

## CHAPTER 7

# NEW LITERACIES IN THE CLASSROOM: FORGING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULA

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### Chapter aims

- To explore the rapidly changing nature of literacy and what it means to be literate in the 21st century and the impact of this on children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties.
- To explore the importance of tuning into children's interests in order to motivate all children to learn and to make education meaningful in contemporary classrooms.
- To reflect on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12 and consider why, and how, we might listen to children's voices about learning.
- To consider the importance of recognising children's home literacy experiences and utilising these to enhance the literacy experiences of children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties.

### Introduction

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Digital technology permeates all aspects of our lives in the 21st century. Everyone is 'logged on', from the 'silver surfers' (adults in the 50+ age

bracket who use the internet on a regular basis) to very young children. For the older generation, communication with distant friends and family used to be limited to occasional phone calls and letters but now it is ubiquitous due to emails, blogs, Skype, Facebook, Instagram and a myriad other websites and applications (Bates, 2011). But it is not only the older generation that is capitalising on diverse forms of technology for communication, young children are appropriating digital technology for their own purposes too. Today's children have been born into a digital world and they have no reservations when it comes to using technology. They do not ask questions about which buttons to press or worry if they might break something; they just use it, whether for playful exploration or more specific communicational needs.

## **New literacies**

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The emergence of tablet computers and touchscreen devices has brought a new shift in edutainment. This term, edutainment, was first used in the computer industry to refer to the act of learning through a medium that both educates and entertains, and with this concept that learning can be fun and fun can enhance learning, edutainment is a huge market (Rapeepisarn et al., 2006). There is a vast array of computer applications (apps) aimed specifically at young children and the nature of the interactive interface of tablet computers and their appropriate size and portability means that there has been an explosion in young children's use of touchscreen tablets. Recent data gathered in Europe suggests that 50% of Swedish children aged between 3 and 4 use tablet computers; 23% of children in Norway from 0 to 6 years old have access to touchscreens at home and 17% of families in Germany with children aged 3 to 7 have touchscreen tablets. In the UK the use of tablet computers by children increased from 2% to 11% between 2011 and 2012 and the current rate of uptake is likely to be considerably higher than this (Holloway et al., 2013). Hence, the digital landscape of early childhood is changing rapidly and influencing children's early experiences of literacy.

Children's emerging understanding of what literacy is, and is used for, will be influenced by their own and their immediate family's use of technology to read, write and communicate. Digital technology is transforming the communicational landscape and bringing fundamental changes to what it means to be literate in the 21st century. Ten years ago, Gunther Kress highlighted two key changes in literacy: the move from the dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the

medium of the screen (Kress, 2003). There are a variety of terms used in the literature to indicate changing views of literacy: 'new literacies', 'multiliteracies', 'technoliteracy' and 'digital literacy' (see Merchant, 2009), all of which refer to the ways in which new technologies intersect with changing practices in making meaning in the modern world. There is criticism of the narrow view of literacy in our schools compared with wider literacy practices in society. Leading literacy educators have been calling for a change to the constraints of the official curriculum since the 1990s with a greater focus on real literacy practices and the multiple and multimodal texts that children are familiar with. Whilst they are sometimes referred to as new literacies, they may be new to school but they are already well established among many children and young people (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003).

### **The impact of new literacies on the motivation of children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties**

There is a body of research that recognises the negative impact of children's struggles with literacy learning and self-esteem (see Humphrey, 2003; Long et al., 2007, 2012). Children who constantly struggle with literacy throughout school very quickly begin to see themselves as failures in a system which privileges the written word. They are the outsiders, trying to get to grips with reading schemes, spelling lists and phonics and struggling to get their thoughts and ideas written down using paper and pencil. They can feel anxious, inadequate and alienated from their peers. A strong sense of failure prevails and they have not even left primary school yet. Chapter 3 in this book provides a more detailed discussion on the nature of emotional intelligence and its relevance to children experiencing difficulties with the acquisition of literacy.



