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Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University

A resource for anyone  
working with families  
and young children

**MORE-THAN-HUMAN  
LITERACIES IN EARLY  
CHILDHOOD;  
WEAVING RESEARCH  
AND PRACTICE**

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 The  
British  
Academy



# PRINCIPLES FOR MORE-THAN-HUMAN LITERACIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

These principles for a more-than-human approach to early childhood literacies are informed by The British Academy funded research '*The Emergence of Literacy in Very Young Children*'. You can read more about the research methodology and further publications at the back of this booklet.

## Why literacy? What literacy?

The fantastic thing about working with young children is that often they blur boundaries and refuse to be squeezed into categories. Usually when we think about "literacy" in relation to older children, we are thinking about reading, writing and related activities. When working with the youngest children, who are not generally reading and writing in the traditional sense, we look for the roots of literacy in meaning making.

This can include moving, making, marking, singing, swinging, running, vocalising, talking and playing. A glance can mean a hundred things. A gasp can tell a whole story. This resource will be useful for anyone working with young children. It is for anyone who would like to create spaces and moments where, for young children, moving, playing, communicating, storytelling, disrupting, experimenting, surprising and confusing, will feel easy, comfortable and right.

## More-than-human?

Considering young children's literacies as 'more-than-human' is an invitation to shift our focus from the role of humans (teachers, parents, the children themselves) to consider what else might be involved in the moving, making, running, vocalising and playing that make up early literacy practices. Place is an important consideration, because it can play a huge role in constraining or encouraging different kinds of activities.

Objects, craft materials, food, the weather, sounds in the environment, an animal, natural objects; these are the kinds of tangible things that can be significant in shaping young children's literacies. Finally, we can take the invitation further and think about intangible things, such as an atmosphere, a feeling, a good or bad mood, trust, power, relationships. It might not be possible to pin down and account for everything, but acknowledging that these more-than-human things are worthy of our consideration, is a very good starting point.

## Four principles for supporting the emergence of early childhood literacy

Young children's literacies.....

1. *Emerge from movement*
2. *Depend on place, objects and materials*
3. *Are grounded in everyday life*
4. *Take surprising directions.*



# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource introduces four key principles for more-than-human literacies, showing how they connect to research and theory. For each principle, there are reflective questions for your own practice.

These principles were developed through extensive, detailed observations of what children did in relation to place, language and meaning making. Thus, for each of the principles, I share an example of my observations from the study, and discuss what I learnt from the children and families as a result.

More information about the research itself, including where you can read published papers, is in the back section of the booklet.



# MORE-THAN-HUMAN LITERACIES EMERGE FROM MOVEMENT

Bodies jiggle and spin, arms and hands stretch and sweep, breath must be thrust through throats and vocal chords in order for vocalizations of any sort to emerge. Lips and tongues move and flex to make words that might be understood by adults. My research joins growing evidence for the connection between young children's moving bodies and talking, vocalising, mark making, creating and communicating in many other diverse ways. Movement (of many different kinds) is essential to early childhood literacies.

## SOUND AND MOVEMENT ARE CLOSELY RELATED

A gesture, a vocalization, a word, a nod, a full body run across the space, are all modes of meaning-making where children use their bodies and their voices. All these things involve children's bodies sounding and moving in places. Looking at what kinds of sounds and movements a place seems to encourage or invite, and how children respond to that invitation, is a lens for thinking about how environments might enable literacies.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What types of movements do your spaces invite, encourage or make possible?
2. How can children experiment with what their bodies can do in this place?
3. In your context, could changes in the environment and soundscape help to make moving and talking feel easy and natural?





# LEARNING FROM THE RESEARCH

*J loves playing in the sand and water. He walks through the little streams created by the water, and runs to the pump and places his hands under the water stream. He stands in the midst of all the water, little streams flowing around his ankles, and vocalizes 'wwaaaaateeeerrrrr. Water. Wawawawawa.' His joy and elation make the adults laugh with delight.*

As part of the research, we organised for families to visit a local farm, and this vignette describes a moment when the children visited the play area. There was a large sand and water area at the farm and all the children spent a long time deeply immersed in sensory play as they pumped water to make streams, stacked sand to make dams, and moved their feet, arms and legs through these materials.

