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'I'm rewriting the law' when children bring literacy into nursery school

Lars Holm , Helle Pia Laursen and Annegrethe Ahrenkiel

Abstract

Based on an analysis of three literacy events in nursery schools, this article focuses on how literacy forms part of children's social practices and co-creates the language environment in the nursery and how place, affect and materiality play a key role in children's multimodal and embodied meaning-making around literacy. The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in two nursery schools, in which we followed different children through their days in order to explore how they used language in different contexts, what characterised their language practices and what appeared to encourage and constrain their desire to express themselves. It shows how the written word means much more to children than knowledge about the structure of books and identification of letters and how children draw on their own experience and include the place and the available materials in their joint meaning-making processes. Against this background, we argue for the need for a reconceptualisation of what literacy is and can be in a nursery school context and for a discussion of the implications of this for teaching literacy.

Key words: nursery schools, language environment, linguistic ethnography, literacy events, place and affect

Introduction

Recent decades have seen increasing interest in children's literacy as part of the language environment of nursery schools. This has primarily been related to individual children's development of reading and writing skills or to skills that are seen as preceding these. Framed by educational policies and practices, attention to literacy has been particularly driven by goals of school readiness. Research in this tradition has aimed to identify sub-skills linked to the mastery of written language and language in general and to point out general development paths and create tools to assess them (see, e.g. Bleses et al., 2008; Connor et al.,

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2006; Dickinson et al., 2003; NELP [National Early Literacy Panel], 2008). This research tradition has also increasingly focused on identifying quality parameters for nursery school practices and relating them to children's development of language and pre-writing skills (see, e.g. Slot et al., 2018; SPELL, n.d.). Pre-writing skills are here understood as rhyming, segmentation of sounds and identification of letters. Children's performance in these areas is often regarded as predicting their future performance and must therefore be strengthened to avoid later problems. In a recent interview on Danish radio (Rysgaard, 2022), Bleses stated that assessment of these language skills is important to help children to 'learn and be happy at school. Ultimately, it may affect their marks in their school-leaving exams'. A UK study found that poor literacy was directly linked to expectations of a shorter life (Gilbert et al., 2018) and referred to an intergenerational cycle, which was described as follows:

Our research shows that lacking vital literacy skills holds a person back at every stage of their life: as a child they won't be able to succeed at school, as a young adult they will be locked out of the job market, and as a parent they won't be able to support their children's learning. (Gilbert et al., 2018, p. 6)

The lifelong importance of literacy is thus highlighted as a vital factor in certain parts of the skills-oriented discourse on literacy. This has resulted in efforts to develop and identify ideal practices for nursery schools' teaching of language and pre-writing. An example is the material *Read it again!* This programme has been developed at the Ohio State University and revised and translated into a Danish version named SPELL (a Danish acronym meaning 'language acquisition via play-based reading') (SPELL, n.d.). It aims at supporting children's acquisition of reading and writing based on four areas of language learning: print knowledge, vocabulary, phonological awareness and narrative competences. The material is based on building up children's language skills 'from scratch', which is considered to reflect 'natural acquisition' (p. 4). On this basis, carefully

defined activities are organised, where the child's attention must be explicitly directed towards various elements related to the goal of a particular activity. Examples could be reading direction, book covers, hyphenation or rhyming.

Other research, from the perspective of literacy as a social practice, has shown interest in how literacy forms an integral part of people's social life and is closely linked to their social identity formation. This has roots in the research tradition that named itself 'new literacy studies' (NLS) in the 1990s. Here, researchers emphasise a view of literacy as a phenomenon that exists between people and explore what people do with literacy in their lives, what significance literacy has and what values are ascribed to literacy in society (Barton, 2006). From this perspective, research within NLS offers new ways to discuss literacy that challenge the skills discourse by focusing on literacy as social practices that connect people and include shared notions of what literacy is and can do. NLS research has pointed out how many everyday activities involve written texts, such as writing birthday cards or shopping lists, or reading text messages and searching on the Internet. NLS has also drawn attention to the diversity of the literacy practices of individuals and various groups and emphasised how 'difficulties' cannot by definition be viewed as belonging to the individual.

