



The Emergence of Early Childhood Literacy

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In this chapter we explore, rather briefly, how the approaches researchers bring to studying young children and written language have changed across time, and how in the process critical concepts have been redefined leading to the emergence of early childhood literacy as a major research focus at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We are making the claim that research into early childhood literacy is a very recent phenomenon. This may surprise many people; after all, formal research into the ways in which children have learned about written language has been going on for well over a century, and if an informal definition is adopted then it would be over many centuries, maybe even millennia. However, we want to claim that there are specific attributes of the term *early childhood literacy research* that distinguish it from the many earlier meanings that have underpinned the ways in which previous researchers have examined young children's relationships with written language.

The story of how early childhood literacy emerged as a distinctive and dynamic research area is a fairly complicated one and to do it full justice would require more space than is available to us. To keep control of our account and to contain it within the space allowed us, we have decided to focus on a small number of themes, each of which we see as significant in the emergence of early childhood literacy as now understood. There is, to start with, a crude historical direction the order of our themes; however, this becomes more difficult to sustain as we move towards the end of the twentieth century and at this point considerable overlap is unavoidable. We are conscious that in this short chapter we have to be selective about the choices made for discussion. We select mostly book-length studies for particular emphasis; for, although ideas tend to find their first output in journals or theses, they are then consolidated more comprehensively in books. Our choices are necessarily personal ones and

we do not claim that we always use the most significant texts of their kind (although they may be), or that they are themselves the most influential texts, and neither do we claim that together they represent a completely coherent story. We reflect our perceptions of the changing nature of attitudes, values and influences of the particular shifting intersection among disciplines that constitutes research into learning and using written language in early childhood.

THE MOVE TOWARDS 'LITERACY' AND 'CHILDHOOD'

Psychology, written language and young children

We have chosen to start at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a time in which researchers from one discipline had begun to take a specific interest in young children's relationship with written language, although we are certainly not suggesting that it had been completely ignored before this. At this point it would be very unusual to find anyone researching literacy as, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term 'literacy' was first used in print in 1883. In the nineteenth century researchers, and anyone else, talked about reading and writing rather than literacy.

Even as the modern discipline of psychology emerged in Wundt's laboratories, it took a research interest in reading. The major theme of this early work was that reading is primarily a perceptual activity centred on sound/symbol relationships. The linking of sound and vision made reading susceptible to the interests of perceptual psychologists partly because they focussed upon individual behaviour and partly because aspects of perceptual behaviour could be measured (Catell, 1886). Another theme was acceptance of the notion that learning was unlikely to take

place unless children were 'ready' (mentally and physically). The notion of readiness in association with reading appears to have been used first by Patrick (1899), was supported by Huey (1908), and remained a dominant concept in young children's reading for the next 60 years. Huey's seminal work typifies these characteristics. A lot of it is devoted to visual perception and reading, while in the pedagogy section Huey seeks to reconcile psychological evidence relating to readiness with the contemporary practice of starting children early on reading. His answer seems in some respects to be quite contemporary: root early written language experiences in play.

It was readiness, however, that won. In 1928, two US psychologists began to explore reading readiness formally (Morphett and Washburne, 1931). They claimed that reading readiness was closely linked to mental age and, more specifically, that 'It pays to postpone beginning reading until a child has attained a mental age of six years and six months.' This position was supported by a later study that claimed, 'A mental age of seven seems to be the lowest at which a child can be expected to use phonics.' (Dolch and Bloomster, 1937). That these studies were based on ludicrous and arbitrary notions of what counted as reading (and for a stunning critical review of these studies see Coltheart, 1979) and 'satisfactory progress in reading' did not stop the educational world from falling in love with their propositions. For the next 50 years books about teaching reading repeated the readiness mantras of these four researchers. A number of consequences followed these research studies. First, an industry emerged concerned with promoting and selling reading readiness, usually with non-print-related activities and materials. Second, the limited definition of reading perpetuated a notion of learning to read as an associative

activity, centred on perceptual identification and matching. Third, it supported an absolute distinction between being a reader and not being a reader.

