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ABSTRACT

The thematic network "Early Literacy in Context" is funded by the European Commission to connect four research projects exploring innovative practice in literacy teaching in the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and Greece. This paper, written by two of the network's four members, explores the different notions of autonomy in early literacy learning which animate the four different projects. The paper observes that autonomy is not a simple matter where literacy is concerned; differences exist between autonomy of outcome (orthographic autonomy and autonomy of meaning-making) and autonomy in the learning process (autonomy of participation, cognitive autonomy, autonomy of interpretation, autonomy of composition, and autonomy of judgment). Exercise of autonomy at one level may inhibit its development at another. For example, children who are accorded a large measure of autonomy of participation, that is, control over the initiation of activities, may not choose those activities that allow them cognitive autonomy. Consequently, their development of orthographic autonomy may be significantly delayed. The paper concludes by posing a series of questions suggested by comparison of evidence from different countries, challenging a number of axiomatic beliefs about innovative literacy teaching and learning. (EV)

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Examining the Notion of Autonomy in the Context of Early Literacy Learning in Four European Countries

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Abstract
The authors of this paper are two of the four members of a Thematic Network, *Early Literacy in Context*, funded by DG XII of the European Commission as part of its programme for Targeted Socio Economic Research. The network serves to connect four research projects exploring innovative practice in literacy teaching in the UK, Spain, Italy and Greece. The paper explores the different notions of autonomy in early literacy learning which animate the four different projects. The writers observe that autonomy is not a simple matter where literacy is concerned: xercise of autonomy at one level may inhibit its development at another. It concludes by posing a series of questions suggested by the comparison of evidence from different countries, challenging a number of axiomatic beliefs about innovative literacy teaching and learning.

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Summary
The authors of this paper are two of the four members of a Thematic Network, *Early Literacy in Context*, funded by DG XII of the European Commission as part of its programme for Targeted Socio Economic Research. The network serves to connect four research projects exploring innovative practice in literacy teaching in the UK, Spain, Italy and Greece. The paper explores the different notions of autonomy in early literacy learning which animate the four different projects.

Definition of problem
Although degrees of concern vary, all countries of Europe seem to be experiencing anxieties about how we initiate young children into literacy, as school populations become more culturally diverse, and as the literacy demands of later learning and the world outside school become more complex day by day. The four researchers who already knew each other through their involvement in IEDPE (l'Institut Européen pour le Développement des Potentialités de tous les Enfants), share a number of important concerns, in particular a concern for children in danger of being marginalised. All the projects involve schools which serve communities with many members in danger of marginalisation. Yet the national and regional contexts are very different. Recognising that literacy teaching and learning are not neutral enterprises but cultural activities heavily influenced by their social context, the network exists to explore the component projects from a 'European' perspective, to see whether there are significant commonalities under the rather different practices which the various projects have developed. During this process of exploration the concept of autonomy in early literacy learning has been much discussed.

Theoretical framework
The network is founded on the idea that the four participants share certain key conceptions about early literacy learning:

- Very young children (from four years or earlier), even those at the margins of their societies, are interested in written language and its use, and capable of developing powerful ideas about it (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1979).

- Learning to read is centrally concerned with the construction of meaning, through the processing of language . The learner's engagement with the subject matter of the text and her knowledge of language patterns play an instrumental role not only in the building of overall meaning, but also, as shown by miscue analysis, in the identification of individual words (Goodman 1968).

- It is not only novice learners who draw on many sources of information to identify words. The act of skilled reading involves "simultaneous, multi-level, interactive processing" (Rumelhart 1977). That is to say that reading involves the generation of expectations about the text in general and particular sections, sentences and phrases, and at the same time the recognition of letter shapes, letter strings and common words. Data at one level are used to generate hypotheses at other levels. So to learn

effectively, children need to attend to what a text is saying and what its function is, as well as to the letters on the page and their relation to speech sounds.