#### **Example**

Sarah is 6 years old. She is in her second year of primary school and she has been identified as having difficulties with literacy by her class teacher. Her teacher reports that she struggles to remember high frequency words and has poor word attack skills. She can tell stories very well orally but her written work is disappointing due to poor sentence structure and limited use of vocabulary. The teacher works

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with her in a small group of children during reading time on a basic reading scheme and Sarah also goes out to the literacy support teacher for revision on her letter sounds. Sarah's mother reports that Sarah says she can't read and she can't write stories like her friends and she believes she is stupid because she has to go out to Mrs Perry for extra help with her literacy. However, at home Sarah loves to use her Mum's smartphone and iPad to text and email her Granny. She composes her own messages and attaches photos that she has taken. She is 'pony mad' and can search the internet to find websites about ponies and riding paraphernalia. She will use her Mum's iPad to take photos of her toy ponies and then make her own stories using storybook apps such as BookMagic with a combination of photos and text. She reads these to her Mum as bedtime stories.



### Exercise

There is much debate in the literature about what constitutes literacy. However, if we adopt Street's (1997) view that literacy is a communicative practice, can you identify how Sarah is developing skills in literacy? Discuss the potential differences in the literacy skills being developed in school and those being developed at home and how these might affect Sarah's perceptions about her own abilities in literacy.

Pahl and Rowsell (2010, p. 3) note that 'the literacy found in schools is actually just one type of literacy'. Even though children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties struggle with their literacy in school they persevere in using technology for their own needs and interests in making meaning from a range of digital texts and in communicating with others. There are calls in the literature for more appropriate learning opportunities for children with dyslexia which go beyond the teaching of the mechanics of reading (see Long et al., 2007). Children need to be engaged and motivated in their learning and there is a body of literature which reports on the increased motivation, enthusiasm and engagement of children in their learning when they use tablet devices (Burden et al., 2012). This includes children with special educational needs where research indicates that technology can provide exciting and interesting experiences as well as helping to improve emergent literacy and writing (see Shamir et al., 2012).

In a recent survey of teachers of special educational needs, enhanced student motivation was the most frequently reported benefit of using

tablet computers in school (Johnson et al., 2013). Whilst there are some concerns about tablet devices and overuse, misuse and distractions from learning, research overwhelmingly reports on the positive impact of tablet devices and student motivation. Therefore, there is great potential in harnessing this technology for the purposes of enhancing the motivational levels of children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties and enhancing their views of themselves as literacy learners.

There is some debate that the novelty effect used to explain increases in motivation when using digital technologies may wear off as the technology becomes more established. Davies and Merchant (2014) refer to this as the allure of the new and shiny. However, there is the counter-argument that the content created for the technology, for example the range of applications (apps), is continually developing and pushing the boundaries to create novel and compelling approaches and maintain students' wonder and curiosity (Johnson et al., 2013). As this is such a new area, with a rapidly expanding number of apps (over 1 million reported apps in both Apple's App Store and in Android's Google Play store as of September 2014), the issue of novelty effects, motivation and the use of tablet devices is a growing area for future research.

### **The affordances of new literacies**

An affordance is the quality of a particular object which allows an individual to perform certain actions. So in the case of the use of tablet devices, we want to know what are the particular qualities of this technology that allow children to develop literacy skills and how are these different from the skills which they develop when engaging with more traditional literacy practices using paper and print? Merchant (2015) argues that it is rapidly becoming difficult to talk about literacy without reference to new technology, and the research evidence suggests that integrating digital technology in the classroom requires the development of new literacy skills, strategies and dispositions, since these technologies transform the way that children will learn.

