What Do We Mean by Literacy? Implications for Literacy Education

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ABSTRACT: Literacy education has been of continuous interest to educators and researchers for decades. This paper is concerned with a critical examination of two interrelated aspects of literacy education: (a) the meaning of literacy and (b) its implications for literacy education. It begins with a discussion of the meaning of literacy by reviewing the research literature. It shows that literacy is not singular but multiple and is closely tied to social practices. Then the discussion switches to how literacy as multiple social practices relates to literacy education. This paper ends with a call for a topsy-turvy look at the purpose of literacy education and with a challenge to literacy educators to reflect on their practices accordingly.

RESUME: Depuis des décennies, les enseignants et chercheurs se sont toujours penchés sur les programmes d'alphabétisation. Dans cet article, on analyse rigoureusement deux questions liées aux programmes d'alphabétisation: (a) le sens du mot 'Alphabétisation' (b) la portée des programmes d'alphabétisation. Par le biais d'une recherche littéraire, le sens du mot «Alphabétisation» commence à traiter le sujet; preuve que l'alphabétisation n'est pas une entité singulière mais qu'elle revêt des caractéristiques multiples et est étroitement liée aux pratiques sociales. Le sujet s'oriente ensuite sur la façon dont l'alphabétisation, comme pratiques multiples, établit un rapport avec les programmes d'alphabétisation. En fin d'article, on doit réfléchir sur le rôle de l'alphabétisation d'une manière inverse et les enseignants sont amenés à repenser leurs pratiques.

Introduction

My grandmother was born in a time when education was a luxury limited only to a few affluent elites. In fact, education at that time was not considered important as there was a great demand for labor on the farms, in the rice fields and orchards, and in the factories. In addition, household chores usually fell upon children when adults had to work

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outside. Grandma had to gather firewood, cook for the family, and babysit her younger siblings when she was in her teens. Without any formal education, she could hardly read or write. She could only recognize a few very commonly used words, including her name. Writing was even more difficult for her. She could write her last name, but had a hard time writing her first name as it had more strokes. When asked to write her name, she usually wrote her last name, but drew a peach to stand for her first name as it meant peach. Despite her limited ability to read and write, Grandma was a wonderful story-teller and singer. Most of her stories and songs came from her life experiences and what she had heard and memorized. One of the things I enjoyed most as a child was listening to her stories. Now I still share with my five-year-old daughter some of the stories I heard from my grandma.

Grandma is an example of those conventionally considered "illiterate" due to their inability to decode written texts regardless of the fact that they may be well versed in other forms of communication such as speaking and singing. Consequently, whether one is literate or not depends mainly on how literacy is defined. This paper attempts to explore issues on literacy by addressing two specific questions: (a) what do we mean by literacy and (b) what does it imply for literacy education?

What Do We Mean by Literacy?

Written Literacy versus Oral Literacy

Jack Goody and Ian Watt are among the first scholars and researchers who were interested in the definition and evolution of literacy and their impact on human society. In their classic essay titled "The Consequences of Literacy," (1963) Goody and Watt argued that myth or prehistory differs from history in that the former is characteristic of preliterate societies where knowledge is transmitted orally while the latter is based on written accounts that are available for verification. One of the things that come to the front in their argument is the distinction between the oral (or the non-literate) and the written (or the literate). Specifically, literacy is endowed with the attribute of defining a certain epoch, and written literacy is considered superior to oral literacy. Also implied in their argument is that the cognitive and social development of a society is the consequence of, or dependent upon, the cumulative effects of literacy used in the society. A civilized society is often characterized by its use of written literacy while a pre-civilized society relies on orality.

Goody and Watt's view on literacy, not surprisingly, provoked much controversy and criticism. One of the most powerful counter-arguments was made by Ruth Finnegan (1988), who conducted an ethnographic study of the Limba, a tribal society located in the north of the West African nation of Sierra Leone. The Limba are by and large non-literate (i.e., not able to read and write) and live in contact with many neighboring peoples who speak different languages. Therefore, many Limba "are often bilingual, or at least able to understand a considerable amount of the neighboring language or languages" (Finnegan, 1988, p. 46). Finnegan showed that the Limba are aware of, and able to discuss, the differences among dialects of Limba and other neighboring languages as well. The Limba can also do abstract thinking through their language and understand that their language unites them as a people and distinguishes themselves from others. Finnegan's ethnographic evidence, consequently, "demonstrates the dangers of employing literacy as a diagnostic category for making generalizations about types of societies or, more perniciously, using it to rank them in some evolutionary schema" (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 49).

