

# Cultural agents meet schooled literacies: expanding conceptualisations of early literacy

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*There is currently a pressing need to closely re-examine practices in early years literacy pedagogy. Recent research from a sociocultural perspective has begun to pay attention to embodied, spatial, material and multimodal dimensions of literacy practices and these in turn offer an opportunity to reconceptualise and expand our understandings of young children's literacy practices. This conference paper reports on observations made during a year-long ethnographic research study which examined young children's repertoires for meaning making and literacy practices throughout their first year of school. Data in this particular paper focus on the social, spatial and material dimensions of children's meaning making and its relationship to early literacy.*

*In current statutory frameworks, literacy is presented as autonomous (Street, 2003) and conceptualized as a set of skills to be mastered by the individual. This project aimed to re-examine children's literacy practices and thus provide tools to examine and frame expanded notions of literacy and literacy development. Recognising that literacy is a social practice (Street, 2003), the study observes children as cultural agents (Corsaro, 2005) who transform available space, artefacts and materials around them in order to exact agency and shape the cultural practices of the classroom. These acts are deemed as important to the children's development of schooled literacies.*

## **Observing children as cultural agents**

In order to recognize the experiences that children bring to their encounters with early learning, it is first vital to acknowledge that children are far from passive recipients of school literacies, or that only one 'literacy' exists. This paper recognizes that literacy is an ideological and social practice (Street, 1995, 2003) where multiple literacies exist and that these are embedded and contested in power relationships. Giving time and space to children in order that they can take hold of literacy practices and broaden their repertoires for meaning making, is held to be of importance. Marsh (2005) illustrates how young children integrate media texts, artefacts and material objects into their communicative practices. Indeed, literacy can be seen as a socially (and materially) mediated practice. Dyson (2001, 2003, 2004, 2009) focuses on an exploration of the cultural resources that children bring to school through their lived experiences, clearly demonstrating how some children rely on non-academic social worlds in order to negotiate their ways into schooled literacies. These non-academic worlds are often expressed through synesthetic activities, such as those that children draw upon during play: Kress (1997) describes how when meaning making, children in the early years are predominantly guided by synesthetic activities which draw upon all their senses and use visual, kinesthetic, three dimensional and gestural modes. Children's communicative practices involve transmediation, as children take meaning from one communication system and recast it in the context and expression of a new system (Kress, 1997, 2003). This

lens of interpretation of young children's meaning making activity is essential to this study as it provides a view of literacy learning that is inextricably tied to the child's identity: 'as the child engages with meaning making engagement with an aspect of the world, their resources for making meaning and therefore, acting in the world, are changed - they are augmented' (Kress, 2010, p175) . Furthermore, learning and development, and literacy learning, are now intimately connected to the types of meaning making tools available, and a child's increasing mastery of these tools (Kress, 2010). It would certainly appear that the desire to express cultural agency drives children to collaboratively use available resources and space in order to create hybridized texts, and may be supportive of the master of schooled literacies (Daniels, 2014). It is also important to recognize that children are cultural agents, and to acknowledge not only the role of this in young children's literacy learning, but also to consider the ways in which this agency is expressed, comes into being, or is manifest, in the early years classroom. Corsaro (2005), for example, explores how children innovatively and creatively participate in society by appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns through their own peer cultures. It is useful to bring this to the fore when examining young children's literacy practices in education settings, and in particular, what happens when young children are engaged in play texts and other self-directed activity. Here, children can be seen to be doing more than merely internalising the models provided by adults, but instead, they are acting in the world and changing it in some way, and through this process, bringing about cultural change. By observing the extent to which children are agentic producers of social systems in particular contexts, and the ways in which this agency is expressed, we can aim to explore what happens as children's literacy practices meet those of other children and schooled literacies. In turn this may provide insights into the ways in which young children *take hold* of literacy practices within early education contexts.

