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Literacy as social practice

Literacy as social practice focuses on how people create and use literacy in their everyday lives. We create and use literacy in many social and cultural contexts. These contexts influence how we negotiate meaning. (Gee 1990; Luke and Freebody 1997; Makin and Jones Diaz, 2002 forthcoming) We can use a different register (dialect or language) according to the social and cultural context. Our language changes when talking to our grandmother, paying the road toll, telling jokes, writing an e-mail to a friend and so on. Families have varied ways of telling stories about their day, selecting and viewing television programs, reading for pleasure, drawing, and writing.

Literacy forms part of everyday home and community life, including life in early childhood settings. We use oral and written language, as well as images, to make and take meaning at work, at home and in the community. For example, we may use literacy at the cafe or fast-food outlet when reading the menu, searching on the Internet, talking to friends and checking messages on our mobile phone.

Most children in print-saturated countries, such as Australia, experience multiple literacies as part of their everyday lives. Many children’s home and community experiences include languages and dialects other than Standard Australian English and may involve interacting with texts in community languages other than English.

With the increasing use of technology many children are experiencing texts that are digital, multi-modal and interactive as well as more traditional paper-based texts. These texts are often related to popular culture, with many links between children’s television programs, movies, music, computer games, Internet sites, clothing and toys. Children are generally highly motivated to engage with texts and images of popular culture and they develop a range of understandings about literacy through these interactions.

When early childhood settings include multiple literacies, such as texts in languages other than English, popular culture and digital texts, all children have opportunities to engage with literacy in contexts that are familiar and inclusive. Children’s home and community experiences can then be supported and extended to include mainstream literacy. It is important for everyone to have expertise with powerful, mainstream literacy, which in Australia means the ability to make and take meaning from texts, particularly books, using Standard Australian English. It is important that children are encouraged and supported in becoming proficient users of mainstream literacy while maintaining the literacy practices of the home and the community.

Technologies and texts are seldom neutral in terms of social justice and diversity. Popular culture, media and technologies have a powerful influence on everyone’s lives and world perceptions as well as their literacies. An increasingly important aspect of literacy is the ability to engage in critical thinking, to be able to engage in critical analysis of spoken, print, digital and iconographic texts, including texts of popular culture, and to understand ways in which texts are constructed. Critical literacy can also encourage the consideration of multiple perspectives and the ability to empathise with others and to challenge dominant mainstream world views and ideologies.
Changing views of children's literacy learning

Traditional views of literacy learning focus on literacy as reading and writing in a formal sense. From this perspective children in the years before school are viewed as not ready for literacy learning. Literacy experiences are therefore not considered to be developmentally appropriate in the years before school.

Maturationist theory argues that children mature gradually and suggests that children are not ready to read and write until they are around seven years of age. According to this theory there is no role for the environment, including parents and early childhood educators, in facilitating literacy learning. Children will learn to read and write when they are ready.

Developmental theories, such as those of Piaget, argue that children follow a set pattern of development and that they develop their own understandings by acting on their environment. Experiences that match children’s developmental level are planned to support their learning. These experiences tend to reflect narrow views of literacy as book-based and in English.

According to developmental theories, parents and educators can assist children's literacy learning by providing a physical environment that encourages the development of skills and attitudes that will assist with later literacy learning. For example, providing a book corner and sharing books with children is believed to assist children to develop an interest in books, to develop book-handling skills and to understand the language of books. Experiences such as drawing with crayons and using playdough would also be provided to strengthen children’s fingers and help them to develop hand movements later needed for writing.

Contemporary views

More recently, the notion of emergent literacy suggests that children are developing expertise with literacy from the time they are born. This view incorporates a broader definition of literacy than traditional views and includes talking, listening, reading and writing, and visual literacies such as viewing and drawing, as aspects of literacy.

The focus of emergent literacy is on the processes employed by children to make meaning of and take meaning from their environment, and children's early experimentation and approximations which are often seen in their play. Emergent literacy theories acknowledge the many sources of children's literacy learning in their environments, such as signs and shopping catalogues. Children are seen to be developing in different ways along a continuum of understandings rather than in lock-step developmental stages.

Contemporary views of early literacy learning that draw on the work of social interactionist theorists, such as Vygotsky, argue that the social environment plays a prominent role in children's learning. Proponents of sociocultural perspectives further argue that learning occurs in diverse contexts in different ways and that children learn what is significant for their social and cultural contexts. The values and practices of each child's family and community determine the literacy experiences, models and interactions that then influence the child's literacy learning.

According to social interactionist views, literacy learning occurs as children interact with peers and adults in social contexts. The social context supports children's learning through interactions that challenge, scaffold and extend understandings. Learning is viewed as leading development and the adults' role is to provide appropriate challenges and scaffolds for all children.
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Children develop the sorts of expertise with literacy that are relevant to their social and cultural contexts and follow many paths to literacy understandings. Literacy in a community language other than English; the ability to manipulate computers, videos or game boys; interpreting timetables, maps and signs; or writing and drawing messages are some examples. The implication is that early childhood educators need to be well informed about children’s home and community experiences with literacy in order to be able to extend on these at the early childhood setting.

Sociocultural perspectives value the diversity of children’s literacy experiences, including experiences in languages other than English, experiences with technology and popular culture and other everyday literacy practices. At the same time it is seen as important that all children have access to the powerful literacies, which means in Australia the ability to use Standard Australian English for a range of purposes. This means that educators need to plan experiences that reflect diverse literacies and that provide opportunities for all children to engage with literacy.

Critical theories extend on the ideas within sociocultural perspectives and argue that power bases within different sociopolitical contexts are not equal. From this theoretical perspective children succeed at school when their home practices match those of the school. It is important therefore to include a wide range of texts and experiences that represent children’s diverse backgrounds. Critical literacy also argues that not all children develop understandings of literacy through immersion, and that literacy needs to be made explicit, especially for some children from diverse cultural backgrounds and disadvantaged communities.

Critical literacy further argues that the ability to critique the messages in written, verbal and visual texts is a crucial aspect of literacy that needs to begin at an early age. Critical literacy involves children being aware of how texts work and being able to critically analyse and challenge dominant discourses presented in texts. This involves being aware of the ideologies presented in texts and the way that words and illustrations are used to marginalise particular groups based on their gender, race or class. Children are encouraged to deconstruct, or take apart, texts and then reconstruct them considering multiple perspectives.

We use literacy for a range of purposes, including to remind us of upcoming events such as television programs.
Components of literacy

Literacy involves:

- speaking
- listening
- reading
- viewing
- writing
- drawing
- critiquing

in English, in languages other than English, and in sign language with oral, paper and digital images and texts.