- Following Vygotsky (1978), learning is seen as an essentially social and collaborative process, in which, aided by proficient practitioners and by their own peers, learners engage in tasks which would be beyond their individual independent capacity. Participation in this collaborative activity develops the capacity to perform such tasks independently.

As we discuss below, in their various ways these conceptions all imply valuing the learner's autonomy .

The network's operation and questions raised

The network has operated through meetings in the countries concerned - in Italy, UK, Spain and Greece. As well as visits to project classrooms in Modena, Brighton , Castile, and Thebes, these meetings have included close interrogation of video material. Although we have recognised much in each other's practices, rather than highlighting significant commonalities, the visits and discussions have thrown up questions and issues that underline the complex cultural dependence of literacy learning. While all we network participants and the teachers with whom we are working share an explicit concern to respect and develop children's autonomy as literacy learners, conceptions of what this means in practice appear to differ markedly. The question which initially preoccupied us - What does autonomy mean in early literacy learning?- has been transformed by the various exchanges into the question: What different kinds of autonomy are in evidence in the rather different contexts of early literacy learning as those in the four West European sites involved in this project? This paper explores the question.

Vignettes

But first, in order to situate the problem, we would like to present glimpses of three contrasting classrooms, visited by the network members in the three meetings that have already taken place.

Brighton: In a Reception[1] classroom of an Infant School on a depressed housing estate in South-East England, the teacher, Linda, sits beside an easel which holds a book, large enough for all the 24 children clustered in front of her to have a clear view of both the pictures and the text. This 'big book' reading is a daily activity in which all the children in this class are expected to be involved. As usual, Linda has chosen today's story, although one of the children chose the verses which they have just read, as a warm up activity. Now Linda is conducting a shared reading of the story. So here they are, in an activity chosen, organised and controlled by the teacher. The classroom has a richly stocked book corner and captions accompany the striking wall displays, but otherwise seems relatively bare of print, reinforcing the idea that the teacher is in control of encounters with written language. Does autonomy have any role to play here?

Modena: In a Scuola Materna[2] (nursery school) in the Northern Italian town of Modena, a teacher, Paula calls six of the five year olds in from playing outside. She invites them to sit with her round a table, asking them to dictate to her the rules of a game (a card game called

[1] Reception is the first year of compulsory schooling in England. These children all started Reception class in the September of the academic year in which they would become five years old.

[2] In Northern Italy nearly all children attend the municipally -organised *scuola materna* from three to six years old, when they start their formal education at the nationally organised primary schools.

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Sevens) which they know how to play but which she - so they are told - does not. They are told that if they explained to her how to play it, she could teach another group of children. The children dictate, listening carefully to each other, correcting, adding to and refining what is said. Paula writes down what they say. To allow them to focus on their choice of words, she sits across from them, on the other side of the table, so the children cannot see the detail of what is written. Periodically she reads the text out, asking the children whether she has got it right. Again the activity has been chosen by the teacher, and is organised and controlled by her. The writing on the wall, more varied than in the English classroom, including critical examination of television advertising, nonetheless has a unity of conception about it, betraying the teacher's active role. Again, in what sense can we speak of autonomy here?

Palencia: This time we are in Castile in Northern Spain, in a rural district where opportunities and horizons are markedly more limited than in the nearby small city of Palencia. In a classroom of five year olds in the Parvulario, the pre-school[3] section of a village Primary School, Maria-Paz, with a brisk jollity in her voice, is organising a word recognition game with some twenty children wriggling on a mat in front of her. The walls of this class are lined with boxes of reading games, most focusing on the word matching or phonics. Several children choose to play with these in the free time that follows Maria-Paz's more formal session. There are few books for the children to read, but the children are interested in the local newspaper, particularly the death notices, which have prompted much discussion. In a strikingly focused letter for children of this age, they have also, written to the mayor asking for improved play areas in the village. But to what extent can the children be said to be acting autonomously in any of this?

