Acknowledging and interrogating multiplicities: towards a generous approach in evaluations of early literacy innovation and intervention

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INTRODUCTION

In policy and practice, early literacy provision has long been supported by charities and other agencies working in homes, communities, libraries and other settings, as well as schools. In promoting innovation or intervention, these diverse groups, building on different assumptions about literacy and literacy learning, have designed programmes, provided guidelines and/or refined models for developing effective partnerships with families aiming to enrich, support and value early literacy. Interest in this work from policy makers and research funding bodies has intensified in recent years in recognition of relationships between young children's early literacy experiences and their later attainment at school, but this interest has increasingly been accompanied by calls for 'hard evidence' that captures quantifiable measurements of the impact of literacy innovation and intervention through randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental studies. Policy-makers and funding organisations, working with limited resources, frequently require organisations to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programmes in ways that are quantifiable in relation to specific outcomes, linked for example to literacy attainment or changes in behaviours associated with literacy attainment. The emphasis on 'hard evidence' is problematic for a number of reasons, not least because interventions get interpreted differently in different sites, because programmes need to be locally relevant, and because results can be misleading. This article makes a distinctive contribution to such critique by drawing on Law's (2004) notion of 'method assemblage' to argue that interventions *get constituted differently through different evaluation studies*, and that therefore specific interventions need to be seen in terms of 'multiplicities,' a term used here to capture the multiple ways in which things associated with interventions - such as objects, activities, principles - and indeed interventions themselves, are constituted differently through different kinds of studies.

Below, Part One frames this argument by summarising critique of the drive for 'hard evidence' and expands on Law's notion of method assemblage. Part Two illustrates the contribution of a focus on method assemblage through an extended example based on a corpus of studies of one kind of literacy intervention, early years book-gifting. Analysis of this corpus illustrates how methods help construct interventions in different ways and consequently how, when different studies are considered together, they undermine and complicate the fixed logic assumed in methodologies driving for 'hard' evidence. Part Three explores what can be gained by acknowledging and interrogating the multiplicities generated through diverse methodologies, and identifies three ways in which this perspective is significant: (i) in its contribution to ongoing debates about the current emphasis on 'hard' evidence'; (ii) in supporting arguments for a diversification in methodologies sponsored for

evaluative purposes; (iii) in highlighting the need to acknowledge - rather than reduce - complexity through research and, in doing so, support critical, reflective engagement by policy-makers, practitioners and funding organisations. The article ends by proposing a 'generous' approach to early literacy research and evaluation, that encourages methodological diversification but also acknowledges and interrogates multiplicities.

PART ONE: FRAMING THE ARGUMENT

The drive for quantifiable evidence

The drive for quantifiable evidence of the impact of literacy innovation or intervention aligns with broader trends in evidence-based practice in education that have been gathering momentum for some time (Lather, 2004; Rudolph, 2014). Emphasising that evidence should be used to inform rather than determine professional decisions, advocates have argued that 'hard' evidence offers the best way of judging the impact of interventions as it decouples educational policy from ideology (Haynes, et al., 2012; Marsh, 2005; Goldacre, 2013). These arguments have certainly been influential in shaping the funding policies of governments and other bodies, for example, The Institute for Education Sciences in the United States (IES 2013) recommends 'scientific' methodologies, while The Education Endowment Foundation in the UK sponsors RCTs (https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/). Such methodologies are persuasive to policy makers and educational leaders in an age of financial restraint; they align with existing procedures for measuring children's progress through standardised tests, and offer an apparently 'scientific' basis for making decisions with associated connotations of neutrality and rigour.

In many ways a strengthening of the relationship between research and practice in the field of early literacy is welcome. However, the fixed linear logic associated with 'hard evidence' is at odds with complex understandings of learners and learning. Critics maintain that: there are no universal solutions to educational challenges; pupil achievement is always situated in relation to personal, social, economic and cultural factors; and educational innovations should therefore be localised and nuanced (e.g. see Burden, 2015; Engestrom, 2011; Gutierrez and Penual, 2014). Biesta (2007; 2010) emphasised the importance of acknowledging this complexity, recognising that interventions do not generate effects in mechanistic or deterministic ways and that it is better to see educational development in terms of open rather than closed systems. Acknowledging complexity involves seeing education as inevitably 'moral practice'; interventions are never neutral and are always shaped by values and beliefs (Biesta 2007:57). It requires qualitative methodologies suited to exploring the different 'logics at work' (Moss, 2012) in specific educational contexts or related to particular concerns.

These debates sharpen in relation to literacy research and evaluation, not least because the tools used to demonstrate impact in this area have long been subject to question. Measurement of literacy attainment features strongly in policy at local, national and international level, anchored to an accountability agenda mediated through standardised assessments. Efficiently administered and accommodated within existing school practices, such tests are frequently used within literacy evaluations to measure impact. Gauging the isolable skills measurable through tests may however be misleading when trying to gain a picture of competence and confidence in literacy. Tests such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELs), for example, have been criticised for their inability to reflect children's reading ability in meaningful ways (Goodman, 2006; Shelton et al., 2009), while national tests designed to gauge a wider range of skills have been judged inconsistent over

successive papers (Hilton, 2001). More recently Moss (2013) has explored how the tools used to measure reading engagement for PISA elide uncertainty and how these forgotten uncertainties get further displaced through a chain of coding and measurement conventions (Desrosieres, 2010). Tests used to generate 'hard' evidence therefore can be too precise, privileging certain aspects of literacy (or literacies) over others, too imprecise and open to interpretation, or simply misleading.