If we take the example of e-books, we can see that many of these books aimed at young children allow the reader to use audio support while reading, to turn on text tracking and to record themselves reading the text and play it back. Children can access the definition of chosen words by tapping on them and can add notes if they choose to do so. There are lots of choices in this interaction with the e-book and this is what makes reading more individualised, interactive and engaging, which can potentially engage struggling readers (Larson, 2010). The benefits for children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties lie in the opportunities to make choices in their engagement with texts. They can

choose to use audio support as often as they wish before choosing to read the text unaided. They can also choose to record themselves reading and thus see themselves acting as real readers. Some children with dyslexia can lose their place in the text when reading and the use of text tracking can be beneficial in maintaining place whilst allowing the flow necessary for reading in context. Using a dictionary can be frustrating for some children with dyslexia due to their difficulties with sequencing the alphabet. Therefore, the instant access to word definitions simply by tapping on words can aid their efforts to make meaning without interrupting their enjoyment of the text. These choices in the level of support give children independence in making meaning from the text without heavy reliance on adult assistance, and can potentially engage those readers who are reluctant to read for pleasure.

There is a growing range of apps that allows children to create their own stories using a combination of text, pictures and symbols. These can be organised in a variety of attractive formats through some simple choices by the child. Built-in cameras provide opportunities for children to capture photographs and videos to include in their stories, which facilitates collaboration between children and allows them to create more meaningful texts. Visuals play a very important role in learning, with pictures consistently trumping text and oral information. This is called the pictorial superiority effect (Stenberg, 2006). Pictures are more easily remembered than text, they are more likely to be stored and much more likely to be retrieved. There is a new but growing body of neuroscientific research evidence that suggests that text should be paired with visual information to aid children's learning (Frey and Fisher, 2010).

Many children, especially children with dyslexia, view writing as very hard work due to a combination of possible factors such as poor speed of writing, insecurities about spelling, difficulties organising ideas and embarrassment about the appearance of their work resulting in low self-esteem as a writer (Kelly and Phillips, 2011). There is too much emphasis placed on narrative, essay-type writing in primary school and children need to experience a much broader range of forms of writing as well as self-chosen texts linked to children's own interests and purposes. Healy Eames (2002) reports that children with dyslexia want writing to be purposeful and serve real communicative functions and be linked to their interests. The use of tablet devices facilitates this with the camera allowing children to include chosen and meaningful photographs very easily in their stories. There are options to tell stories orally to a set of selected drawings or photographs. These can be told a number of times, allowing children time to rehearse their story until they have it the way they want it. Children have choices in using a keyboard to type text or using a microphone option for converting

speech to text. This is valuable for children with dyslexia who have a very poor speed of writing due to poor automaticity in letter formation and short-term memory difficulties in remembering and organising what they want to say. This combination of speaking, listening, touching and seeing provides a multisensory approach which is advocated for children with dyslexia. Visual, auditory, tactile and kinaesthetic modalities are all engaged, leading to stronger connections in the brain and thus enhancing memory and learning (Singleton, 2009). These technical capabilities and creative apps transform the writing process for children with dyslexia, assisting them in composing meaningful texts and seeing themselves as real writers.



### Example

Emily is 8 years old and has recently been diagnosed with dyslexia. She has always struggled with written work and finds it very difficult to write stories in school due to a poor ability to structure her ideas and to get them down on paper in time. She is also very embarrassed by her poor spelling. These have all led to her avoiding written activities in public situations such as school or other groups outside of school such as Brownies. However, her Mum has bought her an iPad and encouraged her to dictate stories on it using the microphone option. An older cousin introduced Emily to the app Pic Collage which allows the creation of collages of photos, stickers, text and frames. Emily recently had a jewellery-making birthday party and she enjoyed looking at all the photos that her Mum took of her and her friends making bracelets. So with the help of her cousin she created a collage which included photos of her party, stickers and dictated text. She was able to arrange the collage very easily and choose backgrounds and borders which complemented the theme of a birthday party. The complete collage 'told the story' of the birthday party through a variety of modes including pictures, text and design and Emily printed these off and gave them to her friends.