In continuation of research into literacy as a social practice, some recent research has focused particularly on body, place and materiality and on the affective intensity produced in relationships between people, places and things (see, e.g. Leander et al., 2010; Lenters, 2016; Burnett and Daniels, 2020; Burnett and Merchant, 2020; Hackett, 2021). For example, Burnett and Daniels (2020) encourage us 'to see early literacies in relation to things' and as 'always embodied and entangled with affect and multiple experiences' (p. 310). Similarly, Lenters (2016) underlines that every literacy activity must also always be seen as an affective encounter that arises from one moment to the next in often unpredictable ways.

When literacy is thus understood as social practice and affective encounters, it enables a different perspective on early literacy than one that typically involves a view of language and literacy as individual mental competencies (Holm and Ahrenkiel, 2022; Laursen and Daugaard, 2022). A social practice perspective also makes visible – in the words of Escott and Pahl (2019, p. 809) – 'that literacy cannot be seen as divided from language nor can it be separated from the materials it is formed from'. Rather than considering literacy as an isolated phenomenon and as single skills to be trained bit by bit, the pedagogical gaze is directed towards the role played by language and literacy in children's lifeworld, which can then form a basis for the

pedagogical practice and a view of children as resources for each other in that context.

Building on previous research that challenges school readiness oriented approaches to early literacy (see, e.g. Kuby et al., 2019; Hackett et al., 2020), this article explores how literacy forms part of children's social practices and co-creates the language environment in nursery school and how place, affect and materiality play a key role in children's multimodal and embodied meaning-making around literacy.

Theoretical framework

A classical study that cannot be overlooked in relation to children's early literacy experiences is Heath's (1983) longitudinal linguistic ethnographic study, in which she compares language and literacy practices in two areas of the Piedmont Carolinas in the United States, described as a black and a white working-class environment. Her analysis demonstrates how children in the two areas grow up with very different 'ways with words' (the title of her book from 1983) and how the different language and literacy practices are connected to broader discourses about what literacy is and can do. She relates her analysis to the literacy teaching methods she usually observes in schools, thus pointing out the discrepancy between the conceptions of the school and each of the two areas of what learning literacy involves. For example, schools often take for granted that bedtime stories are a natural way for parents to interact with the child around bedtime (Heath, 1982), which is not necessarily the case.

Heath's work has played an important role in early literacy research by enabling a view of literacy as not merely a series of skills to be imparted to children. Importantly, she also created the concept of 'literacy event', which was central to the development of NLS. She describes a literacy event as 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' (Heath, 1982, p. 50). There exist many kinds of texts, such as books, quickly jotted down notes, signs and instructions for games, and they can play a central or peripheral role in the event.

The literacy event has since become the main observable unit of analysis in NLS and cannot be viewed as detached from the other important, more overarching unit of analysis, namely, literacy practices. Literacy practices are described as general cultural ways of using literacy that people draw on in their daily lives; they are reflected in specific literacy events, values attached to literacy and ways in which literacy is described. 'The idea of *literacy practices* offers a powerful way of conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in

which they are embedded and which they help shape', writes Barton (2006, p. 22), and thus emphasises the close relationship between the two key analytical concepts.

Against this background, Rowe (2008) explored literacy practices in 'an emergent literacy preschool classroom' for 2-year-olds, particularly the establishment of what she called social literacy contracts, understood as 'shared cultural knowledge that individuals draw on to produce and use written texts in culturally appropriate ways' (Rowe, 2008, p. 66). Her analysis shows how children, before they can actually write themselves, learn to recognise and use written texts as a type of particularly appreciated material, to pay attention to the written signs as linguistic messages and in practical terms, for example, to accept the boundaries of the paper as textual boundaries. It is thought-provoking that this project in the southern United States creates specific courses with an explicit focus on literacy learning for such young children, as it demonstrates the intensive attention paid to literacy, which in turn indicates the increased focus on accountability in the educational system. In addition, Rowe's study encourages further reflection on the diversity of children's literacy experiences rather than considering literacy as a universal and individual phenomenon.

