

Broadening the notions of early literacy

...” when we reduce the idea of learning to read and write to memorization and copying letters, the sense of power and expansiveness that comes from reading and writing eludes children who are only taught through prescribed, out of context literacy activities. In contrast, children who are surrounded with meaningful print and stories can’t wait to unlock the secrets of this powerful form of human communication” Curtis and Carter, 2000, p. 80.

Recently the term “early literacy” has been gaining a prominent position on the political agenda. While it is positive that learning in the early years is finally getting the attention it deserves, scholars and professionals in the early childhood field have been increasingly concerned that the definition of early literacy has been reduced to the mechanical aspect of learning how to decode and encode written language (Neuman & Roskos, 2005; Comber & Nicholas, 2004). This narrow view of literacy sprung out of a socio-cultural and political ambience saturated in the ‘school readiness’ discourse, and is too often accompanied with the pressure to teach children to read and write as early as possible. This reductionist view of early literacy fits well with an approach to learning that views teaching as a mere transmission of knowledge and learners as empty vessels; where all children are taught the same thing on an inflexible schedule in a format of one-size-fits-all (Cooper & Jones, 2005). Simplifying the scope of early literacy conveniently allows for controlling learning by means of standardized tests and measurable outcomes. Indeed “Internationally, early childhood teachers are being pressed to deliver better literacy outcomes for young children” (Comber & Nicholas, 2004, p.44).

Unfortunately, a narrow definition of early literacy results not only in limitation to literacy instruction, but most importantly, as the quote above suggests, it inevitably leads to a limited and narrow view of literacy and learning by young children. It is ironic that early literacy - which was a term originally coined to reflect young children’s intuitive capacities to learn and develop an understanding of the complex conceptual foundation for literacy learning without being formally taught - is now equated with the acquisition of basic literacy skills.

This article sets out to problematize and challenge the narrow view of early literacy. It is suggested that by adopting a comprehensive view of early literacy children would be recognized not only as decipherers of the code of printing, but also as thinkers, theory builders, and meaning-makers; who are fully capable of unraveling the complexity and wonders of literacy. Within a broad perspective of literacy, children, educators, and parents become active participants in a collective construction of a wide range of literacy knowledge.

The changing notions of literacy

The term literacy means different things to different people, and it has historically meant different things at different times. Literacy generally implied an interaction with print, and traditional theories in educational thought viewed literacy learning primarily as an application of cognitive and information processes skills. In the early days of schooling it was assumed that learning to read and write came about by means of direct teaching of the alphabetical system and sound-letter relations (decoding and encoding of written text). It was also assumed that literacy learning begins when children arrive at school. In recent years, however, theorists, scholars, researchers, and educators have broadened the term literacy and the processes of literacy learning in a number of ways as described below.

Learning as a process of meaning-making

Literacy has always enjoyed intimate relationships with learning theories and schooling. This is not surprising, since language is a symbol system we use to mediate reality and to understand and explain our world and our experiences. To fully understand the theoretical changes that allowed the broadening of the concept of literacy, it is crucial to link literacy learning to a learning theory known as Constructivism (based on theories by Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner). Constructivism created the stage for the shift in thinking about literacy learning. As opposed to non-constructivist approaches to learning that focus on transferring knowledge to learners, Constructivism describes learning as a dynamic process of constructing knowledge, not merely obtaining it. Constructivism positions the **learner as an active seeker of knowledge and meaning**. Learning, therefore, involves more than memorization of facts or the acquisition of certain skills, it includes the use of higher level thinking skills, such as making connections, comparing, decision-making, and problem-solving. Constructivists view learning as a lifelong process that begins at birth.

Children as meaning makers

“Literacy is not handed down to children but they uniquely construct and refine their literacy through active interpretation and purposeful sense making” - Whitmore, et al., 2004, p. 294.

Researchers of language development and early literacy who view literacy learning as a meaning-making construction, rather than learning of letter–sound relation, have demonstrated that literacy learning begins long before formal instruction begins in school (Holdaway, 1979; Harste, et al., 1984; Wells 1986; Clay, 1991). Because children are meaning-makers from birth, they are internally motivated to construct knowledge in order to explain their experiences. Children actively use symbolic and cultural resources to both emulate and create their worlds. They use symbol systems for communicative

purposes as well as aesthetic expression. Children not only want to know, but they want to make meaning, they want to comprehend, that is why young children ask “why.” This motivation to know and understand will propel their quest to learn about literacy – what it is, what it does, and how it is used - prior to formal instruction. Later this motivation would drive them to learn through literacy.