Changing conceptions of early literacy learning

We need to review what early literacy learning encompasses and examine what autonomy might mean in this domain. Although England has a long history of teaching five year olds to read and write, in those countries where formal schooling starts at six, initiating children into literacy at this early age is, in itself, a novel activity. And of course the nature of that introduction has changed considerably over the last few decades.

While autonomy in the domain of literacy is, as we discuss below, capable of very different definitions, in some sense it has always been the *goal* of literacy teaching to develop this. However, autonomy for the child in the *process* of literacy learning is a more recent concern. Changes in how literacy learning is conceptualised have not developed uniformly in any country. But the move from the view of early literacy learning as passive subjection within a structured programme, focusing principally on phonics (the grapho-phonic code) has been widespread. Very many teachers in Europe, as elsewhere in the world, now have a larger conception of what early literacy learning should involve. Certainly the ideas on what is 'basic' to literacy learning of those teachers participating in the projects which the network has linked together have been much influenced by research work which has shown children's early learning of reading and writing to be:

- *cognitive* activity involving the generation and testing of hypotheses - about what texts might say, what they might mean and how the relationship between spoken words and written symbol might operate (Ferreiro and Teberosky op cit.);
- *semantic* activity centrally concerned with the construction of meaning (Goodman op.cit.);

[3] In Spain education is administered on a provincial basis. Nearly all children participate in pre-school education from 3 years until the start of formal schooling at six. Pre-school provision is sometimes located in classes attached to primary schools, and sometimes separately.

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- *linguistic* activity in which the children learn to make sense of and put to use forms of language that differ from those of speech (Goodman op cit.).

There have, of course, been important differences of emphasis. Different theoretical frameworks have shaped these changes. In Italy, for example, the new practices tend to derive directly from the work of Ferreiro and Teberosky, leading to an emphasis on children's successive theories about the working of the writing system, whereas in England the work of Goodman has been more influential, leading to practices such as the apprenticeship approach (Waterland 1988) where progress is conceptualised in terms of children's increasing autonomy as meaning-makers.

But perhaps the most significant changes in pedagogic theory and practice come from the understanding that literacy learning construed in all these ways begins long before formal education . It is now widely recognised that children from all social backgrounds arrive in school at four, five or six, having experienced literacy in use, familiar with some of its language and having developed ideas about how the system works. Teachers now know that they must not disregard these experiences and understandings, but recognise and build on them, and in doing so must work in collaboration with children's families (Dombey and Meek Spencer 1994). Literacy learning is no longer seen as the province of formal school education alone. Frequently, however, teachers are at a loss as to how to make use of children's implicit knowledge, the 'saperi dei bambini', as the Italians put it.

The need for autonomy in school literacy learning

These conceptions of early literacy learning imply the need for children to be given greater autonomy in their school learning than do earlier conceptions of literacy learning dominated by a mechanical view of learning in general. If learning to read and write are seen as complex cognitive activities, what children do in the classroom needs to engage their active mental participation in developing their own ideas about how literacy works, not just to put them on the receiving end of instructions. If the making of meaning is central to early literacy, children need to be encouraged to seek personal significance in texts that make such explorations possible. And given that children's knowledge, ideas and experience differ, some differences in their encounters with written language also seem indicated. If children are to choose to engage in literacy activities, then we need to provide them with richly significant contexts for doing so, offering them a wide range of different literacy experiences, from deciphering prescriptions to writing letters. Above all, children need experience in putting literacy to their own use, which involves making decisions about what they want to do and the role literacy can play in this. All this adds up to a pedagogy in which autonomy is not just the goal, but also in large part the route to that goal.

Such thinking about early literacy is now widely shared. Indeed it is tempting to see a kind of uniformity in developing conceptions of early literacy learning in disparate parts of the developed world. The shared culture of scholarship, with its paraphernalia of international conferences and journals, would suggest that in our different countries the lines of development of thinking about literacy are broadly similar. However what goes on in classrooms may be rather different. This is in part because of the differences in theoretical emphasis already mentioned. Despite much shared thinking, these different theoretical conceptions provoke different concerns and consequently different classroom practices in different countries.

