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Essay Review

Handbook of Early Child Literacy¹

Henrietta Dombey, Sue Ellis, Kate Pahl and Marion Sainsbury

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Henrietta Dombey writes:

In our competitive information age literacy is always in the spotlight, especially, it would seem, in the English-speaking world. To succeed in a global economy, we are constantly told by our political masters, we need to educate tomorrow's workforce to read and write more effectively, which is usually taken to mean with greater accuracy and speed. Early literacy is a particularly pressing public concern: 'getting it right' in the pre-school and primary years seems to hold an emblematic significance for politicians, administrators, employers, journalists and perhaps the public at large.

The literacy these 'stakeholders' desire is nothing too complex: it is usually equated with technical mastery of the processes of setting words down on the page and lifting them off it. Accuracy and speed are seen to be of the essence. The early stages of such literacy learning and teaching are seen as similarly straightforward and self-evident, as a single right path that all children should follow, a sequence of orderly steps, (perhaps mapped out by psychologists) that will lead children from ignorance (or innocence) to knowledge. To ensure children's progress along this golden path, teachers need to act principally as shepherds (or perhaps sheepdogs) shielding their charges from distraction, and ensuring that none get left behind, or stray from the path laid out before them.

So this volume of closely printed pages is timely. As its size and table of contents indicate immediately, it makes it abundantly clear to the intended audience of student teachers, researchers and literacy professionals of different kinds that literacy learning and teaching are highly complex matters. The collection provides an excellent introduction for those who wish to further their understanding of young children's early steps in the literate worlds that surround them.

¹ Hall, N., Larson, J. and Marsh, J. (2003) *Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy* London: Sage, 438 pp. ISBN: 0-7619-7437-7 (hbk) £85.00/ \$130.00

The 33 authoritative and sometimes provocative chapters come from experts in a far-reaching range of disciplines. But this does not produce incoherence, as their perceptions are, in the main, complementary rather than conflicting. The editors do not claim that the book includes all that can be said on the topic: they recognise the existence of other productive perspectives on early literacy. Rather than aiming for comprehensiveness, they have chosen to look at early literacy as socially situated practice. In their preface they state that most of the contributions are based on the view that early childhood literacy “is a global, social, historical, cultural and political construct” (p. xix). This has the merit of including children’s out of school learning as well as their institutional education, and throwing into relief the rapid and dramatic changes in the forms literacy now takes in the world, and their significance in our lives. It also provides a rich variety of angles from which to view children’s entry into literate practices. The book’s thoughtful structure and the clarity and enthusiasm of the writing make this complexity both manageable and dynamic.

In the first section, ‘Perspectives on Early Childhood Literacy’, each of the four chapters presents a different view of the topic. But all show that, far from being a neutral technology to be mastered and then applied for the benefit of their future lives, for even the youngest children, literacy comes as part of a richly complex cultural package. Writing on the emergence of early childhood literacy, Julia Gillen and Nigel Hall present a useful historical overview, covering the last century or so, which is neat and well informed. But it also has gaps. Where is Gordon Wells? His pioneering work in Bristol in the 70s and 80s revealed the richness of children’s pre-school experience of both language and (Wells, 1981). And what about recent public initiatives such as Sure Start, that have expanded significantly in England in the last decade and appear to be making a marked difference to many children’s pre-school literacy experiences?

Such omissions are perhaps a consequence in part of the chosen emphasis on what might loosely be termed informal literacies.. But the authors do show with clarity and elegance the broad sweep of movement over the last century or so, from an apparently unproblematic conception of the relation between early childhood and literacy, to a far richer conception, that embraces all media and modalities, that moves beyond the confines of deliberate instruction and that “has evolved out of contestation, innovation and reconceptualization”.(p.10) As they stress, young children’s literacy practices are seen now by a body of researchers not as an inadequate manifestation of adult literacy, but as valid in their own right, as ways of participating in the social worlds in which the children move.

With the second chapter in this section we move even further away from the ‘standards agenda’ that dominates much public discussion of early literacy in the anglophone world. Writing on post-colonial perspectives on childhood and literacy, Radhika Veru is concerned as much with what is lost in the process of becoming literate in traditional societies as she is with what is gained. She argues that acquiring literacy in a traditional culture means becoming a hybrid. Veru’s examination of such ‘hybrid literacies’ in Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Inuit communities and many parts of India finds tensions between the culture that the written word represents and brings with it, and the traditional culture that has sustained people for generations.