### Exercise

Merchant (2006) argues that traditional relationships between readers, writers and texts are radically changing. Twenty years ago Emily would only have been able to write her story of her birthday party on paper using a pencil. However, tablet devices allow children

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to create a multimodal text that is no longer contained by the limits of a page. Some of the features of written language are that meaning is conveyed in the absence of a shared physical context between the writer and the reader and that it makes thoughts and emotions permanent. Can you discuss how Emily's multimodal text conveys meaning and brings permanence to her thoughts and emotions?

### Useful links

The following links offer further useful insights into some of the aspects of digital literacy discussed in this chapter:

Professor Jackie Marsh's talk entitled 'How Do UK Children Use ebooks?': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6mYbUON3OQ>

A brief demonstration of Oliver Jeffers 'Heart and the Bottle' iPad picture book app: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wc3fghSjvBM>

A report on how the digital divide starts in the early years: [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk\\_to\\_your\\_baby/news/3561\\_digital\\_divide\\_starts\\_in\\_the\\_early\\_years](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talk_to_your_baby/news/3561_digital_divide_starts_in_the_early_years)

## Following children's interests

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We have already made the point earlier in this chapter, that it is crucial to engage children in their learning by following their interests and thus making the curriculum more meaningful for them. This is true for all children and especially important for children with dyslexia and developmental literacy difficulties as their difficulties with literacy can easily turn them off learning. It has always been the central tenet of early childhood that the starting point for learning should be the child – what they know and what they can do. In her hugely successful book, Julie Fisher (2013) argues that the current government's mantra that children in the Foundation Stage should be 'made ready for school' should be turned on its head and, instead, schools should be 'made ready for children'. She highlights the expertise of children's first educators, their parents, and she advocates an appreciation of the learning that has gone on at home. She believes that it is up to teachers to make children's new learning



environments in school equally relevant and worthwhile. Lilian Katz (2010) also believes that one of the basics for every young child is that they are involved in activities which are real and significant, intriguing and absorbing to them.

### The value of popular culture in the classroom

There is a growing literature which recognises the central role that popular culture plays in many young children's lives. Jackie Marsh, who has written widely on this topic, suggests that popular culture is 'the range of texts, artefacts and practices that are popular with large numbers of children and are either produced commercially or produced and circulated amongst children themselves' (Marsh, 2010a, p. 13). Children are immersed in popular culture from birth and it is evident in children's conversations, play, drawing and writing, irrespective of adults' approval (Ashton, 2005). Research has demonstrated that children will naturally bring their outside interests regarding popular culture into the classroom (Kissel, 2011). Wohlwend (2013) argues that children do not simply watch or read the messages in popular films, television programmes or video games, rather they live immersed in these texts due to what she calls the 'omnipresent flow of transmedia', which are the franchises anchored by children's media that spin off a whole range of consumer goods. Marsh et al.'s (2005) Digital Beginnings Research Report on young children's use of popular culture, media and new technologies states that popular culture is part of young children's social and cultural practices as they grow up in their homes and communities. Childhood in the 21st century is littered with popular culture icons and shaped by, what Marsh et al. refer to, as the 'fashions and passions of media'.



#### Example

Harry gets out of bed (Disney *Cars* duvet cover) in the morning wearing his Spiderman pyjamas. He has his breakfast out of his favourite Shrek bowl looking at the *Monsters University* characters on the cereal box. He sets off for school with his Buzz Lightyear rucksack containing his pencil case with a mishmash of pencils and rubbers from the recent films *Frozen* and *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. He is going to his friend Molly's birthday party after school where the party tableware will be themed on *Despicable Me 2*. He has bought

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Molly a Minion action figure set (characters from *Despicable Me*). She is also getting a Hello Kitty card and wrapping paper. Harry likes *Despicable Me 2* but he really wants Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Winter Games for his next birthday.

