



A Coming Into Being: Learning Multimodal Literacy in Pre-School Through Digital Production

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Abstract

Young children are active consumers, content producers and members of digital culture, which challenges education and literacy teaching. Digital mobile devices allow anyone to produce content by using multiple modalities. Multimodal literacy refers to different ways of content representation and meaning-making that occurs at different levels through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimodal texts and multimodal communication. In this article we illustrate how multimodal literacy can be thought, and how children express their multimodal literacy in a process of producing their own digital content in a preschool education context.

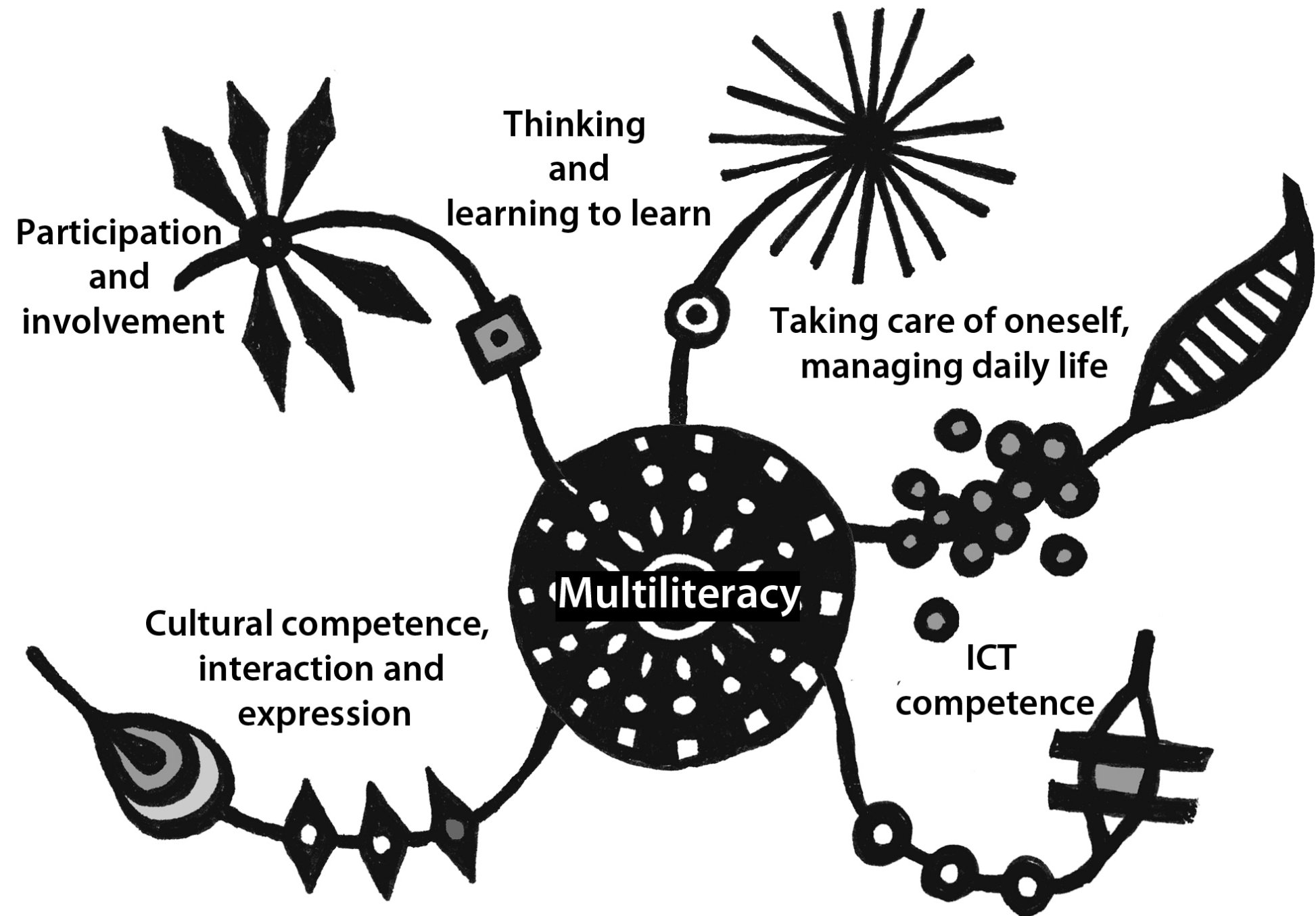
Keywords: multimodal literacy, pre-school, digital technology, mobile learning, Keen Ears