The goals of literacy learning

But teachers' classroom actions are subject also to other influences. As well as by ideas about how children go about their literacy learning, teachers' actions are shaped also by ideas

concerning the goals of literacy learning: ideas about what it is to be literate, what autonomy in literacy itself might mean. As we suggested earlier, different conceptions abound. What kind of control over the written word do we want young children to develop ultimately? Orthographic autonomy - that is the capacity to recognise printed words with fluency and accuracy, and its counterpart for setting words down on the page - is seen by all as an essential outcome of education. So too is some degree of comprehension. But do we want children to focus solely on the literal meaning of the texts they read, or do we want them to pose questions, draw inferences and reflect on what they have read, relating the current text to other texts and to other life experiences? Do we want them to take a critical stance to what they read? Is our chief aim for children to read and make written responses to instructional texts or is it to read critically and construct texts from a wide range of different genres? Do we see literacy as solely concerned with the written word or do we see it as including an interplay between the verbal and the graphic?

Responses to such questions have a significant effect on what happens in the name of literacy teaching and learning in our classrooms, and the responses of different teachers, different schools, different regions, different nations change over time as well as geographically and politically. The lived curriculum in each classroom results from the interplay between conceptions at these different levels. Those in positions of power tend to conceptualise a curriculum of uniformity, based on a pedagogy of transmission, and, at least in the early stages of formal schooling, a comparatively narrow view of what it is to be literate. Meanwhile individual teachers and researchers working closely with them may conceptualise a curriculum of difference, based on a constructivist and interactive pedagogy and a wider conception of literacy that involves engaging with a wide range of texts - visual as well as verbal, personal and persuasive as well as procedural and narrative, texts in non-standard as well as standard dialects. Their aims may include helping children to develop a critical stance to the texts they encounter.

In the UK at present it is evident that the governmental agencies determining the curriculum centrally are moving towards the former view, while they tighten their grip on school practice, making particularly effective use of the instruments of assessment and evaluation, of children, teachers and teacher educators, to steer teachers towards a narrower conception of literacy and a transmissional pedagogy. Thus they make life increasingly difficult for those teachers who tend towards the latter view. However in Italy the national government is supporting local initiatives which introduce more contextualised and meaning-oriented approaches in pre-school settings, informed by a wider view of literacy in the world beyond school. It is also encouraging the extension of such approaches into the nationally run primary schools.

The curriculum in the classroom

Thus schools operate with varied and changing curricula. Each teacher needs a curriculum, some view of what constitutes a productive literacy and how this learning is best ordered. Informed by ideas both of *what* children should learn and also of *how* they learn, such a curriculum embodies the recognition that school is a peculiarly salient meeting place where children's active quest for learning encounters the culture or cultures of the world in which they will move as adults. A curriculum incorporating these two very different elements is essential if teachers are to make informed decisions about where children might be helped to go next.

But different social and cultural contexts dictate that these elements are construed in different ways, and thus curricula inevitably differ. It is relatively easy to see that different teachers, schools, municipalities and national governments have different conceptions of the

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cultures in which education is preparing children to operate. Municipalities and individual teachers with a central concern for the active participation of citizens in their decision-making and cultural life will inevitably give a higher value to a critical literacy than those individuals who see conformity and order as of prime importance, and national governments whose chief concern is to manage dissent while increasing material prosperity. But surely the other curriculum element, the idea of how children learn, is less susceptible to variation? Surely this is a scientific matter, developed and modified through the dissemination of psycho-pedagogical research?