In recent years, literacy researchers, partly inspired by non-representational thinking and socio-material theories, have called for an approach to literacy research that takes an interest in how literacy activities arise and unfold from one moment to the next. While research in the NLS tradition has been predominantly oriented towards revealing regularities and patterns that connect locally situated literacy events to broader social and societal discourses, Burnett and Merchant (2018) suggest the need to include the impermanence and relationality involved in the creation of the activity 'by focusing on how people and things come into relation from moment to moment and by foregrounding not just people and texts but complex intersecting networks of material-social relations' (p. 67). On this basis, they invite researchers to look for openings and possibilities and focus on moments of particular affective intensity rather than seeking predictability, stability and structure (Burnett and Merchant, 2020).

An example of research on early literacy that focuses on encounters between people, things and places is Daniels' (2016) ethnographic study of the literacy practices of 4- to 5-year-olds in a foundation class that focused primarily on the development of language and writing-based activities. While Rowe's research focused on child-adult interaction and on adults' way of guiding the children into what were considered appropriate literacy practices, Daniels (2016) directs our attention to children's activities and meaning-making

around literacy during play. Daniels' observations concentrate on literacy activities where no adults are present or where the adults do not determine what takes place, although adults have organised the place and the resources. Here, she examines how the place and resources provided both create and are created by the children's activity. With a focus on the children's 'desire to express cultural agency' (Daniels, 2016, p. 216), she shows how the children include place, materials, artefacts and texts in their play and how they constantly draw on the meaning that others create and on the spatial and material possibilities of the place.

In our analysis, we will follow Daniels in her interest in children's meaning-making around literacy and the importance of place and material resources in this context. However, we adopt a broader perspective, as we not only examine places that are pre-organised around literacy for learning purposes but also at how children draw on their literacy experiences outside such places and thus create their own 'literacy places'. In doing so, we focus on place as socially produced (Leander et al., 2010; Hackett, 2015; Thiel, 2015). Such a perspective on *place-making* enables us both to recognise and to learn from children's embodied and affective meaning-making through their ongoing engagement in and interaction with available materials and other children.

Data and data collection

The data included in this article originate from ethnographic fieldwork in two Danish nursery schools, with a focus on how the nursery as a whole constituted a language environment for its children. Here, we followed different children through their entire days in the nursery in order to explore how they used language in different contexts, what characterised their language practices and what appeared to encourage and constrain their desire to express themselves. The nursery schools were located in relatively well-off areas, and most children spoke Danish as their mother tongue. The children we followed were 3–4 years old and were selected in consultation with the teachers on the criterion of being 'ordinary', meaning that there was no particular attention or concern directed towards them by staff or parents. We are aware that the category 'ordinary' is a social construct and reflects specific values and understandings, but we found it appropriate for this study not to focus on children who were the focus of particularly intense scrutiny by adults. Although we tried to follow these specific children on specific days, many other children and adults who interacted with these children were included. The fieldwork took place in March/April and

October/November 2021. There were 175 h of observations from 25 days.

The data from the fieldwork consist of field notes from each day as well as photos and audio and video recordings of different types of language practices. Before the fieldwork, we obtained written informed consent from all parents with the help of the staff of the nurseries. This included permission to make video and audio recordings of the children and to use the data for publication and teaching. For ethical reasons, we decided to blur the children's faces in the photos we used, in case the children at a later date would not want to be recognised (Flewitt, 2006). One mother and father from each nursery did not want their child to take part in the project, and we therefore did not observe, photograph or film those children. During our fieldwork, we continuously assessed the situation as to whether the children accepted our presence as observers, and we withdrew if they used body language or words to express discomfort at our presence, thus seeking situational consent from them. This involved considering whether we interrupted their play or disturbed them. However, this was highly unusual; in fact, the children were generally very happy to involve us in their activities.