Restating a central theme of this volume, in her chapter on gender and early childhood literacy, Elaine Millard points out that learning to read and write involves initiation into a set of social practices. In her case the concern is with literacy as gendered practices. Millard charts the shift from an emphasis on what children read to a focus on how they read, and from a concern with the educational disadvantage of girls to anxiety about the underachievement of boys, as literacy has come to be seen as the gateway to economic opportunity. In this thoughtful paper, She argues the case for a broader literacy curriculum, warning of the danger of placing too much emphasis on confronting gendered practices, which may serve to reify the differences rather than mitigate them. She warns too of the danger of trampling on children’s pleasures, arguing that “It is positive adult engagements with children’s own desires and interpretations which offer the best response to dominant messages of gendered difference and disadvantage” (p. 26).

In a chapter entitled ‘Reconceptualizing early childhood literacy: the sociocultural influence’, Aria Razfar and Kris Gutiérrez continue the central theme that literacy needs to be understood as a situated practice, here presented as socio-cultural. Literacy learning, they argue, is a socially mediated process that cannot be understood apart from its context of development, and “even individual cognition is necessarily embedded within a particular social context” (p. 43). They conclude their account of this rich field of research now being explored by claiming that such socio-cultural approaches help us to better understand not only what is going on in early literacy learning, but also what it is to be human, and how to improve the human situation where literacy is concerned.

However, as they point out, a sociocultural conception of literacy learning was notably absent from the findings of the hugely influential National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000), reporting to the US Congress. Thus the authors of this chapter throw into sharp relief the contrast between the conceptions of early

literacy learning held by politicians and those of a growing international body of researchers and practitioners.

Kate Pahl writes:

The second section, 'Early Childhood Literacy in Families, Communities and Cultures', offers seven articles, from different perspectives, but united in a shared view that values the cultural and community experiences of young children, and seeks to investigate them further. The section starts from a critical standpoint that does not take schooled literacy practices for granted. Instead the editors value children's out-of-school literacy experiences, and their home cultures. Rather than seeing early childhood as a place of emergence, as a place from which to go somewhere else, many of the writers ask the question 'What is' and consider the social practices of homes and communities as the focus for their discussion. The section works to problematize and engage with notions of 'What is' within homes, and develops a lens that considers children's cultural experience from the inside out.

For example, Gregory and Kenner offer a fascinating insight into the out-of-school schooling of Bengali children, drawing on their research into community schools in the East End of London. They expose the complex social worlds of these urban children, as they learn Bengali from a primer in which children are pictured in a rural village location, swinging beside a straw hut and a woman pounds spices – a million miles away from the streets of London, but reflecting their parents' prior cultural experiences in rural Bangladesh.

The section is notable for the generosity of the writers in describing so clearly the historical background of their particular academic domain. Some writers draw directly from their own empirical research, while others argue from a broad literature review that allows the reader to gain an insight into the origins of that particular domain of thinking. For example, Baquedano-Lopez describes in some detail the origins of the concept of language in a social context. In that very specific sense, this section realises the book's aim of providing a reliable student sourcebook, that will stand the test of time, providing a definitive high quality introduction to early childhood studies.

However, the section does not shy away from debate and discussion about what home family literacy practices and experiences look like. Many chapters, particularly those by Marsh and Knobel and Lankshear, offer an alternative vision of early childhood that unsettles taken-for-

granted notions of the child growing up within traditional familial relations, with traditional literacy artefacts, such as the book and the bed time story. Instead, many authors engage with children's experience of moving across communicational landscapes, within a web of multimodal threads that stretch across domains and sites. For example, Knobel and Lankshear point to examples of research where children engage with out-of-school practices that may appear ephemeral and lack importance, but that involve globalized discourses and family narratives of migration. Robinson and Mackey provide a nuanced and literature-rich account of the complex television landscapes of children, and what these offer. Traditional models of family literacy, which focus on book-sharing as a prime activity in homes, with a smattering of environment print learned with a stay-at-home mother, are wonderfully disturbed in this rich and inspiring collection.