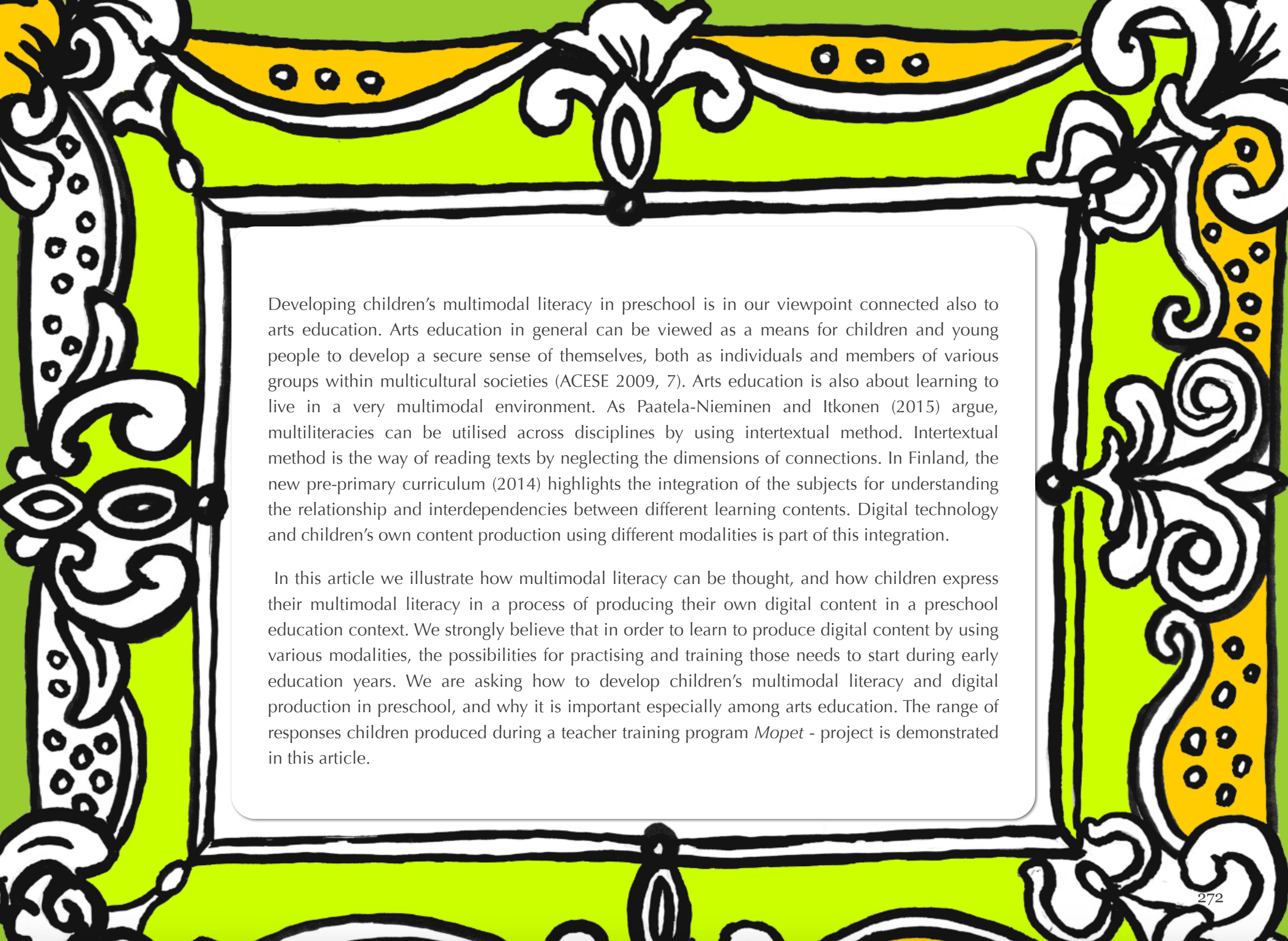


In digital texts meanings are typically constructed and interpreted through various combinations of images, texts, symbols, icons, movement, and sound. Young children are immersed by these texts in their everyday practises. Children have gradually also become digital content producers, giving them their own voice in digital cultures. In this article we demonstrate how children produce digital content in preschool from the basis of pedagogical material created for developing multimodal literacy ('Activity Cards for Keen Ears', Sintonen & Erfving 2016). The pedagogical material was used during a teacher training course *Mopet*. *Mopet* is teachers' continuing education project funded by National Board of Education. Project description is performed in ThingLink, please see <http://bit.ly/mopet16>. *Mopet*'s target is to develop new pedagogical approaches towards multimodal literacy taught in preschool and kindergarten. Participants were asked to use the given material (Activity Cards for Keen Ears) in their own preschool groups, and the data for this article is based on that.

Multimodal literacy refers to different ways of content representation and meaning-making that occurs at many levels through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimodal texts and multimodal communication (Jewitt & Kress 2003). It may include listening, talking and dramatizing as well as the writing, designing and producing of such texts (Walsh 2009). In the new Finnish National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (EOPS 2014), multimodal texts and literacies are included in the idea of multidisciplinary competence areas: The preschool curriculum describes six multidisciplinary modules which epitomise the aims of education and reflect the competences needed in all spheres of life.

Figure 1. The Finnish national core curriculum for pre-primary education (EOPS 2014) describes six multidisciplinary modules. In this article multiliteracy (and more closely multimodal literacy) is seen as a focus.