Concerns have been raised in the literature over the past 10 to 15 years about the dramatic differences between children's early literacy experiences at home (including popular culture) and the literacy they are confronted with when they begin their school lives. The failure to acknowledge children's home literacy experiences and everyday uses and enjoyment of popular culture is stifling the possibility of children's potential to make meaning from their social and cultural worlds. These are lost opportunities for teachers and research indicates that many settings reflect very little of children's home practices (Marsh, 2010b). Children's literacy experiences at home include a vast array of experiences with books, comics, television, gaming, film and many more popular culture artefacts. However, early childhood classrooms offer limited opportunities for children to engage with and explore their passions for these experiences (Marsh et al., 2005). Teachers are either unfamiliar or unwilling to engage with children's culture, and there are ongoing calls for classroom walls to become more porous and for teachers to make children's everyday experiences and interests the starting points for learning.

This is crucial for children who struggle with literacy and who have dwindling self-esteem with regard to reading, writing and spelling. These children find the 'print culture' of our classrooms very difficult yet their problems with learning are not their fault. Teachers need to focus on helping children cope with their literacy learning and tackle their history of failure by adopting a more creative, flexible approach in order to build self-esteem. In 2010, Rose et al. took an interesting stance in an article where they fast forwarded to 2020 where they were presenting the presidential address for the International Dyslexia Association. In this address of the future they describe new landscapes for learning where it was 'nearly impossible to think of students with dyslexia as "learning disabled"'. In fact, these students taught us that our schools were "print disabled" (p. 37). Smith and Scullin (2011) describe how they used a popular text and its film adaptation to engage a group of teenagers who had experienced literacy struggles throughout their school careers. These

young people had individualised education plans, did not see themselves as readers and were at risk of failing in literacy. The use of this text in their literacy lessons engaged these young people to be motivated to read both print and digital texts and to engage in both traditional and digital writing. Smith and Scullin describe how this approach demonstrated the importance and power of focusing on children's and young people's unique interests.



### Example

In a recent research study (Dunn, 2013; Dunn et al., 2014), Dunn worked with a class of 6- and 7-year-old children using the *Toy Story 3* film to engage children in writing about their favourite characters. The children watched a clip from the film and then worked with the researcher in shared writing. The focus for the writing was Woody, one of the main cowboy characters in the film. A cowboy hat and Woody dressing-up clothes were used to allow some children to take on the role of Woody in the hot-seat and to give the class information about the character. The children were then given the task of writing about a favourite character from a children's film of their choice. The class teacher had already highlighted several children with particular needs within the class. One of these was Poppy. She was a reluctant reader and struggled to remember vocabulary and letter sounds. She found writing particularly frustrating and usually wrote very little. However, she was an avid fan of the *Toy Story* trilogy and it transpired that she had many of the characters at home. She chose to write about the cowgirl Jessie. She drew a picture of Jessie and her horse Bullseye. Her detailed drawing demonstrated her knowledge of the character. Her sentences contained some missing words, misspelled words and some repetition but the most encouraging thing was that she was engaged and interested and she was motivated to write. She was particularly proud of her finished character profile and wanted to read it to others at her table.

### Resistance to popular culture in the classroom

The introduction of new technologies and new media can bring with it a range of 'moral panics' (Cohen, 1987). There are concerns that children's access to popular culture can motivate children to become hedonistic consumers and there are those that believe that children are vulnerable to exploitation by marketing. Kenway and Bullen (2001) warn that pervasive

