2018

Literacy

Daniel A. Wagner

University of Pennsylvania, wagner@literacy.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/literacyorg_articles

$\textit{Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Methods Commons, International and Comparative Education Commons, and the Language and Literacy Education Commons}$

Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)


This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/literacyorg_articles/34
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Literacy

Abstract
Literacy is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that varies across time, language, and geography. The origins of literacy can be traced back thousands of years, initially invented as a tool for communication to be shared amongst only a small portion of ‘educated’ human society. However, within the past few centuries, many societies have experienced transitions from mostly illiterate to predominantly literate populations through a variety of means involving both formal and informal learning. The present review considers literacy in a global perspective, with short sections that review: the history and definition of literacy; life-span perspectives; and finally some challenges and opportunities for the future.

Disciplines
Adult and Continuing Education | Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Administration and Supervision | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | International and Comparative Education | Language and Literacy Education

This book chapter is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/literacyorg_articles/34
LITERACY

Literacy is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that varies across time, language, and geography. The origins of literacy can be traced back thousands of years, initially invented as a tool for communication to be shared amongst only a small portion of ‘educated’ human society. However, within the past few centuries, many societies have experienced transitions from mostly illiterate to predominantly literate populations through a variety of means involving both formal and informal learning. The present review considers literacy in a global perspective, with short sections that review: the history and definition of literacy; life-span perspectives; and finally some challenges and opportunities for the future.

History and definition of literacy

Today, the United Nations estimates that about 80% of adults worldwide can read or write to some extent. Nonetheless, the transition to widespread literacy has not been uniform across societies. Contexts vary greatly across the globe, and these contexts have played a significant role in the motivation and support for acquiring literacy. For example, in Sweden, reading ability reportedly rose to above 90% by the mid-18th century as a result of the push from church and state on families to teach Bible reading at home. Among the Vai people of West Africa, literacy in the form of an indigenous script was developed and has been used for economic and personal written communication since the nineteenth century. This tradition was transferred from one generation to another outside the structure of formal schooling. From these and other examples, it is clear that a historical examination of social context is essential for understanding how literacy functions as a historical and cultural phenomenon across the world.

The advent of modern public education, the increasing use of technology, and globalization are among the many factors that have contributed to changes in literacy over the years. At a macro-level, the expansion of literacy work reflects the increased social complexities of our rapidly changing societies in the 21st century. At a micro-level, changes take place at different stages of an individual’s life through the learning of cognitive skills in and out of school, as well as the diverse needs of everyday life. On the international policy stage, literacy is a core component of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, ratified in 2015.

Formal definitions of literacy have varied over the years. A half-century ago, the United Nations thought of literacy as a dichotomous concept—you are either ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’,
and that is how international statistics represented literacy in most countries. Today, most specialists and governments think of literacy as a continuum of reading, writing, and numeracy skills that can be acquired in and outside of schools through training and application. While some view literacy as simply the role of schools to inculcate in children, others explain literacy acquisition as a consequence of (and contributor to) power, hierarchy, poverty and culture. Thus, demographic characteristics, such as poverty, gender and language, help to explain large variations in literacy across and within countries. However, in terms of educational policy implementation and lifespan experiences, a closer look at age-related differences in literacy development is necessary.

Life-span perspectives

In the first few years of life, early language and literacy development influences a child’s potential for future success. Skills developed during these years can affect future acquisition of other proficiencies; also, findings on brain development suggest that learning is a hierarchical and integrated process. As a result, there is a major movement toward support of early childhood development programs to provide children with basic cognitive, social, and emotional skills that set the foundation for learning literacy and numeracy skills at later ages. Conversely, a lack of learning opportunities during the early stages can cumulatively hinder progress in the acquisition of higher order skills and future educational outcomes. Finally, empirical research of comprehensive early childhood intervention programs in the United States and elsewhere have demonstrated that children who participate in these programs can avoid developmental delay in cognitive, social, and family outcomes, leading to improved literacy.