Taking a social phenomenological perspective of agency and structure may provide a useful lens to consider the ways in which young children are experiencing classrooms. Groups and individuals can be seen to be negotiating their agency in the 'dynamic contexts of social relations' (Kostouli, 2009, p101). Agency in turn creates structures; Garfinkel (1967) describes how social actors maintain structures through their agency as they enact these daily, producing social structures through symbolic interactions. Giddens (1984) proposes that social actors operate within structures in which they are positioned, and that these structures exist only fleetingly via their substantiation by social actors as they carry on their daily routines. The early years setting is such a dynamic context where children and practitioners, and children and children, negotiate agency through their day-to-day routines and practices. This is of particular significance when we look closely at children in the classroom enacting agency within an 'entanglement' of discourses and practices. Constructions of childhood and the right way to support and educate children influence curriculum policy and pedagogical practices. In addition, children are enmeshed within adult conceptualisations of literacy development (Daniels, 2015). This notion of literacy development often tracks children's development of print literacy competencies based on how far they reveal hypotheses about print or increasingly accurate forms. There are currently a number of widely accepted models of writing development. An example focusing specifically on spelling is Gentry's 1982 spelling model (Gentry, 1982) which defines children's writing

development in relation to how their spelling becomes increasingly phonetic. This tracks development from pre-communicative, semi-phonetic, phonetic, transitional, and finally, correct stage of spelling. This model has been highly influential in marking progression across statutory assessment tools. For example, the current Early learning Goal for the aspect of Writing within the Specific area of Literacy reflects Gentry's description of a semi-phonetic stage of spelling development. Seeing literacy development through this lens which privileges the mastery of print literacies may not be helpful however if we seek to understand the diverse and multiple ways in which young children negotiate classroom spaces in order to take hold of literacy.

The study looks at the ways in which children negotiate classroom structures associated with early pedagogy and literacy development, in order to gain insights into the diverse ways in which literacy practices are 'taken up'. This point leads to a recent turn in understanding literacy practices as described by Leander and Boldt (2012). The authors focus on non-representational emergence and assign significance to the 'sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity' (Leander and Boldt, 2012, p22). This work draws our attention to the significance of literacy 'in the ongoing present' (Leander and Boldt, 2012, p22). They consider the significance of 'affective intensities' and see texts as artefacts of literacy practices rather than end points. Such work sees literacy in relation to embodied and affective experiences and a series of ongoing and emerging encounters with space and materials. Examining young children's practices as they emerge in classroom spaces moment-by-moment, looking again with fresh eyes, may provide us with insights which will expand our understandings of children's repertoires for meaning making.

### **A methodology for examining children's use of space and materials in classroom contexts**

My intention is to examine both how organized space and provision of resources appear to both *shape* and *be shaped* by children's activity. For this reason, observations focus on child activity when there is little or no direct adult supervision, but where an adult has organized the space and resources in the area. Hand-written field notes were gathered, areas of the classroom were photographed, and episodes of children's activity were filmed using a hand-held camera. Whilst some filming was unobtrusive, much of this process involved the researcher talking to children whilst simultaneously filming their activity: it was important to gain their insights into what was taking place. This is consistent with viewing children as subjects who are citizens with voice and power, and thus aims to faithfully reproduce their voices (Pascal and Bertram, 2009). It is consistent with valuing young children's cultural agency. Negotiated ongoing consent (Flewitt, 2005) was observed closely; where filming was influencing children in any negative way, such as the child seeming nervous, it was immediately discontinued. Parental and school consent were gained for all participants involved.

