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Principles for Literacy Education in a World of Diverse Literacy Practices

DANIELS, Karen <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6604-1353> and HELKS, Marie

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Chapter 1. Principles for Literacy Education in a World of Diverse Literacy Practices

Karen Daniels

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6604-1353

Marie Helks

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7360-3425

Introduction

Young children and school-aged pupils' journey towards confident and creative engagement with ways of being and doing literacy is a fascinating one. It is one of ongoing interest and concern to teachers, parents, researchers, policy makers and essentially, to children themselves. The chapters in this volume offer detailed reflective accounts of what diverse literacy practices in classrooms can be, and how these can be understood. Rather than providing a 'guide' on 'how to' teach English, we present a series of perspectives on literacy that are illustrative of the rich and complex (and often surprising) relationships between teachers and pupils that play out as children encounter literacies in classrooms.

Doing literacy and being a teacher of literacy is a complex endeavour that calls for an understanding of what literacy is, how it is constantly changing, and how it is shaped by our own and others' home, community, and life experiences. Advances in digital technology have changed the way we understand and do literacy and these changes have important implications for understanding the kinds of literacy practices children bring to the classroom. In addition, experiences of literacies outside the classroom will shape the ways in which children access literacy in school. We see this as inevitable change and embrace it by inviting the reader to reflect on those literacy practices commonly associated with schooling and education (for example Helks and Myers' chapter on teaching grammar, Chapter 7and Wigfull's chapter on teaching writing, Chapter 6), but also to consider a bigger picture and engage with those literacy practices children experience outside school and the ways in which these intersect with literacies in classrooms (see for example, Chapter 10, Monkhouse and Bailey's chapter on digital play). Although literacies in school look very different to some of the literacy practices that children encounter in their homes and communities, we see the distinction between those practices as one that is 'porous'. For this reason, we refer to young people in this book, that is those that we work with as educators and researchers, as 'children' throughout, rather than pupils. While children can be seen as 'in role' as pupils in classroom contexts, our decision to use the term children is motivated by our aim of avoiding distinctions between children's literate lives in schools and the literate lives of their home and community contexts.

Throughout the chapters authors share various ways in which they have personally investigated children's literacy practices in community and classroom settings, and the ways that these have shaped the authors' thinking about literacy. Some of the chapters are sole authored, while others are co-authored. Across the chapters you will read about the

combined perspectives of children, practising teachers, academics and researchers. We uphold that this is a good way to proceed as children, families, teachers and academics do literacy 'together'. It may be unhelpful, therefore, to see too strong a distinction between children's literacy practices, and the kind of practices and pedagogical approaches that adults use around children. Instead, we think about literacy as a phenomenon that takes place across people and within communities as we make meaning and share thinking and ideas together.

Our accounts are underpinned by theoretical perspectives about literacy, and you will see some names recurring – Brian Street, Shirley Brice-Heath, Ann Dyson and Gunther Kress's theorisation of literacy as a set of multimodal practices, where reading, writing and oral language takes place alongside other modes of multimodal communication. These are the theorists and pioneers that have inspired and guided us and who have shaped ways of thinking about literacy that are often very different to the standard understandings of 'schooled literacies' where writing, reading and technical accuracy more readily spring to mind. This is not to say these things are not important – but they are only part of the story of the human phenomenon of literacy.

The chapters include extracts of empirical data, from the authors' own research projects and from those who are studying similar topics. Our research is predominately qualitative in nature, as this allows us to look in depth at what is taking place in classrooms. We include the voices of children, teachers and researchers and this is central to our approach in this book. Ultimately, we invite you to examine the relationship between research, theory and pedagogical practice by presenting the following features: *Prompts for Critical Reflection, Spotlight on Research* and *Ideas for Classroom Practice*. We also include the feature *Case Study Focus* where chapter authors provide reflective examples of their classroom practice.

This introductory chapter introduces a view of literacy that is expansive - that is, it recognises the broad, all-encompassing, and ever-changing nature of literacy. Furthermore, it acknowledges how literacy impacts on our own lives and experiences and those of the children we teach. Individually, each chapter in this volume presents the authors' unique perspectives on literacy. We believe that this is an important stance to take, as it is our view that although we have some shared understandings of what counts of literacy, we experience and understand literacies differently. To begin examining shared understandings, we reflect on the question 'What is English' and why do we teach it?

What is English?