Building on these critiques, this article probes further the complexities associated with evaluating intervention and innovation in early literacy, by arguing that interventions *get constituted differently through different evaluation studies*. In expanding this perspective, the next section summarises Law's take on assemblage, and method assemblage in particular. It explores how these concepts can explain how components of early literacy interventions become messy - or 'slippery' (Law and Lien, 2010) - when subject to evaluation.

Law and method assemblage
In an argument for acknowledging 'mess, confusion and relative disorder' in social science research, Law takes the idea of assemblage from Deleuze and Guatarri (1988) and uses it to explore how things come into being as they are understood in relation to other things. Assemblage is not a fixed set of relations but 'an uncertain unfolding process' (Law, 2004, p.41). It is,

> …a process of bundling, or assembling, or better of recursive self-assembling in which the elements put together are not fixed in shape, do not belong to a larger pre-given list but are constructed at least in part as they are entangled together. (Law, 2004:42).

A focus on assemblage helps explain how things (such as objects, activities, principles) do not only act *on* practices. They are also enacted *by* them. They are taken up in different ways and, as such, come to be significant in different ways; they are 'actor-enacted' within complex networks of practices (Law and Mol, 2008). To put it another way, a focus on assemblage explains how, as Law (2004:54) writes, things '…do not exist by themselves. They are being crafted, assembled as part of a hinterland.' As they are actor-enacted differently in practice, *what* they mediate can vary.

Law (2004) argues that research methods exist within rather than outside assemblages. Consequently different studies produce different versions of the phenomena they investigate. Law illustrates this using Mol's research into lower limb atherosclerosis, which explored multiple realities of the medical condition associated with different ways of knowing: by the patient for example through embodied experience, and by the surgeon through professional interpretation of patients' stories in conjunction with test results enacted in a laboratory (Mol, 2002). As Law writes, 'The argument is no longer that methods *discover* and depict realities. Instead it is that they participate in the *enactment* of those realities' (Law, 2004:45). For Law, this means that multiple ways of knowing are produced through different assemblages.

The notion that methods enact realities is an important one in thinking about evaluations of early literacy innovations and interventions. It suggests that interventions are not just *implemented* in different ways in different contexts but are constituted differently as investigated through different studies. Differences do not just relate to programme fidelity or the implementation context, but to the significance or value of the intervention *as constructed*

by research methods. In the next part of this article, these ideas are exemplified in relation to one kind of early years literacy intervention, early years book-gifting.

PART TWO: BOOK-GIFTING - AN EXTENDED EXAMPLE

Overview of book-gifting

Over the last 20 years, early years book-gifting programmes have been introduced in many countries worldwide to promote book-sharing between parents and children through the distribution of free books to 0-5 year-old children and their families. Book-gifting interventions range from straightforward book distribution schemes to those combining book-gifting with support for parents on book-sharing. However, they typically involve the distribution of a free book (or books) to babies and young children, often presented in a custom-made bag with guidance for parents on the value of reading with young children and suggestions for doing so. Sometimes other resources for early literacy are also provided, such as rhyme cards or puppets. Book-gifting programmes build on the assumption, explored through an extensive literature, that book ownership and regular book-sharing in the early years are associated with later attainment in reading (e.g. Bus et al., 1995; Weinberger, 1996; Mol and Bus, 2011). They operate on the premise that book-gifting leads to more book ownership, increased library membership, book-sharing and enthusiasm for books, and that these in turn lead to improved language and literacy. Schemes vary in terms of: age of children and groups targeted; duration; number and range of resources provided; book selection criteria; book-gifting processes; and organisations involved.

Book-gifting programmes are funded variously by national or regional governments, commercial organisations and/or charities. As such they are frequently the subject of internal or external evaluation studies conducted to justify ongoing subsidy and inform programme review. These studies, focusing on broadly similar programmes but varying in scope and methodology, offer a rich resource for examining how different methods play a part in constructing different versions of an intervention or innovation. In what follows a corpus of studies of early years book-gifting is used to explore how and why it is important to acknowledge differences.

The book-gifting corpus

The corpus explored below was generated through a systematic search for studies conducted for a commissioned review of evidence on the impact of book-gifting for 0-5 year olds (Burnett et al., 2014). Nine databases representing different paradigms and disciplinary areas were searched using a range and combination of search terms (see Burnett et al., 2014 for details). These searches yielded 6640 sources which were screened to eliminate any that were clearly not relevant. The abstracts of the remaining 255 were examined, and those deemed relevant scrutinised in more depth. Given budget constraints only reports written in English were accessed. Sources generated were supplemented in the following ways:

- Reference lists of located articles were scrutinised for other relevant sources.

- Emails were sent to book-gifting organisations and to academics working in the field to locate pertinent material not yet in the public domain.

- Internet searches were used to identify unpublished or less widely circulated reports and papers.

- The contents of ten international journals from the last ten years were searched for relevant articles (see Burnett et al., 2014 for details).

Studies were considered regardless of methodological approach, only screened out if the methodology was not transparent or judged to be insufficiently robust to justify claims made. Exclusions were typically: articles written for professional audiences (e.g. programme summaries on organisation websites, magazine/newspaper articles, policy statements); or reports providing little detail on methodology.

59 reports of book-gifting published between 1992 and 2013 and from nine countries were located through this search. Of these, 32 were from peer reviewed journals; 18 were independent evaluation reports commissioned by book-gifting associations; and two were reports from studies conducted by organisations themselves. Sources also included: one conference paper; five reports produced by regional organisations; and one article under review. The majority of reports were associated with the following programmes and locations: *Bookstart* (in UK), *Reach Out and Read* (in USA) and *Imagination Library* (in USA and UK).