For analytical purposes, we read and looked through the empirical material several times and coded it for characteristics of the language use in different events in relation to space and material surroundings. Following a general presentation of how reading and writing-based activities form part of nursery schools' language environment and the related activities of the children, our analysis in this article focuses on three literacy events, selected to show how children themselves draw on their knowledge of written language and the use and meaning of reading and writing, even in places not normally thought of as contexts for the use of written language.

Literacy as part of the everyday language environment

In both nursery schools, the written word formed part of the everyday language environment. On the walls, we saw alphabet posters or letter cards, and there was a laminated picture of the children with their names written next to it, sometimes with red vowels and blue consonants. The children's names were also written in the dressing room and on drawers used to store the things the children had produced in various creative activities and which they could take home. These representations of names functioned not only as indications to the children of where they would find their clothes or where they should put their drawings

but also as a literacy practice that showed the children how to use their names 'properly'. At Easter time, the children in one nursery had been encouraged to draw Easter eggs for their parents. A group of children had been sitting at a table for a while drawing colourful Easter eggs and were about to finish the activity. However, before they could put their drawings in their drawer, they had to show them to a teacher. One boy named Christian had written three large Cs on his drawing, but when he showed it to the teacher, he was told that he should write his complete name there. Somewhat upset, he said quietly that he did not know how to write his name. The teacher then told him to look at his drawer and then copy one letter at a time. He did this, but as his drawer was right down by the floor and his drawing was on a stool by the table, it was rather difficult. He laid down on the floor, looked intently at his name tag with a blue marker pen in his hand, then got up and wrote an 'h' on his drawing after the C. In this way, he continued to lie down on the floor and then got up and copied the next letter until his whole name in rather dissimilar letters was written on his drawing.

Children commonly write their name on drawings before putting them in their drawer, and it is often not considered sufficient to indicate ownership with a single letter. In this way, writing names is a recurrent, almost everyday aspect of the language environment and practice of nurseries and clearly has a relevant pragmatic function. The requirement that the entire name must be spelled, however, suggests that other, more than pragmatic, considerations underlie this practice. In material used to assess whether a child's language is age-appropriate, the ability to write one's name is included as a parameter for determining whether a 4-year-old has an appropriate level of language (Holm, 2019). In this way, literacy in the form of writing one's name becomes a marker of one's identity as a 'big' or 'little' child and is thus included as an element of a nursery school's many ways of categorising children by age and competencies. The children were well aware of the importance for their identity and for the nursery of being able to write their name. This was evident when Bolette, who could easily write her name, was keen to help Idamarie, who could only write 'Ida', to write her full name on a drawing before it went into the drawer. It is also illustrated by the fact that it can bring children to tears when they are asked by adults to write their name, but cannot.

Paper, marker pens and coloured pencils are typically part of a nursery school's material resources, and the name writing ritual often makes the production of a drawing into a literacy event. In one of the nurseries, the children often sat in groups at the outdoor tables at the beginning and the end of the day

and drew pictures without any adults present. They often drew characters from the fictional universe familiar to them from books and other media, and the capacities and qualities of these characters were typically a topic of conversation while they were drawing. It could thus be said that the children, through their drawing activities and the talk around them, demonstrated knowledge of the representative function of writing and of how books could mediate social interaction (Rowe, 2008, p. 68).