The emphasis on measurable behaviour was abetted by the dominance at this time of behaviourism which, in its various guises, claimed to be able to control reading development through systematic reinforcement systems. By breaking down reading into narrow skills and by linking the learning of these skills to reinforcement systems children were supposed to acquire mastery of them (Skinner, 1957). Like much research into children's reading, it was based on a number of assumptions: that children's agency was insignificant, that children could learn nothing for themselves, that they were objects to be manipulated by teachers, and that that reading and writing were individual acts involving sets of discrete perceptual skills. Behaviourist theories of language learning were dealt a severe theoretical blow by Chomsky (1959) in a major review of Skinner's book, *Verbal Behavior*. On the whole, behaviourist approaches to literacy learning only survive in some areas of special education or in more experimental situations using mastery learning.

The major consequence of behaviourism and reading readiness theories was that for much of the twentieth century researchers seemed to have believed that there was simply no point in investigating, or even thinking about very young children's thinking about, understanding of and use of reading and writing; the possibility of this had been defined out of existence until they arrived in school and faced a teacher.

New disciplines and literacy

To a large extent the Second World War provided a new impetus for research into literacy, although the driving notion was

'illiteracy' and it was mostly associated with adults. It was this war with its increased requirements for more advanced skills that really brought home the significance of low literacy levels. The concept of functional literacy emerged during the war and was widely adopted in development education within mass literacy campaigns (Gray, 1956; see Akinnaso, 1991, for a personal perspective on this area) and later in adult and employment education. The notion of functional literacy for the first time forced researchers to be interested in what literacy was for and what people did with it in their everyday lives. Almost for the first time research began to consider reading as something more than simply a decoding process, and that it had a social element. It also led to the realisation that it was not only reading that needed to be considered, but also writing, although it remained true that reading received much greater attention than writing.

Another way in which the Second World War influenced research into literacy was through the emergence and consolidation of newer disciplines: cognitive psychology, the general area of information and communication studies, and psycholinguistics. These disciplines consistently revealed that communication, especially written communication, was a complex, multi-layered, and highly skilled process involving a reflective and strategic meaning-orientated approach to behaviour. While much of this work was related to adults, one book began to pull threads together and powerfully apply understandings to children learning to read. This book was Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading* (1971). It was not a research study itself, but it used a mass of evidence and theoretical work deriving from these newer disciplines. This evidence came from new studies into the cognitive perception (Neisser, 1967;

Gibson, 1969), skilled behaviour (Miller, Galanter and Pribram, 1960), communication and information theory (Pierce, 1961; Cherry, 1966; and Miller, 1967), linguistics (Chomsky, 1957 and 1965), developmental psycholinguistics (McNeill, 1966), developmental cognition (Bruner, Goodenough and Austin, 1956; Bruner, Olver and Greenfield, 1966) and those educationalists who were beginning to make use of these new disciplines (Goodman, 1968).

Smith's book immediately attracted both huge support and massive opposition and severely divided educationalists. It would not be unfair to describe this division as 'war', with such vitriol were these differences manifested. Despite this substantial opposition, Smith's book regenerated and broadened reading-related research, which swiftly flourished and began to move in directions that even Smith had not anticipated.

Smith's analysis and synthesis had a number of consequences for the emergence of early childhood literacy:

- Reading could no longer be seen simply as an associative process. It had to be recognised as a much more complex activity involving cognitive and strategic behaviour. The approach of young children to print reflected this complexity and use of strategy.
- The narrowness of research into reading was breached; the area was opened up as a topic for scrutiny and influence from a much wider set of disciplines than psychology (although this was only a beginning).
- Meaning could no longer be seen as simply sitting there in a text. It was readers who assigned meaning to print and children did this in similar ways to adults, although drawing on different experiences.

What Smith had not done in 1971 was (a) move beyond a reading-oriented understanding of print usage, and (b) follow through his own logic and consider whether

children who had all these complex abilities were applying them to comprehending and making sense of print long before they moved into formal schooling. However, these newer disciplines had begun to reposition the understanding of written language as a much more dynamic and interactive process. It was these meanings that were carried forward and developed by other researchers.