It is not the purpose of this article to summarise the findings of this review in relation to the impact of early years book-gifting. These are reported elsewhere (Burnett et al., 2014). The focus here is a secondary analysis of the book-gifting corpus which explored method assemblage. Repeated reading suggested that methods assembled with the elements of book-gifting in different ways. One way in which these differences crystallised was in different actor-enactments of *books*, which in turn seemed associated with different constructions of book-sharing, book-gifting, and indeed reading. These different actor-enactments of books provide a useful focus for considering how research and evaluation methods can *help construct* the very things they are designed to investigate. Of course an analysis might equally focus on how other things (e.g. people, places, practices) are slippery and assemble differently with methods through evaluations of book-gifting. This complexity and its implications are discussed later in this article, but for now a focus on books serves to exemplify the process of method assemblage and illustrate how multiple studies generate multiplicities. Before looking in detail at these different constructions, it is worth reflecting more generally on the 'slipperiness' of books: on how books are differently constructed as they assemble with diverse purposes, people, places and objects.

The slipperiness of books
Books, like other objects (Thevenot, 2002), are not always understood in the same way. In whichever format - physically in print form or held virtually on e-readers and tablets - books 'become' different things within different assemblages of people, objects, events, places, times, values, and so on. Books for example assemble with other 'basic tools in schooling' (Lawn and Grosvenor, 2005:11), or 'pedagogic commodities' (Luke, Carrington and Kapitze, 2013:409) to become 'reading books' purchased by parents and schools for their anticipated effects on children's reading attainment. Books can also be associated with identity performance: certain titles may be a source of social capital or sign of academic failure; and presence of children's books can be viewed as an indicator of a positive 'home literacy environment' and by implication 'good' parenting (e.g. see Nichols et al., 2009; Park, 2008). As 'placed resources' (Prinsloo, 2005), books may mediate different things in different settings: in religious buildings (Poveda et al., 2006), reading corners in classrooms (Dixon, 2011), or in what Rainbird and Rowsell (2011) term 'literacy nooks' in homes. Books can

take on personalised meanings for individuals when read in particular locations, or as readings intersect with other experiences (Mackey, 2010). Books therefore become different things and act differently in relation to different practices. They are 'slippery.'

This slipperiness is potentially problematic for literacy interventions, such as early years book-gifting. In book-gifting programmes the gifting of books is designed to promote or affirm the practice of book-sharing. However if books are slippery, then *what* they mediate may vary. The significance of books, and the book-gifting and book-sharing associated with them, may shift as they assemble differently with people, places practices, philosophies and so on to produce books, book-gifting, book-sharing and reading in different ways. This is not a new point. Evaluations repeatedly find, for example, that interventions are interpreted differently in different contexts, and this is certainly the case for book-gifting programmes (e.g. Coldwell et al., 2012). The argument however here is that books (and the book-sharing, book-gifting associated with them) are also constituted differently as they assemble with different *research methods*. The next section illustrates this point by exploring how books are constituted differently in the book-gifting corpus.

Method assemblage in book-gifting evaluations
Constant comparison analysis of the book-gifting corpus suggested six broad categories of relationships between methods used and constructions of books. Below, these categories are framed using six metaphors selected to represent how books appeared to be variously actor-enacted through different method assemblages. These metaphors position books as: proxies, brokers, connective artefacts, stories, portals, and visitors. One of these metaphors - 'book as connective artefact' - is drawn from a study from the corpus (Pahl et al., 2010), while the others were chosen by the author.

It is worth emphasising that the six metaphors are used tentatively. They are intended as neither exhaustive nor definitive, not least because the analysis is subjective and this secondary retrospective analysis of research reports could not generate insights into how these assemblages played out in practice. Moreover studies did not fall neatly into categories. Many used mixed methods and could be seen as constructing books in multiple ways and, while each category has a different emphasis, each is broadly conceived and there is some overlap. Moreover, the categorisation could be seen as eliding the differences *between* studies in each group. Despite these reservations, the six metaphors do represent what might be perceived as different kinds of actor-enactments associated with different method assemblages across the corpus. At the very least, they illustrate *how* book-gifting - and by implication other early literacy interventions and innovations - can come to mean different things through method assemblage. Together - and this is a point returned to in Part Three - they also trouble one another as they assemble together, and in doing so, exemplify what can be gained by embracing and interrogating multiplicities.

a) ***Book as proxy for language and literacy development***
While varying in scale, focus and methodological rigour, the majority of evaluations in this corpus (51 of 59) explored relationships between book-gifting and quantifiable outcomes. These included:

- 5 randomised controlled trials exploring changes in behaviour following book-gifting (4) and impact on language and literacy development (1);

- 27 studies of quasi-experimental design that compared changes in reported behaviour (19) or performance on language/literacy tests (8) of participating and non-participating families over time;

- 8 studies which used repeated questionnaires to gauge changes in reported behaviour changes for participating families only;

- 11 which used single questionnaires to gauge participating parents' perceptions of any behaviour change.

While these quantitative studies drew on different methodologies (Boylan et al, 2015), what unites them is their use of measures to generate 'hard evidence' of the 'impact' of book-gifting, whether related to progress in language and literacy as assessed through standardised tests or to behaviours, such as book-sharing, that have been associated with such progress.