Very often when we think of English and English teaching, we think first of reading and writing – or literacy. We might also think about how oral language supports the reading and writing process. These are the most likely things to spring to mind when we think about literacy. We might also think about various 'components' of reading and writing, such as handwriting, spelling, comprehension, decoding, or more specific activities such as writing stories or news reports, reading poetry, or drama activities. These things are commonly associated with 'doing' English. But we might also ask the question about *why* we teach English, and which models we might follow. At first, this may seem obvious to answer, but it is worth reflecting on this question more deeply.

In a landmark report, Cox (1991) presented five views of English Teaching which he claimed reflected what was then 'current' thinking about why teach English as a subject. Goodwyn (1992, p4) suggested that within the English teaching profession, there are five distinct but overlapping views. These include:

1. A 'personal growth' view focuses on the child: it emphasises the relationship between language and learning in the individual child, and the role of literature in developing children's imaginative and aesthetic lives.
2. A 'cross curricular' view focuses on the school: it emphasises that all teachers have a responsibility to help children with the language demands of different subjects on the school curriculum.
3. An 'adult needs' view focuses on communication outside the school: it emphasises the responsibility of English teachers to prepare children for the language demands of adult life, including the workplace, in a fast-changing world.
4. A 'cultural heritage' view emphasises the responsibility of schools to lead children to an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in language.
5. A 'cultural analysis' view emphasises the role of English in heling children towards a critical understanding of the world and cultural environment in which they live. Children should know about the processes by which meanings are conveyed, and about the ways in which print and other media carry values.

Goodwyn (1992) critiqued these five views and raised the point that not all of them are compatible. This critique arguably will shift focus as general understandings of the nature of language and literacy shift over time. Certainly, an issue that seems pertinent in recent years is the question of who decides what is the 'finest' literature? This certainly seems at odds with a 'cultural analysis' view, where print can implicitly or explicitly convey the values of the author. In addition, thinking of English as preparation for later life of work seems instrumental, and perhaps synonymous with views of English that foregrounds the teaching of a set of discrete skills, which some see as contrasting starkly with ideas of expanding children's imaginative and aesthetic lives. Despite four decades having passed since the above five views were written by Cox, you might want to ask where these views are reflected in current thinking about teaching English, and what has changed. The recent focus on heritage texts in some English programmes, for example, reflects a policy re-focus (point 4 of Cox's views). The debate over literacy standards that has raged over the past three decades often seems to be spurred by the need to ensure the adult workforce has adequate literacy skills to contribute to wider society (point 3). English and its links across the Primary curriculum (point 2) is reflected in Monkhouse and Smith (Chapter 11) and Wigfull (Chapter 6)

In fact, what English is and why and how we should teach it has been hotly debated for decades and this is almost certain to continue. A very brief delve into Cox's five views brings to the fore some of the tensions that teachers, policy makers, academics and researchers experience when trying to make decisions about how best to research and teach English. These tensions can be challenging, however, when teaching English, we need to be aware of them and think critically about what we are teaching, why we are teaching it, and what will be its impact on children's literate lives.

Within the chapters in this book, you will see some of these models reflected in the kinds of practices that chapter authors recommend. Doxey and Doxey (Chapter 3), for example, reflect reading aloud as a strategy to nurture personal growth (point 1). Borland, Daniels and Hunt define a 'cultural analysis' (point 5) view of literacy, foregrounding the need for critical literacy, stressing its importance more than ever in a world where texts are multimodal and predominantly digitally mediated. Monkhouse and Smith's approaches to drama suggest amongst other things a commitment to personal growth (point 1) and the use of highly regarded literary texts.

As you read through each chapter of this book, you might reflect on the five views above, and ask if there are other links with the chapters and the five views of English presented by Cox. You might also ask yourself – what else? What is missing from the list above? If you were to define 'five views of English', what would they look like?

