

## **Literacy across the Curriculum**

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My aim, in this brief discussion, is to outline some concerns arising from the research and professional literature related to the issue of the teaching and learning of literacy across the curriculum. I'm focusing here particularly on the middle and secondary or senior years. This is not because the early years are not important – clearly they are – but they also receive more than their share of the research, curriculum and professional development related to the topic of literacy education.

Two of the more dangerous myths about literacy education are: first, if it's done properly, then it's pretty much over by Year 3 or Year 4 for most students; and second, that if it's not quite done properly, or if some topping up is needed, then it is the job of the English department in high schools, or maybe the study skills or special education unit or learning support people. Now, most literacy educators don't really believe these myths. Indeed most state and territory curriculum statements emphasise the ongoing importance of literacy teaching across all of the curriculum domains. It's just that most school systems and the generally intelligent and committed people that work in them need to behave as if they do believe these myths. It's the day-to-day institutional enactment of these myths that make them dangerous; and it's the students moving through the middle and secondary and senior years who are in danger.

These myths rest on a pretty impoverished idea about: first, what literacy is; second, of its pervasiveness across school experiences; and third, of its need to grow rapidly through the middle school years as the materials of curriculum become more specialised and distinct. We use the term 'literacy' to refer to the skills, understandings, dispositions and beliefs that are called upon to participate deeply and effectively in a literate society such as ours – the skills, understandings, dispositions and beliefs called upon to understand and to make printed materials and materials that combine language and other visual modalities.

So 'literacy' refers to a set of self-sustaining resources: how well-developed and flexible our literacy resources are will determine how well-developed and flexible our literacy resources will become in the future. Literacy is a classic instance of a self-growing set of skills in societies such as ours: rich literacy begets richer literacy. In the new circumstances, we find ourselves accessing and working on the edges of our capabilities in our jobs and in our learning; we develop them even further, through middle age, let alone through the middle years of schooling.

Let's consider each myth. With regard to literacy education, the early years of schooling are foundational partly because school systems make assumptions about

what students bring to each phase of their learning; and what the story of their growing capabilities is and should be. These assumptions form the bases of the organisation of school and classroom activities, and the structure, the scope and the sequence of the curriculum. For example, these assumptions can mean that substantial, explicit support for basic learning in literacy, such as breaking the codes of English letters and sounds, can and often does evaporate around Years 3 and 4 of school.

It can mean, for example, that substantial, explicit support for comprehension development and the use of the various features of texts with different purposes and structures can be over and done with by the end of the primary school years. It can mean that secondary teachers are not given substantial, explicit preparation in literacy education in their curriculum areas of specialisation, in professional development and in their training at university.

And all of these consequences arise from the idea that literacy is a fixed, bounded set of skills related to code-breaking and that once the student can break the codes of English, the rest of the school years simply become a matter of reading and automatically understanding all the rest. The premise is that specialised textual formations in Physics or Mathematics, History, English, Biology, literary criticism, and all the rest, are basically just talk written down, conceptually and linguistically transparent, commonsensical and the equivalent of a Year 3 storybook. Of course, it's nonsense, and for many of our students, it's dangerous nonsense.

With regard to the second myth, English departments in high schools usually contain teachers who know a lot about how written, visual, and mixed texts work. They know a lot about how to engage students in reading and writing activities; and they have sophisticated knowledge about how to assess aspects of students' literacy progress. What most of these practitioners tend not to know a lot about is how the texts of Physics, Mathematics, History, Biology, and all the rest, work, or how to assess progress in their management and production. Engaging the ways in which the knowledge is represented in words and images of different kinds in these specific knowledge areas is literacy development in the middle years: it's what that's about. Answering comprehension questions about the high school equivalent of a Year 3 storybook is no longer a high-stakes activity in the middle and secondary years.

So, academic development in the curriculum areas is not somehow separate from developing students' knowledge about literacy conventions. The curriculum disciplines, as we have known them in some cases for hundreds of years, would not exist without the technologies of literacy, nor would societies such as ours have any way of passing them on to subsequent generations if we did not have the technologies of literacy. Accessing those kinds of texts is the ongoing literacy challenge for schools; it's the culmination of the work that's laid down in the early years, but it's a new kind of literacy work.

So the challenges for educators are to do with looking hard at the particular ways in which literacy is put to work in the curricular texts in the middle years, and to create professional settings (in schools, in professional development clusters, in university pre-service and in-service programs) in which the details of these particularities are shared and worked on. Middle and secondary years' teachers cannot, on their own, suddenly be expected to produce support programs that are up to the challenge of providing rich support for curriculum-specific literacy capabilities. This is an ongoing program that must be initiated and prioritised. But individual teachers and parents can begin a process of pointing out to students the different ways in which different texts build knowledge; how language and visual information work together in different ways in different curriculum areas; and how attention needs to be given to the fact that it's no longer some form of 'generic literacy' that the education system is interested in.

In 1974, the United States National Institute of Education in Washington announced the creation of a new research centre to study and make recommendations about reading. Unusually, this centre was charged with focusing its attention on the middle years of schooling and on reading comprehension. The Institute made the point that the vast majority of research and theory on reading had up to that time dealt with acquisition in the early school years, but that it was from the middle years onward that the reading and literacy-related performance of students from disadvantaged and minority groups really began to fall most dramatically behind mainstream and non-disadvantaged groups of students. That centre, that was located at the University of Illinois, went on to produce a vast amount of rigorous and insightful research that has again, 35 years later, generally not been given its due in much of the current debate on literacy and in reviews of the research on literacy education, such as the recent Australian 'National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading'.

The challenge faced, as we examine the literacy demands faced by students in the middle years of schooling, is that we encounter the increasing differentiation of the curriculum. Effectively, we encounter different, more specialised ways of using text literacy and increasingly specialised ways of combining textual and visual aspects of literacy and this is simply because we encounter knowledge in these curriculum and discipline areas. The really high-stakes displays of literacy capabilities for students lie in the ways in which they manage, use and produce these specialised texts to show their knowledge.

Too often literacy difficulties are systematically mistaken for a lack of academic or conceptual aptitude or a lack of requisite knowledge or effort. Apart from the personal distress this causes students, it's a waste of our society's intellectual resources; and further, this wastage is not randomly distributed across equity and mainstream groups. So the breadth of our conceptual understanding of literacy, and the effort we're prepared to expend as individual educators and as a profession of educators to come to grips with the details of literacy demands across the disciplines

of the school curricula, are matters of equity, not just matters of professional competence.