As we state above, the authors of this paper share a number of understandings about how children learn, all of which imply an acknowledgement of children's need for autonomy in their learning. As we indicate, these understandings are based on research findings, on the close observation of what children actually do, say and appear to think in particular situations. But psycho-pedagogical research is not a value-free activity. In choosing what to study, in placing emphasis on some aspects and not on others, in determining criteria for evaluating children's responses, researchers are influenced by value systems which are cultural and not culture-free. Ferreiro and Teberosky's view of young writers as ingenious theorisers of the relation between the written and spoken word, and Goodman's view of young readers as active constructors of meaning, are both influenced by their views of what it is to be literate. Vygotsky's view of learning as an essentially social matter in which the individual learner makes significant progress through collaboration with others is shaped by his view of society, childhood and culture. The understandings we share about how children learn are as much cultural, social and political as they are scientific. And how we interpret these understandings, precisely what we mean in concrete terms in particular classrooms with particular children is also shaped by patterns of culture, from parents' expectations of the school to the unwritten and often unspoken patterns of practice that make up much of teachers' professional knowledge.

So competing views of how children learn, shaped by different cultural forces, are also influential. Many centrally devised curricula present learning as the straightforward product of teaching. What matters in such a conception is not so much the extent to which the teacher draws on children's current understandings and active participation, as the sequential ordering of the her instructions and her effectiveness in ensuring that the children attend to and follow these. In such conceptions there is little place for teacher autonomy, much less for autonomy for the learner.

This is becoming increasingly evident in England, where the National Literacy Strategy specifies in detail how literacy is to be taught and learned from the age of four or five, and even earlier, as concern increases about children's levels of literacy learning on school entry[4]. However, in Italy, pre-school and primary teachers are being encouraged to develop a more constructivist conception of learning, according children a more active role. While literacy education in England is becoming increasingly controlled from the centre, other countries are moving away from such centralised control. In any case, such central control has never operated at pre-school level. As the degree of central control and the actual curricula differ between regions and countries, so too does the notion of what autonomy might mean. S

[4] With the introduction of mandatory 'desirable outcomes for children's learning on entering compulsory education' England's national curriculum has effectively been extended to three and four year olds.

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Towards an anatomy of autonomy in literacy learning
In principle, autonomy can operate in the following ways. First we have *autonomy of outcome or goal* of literacy education, which, it has been suggested, can exist at a number of different levels. One might characterise these as:

- *Orthographic autonomy* - that is control over the process of lifting the words from the page and setting them down;
- *Autonomy of meaning-making*,- a heterogeneous collection, ranging, where reading is concerned, from literal comprehension, through the inferential and evaluative to the critical, and where writing is concerned, from presentation of a comprehensible text to careful control over formal structures, choice of genre, purpose and audience.

Then we can talk about various possible kinds of *autonomy in the learning process*.

- *Autonomy of participation* - that is control over engagement in literacy activities, ranging from initiation of an activity, through voluntary participation, to modification;
- *Cognitive autonomy* - that is control over the construction and testing of theories about how the writing system works;
- *Autonomy of interpretation* - that is control over the interpretation of texts, involving the recognition that there is no one correct reading of any text;
- *Autonomy of composition* - that is control over the wording of texts;
- *Autonomy of judgement* - that is control over the determination of whether a response is correct, or a text is complete.

Autonomy is clearly not a simple matter where early literacy is concerned. Exercise of autonomy at one level may inhibit its development at another. Children who are accorded a large measure of *autonomy of participation*,, that is control over the initiation of activities, may not choose those activities which allow them *cognitive autonomy*. Consequently their development of *orthographic autonomy* may be significantly delayed.

It seems that there are essentially four kinds of autonomy at work here: one to do with participation in an activity, one to do with mastering the orthographic aspects, one to do with the construction of meaning, and one to do with exercising judgement about correctness. The development of autonomy of all types is desirable, in that children should, at least on occasion, freely choose to engage in literacy activities, should enter into them in a purposeful way, making conscious use of strategies that will help them figure out how the systems work, do so in order to achieve the construction of satisfying meaning, and feel confident that they can judge the success of their and others' efforts. The first, autonomy of participation, which concerns choice and definition of activity, is the kind of autonomy which until recent years has been most apparent in English primary classrooms, but now appears to be in decline, with the increasingly detailed specification of curricula.