Three layers of analysis are used. The first layering draws from direct observation of events taking place, and takes the form of a narrative account of what is taking place from the researcher's perspective. This deliberately places the researcher as a subjective observer, drawing attention to the challenges of the observing researcher

intentionally placing their view of the word upon participants (Schutz, 1970). Thus the provisionality of the data is acknowledged. A second layer of analysis portrays children's movement and activity over time in relation to the structure of the space, including such details as positioning of furniture and resources. I have called these 'representations of activity'. This illustrates the positioning of furniture, resources and the movement of children and materials over a more extended period of time. The third layer involves micro-analysis of short episodes of activity using multimodal discourse analysis, modified from that as used by Taylor (2014). The focus of this particular paper is on children's use of classroom space and materials, and as I wish to observe children's meaning making and agency in particular relation to these things. Therefore, in my analysis I am careful to note children's action and movement, that is the ways that they manipulate objects in the available space, and the ways that they move their bodies in space. I also include 'gaze' as this often reveals the focus of children's attention, and the focus of their *intentional* acts.

It is hoped that these three 'windows' examined in relation to each other, provide a reasonable representation of what was taking place in the classroom as children make meaning and the ways in which this was linked to how children interacted within space and with resources. I will now provide contextual data followed by example of data gathered and draw out implications for understandings of literacy development.

### **Context of the study: a site of diverse literacy practices**

The data presented in this short paper presents one data episode drawn from of the year-long study. The episode selected as an example that shows the ways in which practices across the setting are mediated by the environment, by children's developing repertoires for using tools and meaning making. The study involved a class of twenty six 4-5 year olds, in a school setting in the north of England that provides education for children aged 3 to 11. The school supports children from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, including those of Portuguese, Zimbabwean, Pakistani and White British heritage. Provision in both settings is exemplary of that recommended in England's statutory curriculum for children aged 0-5, the 'Early Years Foundation Stage' (Dfe, 2012, Dfes, 2014). Areas or learning spaces often include large, open plan classroom spaces that are freely accessed by children for the most part of the day. These areas are set up by practitioners in particular ways, and with the intention of supporting a range of statutory learning goals. Practitioner-led and directed activities are also carried out with small groups and individuals. These tend to focus predominantly on language and print-literacy activities such as name writing, sentence writing, letter formation and the development of early reading strategies, such as phonic decoding text, identifying rhyme, and developing response to texts.

### **Social, cultural and material encounters in early literacy; representing episodes of self-initiated play**

### **Researcher's narrative observation (January 2015)**

*'Today the teacher has modelled sentence writing about the Three Little Pigs. The writing table is set up with small bricks and puppets for retelling the story, and there are also booklets with images from the story, to invite writing. (See Figure 5). I stand close by the writing table for some time and the teaching assistant invites a few children to come and write. I am a little surprised that the children are not that interested in the writing table resources. I move to observe in a different part of the classroom.*

*When I return, ten minutes later, I notice the children's intense interest in strips of card. (see figures 2-5 for size of strips). I am intrigued. These are on the bookshelf near the writing table, neatly stacked. Joshua and Carl have taken these to the computer table and are copying the teacher's modelled sentence from the whiteboard onto the strips. I begin to take photographs and film children's activity.*

### **Louise and the paper strips**



**Figure 1 Louise and the paper strips**

### **Narrative observation:**

*'At this point, Louise has cut two of the strips into small squares. She has written 'r' onto one of the strips and I stand nearby filming. (See table 1: Example Multimodal Transcript) She makes a pile of letters, writing on each one in turn, then places these in the pot to her right. Meanwhile, Kehinde has taken a paper strip and written letters onto this. She places tissue paper into the bottom of a yoghurt carton, seemingly creating a nest, and then places the paper strip into the top. (See figure 2 Kehinde's pot of letters). Lucy has spent time attaching carton lids to a large container. She shows me how you can lift the lids to reveal the letters below. She is excited to share her artefact. (See figure 3: Lucy's lift the flap letters below) Similarly, so is Grace (See figure 4: Grace's carton.) She is showing her carton to other children, and comes over to show me. Carl and Joshua have been writing together*

on strips. They wrote numerals, then letters, copying the teacher's sentence from the whiteboard. Joshua takes this over and puts it on the writing table. He hovers for a while, then picks up the strips and puts them into his personal drawer'.