global texts invite children to identify with a range of media characters which mobilises feelings of connectedness, gratification, pleasure and excitement. But it can also provoke a sense of envy, yearning and anxiety. There are concerns about ‘toxic childhoods’ (Palmer, 2006) and ‘remote control childhoods’ (Levin, 2010). There is the view that the aim of schools should be to nurture ‘educated people’ and that this can only be done by using ‘high culture’ rather than a ‘culture of fakes’ (see Jones [2013] article in the *Guardian* on high culture versus pop culture). There is also unease about the suitability of certain forms of popular culture for young children. In a recent study of children’s playground games and rhymes, Marsh and Bishop (2014) observed children re-enacting elements of the popular UK television talk show *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. They discuss how this programme, like many others in the reality TV genre, is often cast as ‘trash TV’ in which a particular representation of people from lower socioeconomic groups is embedded which generally features immorality and depravity. They suggest that such programmes are worlds away from the lives of many middle-class teachers but are closer to the worlds of some of the children with whom those teachers work. Therefore, they argue that play based on talk shows or reality TV should not be dismissed or derided but needs to be taken seriously as part of children coming to terms with their complex and often challenging social and cultural worlds.

Karen Brooks (2011) argues that resistance to popular culture and new media is futile. Digital technologies, new media and popular culture have revolutionised the way we live, interact and understand ourselves and the rest of the world. These changes provide stimulating and engaging experiences for children in their private lives and if schools do not move forward to embrace these changes then children’s school lives are going to look very boring in comparison. Prensky (2005, p. 62) goes as far as suggesting that, in many schools, what is being deployed is ‘yesterday’s education for tomorrow’s kids’. Yet, for many teachers, popular culture can be seen as a threat to their educational authority. They do not feel that they have the knowledge or the language to use popular culture and can feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material.



### Example

Janet has been teaching in primary classrooms for 25 years. These are her responses when asked about incorporating popular culture into her classroom activities:

*I really don't know very much about what children watch on the television these days. There just seems to be so much. When my children were young, there were far fewer television programmes and television channels. I remember The Clangers, The Magic Roundabout and Andy Pandy but children today wouldn't know about them. They would be very dull compared to all the special effects of today. And there seems to be a new film in the cinema every week. How on earth do you keep up? Everything is a fad; it is in one moment and out the next. I wouldn't know where to start. I would pick something that none of the children in my class had heard of. I really wouldn't feel comfortable with it; I would rather stick to what I know.*

Brooks (2011) takes the view that teachers do not have to make choices between old and new or traditional and modern. Rather, value should be drawn from both traditional teaching resources and contemporary popular culture to create what she refers to as an intertextual and converged learning environment. However, in order to do that, teachers need to be familiar with what children's popular culture is. Wohlwend (2013) suggests that the best way to do this is to note clues from children's school supplies (bags, lunch boxes, pencils), their classroom talk and their play. She believes that children are the experts and that we need to engage them in discussion and ask them about their favourite characters, television programmes and children's films.



### Example

The author explains her approach to incorporating children's views in her research on the use of popular culture in the teaching of writing (Dunn, 2013):

*I asked two groups of children to tell me what children's films they thought should be used in my lessons. I felt that this was a crucial element in my study since I wanted the films to be appealing to children and the only way to find that out is to ask the children themselves! These children were acting as an advisory group for the research project. The group contained*

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*both boys and girls and the children were all in their third year of formal schooling and were 6 or 7 years old. I explained to them that I wanted films that would appeal to both boys and girls. The children were full of ideas and had lots of enthusiastic discussions with their partners before writing their ideas on sticky notes. Some of the children suggested films that might be considered to be more appealing to a particular gender (for example, some girls suggested Tangled which is a Disney modern day version of Rapunzel and some boys suggested Cars 2 which is a Disney action film). However, many of the children suggested films which might be assumed to appeal to both genders such as Toy Story, Finding Nemo, The Lion King and Shrek. This activity was short and simple to carry out and provided me with lots of suggestions for my teaching. It also meant I could be sure that I was using films that would engage and interest children.*



### Exercise

Do you know what the latest children's films are at the cinema? Are you familiar with the wide range of children's television channels and popular television programmes? Do you know what the most sought after toys are for young children? Make a point of asking some young children you know well what their favourite films, television programmes, toys, etc. are to find out how in tune you are with children's culture.