The predominance of evaluations of impact is understandable as such studies, funded by book-gifting organisations or their sponsors, are designed to generate evidence to inform resourcing decisions; such organisations often expect quantifiable evidence. However, these studies do work to construct books and book-gifting in particular ways. Assuming the chain of causal relations that links book ownership and book-sharing practices to language and literacy development, they attempt to gauge the impact of book-gifting by measuring changes in attitudes, behaviour or scores on standardised tests. Experimental studies of *Reach Out and Read* in the USA, for example, compared the scores of participants and non-participants on tests of expressive and receptive language (Sharif et al., 2002) while Wade and Moore (2000) compared the attainment in English and mathematics of seven year-olds who had participated as babies in an early *Bookstart* pilot study with a matched group that had not. Other studies have charted changes in: frequency in book-sharing (e.g. Barratt-Pugh and Allen, 2011); book ownership (e.g. Silverstein et al., 2002); library membership and/or use (e.g. Bailey et al., 2002); and attitudes or behaviour linked to parental awareness of the role of book-sharing in language development and the value of interacting around books (e.g. NCRCL, 2001; Barratt-Pugh and Allen, 2011; Millard, 2000). Typical methods include questionnaires and standardised assessments of language and/or literacy, designed to measure the impact of book-gifting on child and/or adult behaviours and/or children's language and literacy development.

The metaphor 'book as proxy' is used to reflect how we might see books as actor-enacted in these studies. Books here do not seem significant in their own right but for their role in promoting practices assumed to be significant for language and literacy development. Books appear as *proxies* for the encouragement of shared reading which, in turn, is seen as a proxy for future attainment and ultimately life-chances. This enactment of books is bolstered by the methods used to measure impact. The studies take for granted the practices and assumptions associated with the measures used; none of the studies reviewed include any detailed exploration, for example, of the limitations of the tests used or of responses to book-gifting that are less measurable. Questionnaires and tests then can be seen as assembling with the book(s) and gifting process to discursively position 'book-gifting' as a stable practice that upholds a chain of causes and effects (for which it is suggested books become proxies). These relationships are perhaps most starkly apparent in evaluations of *Reach Out and Read* that have worked to correlate the effect of different 'dosages' of book-gifting with levels of impact (Theriot et al,2003). These assemblages are thrown into relief by considering other kinds of studies that generate other kinds of assemblages.

b) *Book as broker of adult/child relationships*

Five studies seemed to actor-enact books quite differently from those in the previous category. These interrogate the significance of books in terms of emotional intimacy and/or personal relationships. Vanobbergen et al. (2009), for example, conducted an evaluation of the Flemish 'Bookbabies' project. The evaluation did not measure 'impact' on language or literacy but explored parents' experiences and perceptions of the programme, and gathered examples of book-sharing practices. Vanobbergen et al. surveyed families three times in their homes: two phases of interviews followed by a questionnaire. The interview data led the research team to conclude, among other things, that the book-sharing promoted through book-gifting occurred within and perhaps reinforced close relationships between parents and babies. They write for example that,

> Almost all parents think the book-reading sessions have a positive influence on the bond with their bookbaby. The physical proximity between the bookbaby and parents is greatly appreciated by all. Most parents explicitly mention that they think it is important for their bookbaby to be close to them during a book-reading session, both for practical reasons and because it is cosy. This makes the book-reading sessions an enjoyable and pleasant time together. Sometimes it also involves cuddling or kissing. (Vanobbergen et al., 2009: 282).

Two interview studies from northern England drew similar conclusions. Hall, for example conducted telephone interviews with parents about the Babies Need Books programme in North Tyneside. As well as commenting on the programme's contribution to early literacy, parents discussed book-sharing as a valued activity during time spent with grandparents and other family members. Hardman and Jones (1999), in their evaluation of the Kirklees Babies into Books project, foregrounded the emotional dimension of book-sharing and the significance of touch, gesture and physical proximity as well as talk. They commented on the 'special closeness of baby and mother' as parents held books for their babies to see, noting how, 'much of the observed learning and interaction could have been based around any object, not necessarily a book' (Hardman and Jones, 1999: 226-227).

Such interview studies can be seen as actor-enacting books as 'brokers' of adult-child relationships. Book-sharing is not just about language and literacy development but about interactions around a physical object. Books become material objects that can be gathered around, mediating physical and emotional intimacy. In such studies, the role of book-sharing extends beyond language and literacy development, but perhaps is closed down in other ways. Book-sharing is presented as an adult/child activity rather than situated within the more varied family relationships that typify many homes (e.g. see Gregory, 2004). In doing so, they imply perhaps that book-gifting and the book-sharing it promotes construct and reflect a certain kind of parenthood, aligned with assumptions about being a 'good' parent (Nichols et al., 2009).

c) Book as 'connective artefact'

Four other qualitative studies also highlight the materiality of books as objects but do so with regard to a wider diversity of relationships and practices. Using qualitative methods including video, observation and interview, these studies explore how books were actor-enacted through assemblage with toys, the home, children, parents, siblings, other relatives, and family life. In these studies books are not positioned as proxies for behaviours and attitudes or as objects that broker relationships. Instead they become 'connective artefacts' that assemble with other practices in the home.

The term 'connective artefact' is taken from Pahl et al. (2010)'s qualitative study of families' experiences of book-sharing linked to the UK Booktrust Bookstart programme. Pahl et al. made four visits to each of eight families to explore their literacy practices prior to and following the gifting of the Bookstart pack. They used participatory methods, providing parents with cameras to film and take photos of book-sharing episodes and then drew on multimodal analysis to describe families' practices. Unstructured interviews - 'conversations with a purpose' - were used to explore these videos with parents, and parents were encouraged to suggest questions for the researchers to ask. Pahl et al. state that sometimes the process of videoing itself became a part of family life. In this study, methods assembled very differently with books and book-gifting than they did within studies referred to in the previous two categories.