Literacy as a social-cultural practice

A radical change to the conception of literacy occurred when scholars began to recognize that literacy and language learning was embedded in cultural and social context. A new defining of **literacy as a social practice** emerged (Halliday, 1975; Heath, 1984; Gee, 1992). This shift in thinking about literacy signaled a move away from defining literacy learning as merely a development of cognitive skills that occurs in individuals, to viewing literacy as related to real life situations within a socio-cultural context. From the social perspective, literacy activities are situated in, and derive their meanings from, a social context. The focus shifted from viewing language and literacy as a rigid set of rules to an emphasis on the **ways of using literacy in authentic events**. While cognition plays a part in literacy learning, it is seen as guided by social participation and social relationships. Instead of seeing literacy and language simply as an interaction with print, one needs to ask, who interacted with print, for what purpose, and what was the nature of the interaction (Purcell- Gates et al., 2004).

Early literacy and the culture of childhood

When literacy was conceptualized as a social and cultural practice new ways of ‘doing literacy’ emerged. In particular, observant educators and researchers who understood the potential of childhood as a unique culture have developed literacy environments that celebrate children’s imagination, creativity, and genuine motivation to express their ideas. In addition, understanding literacy as a social practice means that learning literacy occurs through social interactions and relationships with others. This implies that educators’ role in literacy learning widened, as classroom culture set by teachers influences how children conceptualize literacy. Teachers are not only bearers of knowledge, rather they become keen observers of learning and partners in the socially-driven process of literacy learning.

Children’s background knowledge and their entire repertoire of life experience, determines the way they interact with literacy (<http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9219/english.htm>). When educators take the responsibility and show the willingness to ‘know’ the children in their class (i.e. who they are, what interests them, what do they enjoy, what are their personal stories), and when they commit to tap into and to respect the cultural worlds of childhood, literacy becomes a medium through which children interpret their live experiences. For example, Vivian Paley (in many publications) weaves the literacy program in her kindergarten classroom around stories she carefully collected from her young students. Acting as a scribe, she gives value and meaning to

children's stories by inviting the children to listen and act out the stories of their peers. With her ability to interpret and reflect on the childhood culture that emerged in her class Paley is able to engage young children in deep level thinking about ethical issues related to identity and human relations through the use of language and literacy.

Anne Hass Dyson (2001) argues for the centrality of childhood culture to early literacy development. She refers to the importance of cultural symbols and cultural resources through which children construct their own literacies. Dyson maintains that, "As experienced composers in speech, play and drawing, children had 'the right stuff' for travel into spheres of school literacy. But to make this journey, they had to begin within social worlds, that allowed them some space for decision-making, or else their agency – their 'budding personalities' – would be hampered, not furthered, by this new medium" (Dyson, 2001, p.10).

Vygotsky theorized that play - an integral part of children's culture - is a symbol system relevant to young children's literacy development. According to Vygotsky, make-believe play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language. As a symbolic activity, pretend play allows children to develop and refine their capacities to use symbols, to represent experience, and to construct imaginary worlds, capacities they will draw on when they begin to write and read (www.mcrel.org/PDF/EarlyChildhoodEducation/4006TG_Scaffolding_Literacy_Through_Play.pdf).

By documenting and reflecting on children's behavior during make belief play Meyer (1994) reveals that as children take roles in pretend play literacy behaviors cross over into other fields of expression. Acting as doctors, reporters, parents, waiters, artists, and readers, children spontaneously write lists, make bank receipts, compose messages, explain what they created, and tell stories. "Classrooms that are socio-cultural systems, in which children use, try out, and manipulate language as they make sense and create meaning, particularly with access to and use of multiple sign systems and play, provide reasons for children to build on their current literacy knowledge and understanding" (Whitmore et al., 2004, p.311).

The notion of multiple literacies

It is now common to use the term literacy in its plural form –"literacies". Often this term is used to indicate a level of competence within a particular area (i.e. "computer literacy"). This new, broader understanding of literacy, or literacies, implies that practitioners of a certain kind of literacy have constructed knowledge beyond reading and writing, and that personal competencies may be expressed not only in words but also in performances (Voss, 1996).

The term "multiple literacies" also entails that many different literacies exist within different socio-cultural contexts and domains. In a well-known ethnographic study, Heath (1983) documented how children from three different cultural milieus learned to

use language and literacy in unique and diverse ways. She later demonstrated how the uses of language established in homes affected children's integration into academic life. Heath studies pushed researchers and teachers to think what kind of literacy was valued in schools.

Merging home and school through multiple literacies

“If we want to engage children in literacy and to have them value it, differences should become the text that teachers weave between the culture of the home and the culture of the school” (McGill-Franzen, 1993, p.181).