But is it the most important? Perhaps the third, *the construction of meaning*, has a greater importance. If we see the purposes of education as more than the merely instrumental, more than the training of the future workforce - but instead as including enlarging children's sense of themselves and the world, the construction of personally satisfying meaning must have a central place, both as an end and as the means of achieving that end. Far too many children gain control over the orthographic aspects of reading and writing without ever having experienced at any significant level what reading and writing can do for them. Meaning implies personal significance. Yet there must always be a tension between the personal meaning vested in a text, and what other members of the culture can legitimately be

expected to make of it, so unfettered autonomy is less powerful than what Wells has termed the negotiation of meaning (Wells1981). Nonetheless autonomy appears to have a particular salience here.

Where mastery of the orthographic aspects is concerned, on its own, autonomy can never be enough. The last twenty years have taught us the importance of developing children's awareness of the sounds of speech and of the patterned way these relate to the spelling of words (Goswami and Bryant 1990). To inform their developing ideas about the operation of the orthographic system, the vast majority of children need instruction (Byrne 1998). Without this they are hampered in the business of developing the essential autonomy: control over the system that will allow them to lift the words off the page with fluency and accuracy. Yet autonomy may be an essential element here too. If children are to develop a sense of themselves as active learners, capable of building and testing theories, and the confidence in their own powers necessary for a critical approach to text, they need to feel that they have and can exercise the tools that will give them control over the orthographic system, and need to experience the intellectual satisfaction of making their own connections.

A closer examination of two classroom encounters with early literacy

At this point, a closer examination of two extracts from video transcripts of classroom literacy activities in Brighton and Modena might reveal what part, if any, autonomy is playing in the children's experience of literacy learning. In the Brighton classroom it is June. The children are nearly all five years old, and have been in school, in Linda's Reception class since last September. Following the daily pattern, until twenty minutes ago they have been engaged in a range of self-chosen activities, many of them involving modelling, drawing or painting (in which they are expected to execute with careful attention their own conception of the physical or imaginary objects they are representing). Since then they have been gathered on the mat in front of Linda's chair, engaged in collective reading activities. After reading rhymes chosen by two nominated children, they read *The Tram Ride,* a familiar text, chosen by the teacher. Now they are working with a new one, *Sand,* which she has also chosen. Linda has 'talked it through' with them, turning the pages while they both explore the pictures and speculate about what might be happening. Now, after this active engagement in meaning-making, they are reading it through together.

29	Linda	Now, d'you remember what we called this?	Linda points to a picture of the seashore
30	Child	Seashore	
31	Linda	Clever girl	
32		It's the seashore, isn't it.	
33		There's that...	Points to 'or' in 'shore'
34	Stevie	'Or'	
35	Linda	Yes, it's got an 'or' in it.	
36		And it's got a 'sh'	Points to 'sh'
37		Sand on the shore	
38	Stevie	Like 'she'	
39	Linda	Yes, like the word 'she'	
40		Ready? Ready Danielle?	
41	Terry	Linda, looks like, looks like, looks like 'she'	
42	Linda	Yes	
43	Ernie	Linda, if you put a 'l' there it would make 'Lee'.	Ernie goes out to the book and points to the 's' in 'sea'

44	Linda	Yes it would make 'Lee' if there was an 'l 'and two 'e's
45		Ready? Carla? Rachel?

In their earlier look through the book Linda has given the children ample opportunity for exercising autonomy in the construction of meaning, as she and the children have talked about their own experiences of sand, how long it takes to make a big pile like the one in the picture and how snorkels work in the water. At the end of this reading they talk about the expression on the protagonist's face and whether sand in your sandwich would make you sick. But here, it is fair to say, Linda and the children are focused on the business of identifying the words on the page. To do so, the children are drawing on their phonic knowledge. So what about autonomy here?

