based on their experiences of lived events, experiences of TV, film and books and their imaginations. Provision for free flow peer play, using open-ended resources, promotes opportunities for narrative play to evolve spontaneously.

Literacy in a phonographic system

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). However, 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. As children reach the later stages of the EYFS, explicit phonics instruction is seen to 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).

An integrated approach to early literacy education

Together, these differing views of literacy broaden and consolidate our understandings. By recognising the multiplicity of contemporary literacy practices and taking an integrated approach to early literacy education, we can support all children's learning and development. As our youngest citizens in the 2020s begin to learn about literacy, we cannot fully imagine how practices, media and technologies might have evolved by the time they reach adulthood. Assessing children's literacy practices purely by standardised assessment criteria, severely limits our view of what children know and can do. It is time to embrace the complexities of literacy as we build upon the experiences and knowledge that children bring to the classroom.

For further information and implications for further practice, please see UKLA's downloadable resource: *Holistic Approaches to Early Years Literacy*
https://ukla.org/ukla_resources/holistic-approaches-to-early-literacy-education/

Sources

Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (2000) Literacy practices, in D. Barton, M. Hamilton, and R. Ivanič (eds.) *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.

Brooks, G., Beard, R. and Ampaw-Farr, J. (2019) 'English Has 100+ Phonemes': Some Errors and Confusions in Contemporary Commercial Phonics Programmes. *Research Papers in Education* 36(2): 1-31.

Daniels, K. (2014) Cultural Agents Creating Texts: A collaborative space adventure. *Literacy* 48 (2): 103-111.

Ellis, S., Anderson, J. and Rowe, A. (2018) Report on the Renfrewshire Literacy Approach: August 2015 – July 2017 University of Strathclyde available at: [Ellis-et-al-2018-Report-on-the-renfrewshire-literacy-approach-august-2015-july-2017](#) (Accessed 9th January, 2021)

Engel S (2005) The narrative worlds of what-is and what-if. *Cognitive Development* 20: 514-525.

Gonzales Rey, F. (2008) Subject, Subjectivity, and Development in Cultural-Historical Psychology, in Van Oers, B., Wardekker, W., Elbers, E. and Van Der Veer, R. (eds.) *The Transformation of Learning: Advances in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

Goswami, U. and Bryant, P. (2016) *Phonological Skills and Learning to Read*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hackett, A., (2014) Zigging and zooming all over the place: young children moving in time, place and more-than-human worlds. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 17 (3): 374-391.

Kress, G. (1997) *Before Writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. London: Routledge.

Kress, G. (2010) *Multimodality, A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. New York: Routledge.

Levy, R. (2011) *Young Children Reading at Home and at School*. London: Sage.

Olsson, L. (2009) *Movement and Experimentation in Young Children's Learning. Deleuze and Guattari in early childhood education*. London: Routledge.

Street, B. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Torgerson, C., Brooks, G., Gascoine, L. and Higgins, S. (2019) Phonics: Reading policy and the evidence of effectiveness from a systematic “tertiary” review. *Research Papers in Education* 34 (2): 208-238.

Wohlwend, K. (2008) Play as a Literacy of Possibilities: Expanding Meanings in Practices, Materials, and Spaces. *Language Arts* 86 (3): 127-136.

Example from an early years setting

In a preschool classroom of 3-4-year-olds, the team of practitioners wanted to draw on children’s interests and funds of knowledge to encourage graphic representation and early writing for pleasure. The ‘writing workshop’ was well established in the setting. This area included a variety of paper, card, notebooks, clipboards (for mark making ‘on the go’) coloured pens, pencils, ink pads and stamps, tape, glue, scissors, stickers, stencils, cut-out letters and numerals, and upcycled greetings cards. These resources were displayed on shelves and available for self-selection during the free-flow part of the session. Thus, representation and early writing were encouraged and sponsored in the setting, yet observation and reflection highlighted that the area tended to be used by the same small group of children, whilst others rarely or never visited the area. Resources were readily available for all children, but motivation was apparently not.

The team were very aware of how children’s popular culture entered the setting with children each day. Characters and logographic print from film and TV were highly visible on children’s clothing, shoes, backpacks or hair accessories for example, and were often a focal point for conversation and play. So, appropriating

a sturdy card ‘scrap book’, the team created a text with each page dedicated to a popular film or TV series, including *Frozen*, *Spiderman*, *Avengers*, *Peppa Pig*, *Paw Patrol*, *Ben 10*. Each page comprised images, logographic print and the names of each character in a standard font.

Over the following few weeks, staff noticed a greater interest and frequency of visits to the area. The text became a focal point for discussion between children, through which affinity was expressed and relationships fostered. The text changed the dynamics of conversations between children and practitioners, in which children became the authoritative knowledge on a subject, such as *Spiderman*. The text also prompted a greater range of children to visit the area, in fact, at times demand for space around the text was greater than availability. Some children copied their favourite characters’ names, proudly showing their writing to others. Some children began imaginatively developing narratives, creating the storyline and the text in unison.

Over the course of the year, practitioners continued to develop the text, extending beyond film culture to incorporate children’s wider interests, adding pages about tractors, motorbikes or *Minecraft*. Their aim was that every child would find something of personal interest to motivate and mediate graphic representation and early writing for pleasure.

Karen Daniels and Lucy Rodriguez-Leon for UKLA

See also

UKLA bookshop www.ukla.org/shop

Handbook of Teaching Early Reading by Sally Elborn

English Language and Literacy 3-19: Reading 3-7 by John Richmond

English Language and Literacy 3-19: Writing 3-7 by John Richmond

UKLA website www.ukla.org/resources

Holistic Approaches to Early Literacy Education on

https://ukla.org/ukla_resources/holistic-approaches-to-early-literacy-education/

Occasional Papers

Literacy in the Early Years:

<https://ukla.org/resources/details/literacy-in-the-early-years-ukla-occasional-paper>

Multimodality:

https://ukla.org/ukla_resources/ukla-occasional-paper-multimodality/

UKLA Special Interest Group: Early Years Literacy in Education:

<https://ukla.org/sigs-networks/early-years-literacy-in-education-sig/>