The emergence of 'emergence'

At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s the relationship between childhood and written language was changing dramatically. There had long been interest (mostly from psychologists) in how some children arrived in school able to read (Durkin, 1966; Clarke, 1976; and Forester, 1977) but such early engagement with literacy (and again it was always reading) was studied because it was believed to be unusual. Asking explicitly how young children made sense of literacy had begun with psychologists such as Reid (1966) and Downing (1979) but had extended to a crop of studies appearing in the late seventies and even continuing to the early eighties. These tended to focus on children in early schooling (Johns, 1976/7; Tovey 1976). At the same other researchers were exploring this issue in what was ultimately a more powerful way. Clay (1969), Read (1970) and Goodman (1976) became interested in the strategic behaviour of children engaging in literacy and it was their approach that led to some major shifts in the conceptualisation of early childhood and literacy. Rather than ask explicit questions of children, something that is always going to be problematic, they looked at the actual behaviours of children engaged in literacy. They saw that while many of the children's literacy behaviours were

technically incorrect, they nevertheless revealed how children were strategic in approaching literacy and were working hard to develop hypotheses about how the system worked. If children aged 5 and 6 were bringing sense-making strategies to literacy, and if research from developmental psychology was demonstrating that young school-aged children were actively making sense of their worlds then how were even younger children responding to literacy? As Ferriero and Teberosky in their seminal study put it:

It is absurd to imagine that four- or five-year-old children growing up in an urban environment that displays print everywhere (on toys, on billboards and road signs, on their clothes, on TV) do not develop any ideas about this cultural object until they find themselves sitting before a teacher.

(1982: 12)

A number of individual case studies, by researchers studying their own children, began to focus explicitly on the period before schooling. Lass (1982) started with her child from birth, Baghban (1984) from birth to 3, Crago and Crago (1983) from 3 to 4, Payton (1984), the first British case study, across the fourth year, while Bissex (1980) followed her son during his fifth year. All showed clearly how their children were paying a lot of attention to print. Literacy was certainly beginning before schooling. At the same time researchers began reporting on broader studies involving a wider range of children (Clay, 1975; Mason, 1980; Hiebert, 1981; Harste, Burke and Woodward, 1982; Sulzby, 1985). A revolution was taking place that demanded a revaluation of literacy as something that moved beyond any conventional ability to read and write. Rather than literacy development being something that began at the start of schooling after a bout of reading readiness exercises, it was becoming a much broader continuum that had its

origins in very early childhood and drew its meaning from making sense rather than formal teaching (Hall, 1987).

The rich range of studies during the 1970s and early 1980s reflected two major moves by researchers:

- There was increasing recognition of the role that young children played in making sense of literacy: even the very youngest were strategic literacy learners who paid attention to the print world, participated in it in their own ways, and developed theories about how it worked. A new field of study appeared – emergent literacy.
- This change involved a redefinition of literacy, such that literacy began to be viewed as a much broader set of print-related behaviours than those conventionally experienced in education.

If there was a criticism that could be made of much of the research of this period, it would be that research tended to be more pragmatic than deeply theoretically based. Subsequent developments would change this. Nevertheless, early childhood literacy had begun to emerge and this shift was being greatly facilitated by research that was focusing more closely on the nature of literacy outside of schooling.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

It is at this point that any notion of maintaining a chronological sequence, however crude, breaks down, for during the last 20 years of the twentieth century a rich range of research and theoretical perspectives began to impact upon the study of young children and written language, and did so in ways that often overlapped or were inextricably intertwined. As a consequence, the following sections should in no way be viewed as discrete areas, but as aspects of a complex mixture of ideas that would, once again, redefine how young children's

relationship with reading and writing could be understood.

The entry of cultural psychology

We will start with a re-entry of psychology into this story. Chronologically the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky belongs to the first part of the twentieth century (he died in 1934). However, after the 1962 translation of *Thought and Language* his work began to have an important influence on research into child development, language and thinking. It was however only more recently (especially Vygotsky, 1978) that his work began to influence research on literacy. The feature of Vygotsky's work that captured the interest of researchers was his recognition of the role of culture in learning, especially that individuals are inseparably connected to cultural history. This made a timely connection with the powerful emergence of sociology and anthropology into literacy research (see next sections).

