



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Allatt, Gwyneth

What does it mean to be literate?

Original Citation

Allatt, Gwyneth (2017) What does it mean to be literate? In: RaPAL Conference 2017, 24th June 2017, Liverpool, UK. (Unpublished)

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/32506/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

What does it mean to be literate?

How literacy is currently perceived by policymakers, teachers of adult literacy and learners.

Gwyneth Allatt, University of Huddersfield



Background and aims

'Definitions of what it means to be literate are always shifting.' (Crowther et al., 2001, p.1)

Notions of what it means to be literate have differed over time, from the simple ability to sign the marriage register (Gardner, 2004) to the decoding of not just written text but also pictures and icons, along with speaking and listening skills in both 'formal' and 'vernacular' language (Smith, 2005, p.321). Literacy has been subject to different representations in policy, educational initiatives and international skills surveys, as identified by previous writing and research in the field (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006; Burgess and Hamilton, 2011; Benavot, 2015).

However, a review of the literature found little consideration of the views of literacy teachers and learners on how literacy should be defined and conceptualised, along with a lack of analysis of recent UK policy. My research, therefore, aims to determine how literacy is perceived **currently** in policy and by teachers and adult literacy learners, along with the factors influencing these perceptions.

Research Design

An interpretivist approach based on three qualitative methods:

- Analysis of current documents relating to educational policy
- Interviews with teachers of adult literacy (face-to-face and via telephone).
- Focus groups with adult literacy learners.

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) is the approach used in analysing data from the texts collected and produced during the research process.

Research questions

- How is adult literacy conceptualised within current educational policy?
- What does the term 'literacy' mean to teachers of adult literacy and their learners?
- What are the key factors that influence current perceptions of adult literacy?

Findings so far:

Perceptions of literacy in current UK policy:

- Literacy = *skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing which are 'essential for learning and for operating in work and everyday life.'* (DBIS, 2014, p.4)
- Discourses of functionality and employability are also apparent within the documents – *returns, economy, investment, market, performance, outcomes, impact, measurement, levels, drivers, Net Present Value, sustainability, function, employment, employers, work, demonstrable, prospects*
- A 'deficit' view of literacy presenting literacy difficulties as a problem or a barrier which must be tackled and overcome and literacy as an attribute lacking in some people – *problem, tackle, overcome, needs, hold back*
- No mention of reading for pleasure or creative writing and little consideration of literacy involving anything other than print-based texts.

Teachers' and learners' perceptions:

Literacy relates to employability and functioning in every day life, but it's also about:

- Autonomy and independence
- Self-sufficiency
- Empowerment
- Social inclusion
- Community involvement
- Self-esteem and self-confidence
- Breaking down barriers
- Communication
- Access to further study
- Helping with children's schooling and improving their prospects

Literacy isn't just reading, writing, speaking and listening in order to 'function'. It's also:

- Critical awareness
- 'Reading between the lines'
- Creative writing
- Self-expression
- Sharing opinions and understanding the opinions of others
- Using technology (texting, blogging, the Internet, social media)
- Maths / numeracy
- Social skills

Summary

Early analysis of the data suggests some similarities in the ways in which literacy is conceptualised within policy documents and the views expressed by literacy teachers, notably in the recurrence of themes of employability and the ability to function in everyday life. This perhaps reflects New Literacy Studies researchers' concerns about literacy being viewed as a distinct set of skills rather than a range of practices (Street, 1997). However, teachers and learners presented a far broader range of perceptions relating to the nature of and purposes of literacy, seemingly with some links between their viewpoints and the type of organisation within which they are teaching or learning. This possible correlation will be explored further as data analysis progresses.

References

- Benavot, A. (2015) 'Literacy in the 21st century: towards a dynamic nexus of social relations' *International Review of Education*. 61 pp.273-294.
- Burgess, A. and Hamilton, M. (2011) Back to the future? Functional Literacy and the New Skills Agenda. Retrieved from http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/66608/1/Functional_Literacy_Discussion_Paper_AB_MH.pdf
- Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (2001) *Powerful Literacies*. Leicester: NIACE.
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) *Adult Literacy and Numeracy: Government Response to the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee. Fifth report of session. 2014-15*. London, BIS.
- Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing discourse: textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.
- Gardner, P. (2004) 'Literacy Learning and Education' in Williams, C. ed. (2007) *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hamilton, M. and Hillier, Y. (2006) *Changing Faces of Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy: a critical history*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Smith, J. (2005) 'Mobilising Everyday Literacies Practices within the Curricula.' *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. 57 (3) pp.319-333.
- Street, B. (1995) *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education*. Essex: Pearson Education.