Linda is certainly in charge. She has chosen the text and instructed all the children to sit in front of her and attend to the business of reading it. Having led them through the initial meaning-making activity of their first 'reading' of the book, she is now conducting a literal reading of the text, with the clear intention of involving as many of the children as possible in the business of word identification. Linda does most of the talking, commenting on the events represented in the text and indicating aspects of the print that will help the children in front of her lift the words from the page. But whether the children join her in the vocalisation of these words is a voluntary matter: they can choose to participate actively or to sit watching, so there is a degree of autonomy of participation. On the whole they choose to participate, most appearing to find the activities enjoyable and challenging.

So what is going on? In the first exchange in this excerpt, prompted by Linda, a child recalls at utterance 30 the word 'seashore' which this text uses, rather than the word 'beach' that they are more familiar with. In so doing she collaborates with her teacher, both of them conforming to the pattern of teacher initiation, pupil response and teacher evaluative feedback that typifies didactic exchanges in the classroom (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975). But apart from this one exchange, the children are not simply responding to the teacher's questions. In fact Linda is not primarily asking questions, so much as articulating the words as she points to them, and commenting on how you might know what these words say, thus demonstrating how she uses phonic knowledge. This does not mean that the children have no role. Her demonstrations act as an implicit invitation to them to do something similar. Their role is to make their own active contributions to the business of word identification, making explicit for their teacher, their classmates and themselves how the business operates. Sometimes this is along the lines she has laid down, as when at utterance 34 a child recognises the 'or' in 'seashore' before Linda mentions it. But more often these interruptions constitute exaggerations or deviations from the pattern Linda has created, as one after another the children throw in their observations on the sound/symbol relations represented in the words they are looking at. At 38 a child contributes "like 'she'" . At 43 Ernie mentally changes the letters on the page to make his friend's name. Cognitive autonomy is at work here.

The children's first 'reading' of the book was very different, with a clear focus on making sense of the events depicted, relating them to their own experiences. In this they were practising interpretive autonomy. But here, in this extract the emphasis is on orthographic features of the text, and how these might be manipulated. As they play with the words and letters the children are operating a degree of cognitive autonomy. So here we see children encouraged to develop their own ideas of the relationship between spoken and written words, informed by the teacher's observations and demonstrations. They are not mechanically following her instructions, but within the boundaries of the activity in which

she invites them to participate, they are operating autonomously, making their own connections between these 'new' words and what they already know. In both readings they exercise a large measure of autonomy of judgement, as frequently they determine whether an observation accords with their experience and the evidence on the page.

Teachers participating in this project, in which they make extensive use of these large format texts or 'big books', with 'open' collaborative readings where the children are encouraged to make their own active contributions, report that children's enjoyment of reading and effectiveness as readers are much enhanced. It is more likely to produce divergent ideas than one to one reading of a text. In making explicit the processes children employ to recognise a word, it shows that there is more than one way of solving a problem. Above all, "the children are in control, in that inside the framework of the reading, they can make any comment they like, leading to more productive routines".

In the Modena classroom it is also June. These five year olds are well used to working collaboratively in groups to analyse how the system of written language works. Through both interpretation and composition they work on the 'co-construction' of texts for a range of social purposes and audiences. These include party invitations, doctors' prescriptions and certificates, instructions for the use of instruments, recipes and so on.

The example that follows of one such co-construction concerns a card game that the children already know well having learnt it from another teacher and played it many times. The children's task is to work out the rules and procedures of the game, and dictate these to their teacher Paula who is unfamiliar with it, so that, with the help of this written set of rules and procedures, she can teach the game to other children.

The six children dictate their joint text to the teacher, often interrupting and correcting each other. Paula acts as the scribe, but also as a kind of active recorder, as she reads back what the teacher has dictated to allow them to review what has been written, posing questions that invite them to expand and elucidate what is unclear.

