Multimodal Literacies in the Early Years

Research summary for practitioners and policy makers

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Broad topic of research: Early Literacy learning with traditional and new technologies

Title of research: Multimodal Literacies in the Early Years

Research Funded by: Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

What is the background to the research?

The research project *Multimodal Literacies in the Early Years* explored what learning to be 'literate' means for young children in today's media-rich world. Its findings contribute to understandings of the role of new technologies in early literacy learning.

In the current Foundation Stage curriculum, literacy is presented as an essentially print-based, linguistic accomplishment. Whilst clear guidance is given regarding the development of traditional early literacy skills, including mark-making, phonic awareness, familiarity with printed texts etc, scant attention is paid to new technologies and the implications of their ubiquitous use in everyday literacy practices. This stands in contrast to a mounting body of research evidence which suggests that for today's young children, learning to be literate involves acquiring a range of skills and practices in diverse media (Hall, Larson and Marsh, 2004) and that 'individuals need new kinds of expertise, technical skills and understanding' (ESRC, 2010) in contemporary society.

This project contributes to practical and theoretical understandings of early literacy learning at the beginning of the 21st century by:

1. producing grounded evidence of how young children develop literacy knowledge and skills as they engage with different modes (such as speech, writing, gaze, gesture, images, music, layout) in a range of traditional and new media;

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2. identifying what kinds of printed and electronic literacy resources three and four-year-old boys and girls from a range of social backgrounds engage with at home and in early education;
3. exploring how adult beliefs and practices about literacy at home and in early education impact on the processes of children's literacy learning with different media.

The project was undertaken in one Sure Start Children's Centre nursery in the South of England, with case studies of ten children's literacy practices at home and in the nursery. On a local level, the project made a positive impact on the setting's planning for the more strategic use of new technologies. Wider distribution of the project findings to practitioners and policy makers are now planned.

What were the outcomes or impacts?

Policy Documentation

The review of documentation found that whilst the Early Years curriculum in England has begun to recognise literacy development as embedded in social practice, national and local policy documentation continues to focus on cognitive approaches, and theorised guidance on supporting literacy learning with new technologies is lamentably absent.

Literacy in the Nursery: Practitioner Beliefs and Practices

In the nursery practice, there was a corresponding emphasis on the linear acquisition of traditional literacy skills, such as sharing stories, mark-making, phonics, rhyming etc, and staff supported children's learning in joint shared attention episodes.

The nursery had diverse electronic resources, including computers, printers, tape recorders, digiblue cameras and programmable toys. However, their use was only occasionally integrated into pedagogic planning or supported by practitioners, with the exception of provision for children with learning difficulties where computers were recognised as offering choice and control.

Most practitioners acknowledged the centrality of new technologies in the children's future lives, but lacked confidence in their use, were uncertain about their pedagogic value and/or feared their potential harm to 'childhood'. Some software and internet access to approved sites offered literacy-learning potential, but only those children who had developed computer skills at home accessed these, either alone or in collaborative participation frameworks with peers. These frameworks were characterised by motivated joint activity, where an 'expert' peer used talk and actions to direct less experienced peers, who usually responded with silent actions.

Literacy at Home: Parental Beliefs and Practices

At home, young children experienced a much broader range of everyday literacy practices with diverse media. Home ownership of mobile phones, TVs, satellite, computers and internet was widespread, although two families in the lowest income band (>£10,000 per annum) had no computer, with implications for social inclusion/equality. Whilst safeguarding against their over-use, most parents recognised the potential of new technologies for their children's learning, but were less sure about

how to support screen-based literacy activities. Some children were not allowed computer access at home, but did use mobile phones, TV/videos, and 'smart' toys which converged new and traditional technologies (e.g. talking books, interactive toys).

A Digital Divide

We therefore found a 'digital divide' where some children in the nursery displayed strategic, meta-level literacy knowledge with new technologies derived principally from participation in supported activity at home, whilst children with less experience only participated in low-level activities or did not use them at all. For example, some 3-year-old boys and girls were able independently to access permitted online educational sites by typing in their names, navigating around complex websites and engaging in sophisticated levels of play that promoted the development of literacy skills, such as recognising and responding appropriately to diverse symbols in multiple modes (on-screen sounds, movement, images, icons, spoken and written words). Less experienced children were only able to access software provided by the setting, and their engagement tended to be brief and characterised by frustration as they did not have the requisite skills to complete on-screen tasks independently. Some children did not engage with the computer at all.

What is Literacy in Today's World?