Vygotsky had a particular interest in the ways in which children use many mediational tools to construct meaning (Lee and Smagorinsky, 2000), an interest shared with more semiotic theorists – see below. Vygotsky argued that language, for example, is first experienced around the child and comes to be used by the child; it is within the flow of experience of that participation in society that language is internalised and understanding develops. In interactions with their environment, including other people, Vygotsky recognised that even young children acted creatively, using their imagination. In particular, pretence play was seen by him as a very powerful opportunity for children to appropriate the symbols and tools of their culture (Vygotsky, 1967; then see Paley, 1984). He was interested in how the learning

relationship between children and their culture developed. In modern research this has primarily revolved around the dyadic exchanges that occur within what is usually termed the zone of proximal development, although Vygotsky himself never studied such exchanges as mother–child problem-solving dialogues (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1994). Despite this, many scholars have explored naturally efficient pedagogic strategies, especially in dyads, examining how adults can structure children's routes into learning from participation and partial understanding to internalisation and expertise. Concepts such as 'scaffolding' (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976); 'structuring situations', 'apprenticeship' (Rogoff, 1986; 1990) and 'assisted performance' (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) have been particularly influential. In the 1990s developments of Vygotskian theory extended into studies that emphasised children's agency, locating literacy within a web of related cultural activities, (Gee, 1990; Göncü, 1999). The rich proliferation of such studies is reflected in following chapters.

Ethnography and literacy outside of schooling

That home circumstances made a difference to children's relationship with written language had been known to researchers for a very long time. Nevertheless, the role of the home was essentially positioned as a handmaiden to schooling. It was sociology and anthropology with their interests in cultural socialisation, the development of sociolinguistics with its interest in language as a social practice (Hymes, 1974), and the growing interest in emergent literacy that led to researchers in the 1970s and 1980s to look at literacy and homes in a different way.

Instead of trying to correlate literacy performance with crude socio-economic indicators, for the first time researchers began to ask in detail how literacy practice operated in homes and how these experiences might influence children's attitudes to and knowledge about literacy. Shirley Brice Heath (1983) brought ethnography to studying literacy in families but, significantly, looked beyond the family to the community. Across a 10-year period she examined how different community language and literacy discourses encultured children. She followed these children into schooling and explored how their early experiences interrelated with the discourses of schooling, demonstrating powerfully different effects on the children's lives in school. In the same year as Heath's book was published another anthropologist, Taylor (1983), introduced the phrase 'family literacy' after spending 3 years working with six families exploring how the children developed ideas and knowledge about literacy in their homes and how this related to their literacy experiences in schools. Neither Heath nor Taylor focussed specifically upon younger children. They did not have to as the ethnographic study of family and community literacy life included all participants in relation to each other; young children and their literacy-related behaviours now appeared in context.

Heath and Taylor were part of a significant shift in literacy studies, a shift that began to emphasise the social nature of literacy. Street (1984) after examining different theories of literacy and analysing community literacy practices in Iran concluded that Western academic models of literacy, while widespread, failed to represent the different ways in which literacy was embedded in cultural practices. Describing the Western model as treating

literacy like an autonomous object, he developed the ideas of ideological 'literatecies' in which different cultural and community discourses led to significantly different ways of valuing and using literacy (something also explored in Africa by Scribner and Cole, 1981, and in Alaska by Scollon and Scollon, 1981). Thus from different cultural contexts children would be bringing very different conceptions of literacy to the autonomous practices of school literacy. Tizard and Hughes (1984) examined exactly what happened when children crossed the threshold of the classroom, challenging a prevailing – and persistent – viewpoint that working-class parents necessarily contributed less to children's oral and literacy repertoires than middle-class families enjoyed.

The introduction of longitudinal approaches and ethnography to studying literacy as a social practice was very important. Uncovering the nature and significance of literacy within family and community life required diverse tools to suit different sites, and ethnography, with its focus on detailed description, the evolving of themes, the valuing of participant's perspectives, and the development of different relationships between researchers and subjects, allowed extremely detailed research to flourish. A landmark study was Wells' (1986) *The Meaning Makers*, researching children moving across different settings as they emerged from infancy, interacted with people at home then at school; following some until the end of elementary education. Significant findings included:

- Children can take the initiative in literacy-related activities from an early age, but school tended to remove responsibility from them;
- 'Listening' to books that are read to them – actually engaging in talk around and through books – is very possibly the most valuable type of early literacy activity;

- Children learn best when engaged in authentic experiences that are meaningful for them.