In the nursery schools we also found a wide variety of children's books. There were picture books that showed, for example, agricultural machines, fire-fighting vehicles and various types of boats and ships, divided thematically. There were books with pictures of animals, books with stories from the Disney universe and books about trolls and monsters. The books were usually placed at a height where children could reach them if they wanted to 'read' a book themselves. Some books mainly consisted of pictures and very little writing, while other books were the opposite. The books formed the basis for various literacy practices. One practice, particularly in one nursery, was that teachers read books to a group of children. When teachers read to the children, it was often because one or more children had asked a teacher to read a particular book. If the teacher agreed, some more children would typically join in of their own accord. Being read to was clearly popular with many children. This was also seen when the researcher doing fieldwork, being an 'extra' adult, could hardly avoid being asked to read a book a number of times, since the researcher did not seem to have a particular 'job' in the nursery school.

However, books had other functions than forming a material basis for a reading session. In some cases, they served as a focal point for the activities of several children, such as when three boys took down a pile of old Donald Duck comics and flipped through them while standing at a table and talking about Euro Disney. In another case, two children were sitting together on a sofa with a book; one was reading the book aloud, while the other one was listening and watching (Figure 1).

Reading books was thus not just a practice linked to 'breaking the code', that is, becoming a reader and having power over written language. A third practice related to books consisted of a child finding a book and sitting alone on a sofa or in a reading corner and 'reading' the book. Children could be immersed in this practice for a long time, and they often positioned their bodies and the book in a way that prevented other children from looking over their shoulder or disturbing them; this can thus be interpreted as a break from participation (Jakobsen, 2021) in the nursery school's typical hectic stream of activities. The physical and social organisation of literacy materials in the nursery thus meant that children were able to seek out and create



Figure 1: Reading books together

literacy events themselves when they wanted to, alone or with other children.

Below, we delve into three literacy events where children, outside the places organised by adults to promote literacy, brought literacy into their play themselves. These events illustrate how literacy for the children is an embodied and affectively charged phenomenon based on their experience of language and writing as a way of interacting with the world.

Literacy event 1: The writing on the wall

It is lunchtime on a Friday. Theo and Emma are sitting next to each other at the long table outside the nursery, where the children eat their packed lunches. Emma is eating her lunch (Figure 2).

Theo has finished eating his lunch, but remains seated and after a while seeks contact with Emma by pushing her with his arm and saying 'bump, bimp, slop'. Emma pushes back and a pushing contest develops with sounds that emphasise the effort of pushing. At first, they both laugh, but at some point, it gets to be too much for Emma, who pushes Theo away with both hands and says in an irritated voice: 'Hey, I'm sitting here. Go away, Theo!'. This leads to a verbal dispute between the two children about who won the pushing match, and although Mads, who is sitting opposite them, suggests that there could be two winners, the children continue their dispute, and now Emma gets up resolutely from the table and goes to the wall behind her and makes large writing movements with her hands on the wall. 'It says, Emma won', she tells Theo in a clear voice. But Theo does not accept that, so now he too gets up from the table, walks over to Emma and makes similar writing movements on the wall next to Emma. 'No, it says, Theo won'. Emma insists in a loud voice that it says that she won, which



Figure 2: *The pushing match*

prompts Theo to make erasing movements with his arms over Emma's 'writing'. Bolette, who is sitting and drawing at the table next to Emma's place, has now turned round to follow the dispute and joins the discussion, stating dryly: 'It doesn't say anything there'. This does not make Theo and Emma stop their dispute, and they continue a little longer, turning up the rhetoric by wanting to 'rub out' what the other one has 'written', until Kate, a teacher, arrives at the table.

This example illustrates children's social, bodily and affectively intense exploration of literacy. Emma brought writing into the pushing competition; in her interaction with the material environment, she attempted to exploit its potential to create and affirm authority.

This took place on the children's own initiative, without the provision of literacy materials or any other framework to promote literacy. One could say that the imagined writing on the wall and the embodied experiences of literacy enabled the children themselves to materialise literacy in an immaterial way and thus use writing as a particularly symbolic and communicative resource in their joint meaning-making process.