# WHAT I LEARNT FROM THE CHILDREN

It can be easy to forget that language starts in the body, with movement and sound. Because of this, it is important to pay attention to movements and vocalisations that have a meaning and those times when meanings are difficult to identify. What does "Water. Wawawawawa" mean? We can say that J is naming the water, but in addition to this, his words or vocalisations are about more than this. They are wrapped up in joy, excitement and how sounds feel on the lips as his feet move fast through the cold flowing stream.



# MORE-THAN-HUMAN LITERACIES DEPEND ON PLACE, OBJECTS AND MATERIALS

Often in early childhood literacy, there is an (over) emphasis on the role of adults in, for example, talking to young children or scaffolding activities. The risk with paying too much attention to the role of adults is that we might under-value the energies that young children often invest in objects or places.

Children use different kinds of communication, in quite different ways, depending on place and context. Place (and the stuff in place) is never just the backdrop to what unfolds, but it shapes and inspires children's play, learning and movement. We could say, then, that language is not just a matter of mastering a system of abstract rules under the encouragement and guidance of adults. Instead, it is about creatively getting involved in the world. This includes joining in with other people, but it also involves joining in with the more-than-human world.

## JOINING IN WITH PLACE

One way we can imagine this is to think about opportunities for children to 'join in' with place. In order for children to join in, we need wide, expansive, unplanned possibilities for what 'joining in' could look like. And we need to make atmospheres in which 'joining in', whether that be through vocalisations, movement, making or any other kind of multimodal literacy, feels comfortable and easy.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1. In your own work, can you think of any examples of differences in how children communicate in places?*
- 2. Can you trace how places might feel familiar and how they might feel unfamiliar to children and families in your own work?*
- 3. What might "joining in with place" look like in your context?*

# LEARNING FROM THE RESEARCH



*T stands on an upturned crate, eating an apple whilst gazing at the horizon. Very slowly she stands, gazes, munches her apple, and every couple of minutes adds another part to her unfolding story.*

*“Does ghost like apple?” she muses*

*More apple eating, more gazing.*

*“Does ghost like bread-stick?”*

*Stood on the crate still, she seemed to be thinking hard.*

*Munching her apple - “ghost can’t reach snack.”*

*“Can’t see me.”*

*“Ghost like apple.”*

*Tina’s apple crunches, and the wind ruffles the nearby willow tree. She climbs down briefly from the crate to fetch a breadstick, then stands back on the crate, watching the horizon.*

*“Can’t reach it.”*

*“Ghost likes bread stick.”*

*“Ghost can’t get me.”*

*“Aaahhhh ghost!” declares Tina, suddenly animated “Get bread stick!” Wagging her breadstick mockingly in front of her forehead, she chants “nananananerner!”*

This vignette took place in the outside space of an early years setting. The setting had just begun to use the outside space more fully, introducing a new outdoors orientated pedagogy, which had had a dramatic positive effect on children’s communication. Language in T’s story emerges in between munches of apple and the crunch of breadstick. It draws impetus from the movement and sound created by the wind, and her extended gaze towards the horizon. Each of these factors are inextricable from the words spoken, providing an example of how inter-twined young children’s talk is with place.

## WHAT I LEARNT FROM THE CHILDREN

Sometimes it is important to stand back rather than leap in, and let children and place do the communicating. As I listened to T’s ghost story from a few steps away, it did not seem to have an adult audience, and I had a sense that interrupting would have curtailed the story. Young children’s talk does not always need to be directed at humans for the purpose of *conveying information*. Instead, we might consider;

1. *Where else* children’s talk might be directed.
2. Different reasons *why* children might be motivated to talk.
3. *What else* (apart from adults) might be involved.