However, the collection is not without some difficulties. The editors are clearly working to provide examples of how literacy practices in homes and communities of young children still emerge in complex and power-laden discursive spaces. Peter Hannon's chapter engages with this, where he argues that,

The challenge for family literacy educators is to value what families bring to programmes but not to the extent of simply reflecting back families' existing literacy practices. Somehow they must offer families access to some different or additional literacy practices but through collaboration and negotiation rather than imposition (Hannon 2003:105)

This sentence still leaves undefined what these different literacy practices should be. The implication is they should be 'schooled literacy practices'. But articles by Knobel and Lankshear and Marsh argue differently. There, this dynamic rests on a different supposition, moving the 'invisible' literacies of homes into a space where their legitimacy can be slowly grasped.

This section does speak inevitably from different ontological and epistemological standpoints, but gives a generous historical account of the field of family and community literacies. What does the section leave out? I wondered if the field of multilingual family literacies, in particular the complex crossings children do as they negotiate meaning across different linguistic repertoires, and equally, detailed accounts of children's experience moving from home to school in linguistic minority communities might have enriched this already full section still further.

When I finished the section, I considered what such a collection would offer the scholar in ten years' time. I realised that each article held the seeds of its successor. Marsh delineates a world of hybrid literacy practices, in which globalised influences press on local spaces. Kenner and Gregory's work opens out the possibility of research into multilingual literacies practices within families. Many authors call for more research in the area of communicative practices of non-mainstream families. By offering the field of family and community literacies within early childhood the possibility of unpacking the meanings of literacies across a plethora of sites and cultures, this collection invites new bodies of work while providing, for the next few years, a section that will stand the test of time.

Marion Sainsbury writes:

The third section of the book, 'Early Moves into Literacy', consists of a substantial review of the ways in which children move into literacy. Consistently with the overall philosophy of the book, it considers this from a very wide range of perspectives, reflecting the multi-layered nature of the concept of literacy.

One possible starting point is to see literacy, at its most fundamental, as about communication of meaning. From this perspective, moving into literacy encompasses all of the ways in which young children learn to make and understand meaning. Not all of this growth in meaning-making involves reading and writing, or indeed language, and different theorists place greater stress on its individual or its cultural origins. Some researchers see narrative as fundamental, and locate the beginnings of literacy in telling and responding to stories. Starting as it were from the other end, other research traditions regard written words as the most basic building block in literacy. These see the beginnings of literacy as the cognitive steps leading up to the ability to recognise and produce written words. A different angle is provided by linguistics, which highlights the grammatical competence that underlies both spoken and written language. Each of these academic traditions takes a different view of what it is to move into literacy, and it is this multiplicity of viewpoints that informs the chapters in this part of the book.

The section opens with two chapters that share a concern with children's early meaning making. Lesley Lancaster surveys research into the ways in which very young children recognise and represent meanings, including objects and gesture as well as words and pictures. This chapter reviews classifications of children's mark-making and how children ascribe meaning to their marks. Gunther Kress, in the following chapter, also stresses that young children's meaning-

making is not yet constrained (or empowered) by convention. The youngest children make apt use of what is to hand to represent their truths, rather than observing conventions of correctness in the context of written language. Kress illustrates this point with examples, and argues for the espousal of a wider definition of meaning-making in society generally.

In contrast, in the next chapter Gerald Coles reviews the evidence from brain research, where claims have been made of the primacy of phonological awareness and the existence of a ‘dyslexia gene’. He argues that these claims do not stand up to scrutiny. It seems likely that the brain works as a complex neural network, with emotional as well as cognitive elements, and that literacy is best seen as ‘learned connectivity’ within this complex system. But Coles argues that substantial further research is needed before this will be understood well enough to make any claims about the role of brain activity in reading.

Following this, another new perspective is provided by Charmian Kenner and Eve Gregory, who consider the literacy of bilingual children. They demonstrate that in our culture, early literacy in other home languages is largely acquired out of school in home and community settings. Nevertheless, biliteracy is a valuable resource involving many linguistic and literary understandings, and it needs to be respected and fostered within schools.