### Useful links

The following links offer further useful insights into some of the aspects of popular culture discussed in this chapter:

Information and ideas on the role of popular culture in primary English: [http://www.ite.org.uk/ite\\_topics/popular\\_culture\\_primary\\_english/011.html](http://www.ite.org.uk/ite_topics/popular_culture_primary_english/011.html)

An article by Donna Alvermann on popular culture and literacy practices: [http://www.academia.edu/359745/Popular\\_Culture\\_and\\_Literacy\\_Practices](http://www.academia.edu/359745/Popular_Culture_and_Literacy_Practices)

An article on practical ideas using children's comics to stimulate talk and writing: <http://education.scholastic.co.uk/content/11848>.

## Accessing the views of children

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For many years, children's views have been regarded as inferior to those of adults. However, the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the UK in 1991 represented a potentially dramatic shift in approaches to children's rights. Article 12 (para. 1) states that:

States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UN, 1989)

In their annual Day of General Discussion on the Right of the Child to be Heard (September, 2006) the Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted the importance of Article 12 and recognised the right of the child to express views and to participate in various activities, stating that this was 'beneficial for the child, for the family, for the community, the school, the State, for democracy' (UN, 2006, p. 2). One of the key recommendations that it makes is that children will be actively consulted in the development and evaluation of school curricula as they state this is conducive to increasing the involvement of children in the learning process.

Therefore, it can be concluded from this that consulting with children about the ways in which they would like to learn is a requirement placed upon all professionals working in education. However, despite this there still appears to be a divide between the rhetoric and the reality of listening to the views and interests of children. Indeed, it might be argued that many teachers continue to disregard children's views in their day-to-day practice. Adults may think they know what children need and may believe they know about childhood as they were once children themselves, regardless of how long ago that was and how the world and society may have changed since. Yet the only people who can understand what it is to be a child in the 21st century is the child who is living that experience. An underlying concern may exist that, in according children their rights, adults will have to relinquish their power and control. Lundy (2007) indicates three possible areas of concern for adults: scepticism about children's capacity in having something meaningful to say, an undermining of adult authority in the school environment, and a concern about wasting time and effort which would be better spent on getting on with education. However, whilst recognising these concerns, Lundy goes on to state that actively involving pupils in decision-making should not be seen as a gift from adults but as a legal imperative which is the right of the child. This includes children with special educational needs.



### Exercise

Consider Lundy's three possible areas of concern for adults when children are accorded their rights and given a voice (see above).

- How do you feel about the notion of listening to the views and interests of children in the context of their learning in school?
- How have you seen this happening (or not happening) in practice in any of the settings in which you have had some experience?
- What do you think are the factors that contribute to children being actively involved in decision-making in schools and what are the factors hindering this from happening?
- Have you seen any examples in practice of children with dyslexia or developmental literacy difficulties being asked their views about their learning in school?

In a recent research study, Long et al. (2012) used creative methodologies with a group of pupils aged between 9 and 11 years to elicit their views on themselves as literacy learners and how they might have more of a voice in how their needs might be addressed. All of these children had longstanding literacy difficulties. Long and her colleagues concluded from their research that there was a real need for children's voices to enable pupils to take more responsibility for their own learning. They also highlighted that this approach which empowers children should also empower teachers to then exercise their professional judgement and to tailor the teaching within their classrooms to the unique needs and wishes of children with special educational needs. See Chapter 2 – *Child-centred Literacy Pathways: Pupils' Perspectives*, for a fuller discussion on pupil voice and consulting with children and young people with special educational needs.

Despite this emphasis on children's voice, Prout (2000) points out that children are being governed more strongly than ever before and this is echoed by Jeffs (2002) who highlights the tensions between children's rights and what he calls the 'authoritarian, repressive and standardised school system' (p. 55). In this confusing situation it is essential to establish appropriate and effective systems for listening to young children and for their emancipation (Moss et al., 2005).