The participatory methods appeared to work through assemblage with practices in the home to position books as artefacts that were integrated into family life: books were sometimes artefacts that mediated intimacy (as in the previous category) but were also lifted, carried, chewed and thrown across a room, for example, and used *in connection* to other activities and to places and spaces within and beyond homes. The methods foregrounded this connectedness. Pahl et al. (2010:30) write,

> We would like to argue from the films that the range of positive outcomes relating to book sharing is much wider than simply enhancing literacy skills. The films show children singing, narrating, tracing with their finger, sharing laughter and cuddles and enjoying quiet moments with a book away from adults.

Other studies using observation and open-ended interviews have also emphasised how books given through book-gifting became part of the fabric of everyday life (Barratt-Pugh and Allen, 2011; NCRCL, 2001). Similarly, Wray and Medwell (2015), evaluating the *Booktime* project, concluded that the *bags* used to gift books were also used in multiple ways, by children to store toys and sometimes books, or by parents to carry shopping. As one parent told Wray and Medwell (2013), 'It was the bag as much as the book, you know.'

There is no neat relationship between cause and effect in the studies in this category. Books and bags are seen as interfacing with diverse practices rather than converging to generate a single intervention. The methods foregrounded the agency of adults and children, uncovering how they took up books in relation to diverse practices associated with family life.

d) *Book as story*
Book-gifting organisations usually have clear processes for selecting books that are likely to be engaging and relevant to babies and young children and which include features that have been associated with language and literacy development. It is perhaps surprising therefore that most studies in the corpus referred to books in generic terms and only four focused on children's responses to specific content.

Four qualitative studies, using observation, video and interview data, provide insights into how *particular* books were taken up by children and their families. Barratt-Pugh and Allen (2011) and NCRCL (2001), for example, noted how relationships with books 'thickened' over time, as books were kept, returned to and used by siblings. Pahl et al. (2010) explored how some stories prompted singing and rhyming by children and adults, and some became firm favourites, returned to again and again. Collins and Svensson (2008) described how

previous *Bookstart* recipients integrated stories into their play, making connections between the books they knew and narratives from other kinds of texts. They note how children played through and with the stories they had read, 'lifting the story off the page through re-enactment and imaginary play' (Collins and Svensson, 2008:83).

In these studies, method assemblage positions children as agentic in constructing their own meanings as they played with stories and made links with other texts. Unlike the previous two categories which explored how books were actor-enacted as objects (as brokering relationships or as connected artefacts), this category explores how books were enacted *as stories*. The methods, and practices they captured, suggested that stories are not anchored to books but are embodied and re-worked through play. Book-gifting and reading, through these studies, become significant for new experiences and imagined possibilities (Cliff Hodges, 2000) associated with narrative.

e) Book as portal

Six studies focus not just on the home and the child, but on relationships between adults. These studies draw on interviews and questionnaires with parents, early years providers, health visitors and library staff. In their evaluation of *Better Beginnings*, for example, Barratt-Pugh et al. (2013) concluded that the gift of the book prepared the way for wide-ranging discussions about language and literacy between health visitor and parent. Similarly, Coldwell et al. (2012) found that book-gifting was the catalyst for long-lasting changes linked, for example, to parents' participation in literacy or mathematics classes, and access to other services, such as libraries or workshops. The book-gifting process was seen as an opportunity for conversations that could strengthen relationships and enable collaboration between practitioners and parents that might have far-reaching effects. Other evaluations have highlighted the implications of book-gifting schemes for the professional expertise of service providers, charting positive responses from health workers and librarians about their role in book-gifting schemes (e.g. Coldwell et al., 2012) and the impact on their understanding of children's language and literacy development (Millard, 2000). The 'portal' metaphor is used here to convey how, in these studies, books as objects and children recede from view. Through an assemblage of questionnaire or interview, book-gifting pack, parents and professionals, the book seems actor-enacted as portal to enhanced relationships between *adult* participants.

f) Book as visitor

Only three studies looked in-depth at other family literacy practices alongside book-gifting. These studies drew on ethnographic approaches to explore book-gifting and book-related practices in relation to wider family language and literacy practices. Billings (2009), for example, investigated literacies in the homes of Latino families in the US who had been invited to participate in *Reach Out and Read*. She describes how the families she observed engaged in a variety of language and literacy-related activities - such as story-telling, singing and rhymes - all of which have been associated with positive developments in language and literacy, but which may be less valued in educational contexts than book-sharing practices. Billings' study aligns with the large body of work that has explored literacies as socially situated (e.g. Heath, 1983; Street, 1986) and critiqued the idea that certain literacies should be privileged over others (Viruru, 2013).

Singh et al (2015) attempted to address such imbalance directly in a US study of an intergenerational family literacy programme that incorporated book-gifting. They aimed to explore how book-gifting might be used with refugee families to support practices likely to

be of value to children entering the education system without devaluing families' existing language and cultural practices. They used ethnographic approaches to explore relationships between book-sharing practices and the wider experience of families involved. The study juxtaposes parents' perspectives on sharing books with children with an account of the wider practices in which families engaged, often linked to a strong oral tradition. It documents how teachers and parents worked together to make sense of book-sharing in ways that took account of these families' experiences and priorities.