Carol Fox describes research into children’s early storytelling, describing it as one aspect of ‘serious play’. The centrality of narrative is an important theme here, as is the exploration of language patterns in a playful way. In a similar way to Kenner and Gregory, Fox argues that research findings in this area are still not well enough integrated into early years teaching, and that children’s narrative skills and cultural references should be given greater respect as a foundation for future learning.

Roger Beard describes research into the key skills of reading in a chapter that fits into more conventional interpretations of early literacy. He surveys ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ theories and outlines the seminal contributions of Adams and Stanovich in advancing understanding. Concluding by explaining an interactive-compensatory model, he defines the current consensus underlying much current teaching in the early years.

Rhona Stainthorp’s chapter on phonology starts with a clear and useful explanation of linguistic terminology and goes on to define the features of different writing systems. The chapter summarises the body of research that demonstrates how phonological awareness is related to better reading. The chapter on spelling by Patricia Schärer and Jerry Zutell, which actually comes later in

the section, gives the other side of this coin. It, too, surveys the nature of writing systems and outlines the features affecting the difficulty of writing words in different languages. The authors then go on to consider stage theories of spelling development and their relationship to the teaching and learning of spelling.

A literary perspective is taken by Miriam Martinez, Nancy Roser and Caitlin Dooley. Based largely on Rosenblatt's account of reading as a transaction between reader and text, their review covers research into the responses of young children, pinpointing variation between individuals, with age and with the familiarity of the text. They also show that the interpretation of a text is a social activity, and highlight ways in which these understandings could be incorporated into classroom practice.

Maria Nikolajeva's chapter looks at picture books, and explains the way text and picture interact in making meaning – whereas much research regards them either as pictures or as books. This chapter includes a discussion of different types and purposes of picture books and their historical role in socialisation. The following chapter, by Allen Luke, Victoria Carrington and Cushla Kapitzke, also looks at children's books and also includes a historical perspective, but by contrast considers the role of reading primers. The authors trace a progression from books intended to enforce a religious or social ideology, through a 'scientific' phase where reading schemes were claimed to embody a fail-safe approach to reading teaching, to the current multinational industry aimed at both school and home markets.

Two chapters are concerned with children's authoring. Deborah Wells Rowe delineates two possible perspectives on this, the individual and the cultural. In the former, the emphasis is on children's intention to communicate meaning and the means, both verbal and otherwise, that they use to achieve this. A cultural perspective sees authoring as essentially social and tied up with establishing roles and power relations. Frances Christie, on the other hand, focuses on children's growing mastery of the grammar of different text types. She uses examples to demonstrate the way in which reading and writing are intrinsically linked as children learn the features of different genres through the models they encounter.

All in all, this section contributes to the book by providing a rich and varied range of ways in which early literacy learning can be conceptualised. There are some chapters where the research described runs along fairly conventional lines and its consequences are visible in everyday classroom practice. But alongside these are several chapters where the authors argue strongly for research

findings to be acknowledged more fully in teaching and learning. This section provides a comprehensive and provocative underpinning for the discussions of classroom practice in the following part of the book.

Sue Ellis writes:

The fourth section, *Literacy in Pre-school Settings and Schools*, examines what is actually going on in these educational institutions. Joanne Larson and Shira May Peterson open it by highlighting the paucity of research on how talk is used in pre-school settings compared to school settings, locating the wealth of research studies on talk and discourse in formal learning settings in terms of the different ideological positions adopted. They use two oppositions: Street's (1995) distinction between ideological and autonomous conceptions of literacy and the distinction between fixed and fluid conceptions of the function of literacy. These are used to separate the studies into four quadrants, giving each a distinctive ideological base. Consequently their analysis does not focus on the groundbreaking impact of individual studies, but instead illustrates effectively how ideological assumptions shape both research design and the resulting recommendations for practice. It also highlights some key research problems, in particular that ideological rigidity means missed opportunities by researchers to build on each others' findings.

In her chapter on effective literacy teaching, Kathy Hall agrees that what constitutes both literacy and effective pedagogy is controversial. She focuses on the research on what characterises effective teacher expertise. Her clear and concise analysis makes this chapter more than just a summary of the research; it is also a brilliant tool for self-evaluation and monitoring and should be required reading on every teacher training and staff development course.