Principles for English teaching

As an introduction to the book, and in response to the above provocation on Cox's five views of English, we offer a set of principles about literacies that we have used to guide our own thinking as we have assembled the book chapters. Despite the chapters being authored by people with different views, experiences and areas of expertise, there are some clear commonalities in our thinking. We have termed these 'principles' as they act as a guide not only our thinking about an inclusive perspective on literacy pedagogy for contemporary classrooms, but importantly, they guide how we enact our roles as teachers, academics and researchers of literacy. Central to this is that children's diverse home, community, linguistic and cultural experiences and differences are recognised and respected. These principles are illustrated and explored in the chapters in this book:

- *Literacies are multiple, diverse, ideological and changing*
- *The kinds of literacies children encounter in school and home and community settings shapes what they think literacy is, who it is for, and what literacy is for*
- *Literacies are powerful – being literate has many benefits and literacy can exert power on individuals and groups*
- *Literacies are social and cultural practices; they are material and affective*

Principle 1: Literacies are multiple, diverse, ideological and changing

The first principle recognises that there is not one, fixed version of literacy, but instead there are *literacies.* In this book we will be thinking of literacy as a *social practice*, that is, that literacy happens across people and groups of people as they communicate meaningfully together. The kinds of practices, and ways of understanding and doing literacy, will vary significantly across time and place (Gutierrez, Bein, Selland and Peirce, 2011) as it is shaped by cultural, linguistic, social and economic factors (Street, 1995). Literacy practices are also shaped by the kinds of materials that people engage with, for example, you might compare how communication by letters amongst friends and relatives, popular at the beginning of the 20th Century, differs from the ways in which we might now communicate and experience relationships as a member of a WhatsApp group, now and again dropping in on a Facetime call. This is a very straightforward comparison when in fact, the ways in which technologies and other materials around us have shaped the ways in which we

communicate, is much more complex. This necessitates a focus on critical literacy of both print and digitally mediated, multimodal texts (See Borland, Daniels and Hunt, Chapter 8). You will notice throughout the chapters, the ways in which this complexity is seen through our interactions with children in classrooms and the ways in which the authors come to understand and make sense of children's participation in literacies.

A second point to note is that literacies are connected to communication and any act of communication is *ideological*, that is, it conveys either explicitly or implicitly the values and beliefs of the text producer. For these reasons, literacy practices are entrenched with power relationships about how and why literacy should be 'performed'. Furthermore, some ways of being and doing literacy are more valued or privileged and therefore 'more powerful' than others. The literacy practices associated with schools, such as those of teaching grammar, phonics, and reading of print-based texts, have a much higher status and power than, for example, the playground rhymes and chants that children enjoy, or the gaming activities children readily chat about and socialise around with friends. The status and power of schooled literacies arises not because these practices are inherently superior in any way, but because they are enshrined in policy and particular ways of thinking about literacy, how it can be taught, and how it is to be learned by children.

Due to the need to have a shared view on how to teach literacy, literacy is often presented in policy as a sequence of incremental skills for the individual child to learn. Brian Street (2003) referred to this as an 'autonomous' view of literacy, in that it fails to acknowledge the ideological nature of literacy, presenting it instead as a neutral set of skills to acquire. It is important to say here that mastering literacy skills is beneficial to children on their journey to becoming print literate. But as teachers, it is crucial to remember that what are often termed literacy skills are only a partial picture of what it takes and means to be literate in contemporary society. The purpose of this book is to share perspectives on an inclusive understanding of literacy in classrooms. This necessitates acknowledging that literacy is never neutral, but that any act of literacy is always ideologically driven and received.

Principle 2: The kinds of literacies children encounter in school shape what they think literacy is, what it is for, and who it is for.

For over four decades, cultural and linguistic differences between home and school environments have been cited as influential in children's success in the education system. Shirley Brice Heath (1983) for example, noted that certain types of language socialisation impacted positively or negatively on children's reading development on entry to school. Brice Heath's suggestion was that teachers should strive to understand and accommodate children's ways of being and doing literacy in the classroom, and to help them bridge their home and community experiences with the expectations and practices of school. Recent policy directions in England, however, often see diversity as an education crisis or problem, focusing attention on language deficit models of young children's communicative practices, and seeking 'remedies' to fill 'gaps'. In this book, we hope to share with you the richness of young children and pupils' repertoires for language and literacy, and encourage a respectful approach, taking the time to know and understand what children know and can do. In addition, we offer suggestions for practice and encourage critical reflection on pedagogical practice and its underpinning research and theory.