Literacy event 2: Rewriting the law

While literacy in the form of immaterial writing in the event above formed part of a struggle for power and the right to a place to proclaim victory, and was thus

a signal to a large audience, other more individual examples of literacy could also be seen in the nursery school.

For several afternoons now, Felix has been very busy writing. He kneels down at the outdoor table with a black pencil or marker in his hand and a sheet of white A4 paper in front of him on the table. He then starts in the top left-hand corner and fills the entire sheet of paper with line after line. The lines are wavy but fairly similar and lean slightly to the right, like handwriting. While writing with great intensity and energy, he turns to the field worker and tells him that he is rewriting the law so that you will be able to do everything you cannot do now. The next day, Felix

immerses himself in the same activity in the same way at the same table, and again he states that he is rewriting the law. This unexpected statement makes the field worker ask what needs to be changed, but gets the same rather general answer as the day before. Felix writes with an almost frantic energy and fills many pages every day with the wavy lines that resemble handwriting. It is obviously a big job to rewrite the law. Felix continues in his role as legislator the next day, but this time not at the table but on a tree stump. The outdoor area of the nursery is being altered because a small roof will be added to the back of the building, which has made it necessary to cut down two small trees. This has resulted in two tree stumps



Figure 3: Legislative work on the tree stump



Figure 4: Birthday invitations

about 70 cm high with about 1 m between them. Today, one of these is being transformed by Felix into a desk for his legislative work. His little sister is standing by the same tree stump, drawing. When Felix has written three or four pages in the usual way, he asks his sister to put them on his shelf so he can take them home (Figure 3).

This example also shows how literacy can play an emotional and socially significant role in children's lifeworlds before they can read and write in the usual sense. Through his desire to rewrite the law, Felix demonstrated not only knowledge of legislation as a form of regulation of human behaviour but also knowledge that the law consists of written language on paper. His rapid writing movements and the intensity of his body indicated great commitment to the creation of the new laws. It is impossible to know the origin of his desire to rewrite the law, but one can imagine an adult voice telling Felix that some things are not allowed because 'it's what the law says' and that if he wants to change that, he will have to rewrite the law. In any case, it was an experience that he had brought to the outdoor area from elsewhere and here he physically materialised it. The fact that he repeated the activity day after day and emphasised that the product must be archived illustrates that this was an important mission for Felix.

Literacy event 3: Invitation to a birthday party

An hour after lunch on a cold spring day with hail and snow showers, Emma, Anne and Fie are in the playhouse after having played in various other places in the nursery playground. In the corner of the playhouse, next to some plastic buckets of sand and water, Emma finds some small pieces of paper. She unfolds them carefully and says in a loud voice, with great enthusiasm: 'It says here: Dear Sofie and Minna. Would you like to come to my birthday party?'. She continues: 'Especially Fie and Emma. That's what it says'. And then she reads out who is invited by pronouncing each name with notably long rising intonation, while she lifts up her hand holding the paper: 'Fie, Emma, Ane, Evy, Ada and Ebba'. The other girls around her are clearly joining in the game and in changing the pieces of paper into birthday cards. One of them makes a sceptical comment on the guest list, saying: 'No, Ebba's not invited'. But Emma does not accept that and says (Figure 4): 'Yes, she is'.

Then the game is interrupted for a moment by the distribution of rye bread snacks. With the rye bread snacks in hand, the children resume their play. Emma finds another piece of paper and says: 'I have read all the letters – except this one'. She then reads: 'Hello

Sofie and Ebba. We would both like to invite you. To two birthday parties. And Felix, Emma, Fie and Ada are coming – but nobody else'. The last part of her sentence is spoken in a loud, insistent voice, while the hand holding the rye bread is raised in the air.