With the global growth of mass public education, primary schooling is the most common starting place for formal literacy learning, typically beginning with children between the ages of five to seven years. Despite widely varying differences in primary schools across the world, the importance of literacy remains central to the curriculum across the globe. The minimal cognitive learning standard for all children is to read, write, and calculate by the end of five grades of primary schooling. Increasing efforts are being made to assess literacy levels among primary and secondary school students internationally. Overall, the rapid expansion of access to primary schooling over the past few decades has resulted in a steady increase in literacy rates across the globe, but it has not been able to address serious problems of low literacy in the poorest countries. Many of these children are still unable to read at the end of the fifth grade. The inability to read not only poses a serious challenge to their future education, but will also have an impact on their potential for economic growth.

Among youth (aged 15-24 years), literacy rates have been improving over the past two decades due to an increased level of investment at the primary school level. The global literacy rate for youth increased from 83% in 1990 to 90% in 2011 according to UN statistics. These literacy trends reflect increased access to primary and secondary education for younger generations and suggest that adult literacy rates will climb as youth replace older cohorts in the future. However, even now, more than 100 million youths lack basic literacy skills, mainly in two regions: South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. These literacy rates are still lower among rural youth and girls. A major part of this problem results from
young people who have never attended school or left school before acquiring strong literacy skills.

Adult literacy has improved somewhat for a majority of countries over the past two decades, at least in part due to the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012). Even so, more than 70 countries failed to make significant progress over this same time period, a reflection of the limited national and international investments made, and also of the complexity of motivating adults to take part in such programs. Demographic changes, including the increase in access to primary and secondary schooling, will no doubt continue to improve adult literacy rates, but substantial low-literacy and illiteracy will likely persist well into the future.

**Challenges and opportunities**

In spite of the considerable efforts of governments, school systems and other agencies over many decades, achieving the improvement of, and equity in, literacy development has faced many challenges. Both *access* (such as student enrolment and retention) and *quality* (of instruction and student learning) are critical. Many barriers to student enrolment and quality education exist, particularly for children growing up in poor contexts and in developing countries. In early childhood, children’s language and cognitive developmental needs are crucial, and appropriate support has often not been available. In primary and secondary education, challenges exist regarding poor quality schooling, including underpaid and/or unmotivated teachers. In youth and adult literacy programs, a major challenge is to meet the diverse needs of learners who are no longer in formal school programs.

One area of literacy that is receiving increased attention is that of information and communications technologies (ICTs). ICTs (including the Internet and mobile phones) are having a major impact on our thinking about literacy. On the one hand, ICTs are changing the nature of learning processes themselves. Observational studies indicate that young learners in wealthier communities actively use websites, message boards, social media, and so on. If given a choice, they often prefer social interaction on the Internet or mobile devices instead of listening passively to an instructor or reading a textbook. Others have found that reading skills are significantly impacted by continuous interaction with web-based reading. On the other hand, it is clear that young children with access to mobile devices have many new opportunities and ways to learn to be literate. In addition, given that ICTs provide a ‘lower barrier for entry’ for children to create texts themselves, they can write texts rather than simply consuming them. In the age of new ICTs and their expansion across the globe, literacy acquisition is no longer restricted to the use of pencil, paper, or textbooks.

Over recent decades, we have learned more about the various ways that literacy is changing, how to improve literacy from early childhood through adulthood, and now new technologies are reshaping the possibilities of becoming literate. The challenges are many. The importance and significance of literacy to both individuals and societies necessitate looking at these challenges as resources to inform current practices and improve future ones. Progress can be made only with the public and personal conviction that literacy is at the core of human development and international development. Policy decisions about literacy will become ever more relevant and more complicated, even as our knowledge base about literacy continues to
increase. To keep pace with changes in societies today, as well as with a global economy that requires ever more skills in a competitive market place, we will no doubt have to keep the study and promotion of literacy central to educational planning for many years to come.

**See also:**
Achievement, Bilingualism, Child Care, Classrooms, Cognitive Development, Computers/Internet, Contexts of Development, Early Childhood Development, Educational Attainment, Expertise, Gender, Global Developmental Science, Intergenerational Transmission, Learning, Poverty and Brain, Development, School Dropout, Technology

**Further reading**