**Table 1: Example multimodal transcript - Louise writing on paper strips**

Time	Speech	Gesture	Gaze: focus of attention- Louise	Action : Louise's movement of materials and bodily movement in classroom space
00:1	(child nearby) i, i, i,		Looking to piece of card	Swaps pencil from right to left hand. Takes card in right hand.
00:11	(Child nearby) Need sellotape!  R: I think it is all gone!		Looks to researcher Looks back to hands Looks to card.	Puts card on counter Draws 'i' on card. Places the card onto the piece of card she wrote r on earlier. Pulls hands away
00:16	Child – It hasn't!!		Looks to researcher	Turns back to counter and continues writing on card

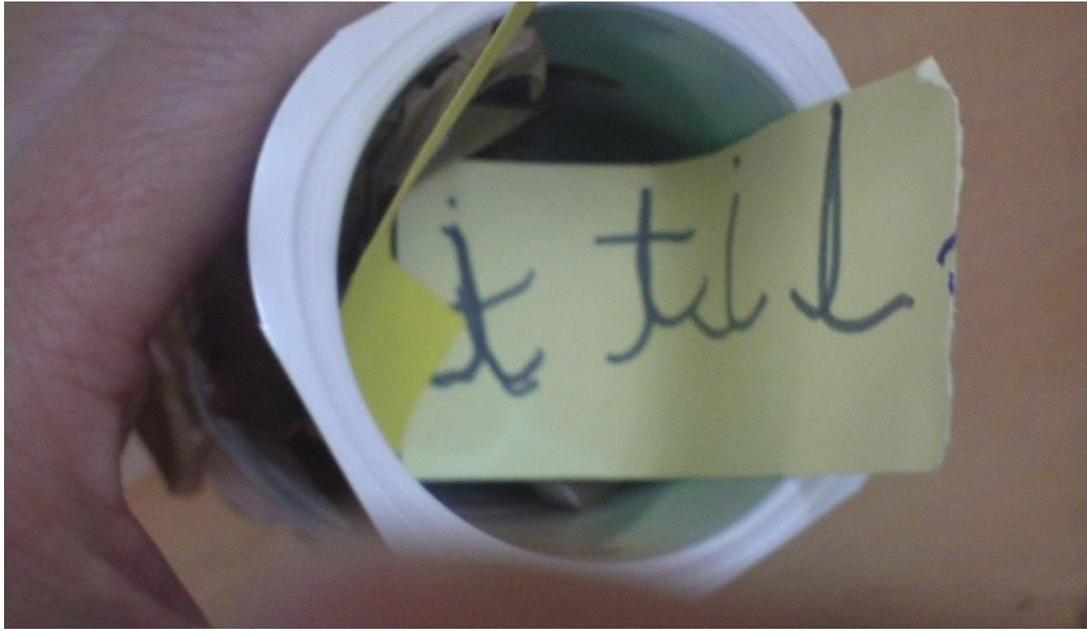


Figure 2: Kehinde's pot of letters.



Figure 3: Lucy's lift the flap letters.