This example shows how the discovery of some pieces of paper, converted into birthday cards, lead to an interaction that not only demonstrated the children's knowledge of literacy but also tells us what is important to them. Emma announced the names in a way that showed that she was familiar with birthday invitations and their social potential, where six children must be invited initially. That could not be changed, even though one of the other girls thought that Ebba should not go to the birthday party. The interaction and intense energy in the room also seem to suggest that assuming power over the written word places one in a particularly powerful position. After the distribution of rye bread snacks and the interruption of the interaction for a moment, Emma resumed control by finding a new letter. Now there were invitations to two birthday parties, and the guest list was changed a little, as Felix was now included, while Evy and Ada had been excluded. This part of the activity shows how literacy can function as a tool for social inclusion or exclusion. Emma's creative reading of the fictitious invitations on the pieces of paper brought literacy into the children's interaction. Her use of literacy in this particular way was not opposed by the other children. On the contrary, the attempt by one girl to exclude Ebba can be seen as acceptance of the terms of the interaction. Viewed in a broader literacy perspective, it can be said that the girls in this example used, tried out and further developed their socio-material and embodied experiences of literacy.

Conclusion and discussion

To consider literacy as a social, bodily and affective practice can open up new perspectives on how writing and reading forms part of the language environment of nursery schools, leading to a realisation of how children themselves bring literacy into their play and together explore the potential of writing. Writing is part of children's daily life and a phenomenon with social significance for them, even before they know the letters and can translate writing into sounds. In our analysis, we have particularly focused on literacy events where adults are absent. This has shown how children draw on their own experience and include the place and the available materials in their joint meaning-making process. A wall can become a scoreboard, a tree stump can be a desk, and a torn piece of paper can be an invitation to a birthday party. What the three events analysed here have in common is that literacy was

brought in as a concrete experiential resource that had social significance for the children and a powerful position in their lives when it was used to announce winners, to determine what was legal and to regulate access to birthday parties. In all three cases, the episodes also displayed a particular affective intensity, whether it was a stubborn, insistent struggle to be right, a deep immersion in writing or a common urge for social inclusion and exclusion. These literacy events demonstrate how the children, in interaction with the material environment and other children and with great bodily enthusiasm, explored and played with the different roles of literacy in everyday life. This also applies when the children, alone or with others, explored the potential for experience to be found in books and other media, or the opportunities that books could provide to withdraw a little and be alone for a while.

These observations lead us to question what is considered in prevalent skills discourses as the 'natural acquisition' of literacy. When we observe how the children themselves create literacy events, the social potential of the use of literacy is in the foreground. This also makes us question the approach to literacy that typically stems from thinking of literacy as individual, isolated skills that must be built up from scratch. In SPELL, for example, the approach to literacy is based on the notion that the books that form the foundation of the learning process 'are read with the particular aim of supporting the four learning areas, and the entire reading of the book and the supplementary activities should focus on this' (SPELL, *n.d.*, pp. 3–4). There is a risk that activities that are pre-determined in such detail and with a focus on decontextualised technical aspects of literacy will diminish the experiential potential of books and children's curiosity instead of strengthening their interest. For example, Andersen and Krab (2014), in an analysis of a SPELL-based activity in a nursery school, demonstrated how a highly pre-programmed and controlled process can make it difficult for teachers to maintain children's interest and for children to understand the purpose of the activity (Andersen and Krab, 2014).

Our analysis shows how writing for children is much more than knowledge about the structure of books and the identification of letters. For children, there are many paths to literacy, paths that are linked to exploration of the possibilities offered by the written word as a phenomenon in children's lifeworld. Against this background, we would argue for a reconceptualisation of what reading and writing is and can be in a nursery context and a discussion of what this may mean for educational practices around literacy. In our view, a focus on children's own literacy practices and the way they interact with the space and materials around them provides alternative understandings of literacy to those encountered in SPELL

and in various language assessment tools. Such a focus can give nursery school teachers a different and broader basis for integrating meaningful literacy practices in their daily work and creating space for children's own embodied and affective experiences with reading and writing.

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