In Finnegan's work to dismantle the distinction between the oral and the written, she also analyzed oral poetry (unwritten poetry) and the written texts. Finnegan (1978) argued:

> Most oral poetry in this century is likely to be produced by people who have at least some contact, however indirect, with the wider world in general – and with writing and its products in particular. The result is a continual and fruitful interplay between oral and written forms of literary expression. (p. 2)

Finnegan's work has shown that it is untenable to use the written and the oral as mutually exclusive categories in distinguishing literate from non-literate societies. Similarly, Bauman (1996) and Herzfeld (1996) have found that mixed forms of the oral and the written exist in literary works in societies throughout the world. Therefore, the distinction between written and oral literacy is not clear-cut, and there is a continual interplay between them.

Literacy as Multiple Social Practices

Shirley Brice Heath also took issue with the argument implied in Goody and Watt's view that one form of literacy – written literacy – is superior to another – oral literacy. In *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Heath, 1983), she studied three communities in a city of the southeastern United States: a) Roadville, a

primarily white working-class community of families steeped for generations in the life of textile mills; b) Trackton, an African-American working-class community whose older generations grew up farming the land, but whose existent members work in the mills; and c) Townspeople, a composite portrait of middle-class town residents of both ethnicities. In tracing the children's language development, Heath showed the deep cultural differences between Roadville and Trackton, whose ways with words differed strikingly from each other as they did from the pattern of the townspeople, the mainstream blacks and whites who held power in the schools and workplaces of the region. Employing the combined skills of ethnographer, social historian, and teacher, Heath raised fundamental questions about the nature of language development, the effects of literacy on oral language habits, and the sources of communication problems in schools and workplaces. For example, the teachers in Heath's study reported that students from Trackton did not or could not respond appropriately to even the simplest questions or instructions. Heath found that children in Trackton learned very early that it was not appropriate to report on the behavior of their intimates to strangers. Therefore, the teachers were likely to receive no answer if they asked a child anything related to the child's family, such as how many brothers and sisters he or she had. With little knowledge of the child's cultural influence on his or her school behavior, the child was often misjudged as being slow or at-risk. Heath's work teaches us that there is no universality to literacy; there are many literacies such as home literacy, school literacy, work literacy, and so forth. Prioritizing one type of literacy against another is ignoring the impact social and cultural aspects have on literacy development.

In parallel, Brian Street (1984, 1993, 1995) contends that the meaning of literacy depends on the socio-cultural contexts in which it is imbedded. Street (1984) studied the fruit-growing villages, especially Cheshmeh, located around Mashad in north east Iran. The villagers in Cheshmeh attended a Koranic religious school and learned the Koran, which is considered to be "the Word of God" and of fixity in nature (Street, 1984, p. 135). Yet the villagers in Cheshmeh adapted the literacy they learned from the religious school to commercial purposes to help them conduct business with people in the surrounding villages. Consequently, Street argued that literacy is multiple and subject to individual interpretations regardless of the fact that it may be first acquired in a textually invariant context.

What we can learn from Street's insights is that literacy is not singular and is closely tied to social practices. The notion of multiple literacies implies that different cultural groups have different ways of making meaning. There are terms or concepts unique in a culture that are difficult for people in another culture to grasp. For example, the term or concept "Wal-Mart" (an American corporation that runs a chain of large discount department stores and warehouse stores) is so familiar to people in the United States that it has become part of their lives. Implied in "Wal-Mart" are social practices (i.e., shopping for general merchandise and groceries in a large retailing store usually on the weekends). Yet in a country where there are no such huge retail stores, it is a term or concept which is hard to understand, and there is no direct translation for it. Therefore, it is the social practices that keep the literary terms, such as Wal-Mart, in place and make them meaningful. And to change the literary meanings, the corresponding social practices have to change, too.

The ethnographic approaches to literacy taken by Finnegan, Heath, and Street have provided alternative ways of understanding literacy to Goody and Watt's oral/written dichotomy. They show that it is not literacy itself but literate practices situated in social contexts that play a determining role in deciding whether one is literate or not. One is considered literate when his or her literate practices are aligned with those defined to be literate. Yet Finnegan, Heath, and Street argue that there are multiple literacies and literate practices. For example, while reading texts of certain genres and doing well on standardized tests is considered one type of literacy, learning how to fix a car by reading the driver's manual is another type that should be valued as well.