11	Emanuele:	[5] You have to deal the cards to everyone, then the person who has made seven wins
12	Teacher:	Just a minute. You have to give. Who has to give the cards?
13	Chiara V & Emanuele:	The teacher
14	Teacher:	Only the teacher, or can a child do it too?
15	Chiara V:	A child[6] can too, oh yeah!
16	Emanuele:	And a little girl
17	Teacher:	So who deals the cards, one of the players? How can I write it?
18	Chiara V:	A person who is playing cards.... Sevens
19	Teacher:	So, I write 'one of the people playing Sevens ....' What does the person do?
20	Emanuele:	Deals the cards
21	Teacher:	To everyone?
22	Chiara B:	To everyone
23	Chiara V:	To everyone who is playing.

[5] The Italian words used here 'deve dare le carte' quite grammatically, contain no mention of the agent, of *who* has to deal the cards

[6] The Italian word 'bimbo' used here denotes a boy

Further on:

35	Chiara B:	Then whoever counts the cards that are seven wins a ...?
36	Teacher:	I don't really understand, one person has to have seven cards?
37	Chiara B:	When she counts that there are seven
38	Teacher:	Just a minute. But how many cards does she give to each person?
39	Emanuele:	Two
40	Chiara V:	One
41	Emanuele:	First one, then two.

The whole event consists of 240 turns, all focused on the task, with no overt signs of distraction, clearly showing that when children are involved in interesting work, even at this young age they can concentrate for a remarkably long time. Emanuele opens with a statement that encapsulates the game with remarkable clarity. Paula the teacher intervenes, posing a question which picks up Emanuele's first clause, inviting the children to specify who has to perform this action. Emanuele, joined by Chiara, specifies who deals the cards, but again the teacher queries their account, pushing them to be more precise, with the result that the children complete the description.

So what part is autonomy playing here? Paula, the teacher, has assembled the children and given them this particular task. Although she takes on the apparently lowly role of scribe, her interpretation of this role puts her in charge. She does not simply register the words the children produce, taking her cue from their lead, but instead initiates every exchange, posing puzzled questions whenever the text is unclear, as she pushes for greater explicitness, coherence and completeness from the children. She is in charge, working to achieve a set of clear intentions about what the children shall learn.

However, in all this, she cedes to the children the role of primary knower: they are the experts on this card game; she is the novice struggling to understand. The words she writes on the paper are their words. Elsewhere in the text she checks with the children to see if she has set them down correctly. The children are thus invited to exercise autonomy of judgement. Although neither Paula nor the children are concerned here to tackle the orthographic code, the children are exercising a degree of cognitive autonomy as they puzzle out how to explain the game. They certainly have a large measure of autonomy of composition: the words are theirs, not entirely shaped by Paula's questions.

As in Linda's class in Brighton, within the boundaries the teacher has set, the children are operating autonomously. This is perhaps most evident when they correct each other, as Chiara does at 23 and Emanuele at 41. They know that the text will be used for the purpose stated, and that it matters that it should be carefully worded. Perhaps because here they are liberated from the problems of getting words onto paper, and can concentrate on producing an effective text, they have a very sharply defined shared focus and a shared sense of purpose. Importantly, their teacher accords them the central role of determining when that purpose has been achieved.

Perhaps this is the most important aspect of autonomy: that children should engage in tasks that seem to them significant and that they should be encouraged to determine whether or not particular moves are acceptable or 'right', and when the task itself has been satisfactorily achieved.

Concluding thoughts

These explorations have, thus far, raised more questions than answers. Instead of a neat conclusion about the role of autonomy in early literacy learning, we would like to leave you with some further questions.

- Does explicit attention to the code in the early stages of learning to read and write necessarily inhibit the learner's autonomy of meaning making?
- Is it legitimate to talk of children taking the initiative and showing autonomy where the field of activity is determined by the teacher?
- Do complex orthographies, such as English, demand a different approach in the early stages, with more explicit attention to the code, and less cognitive autonomy?
- What determines if a purpose (for reading or writing) is seen as 'real' or 'authentic'?

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