### How can we listen to the voices of young children?

Listening to children can imply a passive process but Rinaldi (2001, p. 4) suggests that 'listening is an active verb, which involves giving an



interpretation, giving meaning to the message and value to those who are being listened to'. This pedagogy of listening is central to the ethos of the Reggio Emilia pre-schools. Listening may suggest verbal interactions; however, with very young children this may not always be an appropriate way to access their views. Malaguzzi, the first pedagogical director of the pre-schools, created the phrase 'the hundred languages of children' (Edwards et al., 1998) which indicates the potential of children expressing themselves in a wide range of ways. Those that work with young children will know that children will express themselves through play, movement, dance, art, interacting with puppets, singing and a myriad other ways. What is required on the part of the adult is to observe children and learn to 'listen' and interpret what they are telling us through their actions.

Observation of young children has always been fundamental to Early Years practice and Nutbrown (1996, p. 55) emphasises the importance of this as an appropriate means of understanding young children's views: 'adults with expertise who respectfully watch children engaged in their process of living, learning, loving and being are in a better position to understand what it is these youngest citizens are trying to say'.

Clark and Moss (2001) have developed a well-known framework for listening to young children which they call the Mosaic approach. The principles of this framework are that it is: *multi-method*, in that it recognises the different voices of children; *participatory*, in treating children as experts; *reflexive*, including children's, practitioners' and parents' views in the overall interpretation; *adaptable*, within a wide range of settings; *focused on children's lived experiences* and *embedded into practice*, rather than seen as a bolt-on activity. The different pieces of the Mosaic include a creative range of approaches in listening to young children. These involve observation, child conferencing, using cameras to take photographs, tours led by children, map making by children and role play (Walsh et al., 2006). Clark and Moss recognised that there was a need to imaginatively re-think appropriate methods of consultation with very young children which would access their views in ways that were familiar, comfortable and engaging for them. This array of fresh and innovative techniques in accessing children's views accords with Article 13 of the UNCRC which states that children's right to freedom of expression includes the right to 'impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice' (UN, 1989).

### **The challenges in listening to children**

There are a number of challenges and dilemmas in relation to listening to young children and giving them a voice in the classroom. There are

those that argue that children are very diverse and that we must be very cautious that we do not treat children as a homogenous group. We must be aware that the views of *some* children do not represent the views of *all* children. Therefore, engaging children in sharing their views about learning cannot be one-off experiences. Rather, they must be on-going to capture the multiple and changing perspectives of children. Dockett et al. (2009) urge adults to engage in ongoing, recurrent listening since children have diverse perspectives, experiences and understandings.

### Useful links

The following links offer further useful insights into accessing the views of children as discussed in this chapter:

A summary of children's rights from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: [http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights\\_overview.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf)

A short presentation by Professor Laura Lundy on the involvement of children in education decision-making: [http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/NewsEvents/38iv\\_ESRC\\_TT3\\_PPT\\_LLundy.pdf](http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/NewsEvents/38iv_ESRC_TT3_PPT_LLundy.pdf)

### Summary

The aim of this chapter was to explore the rapidly changing landscape of literacy. Young children's experiences of literacy at home have been discussed and shown to involve technology, media and a vast range of popular culture, yet these experiences are not often reflected in many classrooms. The world is changing, with boundaries between work and leisure beginning to blur, and the serious and the frivolous starting to intermingle (Merchant, 2006). Children's interests and passions need to be recognised and capitalised on if classrooms are going to be meaningful and engaging. This is even more important when teachers are working with children who are experiencing difficulties in their literacy learning and for whom school can be a very difficult and disheartening experience. Children themselves are the experts on being children in classrooms today and are in a unique position to tell us how they might learn better. Therefore, it is the responsibility of those involved in education to take their views seriously and involve them in activating change.



### Recommended reading

- Dunn, J., Niens, U. and McMillan, D. (2014) "'Cos He's My Favourite Character!" A Children's Rights Approach to the Use of Popular Culture in the Teaching of Literacy', *Literacy*, 48(1): 23–31.
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