The above principle is central when thinking about an inclusive approach to literacy. Children enter school settings with a range of home and community experiences of literacy, and this difference no doubt continues throughout their school life. This in itself is not an issue- but is rather a reflection of the nature of literacy, that is, literacy practices- the ways in which we do and understand literacy will always vary across people and places. The kind of literacy children encounter in schools is a specialised form of 'schooled literacy', deemed as the official version of literacy, often defined in curriculum documents and statutory orders. Where difficulties can arise however, is where the 'official' version of literacy is seen as superior, and any other expression of being literate is seen as unimportant, inferior or sadly, even deficient. This issue is raised in several of the chapters in this book. Smith and Sanders (Chapter 4) discuss how too rigid a policy on standard English can disenfranchise children from minority ethnic backgrounds or certain socio-economic backgrounds, as well as create tensions for teachers. Avis and Hesmondhalgh (Chapter 5) remind us that supporting children's linguistic repertoires can be empowering by equipping children with the skills to express and develop their ideas and thinking. Daniels and Hussain (Chapter 2) present the case for a supportive and responsive approach when working with very young children that looks at what they can do through a variety of 'lenses' that gives us a view that lies beyond simplified developmental literacy 'milestones'.

Our language and literacy experiences are deeply interconnected with our understanding of ourselves and our world, and they shape how we make sense of our experiences. As Smith and Sanders explore (see Chapter 4) our unique language experiences are closely related to our identities, sense of self, and our agency. Smith provides a framework for reflecting on our own language identity, charting this and reflecting on those key experiences that have shaped us: It is by understanding our own histories and language experiences, that we can better understand those of the pupils we teach. In many ways, this chapter epitomises a key tenet of this volume: how the social construction of literacy practices means that these are never static, but always changing and enacted by us each time we take part in language and literacy. Indeed, this constant change through the social construction of literacy practices is what gives rise to diversity of practice.

This book is about diverse literacies, and diversity takes many forms in this volume. The chapter authors offer their own insights into literacy from their work with children over time, with student teachers, and as researchers in their field. What is offered is a rich array of perspectives that show ways of looking at and thinking about literacy in ways that consider children's own unique experiences. Furthermore, these insights veer from the more typical constructions of literacy more commonly understood and reflected in national policy. For example, Doxey and Doxey (Chapter 3) remind us that when selecting texts in the classroom, we should consider the ethnic, linguistic and social diversity of pupils, including neurodiversity (Monkhouse and Bailey, Chapter 10). The authors draw our attention to the neurodiversity of our pupils and ask us to consider with care the children's literature that reflects diversity positively. In many ways, the authors of these chapters bring their own perspectives on literacy to the fore – and these in themselves are diverse.

Principle 3: Literacies are powerful – being literate has many benefits and literacy can exert power on individuals and groups

Possessing good skills in language and literacy is often viewed as synonymous with success in education and more broadly linked to positive overall life chances. In many ways literacy has been seen as a panacea to the inequalities that exist in society and indeed, by some, 'poor' literacy skills are seen as synonymous with a lifetime of poverty, poor lifestyle and even an increased likelihood to commit legal offences. Such possible devastating implications have provided impetus to decades of policy interventions with the aim of 'raising literacy standards' facilitating 'social justice' and 'solving' the perceived problems of low standards in literacy. Perhaps ironically, policy initiatives aimed at raising literacy standards, have increasingly shaped what literacy is and how might best be taught in schools. In some cases, this has led to a narrowing of the literacy curriculum in some areas of English teaching where the focus has become one of addressing pupils' technical skills in literacy. Where literacy is framed as an incremental set of technical skills to be acquired by the individual child or pupil, the value and purpose, and what we understand about literacy as a socio-cultural practice, can be reduced and undervalued. Literacy can never be 'given' neutrally to a passive class of children. It is always saturated with power relationships (see the work of Brian Street) and thinking about literacy as a set of skills presents a kind of 'neutrality' that does not reflect or acknowledge the power relationships that exist in literacies, but instead glosses over them. Helks and Myers (Chapter 7) propose a structured approach to working with real texts to support children's understandings of how grammar works in texts to create meaning, and how to integrate grammar in meaningful ways, thus empowering children as language users. In this volume, Sharpe and Taplin (Chapter 9) chart policy moves over four decades that mark shifts in English policy over time. Sharpe and Taplin are clear to point out that notions of 'inclusivity' in literacy need to go further than simply providing access to literacy in classrooms, and instead need to consider *belonging* and *participation.* Within the chapters in this volume, these two concepts are taken-up and explored as we ask the question - How can we facilitate pupil's participation in literacy activity and how can we nurture their sense of belonging?

