In the past decade there has been extensive research in the area of literacy, coming from many different disciplines and working within different research paradigms. The study of reading and writing has broadened enormously, encompassing a range of locations for learning and a range of age groups. Existing assumptions about the nature of literacy and its connection with everyday life and learning have been brought into question.

Too often, however, these developments have happened in the absence of dialogue between those taking alternative approaches. This has been particularly true for those working within a cognitive model of literacy and those working with a model of literacy as socio-cultural practice. The socio-cultural view of literacy (e.g. Barton, 1994) asserts that literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skill, but are relational concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life world. It sees literacy as historically and socially situated, placed in its wider context of technological change, institutional purposes and power relationships (see Street, 1995).

Researchers working with a socio-cultural approach suggesting that we should look beyond texts themselves to what people do with literacy, with whom, where, and how. That is, attention is focused on the cultural practices within which the written word is embedded – the ways in which texts are socially regulated and used. This leads to a consideration of the differentiated uses of literacy in varying cultural contexts. It leads to a consideration not just of print literacy but of other mass media including visual and oral ways of communicating (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) and especially the way that the use of these media, using both old (print) and new (electronic) technologies, is interlinked. Writing becomes as central as reading, and other ways of interacting with print culture are identified.

The focus shifts to the many different ways that people engage with literacy, recognising difference and diversity and challenging how these differences are valued within our society. It involves looking beyond educational settings to vernacular practices and informal learning, and to the other official settings in which literacies play a key role. Literacy learning does not just take place in classrooms and is not just concerned with pedagogical methods. Another implication of this shift in understanding literacy is that it places at centre stage people’s own definitions of...
literacy. This means exploring both teachers’ and students’ own starting points and assumptions about literacy.

This special issue of the *Journal of Research in Reading* presents a range of new data on written communication across school, home and community. It deals with literacy across the lifespan, from pre-school to adult lifelong learning. The purpose of gathering these papers together is not just to look at school, home and community as complementary sites of literacy learning. The aim is also to present some of the key ideas about literacy that are emerging from current research, and to demonstrate the many places where learning takes place. The papers in this special issue have been selected to show a range of topics of study and to juxtapose some of the different methodologies being used, with the intention of beginning a dialogue between these different approaches. The order of the papers reflects a gradual broadening of research focus – moving outwards from literacy learning in formal education to new contexts, modalities and groups of learners.

Inevitably, the shift to a broader focus on literacy has implications for the methodologies used by researchers. There has been a movement away from small-scale, laboratory controlled experimental studies of reading to an exploration of naturalistic contexts as settings for data collection. For example, our own recent work, presented in the volume *Local Literacies* (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) used an ethnographic approach to document the roles of reading and writing in people’s everyday lives in the locality where we live. Such an approach, we believe, demonstrates the value of the detailed local study for developing broader theory about literacy.

A range of new methodologies are represented in this issue, from conversational analysis to ethnography to action research. These different methodologies each have their own way of structuring explanations and presenting data. The data itself is different in kind, more qualitative than quantitative, including images as well as words.

The more traditional and familiar way of viewing literacy starts from the individual child reading in the classroom setting. We also take this as our starting point, beginning this collection with Peter Freebody and Jill Freiberg’s study, *Re-discovering practical reading activities in homes and schools*. They work within the framework of ethnomethodology and their paper begins by providing a summary of the principles underlying ethnomethodology and its associated form of the analysis of interactions, conversational analysis. They demonstrate what can be revealed by close examination of classroom interactions and they argue that such an approach challenges the idealised models of reading acquisition and the generalisations which are common in much advice on teaching reading. They suggest that the institutional context of school has powerfully limited the theoretical lens through which literacy is viewed and so hidden from sight many important features of how learning actually happens and is experienced by children.

Freiberg and Freebody claim that homes and schools constitute distinctive contexts of interaction. In the home, they document a particular set of parameters that define the interactional context: often one-to-one interaction, with consequently fewer talk-management problems; high mutual familiarity with the knowledge base, interests, and interactive preferences of the learner; a focus on the accurate completion of the reading exercise; and less evident interest in displaying the talk-formats derived from theories of ‘good classroom practice’.
Subsequent articles in the issue progressively broaden the discussion about literacy by adding further dimensions which a situated learning approach highlights.

In their paper, *High school students’ literacy practices and identities, and the figured world of school*, Wendy Luttrell and Caroline Parker write about issues of identity and informal learning practices among high school students. Reporting on some data from a large ethnographic study of several schools, they highlight the crucial mismatch between school assessed literacy and the observed and reported literacy activities of the students. Luttrell and Parker use the concept of ‘figured worlds’ to explain their findings: figured worlds are frames of meaning that provide contexts for action. They argue that students use their literacy practices to form their identities within, and sometimes in opposition to, the figured worlds of school, work and family. Their findings suggest that many students look to school to provide formal literacy experiences, but find their reading and writing passions at odds with the demands of the school curriculum. In this study, only some students’ everyday literacy lives were being validated within the figured world of school.