Developing children's multimodal literacy in preschool is in our viewpoint connected also to arts education. Arts education in general can be viewed as a means for children and young people to develop a secure sense of themselves, both as individuals and members of various groups within multicultural societies (ACESE 2009, 7). Arts education is also about learning to live in a very multimodal environment. As Paatela-Nieminen and Itkonen (2015) argue, multiliteracies can be utilised across disciplines by using intertextual method. Intertextual method is the way of reading texts by neglecting the dimensions of connections. In Finland, the new pre-primary curriculum (2014) highlights the integration of the subjects for understanding the relationship and interdependencies between different learning contents. Digital technology and children's own content production using different modalities is part of this integration.

In this article we illustrate how multimodal literacy can be thought, and how children express their multimodal literacy in a process of producing their own digital content in a preschool education context. We strongly believe that in order to learn to produce digital content by using various modalities, the possibilities for practising and training those needs to start during early education years. We are asking how to develop children's multimodal literacy and digital production in preschool, and why it is important especially among arts education. The range of responses children produced during a teacher training program *Mopet* - project is demonstrated in this article.



Researchers are just beginning to learn how children interact with digital devices as meaning-making tools and the influence they have on how children develop and learn literacy skills. At the same time, the re-conceptualizing of pedagogy towards more participatory methods has recently been adopted as part of Finnish early childhood and pre-primary education (see Venninen, Leinonen, Lipponen & Ojala, 2012). Participatory learning methods mean for example that children plan, implement and evaluate their own learning in social interaction together with others and educators. Also, literacy can be seen not so much as a skill, but as a social practice; digital (media) literacy has become socio-cultural in nature (e.g., Burn & Durran, 2007; Kupiainen & Sintonen, 2010).

The earlier research (Leinonen & Sintonen 2014) concerning preschoolers' digital production, indicated that children express strong ownership of their own media creations. Children created meaning socially. Digital devices and technology were not the focus in action, but they provided an opportunity to document and share material. Children used this opportunity willingly.

The pedagogical material called the *Activity Cards for Keen Ears* (Sintonen & Erfving 2016) were used in several preschool and kindergarten groups. The pedagogical goal of the activity cards is to spark interest, curiosity and sensitivity towards sounds and images. The tasks encourage in a playful way to observe, think, imagine, see, and above all to listen. Cards are available online (as pdf) and during this project preschool teachers were encouraged to use them digitally in various ways (pictures 1-5). Affording the pedagogical material for teachers was also the way to model the idea of multiliteracy, especially multimodal literacy, for them. Multimodal literacy is a new concept for Finnish teachers, although it is mentioned in the new curriculum. As it states in the new Finnish National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (EOPS 2014), multimodal texts and literacies are included in the idea of multidisciplinary competence areas. Teachers are still hesitating, partly because of a lack of pedagogical material.



Picture 1. In the Mopet -project teachers were encouraged to learn multimodal digital production together with children.

Picture 2. Digital tools and mobile devices are easy for children to use and produce their own creative ideas (Keen Ears sounds) for others.





Picture 3. One card asks children to ‘draw a picture of a thing that makes an annoying sound’. In this case preschoolers were documenting things with annoying sounds by their mobile devices.

Picture 4. Digitally produced visual Keen Ears representations by preschoolers (a. Invent and draw a machine that makes a popping sound, b. Draw what makes this kind of sound, c. What sounds do these creatures make, d. What sounds can you hear in this picture?).



Picture 5. *“Hey, we did this!”*

The shared viewing moment enables preschoolers to reflect various interpretations and talk about what others has learned and done.



However, in this case the Keen Ears pedagogical material creates the starting point for children's own thinking and ideas.

It has been designed to be “open” for any interpretation children produce, and includes no right answers which highlights the variation of the meaning-making and interpretations. Adapting open material to teaching requires openness from the teachers as well, hence their task is to generate possibilities or children's ideas to flourish and come into being (pedagogical sensitivity). The key idea is not to limit children's production to one modality, but allow them to create and produce their ideas with a suitable form or combination of modalities including the choices they make concerning the digital tools.



Following videos are combined by pre-school teachers during the Mopet-project (Videos 1-4). Teachers were asked to record the Keen Ears learning situations in pre-school groups and report those in an online video. Videos demonstrate the various ways of using the activity cards for inspiring children to produce digital content.

Video 1. <https://youtu.be/yyECDmb04ss>

1:32 a child is creating an acoustic sound and an other child is drawing it digitally.

Video 2. <http://youtu.be/RJRuAk5MxRs>

Children producing sounds from the image.

Video 3. <http://youtu.be/PM2uQ8pSi94>

Children are co-creating a story.

Video 4. <http://youtu.be/aY5Twpk7FKI>

2:40 producing sounds from the image.

Multimodal literacy can offer a perspective and framework into preschool literacy practises in a digital era.

In this article we have demonstrated the potential of digital production for preschool multimodal literacy learning. As it states in the new Finnish national core curriculum for pre-primary education (EOPS 2014, 18), learning multiliteracy creates basis for all the learning and studying. This is also part of the ongoing education digitalization process in Finland: According to the latest report (VN 2016), 75% of the Finnish teachers would like to use more digital content and devices in their teaching.

Digital multimodal production is a creative, communicative activity. In preschool education, equal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills and knowledge that will prepare children for digital participation should be guaranteed, and young children need to confront as potential content creators. The future digital landscape of these children will be filled with multimodal communicative acts on many levels.

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