Implications for Literacy Education

The ethnographic approaches to literacy have not only broadened our view on the meaning of literacy, but they have also had a tremendous impact on what we think about literacy education. As a result, an important question we need to ask is: "What does literacy as multiple social practices imply for literacy education?" In what follows, I will explore this question from various angles.

Teaching More than Skills

Traditional literacy education is concerned with the mastery of literacy skills such as reading and writing. In light of the fact that reading and

writing, especially reading, are tested frequently in the schools, it is no wonder that they become the focus of literacy education. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) in the United States, for example, "states are required to set clear and high standards for what students in each grade should know in core academic subjects, and they are required to measure each student's progress toward those standards" (Leckrone & Griffith, 2006, p. 53). The core academic subjects that are measured refer to English and Mathematics, and reading and writing are the two major skills tested for the English subject. States have to develop target achievement goals each year that define Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) while students are required to take standardized tests and achieve AYP. The disciplinary consequences for schools that fail to reach AYP contain "a series of state-driven reforms that include state takeovers, state intervention in poorly performing schools, options for families in schools not making adequate yearly progress to transfer to another school, and the implementation of supplemental educational services" (Wong & Sunderman, 2007, p. 338).

Consequently, the concept of literacy as multiple social practices poses a great challenge to the current American educational system (with its mandate and high-stakes testing) where literacy is regarded and taught mainly as testable skills. Skill-based literacy education ignores the fact that there are multiple literacies and that each type of literacy is associated with a particular set of social practices. Focusing only on skills, at best, covers a limited part of literacy education and is likely to advantage some students, whose home literacy practices, for example, are similar to school literacy practices, while marginalizing others. In addition, teaching literacy as decontextualized skills, on the one hand, deprives literacy of its social context which gives birth to its meaning and, on the other hand, makes literacy education irrelevant to students' social and cultural lives.

Luke (1998) argues that the question for literacy educators "should not be: What is the best way of teaching reading and writing?" because all literacy-based programs (such as phonics, literature-based, genre-based programs) work to one degree or another (p. 306). In other words, different literacy skills can be taught or learned through programs of different natures, yet they are skill-oriented and thus limited. Luke goes on to propose that the question for literacy educators should be a normative social and cultural one:

> It is about how and to what ends we can reshape students' reading and writing practices – and their schemas for transgressive and

> progressive work with cultural texts – in communities facing new and old technologies, media, and modes of expressions, emergent hybrid cultures and institutions, and forms of cultural identities and life pathways for which we have few precedents. It is about the kinds of literate cultures students are likely to encounter and how we would have them design and redesign those cultures and their texts. (p. 306)

Luke emphasizes the importance of shifting from the paradigm of looking for best strategies of teaching literacy skills to that of helping students investigate and shape and reshape their literate practices in response to ever-changing social and cultural practices. Luke's view reminds us again that literacy education is much broader than skill-based instruction.

Accommodating Multiple Social Practices

Literacy as multiple social practices also suggests that all literacies, along with their social practices, should be understood and respected. Harste (2003) proposes that we as literacy educators should know what kinds of social practices are in place in our classroom and, as a result, how literacy is being defined. In addition, we need to understand who benefits from this definition of literacy and who is marginalized. To make our classrooms a place where students feel their home literacies are honored, we should also reflect on what social practices we have to put in place to make the everyday literacies that students bring with them to school legitimate. The goal is to foster a learning environment where students are not alienated from the school literacies and their corresponding social practices. For example, Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds us that "African American learners often are treated as if they are corruptions of White culture, participating in an oppositional, counter-productive culture" (Ogbu, cited in Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 206). As a result, their language (e.g., Ebonics), prior knowledge, and values are looked upon as deviant and worthless in the school setting. In fact, some teachers even presume that their job is to "rid African-American students of any vestiges of their own culture" while, to the contrary, the African-American culture should be considered distinct and valued as an asset in the school curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 206).

To create a classroom that encourages multiple literacies, Van Sluys (2005) suggests that we should include texts that: a) reflect linguistic and cultural diversity; b) represent a variety of genres, purposes, and

authorial perspectives; and c) move beyond words and encourage many ways of knowing. Such texts will help students, according to Van Sluys (2005) "see themselves as active and valued participants and become more than readers of words" (pp. 69-70).