Analysis of the children's engagement with a range of media revealed that becoming 'literate' in today's world involves mastery of diverse practices and technical skills, along with the ability to adapt, improvise, identify relevant features in static and dynamic texts and to navigate around them. It was clear that reading on-screen was profoundly different to reading print. It involved the use and interpretation of multiple modes (images, sounds, movement, layout, spoken and written language), which appeared in non-linear, hyperlinked formats with diverse possible pathways. We are developing a theorised framework for supporting literacy learning in diverse media through 'collaborative multimodal dialogue' (defined as the inter-subjective, multimodal meaning-making processes that occur through joint engagement in activity) to enable educators to help all children achieve their full potential as members of a society in which knowledge and communication in both traditional and new technologies are highly prized.

What was the intervention/teaching and learning process?

This study did not set out to *intervene* directly in teaching and learning processes, but to investigate a poorly understood area of early learning with a view to *informing* practice and policy.

Impact on local practice: The project helped to develop staff and parent awareness of the importance of new technologies for children's early literacy development. Nursery staff displayed increased confidence and improved strategic planning for the incorporation of diverse media in early literacy practice. Parents showed increased confidence in their choices of new media resources and support of their children's uses of new technologies. Further outcomes for the early years sector are in development.

Impact on policy: Outputs for policy are in development, including a 1-day Digital Literacies conference at the Open University 20/03/2011.

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Impact on research: Dissemination to academic audiences include: presentations at international conferences; invited talks at Goldsmiths, Birmingham and Lancaster Universities, and OU Digital Literacies conference. Future dissemination includes articles on substantive outcomes and a book.

How was the research carried out?

This small-scale project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It used an innovative methodology that combined ethnographic methods, informed by sociocultural theories of learning, with multimodal analysis. Data collection methods included:

- *A review of relevant national, regional and institutional documentation* situated local practice within local and wider sociocultural contexts.

- *A questionnaire* of all parents at one Sure Start Children's Centre explored home literacy practices, parental beliefs around literacy, ownership and uses of traditional and digital literacy resources (Total 41 responses: 54% response rate). A similar survey was given to all nursery staff (Total 17 responses: 81% response rate).

- *General observation of settings* Preliminary observational visits in the children's homes and nursery assessed literacy provision based on Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Extension (ECERS-E).

- *Video case studies* of ten children (equal numbers of boys and girls from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds, with a spread of learning abilities and reported uses of printed and digital media). Video recordings of each child in Spring and Summer terms for up to 1 hour in the nursery and 1 hour at home. Children were observed from a respectful distance without interrupting the natural flow of their play. (Total 30 hours video data)

- *Semi-structured interviews* with staff and parents were audio-recorded and transcribed, and explored emerging themes. *Unstructured interviews* and 'chats' with children were noted in field notes, shared video viewings were sometimes used as a catalyst for discussion. (Total 12 hours interview data).

The resultant multi-media data set offered rich, complex and grounded evidence upon which we were able to build deep understandings of children's early experiences of literacy in diverse media.

What might the implications of the research be for policy makers/ practitioners?

Implications for practitioners

- *Professional development* is needed to: increase practitioners' confidence and skills with new technologies and integrate the strategic use of new media resources in a range of independent and supported literacy learning activities. These could include, for example: more shared enjoyment of new technologies embedded in the literacy curriculum; greater use of new media to document and share young children's learning; and to make stronger connections between children's learning at home and in early education.

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- *Ongoing support and guidance* is needed to direct practitioners to computer games that offer productive literacy learning experiences, as many commercial games are of low educational value. Technical advisory support is also needed occasionally on a local level.

- *Opportunities to share knowledge and resources with parents* should be sought eg via parent meetings and a nursery website which hosts suitable material.

Implications for parents

The research suggests that parents would welcome guidance on good practice in supporting their children's use of new technologies, and exchanging views with early years educators. This would enhance recognition of parents' vital role in young children's learning.

Implications for policy

Curriculum development The revised Foundation Stage curriculum should recognise and value the increasing role of new technologies in language and literacy learning, and provide explicit guidance on supporting children's critical and meta-level awareness of the purposes and uses of both new and traditional literacy resources.

Reading and the curriculum Forthcoming outputs will unravel how 'reading' on-screen differs from reading traditional literacy texts, and point to the need to develop theorised understandings of literacy learning in diverse media to help all children achieve their full potential as members of today's and tomorrow's world.

At a local level literacy advisors could coordinate training and resources to boost the effective use of new technologies in early literacy learning at home and in education.

Where can you find out more about the research?

Contact: r.s.flewitt@open.ac.uk

Research website: http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/multimodalliteracies/

References

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