The metaphor 'book as visitor' is used to capture how, assembled with book-gifting, ethnography and other literacy practices, the gifted book in these studies seems actor-enacted as a welcome but potentially out-of-place addition to family life. Sitting alongside the families' other literacy and language practices, books in these studies seem to mediate values and practices that, if not at odds to those already evident in homes and families, were different. Book-sharing in these studies is presented as a culturally located practice that offers just one of many alternative routes to literacy.

Troubling the idea of book-gifting as a bounded and stable intervention

The six metaphors, representing different actor-enactments of books in book-gifting studies, illustrate how methods are significant to how interventions and innovations are constituted through evaluation. Books, as characterised here, become proxies, brokers, connective artefacts, stories, portals, and visitors. These six actor-enactments are summarised in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 about here.)

As stated earlier, it is not the purpose of this article to consider the case for or against book-gifting or indeed the book-sharing it seeks to promote. The book-gifting corpus is used to exemplify how a focus on method assemblage is relevant to evaluating developments in early literacy more broadly. However it is worth summarising some different ways in which these actor-enactments of books speak to evaluations of book-gifting:

- Studies of book *as proxy* discursively position 'book-gifting' as a stable practice that upholds a chain of causes and effects.

- Studies positioning book *as broker* shift the focus from literacy to foreground the physical and emotional closeness associated with sharing books.

- Studies enacting books *as connected artefacts* remind us of the book's material presence.

- Studies enacting book *as story* shift the frame to the contents of particular books.

- Studies enacting book *as portal* expand the frame of reference, enacting children's reading as a project distributed between parents and service providers, with service providers as the experts.

- Studies enacting books *as visitors* present book-sharing as a culturally located practice that offers just one of many alternative routes to literacy.

While the primary focus of the previous analysis is books, this brief summary foregrounds how different studies do not just enact books differently but evoke different 'maps' (Masny and Cole, 2012) of *book-gifting*, *book-sharing*, and *reading*. Processes and objects associated with different methodologies, such as questionnaires, tests, interviews, video footage and observation notes, work through assemblage to actor-enact books, book-gifting, book-sharing

and reading in diverse ways. In some studies, for example, tabulated results are foregrounded as the evidence that *book-gifting* 'works' while books, bags, and feelings of annoyance, inadequacy and/or delight are side-lined. Studies may also enact book-gifting in relation to different timescales, ranging from the immediate (e.g. enjoyment of book-sharing in the moment), to short-term (e.g. changes in parental practices), and long-term (e.g. book-sharing as passport to future educational and economic success). The purpose of *book-sharing* also shifts through different method assemblages, variously concerned with establishing routines, sharing stories, prompting other activities, or developing relationships. *Reading* meanwhile is actor-enacted differently as individual or distributed, cerebral or embodied, unitary skill or in relation to multiple practices, and children and families are seen to exhibit different levels of agency. Book-gifting then is not fixed or stable. Each assemblage involves different configurations as methods assemble differently with people, things, timescales, places, events, objects, and so on. And these different assemblages realise, uphold or challenge different values, linked for example to what makes 'good' learning, or literacy, 'good' parenting, family or childhood.

This mapping is complicated further when we consider all the other things, people, places and practices that may assemble (or not) through evaluations of book-gifting, foregrounded (or not) through different methods. As explored earlier, for reasons of manageability this article has foregrounded actor-enactments of *books*. However, the studies also refer to other mediators - the gifting pack, different individuals, various locations, and so on - all of which may be actor-enacted differently through method assemblage. Moreover, there are many other things, relationships and practices that might assemble with book-gifting that were not addressed by the studies generated through this literature search. Digital resources, for example, were notable by their absence and yet we might well consider what book-gifting becomes through assemblage with the digital objects, screen-based texts and techno-literacy practices that are ubiquitous in the lives of many young children and their families (Merchant, 2015; Marsh et al., 2015). Many other dimensions of experience were also missed. There is little, for example, about how the practices described map onto or produce different kinds of identities, or how book-gifting intersects with constructions of gender or (dis)ability. These studies then, through different method assemblages, constitute books in certain ways, and book-gifting becomes about some kinds of things and not others. Different studies do not just generate diverse or complementary insights into book-gifting, but *constitute* book-gifting (and book-sharing and reading) differently.

In the second part of this article, then, the book-gifting example has illustrated how methods work through assemblage to help construct what is ostensibly the object of evaluation. Methods do not exist *outside* a phenomena to capture objective realities but assemble *with* the phenomena they investigate, producing different ways of understanding - and knowing - the innovation or intervention as they do so. Different studies *produce multiplicities* as things associated with interventions (e.g. in the book-gifting example, books, book-sharing, children as readers) - and indeed the interventions themselves - are constituted differently through method assemblage.

Looking across these studies we see how book-gifting as an intervention comes to matter in different ways and exists at a nexus of multiple - perhaps competing - priorities and assumptions, values and experiences. Like the Zimbabwean bush pump that Mol describes that gets used in ways unimagined by its designers, it may even be that 'it is fluidity, the capacity for shape-changing and remaking in context that is key to its success' (Law, 2008:81). It may be that book-gifting - like the pump - is valuable *because* of its slipperiness, *because* it has been recognised in different ways; it sits at the confluence of different

paradigms, working for those that prioritise having fun with books, as well as those focused on literacy standards, and those interested in parent/child relationships. However, problems arise when certain methods gain so much credence that they squeeze out other ways of knowing participants' experience, or indeed lead decision-makers to support only those interventions that appear measurable. The third part and final part of this article therefore contributes to critiques of the drive for hard evidence by expanding on why it is important to acknowledge and interrogate multiplicities, and what might be gained by a 'generous' approach that involves seeking out multiple assemblages generated partly through diverse methods.