New concepts, such as multiple literacies, and recent theories that portray literacy as a social practice help us understand that children differ in the personal histories they bring to school, and that families differ in the ways children participate in the language and culture of their community. It is crucial to remember that **all families are participants in the social construction of literacy**, and that there are complex relationships between culture and literacy. McGill-Franzen (1993) suggests that such diversity among ‘ways of knowing’ should be a resource for schools and not an obstacle to literacy instruction. Similarly, Comber & Nicholas (2004) claim that, “When teachers design curriculum and pedagogies that are permeable and allow children to make use of knowledge acquired at home children’s literacy development is enhanced” (p.60).

In a research into the lives of working class Mexican-American, Luis Moll (1994) revealed that many families had abundant knowledge (what Moll called: “Funds of knowledge”) that the schools did not know about (i.e. knowledge about agriculture and mining). Moll argued that schools make some children’s knowledge invisible. Moll developed a new vision for school literacy development based on questions, such as how do our teachers tap into each student's "funds of knowledge"? and how does our school encourage students to articulate their dreams and aspirations and link them to their learning?

Literacy event as a transactional process

Another dimension of the expansion of the meaning of literacy is related to transactional theory. Transactionalists view literacy event as a process through which both the text and the reader/authors are changed. Readers and authors engage in bringing personal knowledge and understanding to the text while learning and interpreting (making meaning, or making sense) the text at the same time. Within this transactional framework, literacy learning is shaped by the emergence of two opposing forces - invention and convention. As participants transact with texts “a dynamic tension exists between their personal construction of literacy knowledge (invention) and society’s construction of agreed upon social uses of literacy (conventions)” (Whitmore, et al., 2004, p.293). Because language and literacy are dynamic, ever-changing processes,

the tension between invention and convention necessitates a life-long personal and social learning.

Children as inventors

Transactional theory allows us to appreciate the inventive forces that young children bring into their learning when they interact with literacy. In their attempt to make meaning young children become inventors. They invent words, meanings, spelling, and grammatical formations. Children's thoughts processes and inventions about literacy are representations of their developing theories of the world, **NOT** imperfect representations of adult concepts. To become active readers and writers, students need to be positioned as active thinkers in relation to texts (Comber & Nichols, 2004, p.56).

Over the past 20 years the concept of "emergent literacy" has gained a prominent role in educators' perception about young children and literacy development. Ethnographic studies revealed that young children construct concepts about the functions of symbols and print based on informal experiences facilitated by interactions with others (Harste, et al., 1984). Yet, emergent literacy is not a process that needs to stop when children come to school, rather, it is crucial that schools would create environments that broaden children's literacy experiences and by doing so expand children's perception about literacy – expend their emergent literacy. Emergent literacy and conventional literacy are not discrete stages but a continuum of learning that varies with the complexity of the literacy event.

Multimodal representations of literacy

Since cultural, technological, economic, and social changes continuously affect and change literate practices, particularly in the 'information age' (i.e. instant messaging), a growing number of researchers and educators are calling for a multimodal perspective of literacy. According to Kress (2003) and others, symbol systems, such as art, music, drama, and photography, should be recognized as forms of literacy. "This broader definition of literacy goes beyond language symbols to that of multiple symbols" (Kendrick and McKay, 2004).

Multiple languages of children

"We must counter the pressure to narrowly define learning to read and write and give children significant recognition for their exploration in all modes of representation"- Curtis & Carter, 2000, p.81.

Children are not only meaning-makers, they are also keen to convey meaning and express their ideas and theories. However, young children use meaning-making systems that are not necessarily expressed as words. Children naturally move between art, music, movement, mathematics, construction, drama, and language as ways to

think about the world, express ideas, explain thoughts, and communicate with others (Kendrick and McKay, 2004). This insight is a precursor to learning literacy. While young children develop a conceptual understanding of literacy their ability to use literacy in a conventional way is both limited and limiting. Kendrick and McKay (2004) argue that, "There is an urgent need for including in school curricula multimodal representations which allow for the expression of much fuller range of human emotions and experience, and which acknowledges the limits of language" (p.111). In their study Kendrick and McKay (2004) demonstrated how children successfully used drawing as a medium to express their knowledge and theories about the meanings of literacy.

Why should we broaden our conception of early literacy?

The simple and direct response to this question is – because we owe it to our children. A narrow view of literacy learning inevitably leads to a limited view of children. If we see children as resourceful, intelligent seekers of knowledge and meaning, then we understand that it is their right to be participants in an educational environment that embraces complexity. An environment that invites them to think, to tell their personal stories, to use diverse modes of representation, and to socially engage in "***unlocking the secrets of this powerful form of human communication.***"

In educational environments where literacy becomes a medium through which knowledge is constructed – where literacy is serving thinking and communication - sets of language rules and technical aspects of literacy learning are not viewed as the goals of literacy learning or as means to control learning, rather they function as support systems. They are utilized to enable children to exercise their right to make meaning of their experiences, to discover who they are, and to share their understanding of it.

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