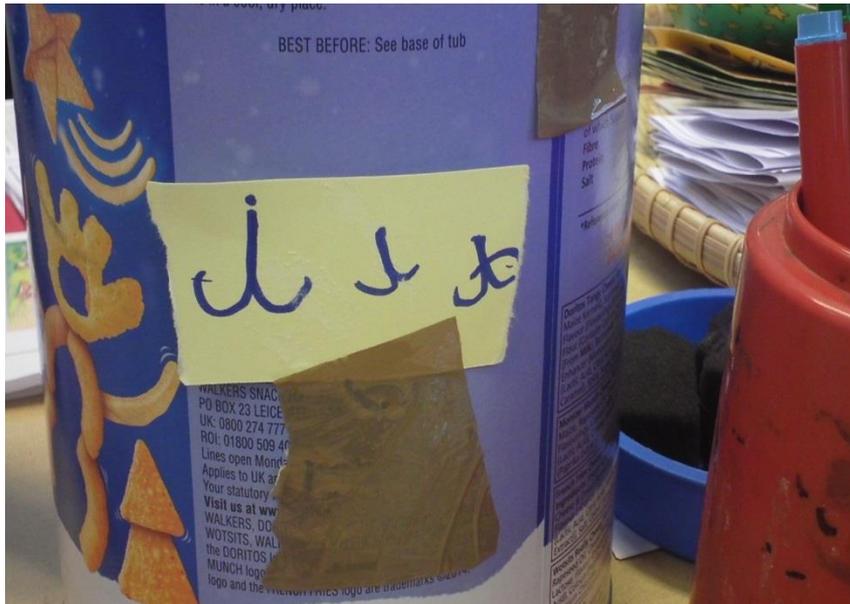


Figure 4: Grace's carton

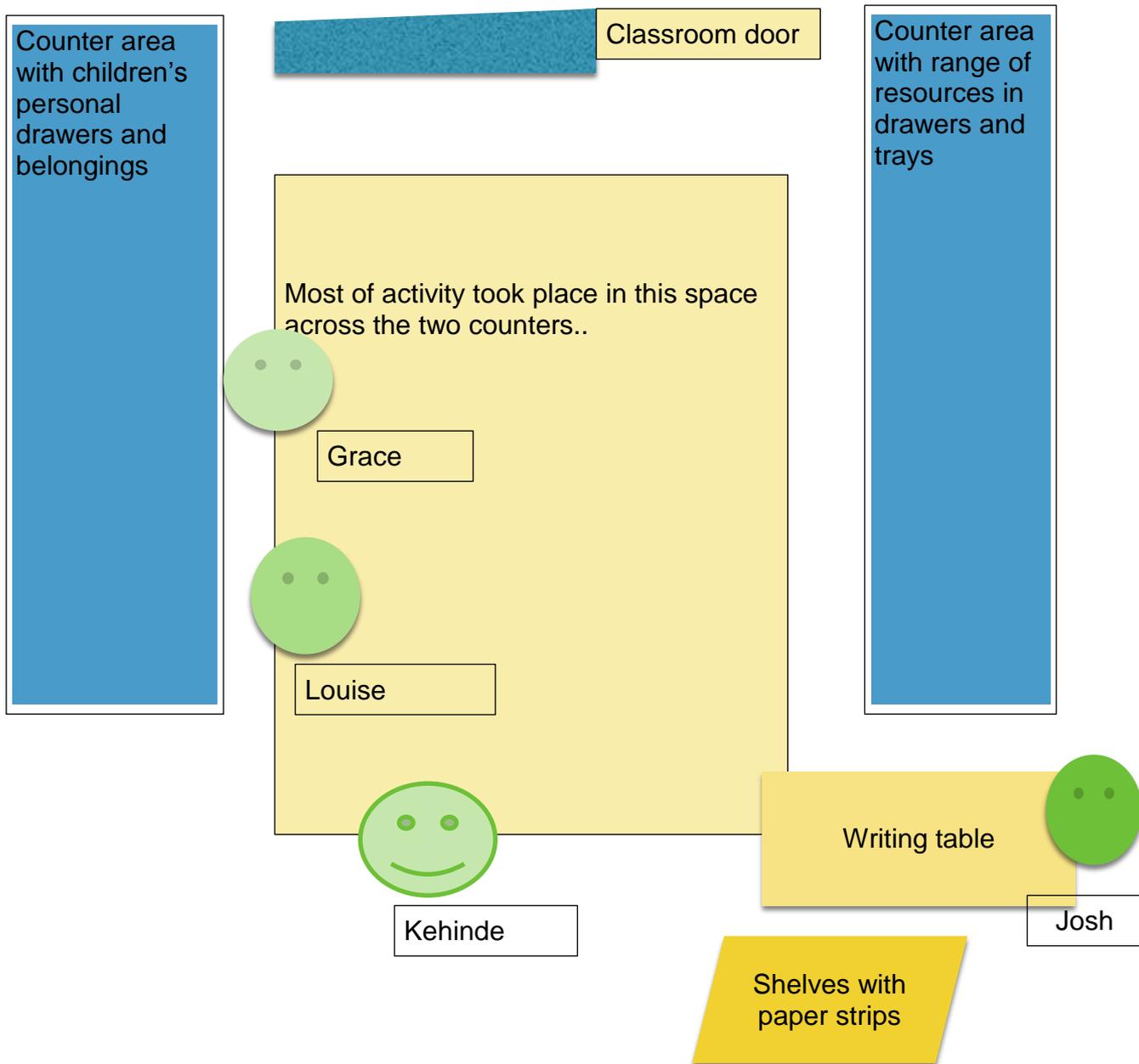


Figure 5: Jason and Carl's sentences on strips

**Researcher's reflection from fieldnotes.**

*'I quickly became fascinated by the children's engagement with the paper strips and the way in which the practices of cutting and joining, which I had seen them enjoying many times, was being merged with schooled literacies. I commented on this to the teaching assistant, asking if the strips had been purposefully put there because the children liked them. She informed me that they were left over from Christmas, where the children had been using them to make paper chains, but that they were just the right size for practising letter formation. (The teaching assistant had been reusing the strips to meet a pedagogical goal). I was again intrigued as to the traces of different practices that seemed to be emerging through children's activity, and the way that this was shared by the group who quickly took up ideas and explored their potential.'*

Figure 1 Representation of space and movement



## **Discussion: The mediation of time, space and materials.**

In the data above, I deliberately draw upon an episode where children are, to a large extent, unsupervised by an adult, or where their activity receives very little intervention from adults beyond the organization of space and provision of resources. But what is paramount in this observation, is the significance of material resources and the time and space that children need in order to explore the potential of materials. Indeed, at this point in their literacy development, the material objects and artefacts appear to be of a very particular significance. The affordances of the strips of card, their size, malleability and potential for reshaping appeared to be of central to this activity, and the affective intensities observed during these episodes was palpable.

