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YOUNG CHILDREN, TOUCHSCREENS AND LITERACY PRACTICES



Most research recently developed in Europe has shown that younger children (0-to-8-year-olds) grow up in media-rich homes and pre-school contexts. Among this age group, access to digital media mainly happens through touch-screen devices, such as tablets and smartphones, which can be used in a more intuitive way than a PC, before the child learns to read and write, thus allowing highly individualized internet access.

Since early childhood, children pursue online their interests, and engage with kids' favourite TV content (e.g., Peppa Pig, Disney characters, etc.) and games (e.g., Angry Bird, Temple Run, Minecraft, etc.). The use of educational apps appears to be driven mostly by parents, who perceive technology as a support for children's learning.

Nonetheless, by using touchscreens, young children engage in emergent literacy practices (that is, knowledge of reading and writing skills), develop digital skills, and are socialised to online communication and entertainment. Their learning practices are socially and culturally situated. Both the family (parents, siblings, extended family members such as cousins or grandparents) and the pre-school context (teachers and peers) can scaffold younger children's emergent literacy and digital literacy in a variety of ways.

As a consequence of being embedded into everyday life activities, digital literacy is more and more a matter of informal, instead of formal, learning.

On the other side, however, digital media use at a very young age poses a number of concerns, from the commodification of childhood and the commercial exploitation of their online engagement, to threats to children's privacy and the exposure to inappropriate content. Therefore, such a domestic or pre-school media-rich landscape rises a number of questions about the role of parents, sib-

lings, peers and teachers in scaffolding children's digital skills and emergent literacy. Pressing issues concern:

- the market pressures;
- the quality and safety of the most popular apps;
- the gender stereotypes promoted by apps and digital content for younger children;
- the specific digital skills and competences that children gain through the use of touchscreen devices;
- and the effects of children's engagement with touchscreen devices on the traditional literacy and numeracy.

The special issue aims to investigate all the above mentioned topics, focusing on the digital literacy of young children (0-to-8-year-olds) in the everyday life contexts (home and pre-school) which are increasingly saturated with touchscreen mobile devices. The following contributions adopt different theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of how younger children's are appropriating touchscreen and digital media.

The issue builds on the experience of two important European networks devoted to the study of young children's emerging and digital literacy practices. Most authors of the empirical contributions here presented are members of the COST Action IS1410 *The digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children (DigiLitEY)*, chaired by Professor Jackie Marsh, and aimed at creating an interdisciplinary network that will advance understanding of young children's digital literacy and multimodal practices in the new media age (<http://digilitey.eu/>). Two empirical contributions draw on data collected as part of the EC's Joint Research Centre project on *Young Children (0-8) and Digital Technology* coordinated by Stephane Chaudron, the first attempt to collect comparative data on younger children's and their families' use of digital media in Europe.

The focal points of the papers

The first two articles by Donata Ripamonti and Andrea Nardi introduce the reader in the main topics of the special issue, offering a literature review about access to, and use of, digital media by younger children; in the frame of an educational approach, risks and opportunities of digital devices are pointed out, together with the novelty introduced by new ways for learning and reading.

On such a background, the following articles account for different research projects involving children aged 0 to 9 and, in most cases, their parents or teachers.

Jackie Marsh reports on a study of young children's (0-to-5-years-old) use of tablets and apps in the UK through a survey of parents and case studies with children filmed using tablets in a nursery and primary school. The findings indicate that parents identify a range of skills and knowledge that they perceive their children gain by using tablets.

Another study is reported by Vitor Tomé and Belinha de Abreu, who account for their project ‘Digital Citizenship Education for Democratic Participation’, focused on empowering children in three related contexts: family, school and community in Portugal. Results showed that through professional development training, teachers were able to develop digital literacy activities without deviating from their previous pedagogical plans.

The article by Gianluca Argentin and Tiziano Gerosa focuses on the interactive whiteboard (IWB), a device on which large public investments have been recently made in Italy. Using a cross-sources database from INVALSI 2013-2014, they estimate the effects of the presence of a IWB in the classroom on the school performance of students. The results are consistent in showing a null effect of LIM on school performance of students, questioning the legitimacy of significant public investments directed to its introduction in the early years of primary school.

Built on prior research by the authors with 70 families in seven European countries, the article by Giovanna Mascheroni, Sonia Livingstone, Michael Dreier and Stephane Chaudron shows how parents’ approach towards digital play is indicative of different imaginaries around ICTs, parenting styles and mediation strategies; such parental mediation is affected by both the family socio-economic background and their attitude toward technologies, and contribute to shape the ways in which children are socialised into using digital media at home.

Family is the main social context researched by the following four contributions, generally with a qualitative and ethnographic approach. Four different European countries are represented. Rita Brito aims to identify digital practices and skills of Portuguese children up to the age of 6. Nieves Galera, Mitsuko Matsumoto and David Poveda present the results of a study exploring the place of digital technologies in young children’s daily routines in Madrid. Elyna Nevski and Andra Sibak present an ethnographic case study aimed at understanding parental mediation strategies and older siblings’ influence on toddlers’ touchscreen use and family’s everyday life in Estonia. And finally Claudia Lampert presents the findings of an exploratory qualitative study on the relevance of touchscreen media in the lives of 2 to 6 year-old German children, on their access to and use of these devices, parental concerns and the strategies they adopt when they encounter those challenges.

María García-Pernía, Pilar Lacasa, and Laura Méndez close this special issue with a paper aimed to analyse children’s and teen’s participation in global and local media communities when they use technology creatively and intelligently, interacting with both peers and adults.

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