Reading Critically

Reading a variety of texts and examining them from multiple viewpoints are intertwined inevitably with reading critically. Literacy education should begin with the assumption that all social practices should be respected as possible vehicles for learning. However, Nieto (2010) warns us that because we are "concerned with equity and social justice, and because the basic values of different groups are often diametrically opposed, conflict is bound to occur" (p. 257). Therefore, teaching literacy as multiple social practices should be based on the understanding that no social practices are fixed or unchangeable and thus they are subject to critique. Passively accepting the status quo of any set of social practices is simply perpetuating the ideologies embedded in those practices. Yet substituting one myth for another without critique contradicts the fact that no literacy, along with its social practices, is superior to any other. Therefore, while assuming an inclusive attitude toward a different culture is important, accepting as legitimate, for example, the view in the culture that women should not be as well educated as men is certainly unreasonable.

In addition, to include multiple social practices in literacy education is not to romanticize and embrace them blindly, but to acknowledge that differences exist and should be examined critically. This is where critical literacy comes into play. Aligned with Paulo Freire's (1984) critical pedagogy, critical literacy practices are defined by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2008) as follows:

> They encourage students to use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice. (p. 3)

Critical literacy practices help literacy learners disrupt the norms and power relationships embedded in social practices, problematize them, and examine them from multiple perspectives. The purpose is to identify "social practices that keep dominant ways of understanding the world and unequal power relationships in place" (Lewison, et al., 2008, p. 3). Therefore, though multiple social practices are desirable, they should be

subject to critique. And critical literacy keeps our literacy classroom from turning into the "Tower of Babel."

Taking Action

Literacy as multiple social practices is also action-orientated. This is in contrast to the skill-based literacy instruction. One common myth about literacy education that teachers have to unlearn is that "knowledge is unrelated to action. ... Knowledge, in this case, is about more than understanding; it is also about the possibilities of self-determination, individual autonomy, and social agency" (Giroux & Giroux, 2004, p. 84). Actually, there are two important concepts – literacy and social practices, or theory and practice, to paraphrase them loosely – juxtaposed in the phrase *literacy as multiple social practices*. As discussed previously, literacy and social practices are closely interrelated. As literacy is influenced by our social practices, so are our social practices shaped by literacy. Consequently, literacy education should not stay at the theoretical level but extends to make an impact on our social practices, especially those that keep unequal power relationships in place. Action is inseparable from literacy education and is actually what makes it empowering. Literacy learners are empowered when what they learn in school is related to, and can be used to change, their daily lives.

Dana Hubbard (2008), a fifth grade student teacher, is a good example of how a literacy educator can help students put theory into practice. Dana was informed by his supervising teacher that the district required fifth graders to study the legislative process and how laws are made. And it would be his responsibility to teach the unit. Instead of relying solely on the explanation of the textbook, which was unfortunately confusing and sleep-inducing, Dana took his students on a field trip to the Indiana Statehouse. On their way back, Dana noticed his students' conversation about the laws they would make if they were kings. He then told his students that they indeed could have an impact on the legislative process. Dana encouraged them to write to the senator letters about their concern with issues in their community such as gun shooting, gambling, and unemployment. Stereotypically labeled as reluctant learners in an urban school, Dana's students, through their action, transformed themselves into writers who purposefully used literacy in an attempt to change their status quo. Dana's work

demonstrated how literacy can be used to empower the marginalized through action taken by the teacher as well as the students.

Conclusion

The link between literacy and success is often taken for granted and is used as a reason to justify what we are doing in literacy education, including imposing dominant values and ideologies on learners as if they were neutral and desirable. While literacy is certainly important and should be taught and learned, teaching it uncritically as neutral skills ignores the fact that literacy is multiple and associated with social practices. Teaching literacy as multiple social practices acknowledges the fact that literacy is intertwined inextricably with social practices. Examining it critically also helps us identify unequal power relationships embedded in our social practices. Most importantly, literacy is action-based and life-changing as it can be used to empower the marginalized. As a result, literacy education is not only a pedagogical issue but an ontological one. Harste (2003) argues that the real question each literacy educator and/or learner should ask is: "What kind of lives do we want to live and what kind of people do we want to be?" For myself, I want to be a critically literate being who knows how literacy works and can use it to make meaning and make the world a more democratic and equitable place. What about you?

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