Considering literacy as a social practice became and remains a dominant theme in literacy studies and most frequently draws heavily, although not always directly, on ethnography. Much subsequent research concentrated on developing more theoretical accounts of literacy (for instance, Gee, 1990; Baynham, 1995, and Lankshear, 1997), or on exploring specific community literacy practices (for example, Besnier, 1995; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Others paid more attention to children (for example, Fishman, 1988; Lofty, 1992) and some have concentrated on older children and adolescents (for example Voss, 1996; Finders, 1997, and Knobel, 1999).

How did all this work impact on the emergence of early childhood literacy?

- It demonstrated clearly that literacy cannot be divorced from language as a whole, and neither from its wider cultural context. Literacy is given meaning by the cultural discourses and practices in which it is embedded and young children are from birth witnesses to and participants in such practices.
- In uncovering young children's literacy lives in families and communities it drew attention to how young children are learning to make meaning with a much wider notion of literacy than previously considered, thus opening the way for later investigation of broader notions of authorship, young children's relationship to popular culture, and their involvement in the new technologies of communication.
- It has raised and invited powerful questions about the relationship between literacy as a social practice and literacy in schooling at a time when in many parts of the world the autonomous models of literacy was being increasingly privileged by governments.

The literacy classroom as a dynamic social space

The research shifts identified so far had been increasingly opening up literacy as a

complex practice, and gradually the assumption that in classrooms the activity of teaching literacy was much less problematic came to be challenged. While earlier studies had begun to reveal that young children were strategic, active learners when faced with classroom reading demands, classrooms were still typically viewed as less dynamic situations in which children were positioned as passive consumers of literacy knowledge. Drawing on theoretical stances derived from ethnomethodology and social interactional perspectives (Garfinkel, 1967; Hymes, 1974; Goffman, 1981; Bloome and Green, 1984) a number of researchers began to problematise this instructional space. By exploring in considerable detail the activities and behaviours that made up everyday classroom life, these environments, far from being places where teachers simply taught and children simply learned, were gradually uncovered as complex communicative spaces. Children were not simply learning the academic content of lessons, but were learning (or contesting) the ways of being in classrooms. Classrooms began to be perceived as dynamic spaces that had social structures, academic structures and activity structures, and each was interlocked and interdependent (Erickson and Mohatt, 1982).

McDermott (1979) explored the discursive construction of identity and how this impacted upon performances of literacy in second-grade classrooms. With the aid of painstaking investigation of frame-by-frame video playback, McDermott demonstrated that children in the apparently chaotic bottom group were actually responding in ways that were equally strategic as the responses of children in the manifestly achieving top group. McDermott set his analysis not in the context of prior investigations into educational achievement, nor indeed in mainstream

psychology, but rather in micro-sociological questioning of how people in their moment-by-moment behaviour negotiate and construct their roles and identities. This detailed, almost second-by-second examination of classroom activities became a common procedural technique in an effort to locate precisely how literacy sessions were constructed and negotiated during interactions between teachers and students, and between student and student (Green, 1987; Bloome, 1989; Heap, 1989; Floriana, 1993).

One consequence of this research was a growing focus on what it was that children brought to literacy sessions, both academically and socially, for instance recognising that child participation depended not only on the teacher's rules for participation but the child's standing and relationships with peers. These more finely focussed observations gradually changed from simple comparisons between the language and literacy of home and school in which the child's language in school was seen as somewhat impoverished. Increasingly researchers discovered that whatever the formal agendas of schooling might demand, within them children were nevertheless making rich use of their out-of-school language and literacy lives both in adolescence (Gilmore, 1986) and in early childhood (Dyson, 1989, 1993, 2002).