PART THREE: CONTRIBUTING TO CRITIQUES OF THE DRIVE FOR HARD EVIDENCE

Acknowledging multiplicities: an imperative for early literacy evaluation

The example above illustrates how, when multiple studies are considered together, they undermine and complicate the fixed logic assumed in methodologies driving for 'hard' evidence. While, it may not matter if interventions mean different things to different parties as long as they work for them all in different ways, problems arise if, as Law argues, particular methods become reified and work to generate a sense of fixity or 'produce singularity' (Law, 2004:75). Narrowly bounded evaluations, using measures such as tests of reading progress or surveys of behavioural change will inevitably miss ways of understanding the benefits and drawbacks associated with literacy innovations or interventions. If the world is regarded as a set of stable realities there to be uncovered, then ways of doing or understanding early literacy may be missed that are resonant and potentially beneficial to learners and their families. As Law (1999:9) writes,

> …the premiums we place on transportability, on naming, on clarity, on formulating and rendering explicit what it is that we know - this premium though doubtless often appropriate, imposes costs. […] It renders thinking – thinking that is not strategically ordered, tellable in a simple way, thinking that is lumpy or heterogeneous - difficult or impossible.

This 'singularity' is particularly problematic when studies assemble with policies and practices that sustain broader economies of literacy education. Not only do policy and practice work to uphold use of certain evaluation methodologies, but methodologies in turn uphold those policies and practices. In England, for example, systematic synthetic phonics as the primary approach to teaching early reading has been justified in relation to studies measuring impact on isolated skills (Ellis and Moss, 2014) and then held in place by tests designed to assess the successful grasp of targeted strategies. Tests, tied to accountability systems, can work to embed certain literacy pedagogies which in turn stabilise certain ways of 'doing' and conceptualising early literacy and early literacy provision. Evaluation studies, that re-purpose such tests to capture impact on attainment for the purposes of research, themselves work to further embed the 'truths' about literacy on which they are built.

Reifying certain methodologies (through funding mechanisms or other measures rewarding 'hard' evidence) can mean we miss the situated, rhizomatic, multiple ways in which interventions happen and come to matter in practice, not to mention all the other ways of doing literacy that are happening concurrently with and often woven through the practices encouraged through the intervention (as illustrated by the book-gifting example). Moreover, practices that are not easily bounded for the purposes of such evaluation, e.g. virtual world play, may simply not meet the criteria for inclusion or their potential contribution may be

reduced to what is measurable (Burnett and Merchant, forthcoming). A focus on cause-effect relationships, therefore, risks generating an overly simple literacy map that excludes significant dimensions of early literacy practices, such as the situated, elusive, affective and ephemeral.

Approaches to acknowledging and interrogating multiplicities
These concerns can be addressed partly through mixed methods research, by complementing quantitative analysis of impact with qualitative approaches to investigating lived experience. Other possibilities involve a shift from the linearity of cause-effect studies to the iterative re-framing involved in design-based research (Amiel and Reeves, 2008), or the ecological approaches often associated with ethnographic studies. Well-designed and adequately funded studies, drawing on quantitative and qualitative approaches, can explore diverse and situated experiences of innovations and interventions and capture a range of impacts for different participants (as indeed did some studies in the book-gifting corpus). Also, however, as Law writes, 'We might... imagine versions of method assemblage that craft, sensitise us to, and apprehend the indefinite or the non-coherence-in-here and out-there' (Law, 2004: 82). There is much work in literacy studies, for example, that is exploring different ways of knowing, including use of participatory methods (e.g. Comber, 2014), arts-based and creative methodologies (e.g. Somerville, 2013) and methodologies that account for embodiment and affect (e.g. Ehret and Leander, forthcoming). These methodologies sit uneasily with the realist assumptions and fixed logic that inform most evaluations of early language and literacy intervention. However, working to preserve and extend the multiplicity of methods is necessary if we are to move closer to understanding the multiplicities of experience associated with such interventions.

As well as supporting calls for diversifying the range of methodologies sponsored for evaluative purposes (e.g. Moss, 2012), however, it is important to emphasise that *all* studies work through method assemblage to construct what they evaluate in particular ways. These include mixed methods and arts-based approaches, design-based studies, and ecological analyses, even if some of these are messier than others and acknowledge a greater degree of complexity (Masny and Cole, 2012). *All* studies generate assemblages that privilege certain ways of understanding or 'knowing' an intervention or innovation; evaluations always tangle together certain things and not others. Rather than replacing one singularity with another - albeit more complex - one, there is therefore a need to *acknowledge* the multiplicities generated through method assemblage in multiple studies. As Law explores, acknowledging multiplicities does not mean embracing relativism. It does require us, however, to approach and interpret literacy research 'generously' (Law, 2004:82) in order to acknowledge different ways of doing, experiencing or knowing interventions.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore fully what 'generosity' in literacy evaluation might involve but in beginning to develop such thinking, I return to Law and consider how we might approach 'generous' readings of innovations and interventions in order to support critical, reflective engagement by policy-makers, practitioners and funding organisations. In doing so, I consider how alternatively framed research reviews, such as the one in this article, might contribute to such a project.