Laurie Makin emphasises the importance of resource-rich and media-rich environments within a productive pedagogy in her chapter on positive literacy learning environments. She explores some consequences of discongruent home and preschool literacy practices, arguing that if an early years 'print rich' environment is to be positive for all, every child needs to see his or her own cultural, personal and social literacy practices reflected its use of print.

A clear and engaging account of the research into literacy, digital technology and educational computer use is provided by Linda Labbo and David Reinking. They argue that 'context counts'

and that the studies so far indicate important messages about the useful, necessary and appropriate ways forward for research, policy and practice in this area. It is a central challenge for future developments in the field to keep abreast of technological developments and acknowledge the multiple realities and different ways that these new devices are being incorporated into social worlds.

The development of critical literacy in the early years is Barbara Comber's topic. She describes its progress from studies questioning the basic tenets of early theorizing about the nature of childhood through to studies challenging the ideological assumptions of basal readers and the absence of the genres of power within process writing approaches. Comber embraces studies of power, literacy and identity that are not seen as traditional 'critical literacy' research, for example Dyson's work on the interfaces between personal and social knowledge, between school and home practices and between play and work, exploring children's empowerment through literacy. So the chapter is wide-ranging, providing useful illustrations of the variety of research in this field, from studies of young children exploring adult-identified issues to studies focused on empowering children by developing their repertoire of literacy practices and the ability to use them to impact on the issues, interests, questions and observations they think most important.

The section concludes with a chapter on assessment, in which Sharon Murphy starts by exploring the value laden nature of both assessment and language. She examines the underpinning values of three archetypical methods: standardised assessment, observation and responsive listening. Using historical perspective and discourse analysis, she examines the architecture of each assessment type explaining the longevity and popularity of standardised testing, the emergence of, and variety within, observational assessment as well as the power of responsive listening. The concerns she voices about each assessment type raise many issues about current early years policy and practices. Her final point, that most literacy assessment focuses on 'who do we want you to become as a literate person?' but that real progress will come from a more interesting question, 'Who *are* you as a literate person?' reflects the key theme underlying this section of the book.

Henrietta Dombey writes:

The fifth and final section, 'Researching Early Childhood Literacy', is concerned with research methodologies. We are at last looking closely and critically at the lenses through which the writers of the earlier sections have viewed the literacy practices of young children in and out of school.

David Bloome and Laurie Katz use a notion from Bakhtin – the chronotope, the time-space in which particular art forms operate, such as the world of the Greek myths (Bakhtin, 1981). The chronotope sets a limit on what may happen and remains fundamentally unchanged, whatever events may have taken place within it. Bloome and Katz see every literacy research methodology as operating within a particular chronotope, formed by the components of a study and their relation to each other. To identify the chronotope it is necessary to study not the intentions of the researcher, but the methodology in use.

But in the human sciences, research methodologies “are necessarily arguments, explicitly or implicitly, about what can be known about the nature of human beings in the world.” (p. 382) So as well as chronotopes, we need to look at researchers’ underlying epistemological assumptions. In the field of literacy research the sharpest distinction concerns the definition of literacy. Following Street’s taxonomy, Bloome and Katz separate studies based on an autonomous conception of literacy from those informed by an ideological conception (Street, 1995). They argue that whereas the chronotope for the former is a race towards a goal, with complexity reduced and change codified in ways that regard much of the value and meaning of the activity as an irrelevancy, the chronotope of the latter, the ideological conception of literacy, is of a whole scene in which people are not separated from their situations.

So now we can see the animating principle of this book laid bare. The research by which nearly all the earlier chapters are informed is based on an ideological conception of literacy, where the concern is less with ‘better reading’ than with theorising and defining what is actually happening. The kinds of questions asked include “What is happening?” “What does it mean to the participants?”. But helping children to read better is precisely the role of educators. So are we dealing here in self-indulgence?