Space and materials in classrooms are clearly claimed and re-claimed as they are made meaningful or assigned meaning by both teachers and children as they go about their day-to-day activities. This claiming takes place through a complex interweaving of relationships and communication between children as they engage in play in classroom spaces. Negotiation of some spaces, of course, is more or less open than others. Some uses of space are 'suggested', for example, the pot of pens on the writing table, the Three Little Pigs booklets and puppets. The strips of card had been re-appropriated from Christmas decorations, to a resource just the right size for letter formation practice. But at both points, the strip of card had clearly recognizable pedagogical goals. What is interesting about the example above however is what is and what is not taken up by the children. What is equally of interest is that when examined closely, the meaning making that emerges through the use of space and materials, often looks quite different to what we might expect. It is the episodes of this *unexpected* or *novel* activity that provides the lens to understanding children's expanding repertoires for meaning making and in turn can further enhance our understanding of literacy development. For example, rather than take up the Three Little Pigs writing activity, the children much preferred the paper strips. This as we saw, was scattered across the classroom space and involved individuals, pairs and groups, whose activity intersected, separated, and regrouped across different parts of the area of classroom as artefacts were created. Cultural agency involved reimagining the world and drawing on a range of cultural resources in order to shape and assign meanings to these artefacts. Children recasted what was available into something of significance to them. Their observed fascination with cutting and joining of materials, merged with what are schooled print literacy practices in an unexpected way. What we see is an inseparable interaction between children, the spaces they inhabit, the materials and tools available to them and the ways that children, given time, materials and space, begin to integrate new practices, such as the print literacies of schooling, into their existing repertoires.

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