Towards a generous reading of innovation and intervention in early literacy
Adopting a generous approach might well start by acknowledging the multiplicities generated as different methods assemble with interventions and innovations, but also take time to explore and interrogate these, and to seek out others. Such an approach involves questioning what happens as programmes, guidelines and/or models for early literacy innovation and

intervention assemble with methods used for evaluation. And how other methods might be used to generate ways of knowing that evoke ephemeral and unquantifiable aspects of social life. This kind of generosity, for example, might involve setting out to tangle things up differently, to both 'look down' (Kwa, 2004) into the detail of feelings, memories, interactions, relationships, things, bodies and spaces associated with early literacy, and to look back up to consider the broader social, economic, political and historical flows that pulse through early literacy innovations and interventions. Rather than (or in addition to) examining trends and generalities, such generosity might highlight the multiple ways in which children take up new opportunities and the complex and often elusive ways these experiences interact with other dimensions of their lives.

Importantly, Law argues that the purpose of generating multiple perspectives is not to arrive at a kind of all-knowing synthesis (of the kind often aspired to through triangulation or systematic reviews). Instead, by acknowledging multiplicities, we can, as Law and Mol (2008) suggest, explore how different realities 'interface' with each other. In the case of book-gifting, we might focus, for example, on the book as proxy *and* connective artefact *and* broker *and* story *and* portal *and* visitor, as well as considering other assemblages through which books and book-gifting are brought into being. Law and Mol suggest that multiplicities might be approached in the manner of a list in which each approach, 'orders and simplifies some part of the world, in one way or another, but what is drawn is always provisional and waits for the next picture, which draws things differently' (Law and Mol, 2002:7).

In addition to thinking about study design, a generous approach also has implications for how research reviews, such as the one that formed the basis of the book-gifting example, are approached. Of course, the methodologies for reviews themselves (including this one) assemble with – and help construct - their focus in particular ways, through the ways they generate, analyse and present data. While journal-based reviews frequently problematize and interrogate the diverse principles and assumptions underpinning research in a particular field (e.g. Compton-Lilly et al.), those commissioned for commercial organisations, charities and government bodies tend, to 'organize phenomena bewildering in their layered complexity into clean overviews' (Law and Mol, 2002:3). They typically screen out studies that do not frame rigour and generalisability in particular ways, and their findings are often communicated in ways that distil their findings further.

Rather than searching for synthesis and 'key messages', research reviews might usefully be designed to generate other kinds of assemblages that acknowledge and interrogate multiplicities. The approach taken in this article offers one example. The six metaphors assemble together to trouble the idea of book-gifting as a bounded and stable intervention. Each metaphor disturbs the logic of the next, foregrounding different kinds of relations between practices, locations, strategies, literacies and so on. Reading across these studies highlights not just that things happen differently in different contexts, or that people bring different kinds of social, personal, cultural experience and orientations that are important in understanding early literacy, but that these experiences and orientations are myriad and complex, and that what matters at any moment - as multiple practices coalesce - may be very different in the next. A review, such as this one, assumes a single 'true' account is never possible, but that it is necessary to keep working to explore, uncover and illuminate new dimensions of experience.

While these brief suggestions only hint at what generous readings of innovations and interventions might involve, it is clear that such approaches sit uneasily with models of evidence-based practice that privilege the 'hard evidence' generated through quantitative

methodologies. However, they may prove more fruitful in evaluating or informing practice than do streamlined, linear studies. In contrast to the instrumental rationality implicit within much educational evaluation, a focus on acknowledging and interrogating multiplicities may be a useful starting point for a 'practice-orientation to evaluation' (Schwandt, 2005) that acknowledges contingency and foregrounds opportunities for critical reflection and review by those working in the field. By juxtaposing different kinds of studies that draw on different kinds of logics, we can start to trouble taken-for granted assumptions about how things are and what works; and the outcomes of research and evaluation may become resources to work and think with rather than truths to be relayed.

Conclusion

This article has explored how research and evaluation work through method assemblage to produce different understandings of literacy innovation and intervention, and argued that interventions are consequently *constituted differently through different studies*. These ideas have been exemplified using a corpus of studies generated through a systematic search for studies of one kind of literacy intervention, early years book-gifting. These issues have particular resonance at a time when funding organisations and policy-makers are increasingly making decisions about the withdrawal, adaptation or continued use of programmes or approaches based on measurable outcomes. The book-gifting example illustrates why this is problematic, demonstrating how interventions become different things through different assemblages. They do this as people/things/places/times/etc. come together with methods in different ways, as things mediate different ways of doing, being and knowing, and as diverse priorities, values, beliefs and assumptions are variously fore-fronted and backgrounded. The example problematizes the use of measures typically associated with 'hard' evidence, exemplifying how such methods can erase dimensions of experience as they attempt to generate 'technically robust accounts of reality' (Law, 2004:9) which work 'not only to describe but to produce the reality that they understand' (Law, 2004:5).

This discussion is significant in three ways. Firstly it builds on existing critiques of evidence-based practice and its focus on 'hard evidence.' It highlights what is lost if, persuaded by the neatness, singularity and apparent clarity of hard evidence, we delete multiplicities generated through multiple assemblings. Secondly, while supporting arguments for a diversification of methodologies sponsored for evaluative purposes, it also highlights that *all* studies work through method assemblage to construct what they evaluate in particular ways. This leads to the third point: the need to acknowledge, rather than reduce, complexity, and engage in research, and indeed research reviews, which support critical, reflective engagement by policy-makers, practitioners and funding organisations. The re-framing of a literature review offered in this article offers one example of how this might be achieved. The article therefore argues for a 'generous' approach to early literacy research and evaluation, that encourages methodological diversification but also acknowledges and interrogates multiplicities. Such an approach, it is proposed, is more likely to enable the new understandings needed to enhance and enrich children's life-chances than narrowly defined studies that limit what can be known.

Acknowledgements

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