Principle 4: Literacies are social and cultural practices; they are material and affective

At the time of writing of this book, the dominant education policy from the English government presents Literacy in a way that Street (1995) would likely identify as autonomous. In the light of this, defining an inclusive literacy pedagogy that recognises diversity, may seem like a 'closed chapter', where there is little room for manoeuvre. However, it is important to acknowledge that curriculum documentation and policy are only part of the story of what happens in literacy classrooms when teachers enact literacy pedagogy. As teachers, we are tasked with working with the statutory curriculum in ways that translates programmes of study into experiences that mean something to children, and that are relevant to their lives and experiences. An example of this is Wigfull's chapter (Chapter 6) on writing which places the child-author at the centre of the writing endeavour.

Our authors aim to expand on the definition of literacy presented in dominant policy and call for open-ended opportunities for children to critically examine what literacy is and how they can be critical and active participants in text creation and consumption. The idea of *playfulness* is key to such a pedagogy - and an antidote to what may be lost when teaching emphasises technical accuracy over expression of meaning, where reading is defined as accurate decoding and writing defined as grammatical correctness. You will see many episodes of playfulness reflected across the chapters, for example, Monkhouse and Bailey

(Chapter 10) present the ways in which children's playfulness leads to creative expression when exploring digital worlds. This playfulness and creativity lead to the production of imaginative texts that are meaningful to children's lives and interests and sees them as agentic.

More recent theorisations of literacy take account of the materials that surround us, and that we may use, during literacy activity. The pens, pencils, crayons, screens, tables, books, chairs and all other materials around us are not merely 'tools' that we use to do literacies. In fact, they shape *how* we do literacy, and what might be seen as possible – that is, tools of literacy have affordances. Socio-material thinking about literacy considers the ways in which the objects and things around us shape literacy in particular ways. A clear example of this is Monkhouse and Smith's chapter (Chapter 11) that explores how the props, costumes and children's bodies shape particular kinds of 'texts' of expression and meaning.

Earlier thinking about literacy often overlooked the bodily sensations of the experience in taking part in literacy activity. Leander and Boldt (2012) drew attention to the ways in which whenever we take part in any literacy activity, it is accompanied by feelings and sensations that are significant. Prior to this, dominant thinking about literacy is that it was an act that takes place in your 'head' or purely as a 'cognitive' activity. However, more recent research has been examining embodied theorisations about literacy, about the sensations of changes in the body that we experience as we take part in literacy activity. Social and cultural practices from this perspective therefore far from purely linguistic. They are material and interrelated with bodily experiences of literacy. While this work is in its infancy (in contrast to more traditional thinking about literacy) it is raising debates about the nature of inclusion, participation and what gives rise to social inequalities, and importantly, how these can be addressed.

The overarching messages arising from these principles are clear:

- There are many ways of thinking about literacy. No way of thinking is inherently superior to the other, but each offers a lens for understanding literacy differently, in a more expansive way.
- Some ways of thinking about literacy offer a deficit view of children and families. They focus on what children *cannot* do. The tendency is to view literacy practices that are different to schooled literacies as *deficient* in some way. In this volume we take an asset perspective, focusing on what pupils *can do* and consider how teachers can build on and support pupils' repertoires.
- Literacy is about participation and classrooms are communities where teachers need to look for opportunities to nurture belonging through literacy.
- Taking time to think about children's literacy practices, including those that are digitally mediated and incorporate these into our teaching, can foster belonging in a literate community and provide children with confidence and agency to become creative and critical consumers and producers of print and multimodal texts.

Chapter summary

In this chapter we have shared a number of perspectives on what literacy can be and some of the underlying principles for literacy education that are consistent with those perspectives.

As you read on, you will see that our authors - literacy researchers, teachers, pupils – each present a unique view of their experiences of 'doing' literacy. Literacy means different things to different people, but the principles we shared early in the chapter are common across all voices: Literacies are multiple, diverse, often digitally mediated and powerful.

Becoming literate is a long journey, and one could argue it never ends because language and literacy practices evolve and change. In the final chapter of this book, Merchant looks back at how literacy 'used to be' and what it might be in future. Importantly, in his final paragraph, Merchant stresses the need to approach literacy 'with a sense of appreciation of the vibrancy of childhood culture, a culture that does not distinguish between digital and non-digital worlds, but it is one in which communication is part and parcel of everyday life', where technology plays an important part. Engaging children in this process, equipping them to take part in literacy in all its manifestations in a critical, positive and responsible way is the task we face as literacy educators, researchers and academics. The role of the teacher in this endeavour is crucial.

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