# MORE-THAN-HUMAN LITERACIES ARE GROUNDED IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Grounding literacies in everyday life is firstly about starting with the things young children already do. Perhaps the children you work with like; running in crazy circles OR hoarding small collections of found objects OR treasuring one particular special toy OR singing a made up song at the top of their voices. How can early literacies celebrate and work with these things, rather than against them? It is important not to dismiss the things young children naturally gravitate towards just because they do not fit into our (adult) pre-existing frameworks.

Secondly, grounding literacies in everyday life is a political position. It is saying – children are not abstract-able from everyday life in communities. Whatever is going on for families, they bring with them and this should be welcomed and valued. Early childhood is not an apolitical space, and we should not pretend that it is.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1. In your context, where do children themselves invest their energy and enthusiasm?*
- 2. What happens in spite of, rather than because of, what is planned and organised?*
- 3. What challenges do families you work with face? What strengths do they bring?*





# LEARNING FROM THE RESEARCH

*Chatting with one of the mums at playgroup, I mentioned that my research was not just interested in words, but in all the different ways children communicate. The mum immediately became animated, “Yes!! Before kids have words, they use all these little gestures. And then, when they have the words, they stop using the gestures. And then you forget them, don’t you?” she said.*

This conversation came about because I asked a mum whether I could observe her daughter’s communication at a special event planned at playgroup the following week. She agreed but apologetically told me her daughter did not have many words. After this conversation, she and her friend spent a long time giving me examples of different gestures their children used, and all the meanings attached to them.

# WHAT I LEARNT FROM THE FAMILIES

This conversation taught me how important it is to think about changes in children’s language and literacy practices beyond a narrative of “gain without loss”. New communication practices do not enter and fill an empty void. Rather, during the toddler years, changing ways of moving the body, flexing vocal chords, and communicating in the world each involve something being gained and something being lost. Within the research, I encountered many examples of gestures and vocalisations that were personal, idiosyncratic, or could have meant multiple different things. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate these, rather than see them as falling short of an ‘ideal’ of clear transparent communication. Sometimes, parents, carers and educators can feel commandeered into the project of socializing young children towards particular kinds of literacy and language practices as quickly as possible; it is important to notice and resist this. Opening up conversations about valuing all kinds of communication is one way of doing this.



# MORE-THAN-HUMAN LITERACIES TAKE SURPRISING DIRECTIONS

Sometimes, learning or play activities for children are presented as having (ideally) clear outcomes, with a sense that, if the activity goes well, it should involve reaching a pre-planned destination. The problem with this sort of approach is it leaves little room for children's input, or for the activity to take surprising directions, things that research shows are essential for early childhood literacies.

## THING-POWER!

Children sometimes gravitate towards tiny toys, found objects or pieces of rubbish stuffed in pockets or hidden in shoes and on shelves. Objects that seemed somehow in that moment to belong together are placed carefully in a line, or slotted inside each other. Small, collected piles of plastic figures, or stickers, or stones, or hairclips inhabit tables or corners of the room and parents and educators trip over them or move around them each day. Objects such as these can be irresistible invitations. Children and grownups become drawn into the moment. One of the important things about these moments is that the objects go beyond their functional use – they have a kind of pull or attraction that is not connected to usefulness, and not easy to predict ahead of time. Bennett (2010) calls this thing-power and reminds us that objects are not only there for human purposes.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1. How can we plan for the unpredictable?*
- 2. How can we make space for things we have not yet imagined?*
- 3. What might irresistible opportunities look like in your context?*



# LEARNING FROM THE RESEARCH

*Gradually, more and more objects are gathered from around the room and brought into the gazebo; dried pasta pieces, a plastic dinosaur, some leaves, a baby doll in a bathtub. Someone props the dinosaur up next to the baby bathtub to say 'hello' to the baby. The plastic dinosaur head rests at an angle against the baby doll. Someone says "they are eating the baby." Dinosaurs are eating the baby. "No, no dinosaurs eat leaves, don't they?" "Dinosaurs eat baby snot".*

