Children’s social literacies: meaning making and the emergence of graphical signs and texts in pretence

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Abstract

This study builds on recent research into young children’s pretend play. Social literacy practices and events in which children engaged were investigated to reveal features of their meaning making. Drawing on Vygotsky’s view of the social nature of symbol use and writing, it stresses the significance of cultural and social features of meanings and literacies within children’s play narratives.

Data were collected from case studies of seven children aged three to four years in an inner-city maintained nursery school in southwest England, as part of a larger longitudinal ethnographic study. Data comprise written documentation of the children’s play and their visual representations, and the analysis follows an interpretive, social semiotic multimodal paradigm.

The findings make a compelling case for greater appreciation of pretence as a potentially valuable context for the enculturation of literacies, highlighting the diversity and richness of children’s spontaneous meaning making and self-chosen literacy events. Informed by cultural and literacy practices of home and nursery, the children’s communications show how meanings and signs are carried across time, space and contexts. Rich and sustained play supported the children’s self-initiated literacies in which they explored a heterogeneous range of textual genres, revealing their developing semiotic understandings and expanding repertoire.

Key words
Pretend play, literacy practices and events, multimodality, meaning making, graphical signs and texts