Anne Williams and Eve Gregory move from the classroom into the informal world of family learning in their paper *Siblings bridging literacies in multilingual contexts*. They examine the role of siblings in literacy acquisition, and the subtle interactions between school and home practices performed by children in their everyday play. In comparing families from different socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds, their study highlights cultural diversity in literacy learning. The findings challenge the common assumption that economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority families are likely to differ in their educational aims, beliefs and values from teachers. Working with families from two different cultural backgrounds they show a more complex picture. Older siblings act as intermediaries, interpreting the discourses, values and practices of the school and bringing them into their living rooms, where they blend practices from each domain in their play with their younger brothers and sisters.

Jackie Marsh and Philippa Thompson also focus on the interface between home and school. In their paper, *Parental involvement in literacy development: using media texts*, they look at the nursery school with an action research study of parental involvement. Unlike many studies of parental involvement, the starting point for this project was an analysis of existing literacy practices of parents and children at home which are then used to develop materials and curriculum in the school. Such an investigation unsurprisingly reveals the huge significance of popular culture, especially television and film, in the lives of these children and their families. This is mainly a study concerned with motivation. It offers a strategy for producing a curriculum for beginning readers that parents and children alike are interested in and feel knowledgeable about. Such a curriculum is able to stimulate young children’s learning and enable their parents and others providing literacy support at home and to feel that they have a valued role to play in literacy development.

In adding the dimension of popular culture into discussions about literacy development, Marsh and Thompson open up a set of issues to do with the relationship between the traditional, canonical reading curriculum and new forms of popular culture. Whilst these privilege the visual, they offer opportunities for developing literacy since they combine a variety of semiotic resources in a rapidly shifting landscape of meaning that is experienced by adults and children alike as highly pleasurable. The scope of the current paper, dealing as it does with initial motivation,
cannot go into the complexities of this approach as it can be developed in the later stages of schooling, but it firmly establishes the importance and integral relationship of the critical study of media within the basic skills curriculum from pre-school onwards.

Gemma Moss’s paper, *Seeing with the camera: analysing children’s photographs of literacy in the home*, picks up the theme of the power of the visual to examine a different methodology for documenting home practices around literacy. Moss’s methodology-focused paper reports on work done as part of a larger ethnographic and observational study of the gendering of literacy practices in the primary school classroom. The data consists of photographs taken by the children themselves of literacy resources and practices in their homes. As well as providing a new type of data, this methodology points up difficulties about the validity of the methods used to document literacy practices and to make assumptions about the meanings of literacy in people’s lives. Moss opens up debates which are relevant across the field of research. The photographs show striking differences between the amount of resources for literacy in the children’s homes. Moreover, where homes had very little, those resources that were recorded were almost entirely for children, not adults. Moss makes the crucial distinction between developing competent reading skills and the notion of ‘readership’ – that is fostering a commitment in children to actually reading the texts they can decode. She suggests that schools need to work harder at this latter aspect of literacy and also to pay more attention to the differential resourcing of literacy in the home.

Guy Merchant continues to broaden the field of literacy by concentrating on the emerging world of computer-mediated literacy. Teenagers are among the most enthusiastic and innovative pioneers in this new world (see Lankshear et al, 1997) and in *Teenagers in cyberspace: an investigation of language use and language change in Internet chatrooms*, Merchant provides a small-scale case study of a group of young women using chat-rooms and mobile phone text-messaging. He uses interviews and transcripts of on-line interactions. In line with the newness of this field, Merchant’s data show how it is possible to begin building plausible explanations about new areas of literacy practice from attention to detailed data rather than trying to extrapolate from existing theoretical templates.

People’s use of chatrooms and text-messaging may seem a great distance from the initial starting point of the individual children reading in the classroom. Most of the computer-mediated literacy practices that children are now using and inventing moment by moment have no connection whatever with education – certainly they are not part of the formal curriculum, and most of them do not take place in classroom settings or with educational purposes. There is no doubt at all, however, learning is taking place, and happening with the vitality, passion and fluidity that typically characterise everyday practice.

Mike Baynham’s paper, *Reading the weather: ruling passions, numeracy and reading practices in an Australian farming community*, offers another case study from the world of everyday practice of literacy that is unrelated to formal schooling. Baynham introduces three different kinds of reading: reading the weather, reading the media text of the weather report, reading and recording the rainfall. Each of these is rather divergent from the traditional print-based conception of reading, but each is an instance of a broader semiotic notion of reading, which can involve both visual and verbal texts and mathematical reasoning, including the reading of scientific instru-
ments and indeed the reading of signs present in the physical. The case study strikingly illustrates the interrelationships between literacy, numeracy and visual semiotic modes in everyday practice. It invites to reconsider the boundaries we set upon the term ‘literacy’.

Ian Falk’s paper, *Literacy by design, not by default: social capital’s role in literacy learning*, concludes this special issue by offering a broad perspective on lifelong literacy learning in the context of community networks and relationships. He argues that literacy learning can never be the stand-alone acquisition of technical skills. Using Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, currently popular in policy circles, and illustrating this with examples from community projects working with older adults, Falk makes a compelling case for the importance of underpinning networks of trust and mutual support to the development of a sustainable learning culture. He also begins to explore how literacy and other forms of communication crucially mediate these networks and argues that learning always involves issues of self-efficacy and identity.

The papers collected in this issue are a resource to feed into the debates that face the field of literacy. It is an exciting time to be working in this field, a time of technological change and the ever-increasing importance and complexity of communication choices in people’s public and private lives.

Mary Hamilton and David Barton

REFERENCES


© United Kingdom Reading Association 2001