This vignette describes an event at a playgroup. I worked with an artist, Steve Pool, for some of the project and he brought some additional resources into the playgroup for the children – a pop-up gazebo, some coloured chinks and enough brown paper to cover the floor of the gazebo like a carpet. In amongst play, movement and a chaotic assembly of toys and objects, a story about dinosaurs and baby snot unexpectedly emerged. This story could only have emerged because of, firstly, the very strange and unusual selection of objects that the children gathered together from different 'activity stations' around the playgroup. Secondly, something no one could have predicted; the angle of the plastic dinosaur's head and neck, which unexpectedly resulted in its mouth leaning against the baby doll's head.

# WHAT I LEARNT FROM THE CHILDREN

There can be a tendency in education for objects to be understood in terms of their 'sanctioned use', that is, what they are intended to teach children and how they are to be used 'correctly'. Organising activities in playgroup or early years classrooms into 'stations' according to different intended activities (craft station, role play station, small world play and so on) is also a common practice. However, valuable literacies, such as the shared and collaboratively created dinosaur-baby-snot story, illustrate the kinds of opportunities that might be missed if we too tightly prescribe how objects and children should tangle together. Moments such as this one taught me how important it is to leave room for the potential of children and objects to rearrange the action, divert from what is planned, and create something completely new.



# MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

*'The Emergence of Literacy in Very Young Children: place and materiality in a more-than-human world'* is a three year research project funded by The British Academy. The lead investigator is Dr Abi Hackett from Manchester Metropolitan University. The research took place between 2017 and 2020.

## WHAT HAS THE RESEARCH INVOLVED?

The research is looking at children aged between 1 and 3 years, and their literacy practices in ordinary, everyday community contexts. These contexts include community playgroups, parks, farms, outdoor spaces, and a museum. The research is an ethnography, meaning Dr Hackett spent two years in community early childhood spaces, observing and learning from the children and families who use them.

## WHY IS THIS RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

A great deal of anxiety surrounds the development of young children, and increasingly, investments are being made to try to support families and ensure children get the best start in life. However, the lives of children aged between 1 and 3 years and their families in everyday contexts is surprisingly under-researched. A better understanding of children's everyday lives will enable policy and practice to support families more effectively.

In addition, a great deal of current research on children's language development focusses on the role of adult humans. In this country (but not in all countries), parents are often told "talk to your baby". Whilst there is nothing wrong with talking to your baby, the emphasis on the role of adults means that other important aspects of young children's lives have been over-looked. How might a place, or a toy, or a pet, or the weather, or a pile of sand or jug of water, influence how and what children choose to communicate about?

This research project is important because it addresses important gaps in research by

1. *Providing a better understanding of the everyday lives of young children and their families and how literacy and language fits into this.*
2. *Examining the role of non-human things (such as places and objects) in how young children are inspired to communicate.*





# WHERE YOU CAN READ MORE

## ARTICLES

The following academic papers relate to Dr Abi Hackett's research on early childhood literacy. If you would like to read these papers but are unable to access them, you can email Abi ([a.hackett@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:a.hackett@mmu.ac.uk)) and she will send you a pdf copy.

Hackett, A. MacLure, M. and McMahon, S. 2020, Reconceptualising early language development: matter, sensation and the more-than-human. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. Online first.

Hackett, A. and Rautio, P. 2019, Answering the World. Young children's running and rolling as more-than-human multimodal meaning making. *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32 (8).

Hackett, A. and Somerville, M. 2017, Posthuman literacies: young children moving in time, place and more-than-human worlds. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 17 (3): 374-391.

## WEBSITE

This is Abi's personal blog, where she shares some of the ideas emerging from the research project. [www.abigailhackett.wordpress.com](http://www.abigailhackett.wordpress.com)

## FORTHCOMING BOOK

The final outcome from the research project will be a book called *More-than-human Literacies in Early Childhood*. It is due to be published by Bloomsbury in 2021.



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