In the second chapter in this section, Jeanette Rhedding-Jones introduces an ethical dimension into research, seeing a large part of the function of feminist research to be uncovering the politics of power, that gives boys and men educational advantages in a patriarchal agenda. Rhedding-Jones is less concerned to document the findings of feminist approaches than to explore their ways of working. A feminist approach to research may involve simply being sensitive to matters of gender. But she identifies a more complex feminist practice as “selecting and constructing other forms of analysis, interpretation, critique or deconstruction so that gendered aspects of these are made clear, resisted or challenged.” (p. 403). This concern is not restricted to gender, but extends to other groups of oppressed minorities, defined in terms of their race, poverty or extreme youth. For to

Rhedding-Jones their lack of power means that young children are also a minority group in need of documentation. Her over-riding concern is ‘Who is being marginalised by whom and how is this taking place?’

However, there is a price to be paid for her disregard of quantitative research as oppressively patriarchal. Defending the Norwegian practice delaying reading instruction until children show an interest in it, Rhedding-Jones states rather blithely that “As teenagers and adults, Norwegians appear no less able to read and write than people anywhere else in capitalist society” (p. 401).

Particularly when it conflicts with the findings of international surveys (PISA, 2000), such self-serving anecdotalism plays into the hands of those who would discredit qualitative approaches. Personal impressions do not form a satisfactory replacement for quantitative studies, however flawed.

The book’s final chapter, by Brian Cambourne, has the title ‘Taking a naturalistic viewpoint in early literacy research’. In Cambourne’s view such an approach has three parts, which he explains with illuminating references to his own work. Naturalistic research involves a particular set of behaviours, mainly to do with observing and questioning the participants as they engage in literacy practices in a normal setting, but also concerned with developing an understanding of what is being observed and with writing papers, often in ‘a quasi-narrative genre’. Secondly, following Willems, it means maintaining low values for two variables: the degree of the investigator’s manipulation of the situation under investigation, and the degree to which the units of measurement are imposed on the behaviour studied, rather than emerging from it. So the observational, reflective and reporting behaviours listed above are disciplined by a particular relation to what is being studied.

But in Cambourne’s view a set of behaviours and a particular relationship to the phenomena under study do not by themselves add up to a naturalistic approach: the researcher’s beliefs about the nature of reality and truth, and the methods for discovering what these are form an essential third component. Unlike the scientific, quantitative or rationalistic investigator, the naturalistic researcher sees that meanings do not reside in phenomena, but are imposed by the human mind. And because minds are various, there can never be one correct set of meanings associated with any event or concept. While the scientific approach has illuminated events in the material world, where mass, force, motion and position in space can be controlled, human behaviours “frequently refuse to be isolated or compartmentalized for purposes of experimentation” (p. 416). The researcher’s view of what learning is and where it might lead are also an essential part of this

philosophical component. Cambourne argues that the kind of learning necessary for the development of a highly productive adulthood is something “far too complex to be understood by applying simplistic cause-effect, measurement-based logic” (p. 416). There is also the question of how any investigation is to be approached. The argument here is that naturalistic research demands a belief that only prolonged periods of immersion in the settings where these complex phenomena occur will allow the investigator to identify what is important, pervasive and salient. So this component involves key philosophical issues – ontological, epistemological and methodological.

What Cambourne manages to do is to make a strong argument for qualitative, naturalistic research as providing not just a description of what is, but also clues as to how things could be better. While quantitative approaches can tinker with elements of instructional programmes, what actually happens in homes, communities and classrooms is far too complex to be improved by such interventions. Indeed we will be able to provide young children with a better literacy education only when we understand what goes on in these complex interactions between people and texts. Cambourne lists the basic research questions asked by the pioneers of naturalistic research, of which the last two are:

- “Why does this system work the way it does; or, what’s a possible grounded theory which will explain how these systems work?”
- “How can we use this theory to inform what we do?” (p.421)

Politicians, administrators, employers, teachers and perhaps even journalists are united in wanting systems to improve. But to improve a system you first need to understand how it works. What this book shows is that there is no one golden road, either for literacy learning or for making literacy learning better. Instead of reducing the process to a narrow and regimented advance along a fixed path to a single limited goal, this volume opens things out, giving the reader wonderful views of what it is to be literate in different ways in different communities and also powerful instruments that will enable us to see something of the rich variety of that learning, and perhaps even make it better.

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