While the socially oriented work of the researchers in the previous two sections has been highly significant, it has also been criticised for not connecting with wider concerns of a social theory of pedagogy: 'the cross-generational production and reproduction of knowledge and power' and 'the complex fabric of texts and discourses through which social representation and reproduction is effected.' (Luke, 1992: 108) These wider perspectives on literacy emerged from the work of theorists associated with discourse studies (Lankshear and

Lawler, 1987; Luke, 1988; Baker and Freebody, 1989; Edelsky, 1996) – although these have their origins in a long history of social, political and philosophical theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Foucault, 1979, 1988). Discursive approaches broaden the scope of studies into family and classroom life by examining how these social institutions are located in discourse structures and wider ideologies (Gee, 1996). Discourses are deeply embedded and largely invisible to participants within them (although not to those outside them). Some discourses have historically gained immense power and status, something that becomes unproblematic to those subscribing to their ideas and practices. This understanding of how discourses and ideologies position participants, materials and practices within early childhood, is increasingly challenged through the valuing of diversity (Cannella, 2002; Vasquez, 2004; Janks, 2010). González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) used the concept of 'funds of knowledge' to develop a powerful strategy of involving teachers to facilitate parents and their communities to come to a strength-based analysis of the resources they hold to support their children's literacy development.

Literacy as semiotic and technological practice

If there is one thing that most of the research written about so far has in common, it is that it focusses on literacy as an activity involving the use of print. To most people this long seemed an *a priori* condition of researching literacy, but one of the more recent shifts in early childhood literacy has been as a result of social semiotic theory. This theory is concerned with ways in which meaning is made in social contexts (Eco, 1979; Halliday, 1974). Conventionally literacy is an act of

meaning making, whether it be in interpreting a text or generating a text, and it has always been acknowledged that there are many other forms of meaning making, e.g. through art, music, dance, etc. Historically these have always been linked generally as 'creative' areas, but specifically separated as cultural practices. Thus, for instance, there is a long history of studies of children's literacy, and a strong history of studies of children's drawings (for example, Kellog, 1969; Goodnow, 1977; Gardner, 1980), giving the impression that these activities are quite distinct. Social semiotic theory points out that as forms of meaning making they, and all other forms of meaning, have as many similarities as differences, and that it is history and ideology that assigns particular values to these differences.

Children from very early on utilise a rich range of ways to make meaning and while they might be able to distinguish between them as forms, they utilise whatever they feel is appropriate in whichever ways they want to intend a meaning (see Flewitt, this volume). One of the earliest teams of researchers to explore this area, albeit embryonically, was Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984). They believed that young children's meaning making used exactly the same overall strategies as adults, but that their results reflected differences in experience and interest. Although focussing mostly on print-related meaning making by young children, they nevertheless viewed authoring as something that could move across communication systems and which was truly multimodal. This was taken further by Rowe (1994) in her study of preschoolers as authors. She points out that young children do not feel excessively constrained by society's distinctions between communication systems, and the belief of many that young children use a

variety of graphic media because they cannot write reflects a major failure to understand how powerfully children switch between modalities as their intents shift.

The seminal text in this area is *Before Writing* (Kress, 1997). While acknowledging that children increasingly become aware of the ways in which conventions operate, Kress points out that learning is not a simply unidirectional movement in which children simply take on board a socially determined world. Children as well as adults transform the world while operating within its conventions. He argues powerfully that children's use of signs, symbols and modalities is not arbitrary but is structured and reflects strategic choices by them to represent things that are important to them. Like Haste, Burke and Woodward earlier, he argues that it is experience and interest that distinguishes their meaning making from adults, not their strategies. Young children choose what they want to represent and then select the best possible means for doing it. What is best (and often very complex) may come from different modes, means and materials, regardless of whether adult culture uses or sanctions such selections.

A number of scholars associated with Kress developed these ideas (e.g. Pahl, 1999; Lancaster, 2001; Kenner, 2004). Pahl examined meaning making in nursery school as well as the home and demonstrated how the texts young children create, while often ephemeral and 'messy', nevertheless represent a crossroads where adults' preoccupations, children's popular culture and interests, and the school and family narratives are played out. Lancaster focussed on how successfully an 18-month-old child explored in complex ways different forms of graphic representation while Kenner explored how 5-year-old bilingual children understood different graphic

systems of writing, what she termed 'signs of difference'. This stress on the continuity of literacy with other semiotic systems can be linked to an emphasis on the multimodality of all communicative behaviour (Finnegan, 2002) and even the argument that in all modes symbolic representations should logically be defined 'literacies' (Lemke, 1998).

Literacy practices necessarily involve technologies. Communication technologies extend the reach of communications across space and/or time. Children's play regularly utilises pretend or actual technologies that are part of their environments (Wohlwend, 2011). For example the telephone as a medium possesses its own specific constraints and opportunities for discourse, necessitating a shift away from the 'here-and-now' characteristic of very young children's talk, to a consideration of the interlocutor's distance that is also characteristic of literacy (Gillen, 2002). In recent years engagements with digital technologies have been much studied. As discussed by Marsh (2010) and Flewitt (this volume) such research is challenged by a perhaps paradoxical social response to new technologies. Learning with those technologies long conceptualised as 'ICT' (information and communication technologies) is emphasised in education, with a commensurate hype that an early a start as possible can increase advantage. Yet simultaneously a kind of moral panic surrounds their use in early childhood, to the extent of characterising them as 'toxic' (e.g. Palmer, 2006), an anxiety that is perhaps in part a romantic nostalgia for earlier eras supposedly characterised by outdoor play and handcrafted toys. Yet, as Buckingham (2000) argued, carefully conducted research leads to a more balanced position. Studies in the UK and USA (e.g. Rideout, Vanderwater, and Wartella, 2003; Marsh

et al., 2005; Plowman, McPake, and Stephen, 2010) have subsequently shown that many young children are growing up immersed in digital technologies and new media from birth, that patterns of interaction differ and that many parents recognise that children are developing a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding in their use. Burnett (2010) identifies three key categories of assumptions underpinning recent research on young children's literacy in connection with educational settings: of technology as deliverer of literacy, as site for interaction around texts; and medium for meaning-making. In practice, children's spontaneous interactions around digital texts can be seamlessly blended with other practices. As a technology becomes increasingly embedded in society instrumental or deterministic accounts of its influence may begin to lose their power and greater become the possibilities for recognising children's agency.

Finally it should be noted that while very young children have little social or economic power and their transformations may not significantly impact upon the wider world, as children get older this changes and as adolescents their linguistic and multimodal transformations become powerful enough to generate considerable (but ultimately futile) resistance by adults.

CONCLUSION

We are conscious that our survey has necessarily been short, is very selective and partial, and inevitably reflects the histories of the authors. We are keenly aware that nowhere have we been able to do justice to the complexity of the perspectives included (and certainly not to those that have not been included) but know that

many of the following chapters offer the opportunity to explore recent perspectives more deeply.

We began this survey at a point where the relationship between early childhood and literacy appeared relatively straightforward and unproblematic, and have explored how this relationship became more complex and problematic over time. It is clear that these changes have been dramatic and now reflect a hugely different construct of the relationship between children and written language, a perspective than can now justifiably be termed early childhood literacy. We hope we have also shown how these changes are not discrete but are situated in much wider and deeper level changes in the way research, culture, and society have been conceived. So what is now implied by the use of the phrase 'early childhood literacy'?

We would want to claim that:

- It is an all-embracing concept for a rich range of authorial and responsive practices using a variety of media and modalities, carried out by people during their early childhood.
- It is a concept that allows early childhood to be seen as a state in which people use literacy as it is appropriate, meaningful and useful to them, rather than a stage on a path to some future literate state. It is not about emergence or becoming literate; it is about being literate and allows the literacy practices and products of early childhood to be acknowledged as valid in their own right, rather than perceived as inadequate manifestations of adult literacy.
- It is a concept that allows early literacy to move way beyond the limitations and restrictions of schooling and extend into all domains of the lives of people in early childhood.
- It is a concept that has evolved out of contestation, innovation and reconceptualisation and one that has become and continues to be susceptible to the scrutiny of a wide range of theoretical and methodological positions. It is not a concept that has finished evolving, nor will it ever do so. It is a social construct and as such will never achieve fixity.

We would also want to claim that the study of early childhood literacy is in a healthy state. It is a dynamic, fresh and continuously invigorated area, as is shown by the chapters that follow. It is also unfortunately an area where much of the contemporary research has had very limited impact upon political views about pedagogic practice. We would, however, want to point out that the study of early childhood literacy is no longer constrained by pedagogic demands; it is now an area of investigation that has integrity in its own right.

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