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The social construction of literacy

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Educational institutions, their promises and limitations were at the center of public debate for most of the twentieth century. Now in the twenty-first century schooling continues to be seen as an institutional force both for bringing about social change and for providing stability. When outcomes are not as expected or when desired transformations do not come about, then the problems are seen as directly attributable to educational failure. Over the past hundred years of universal schooling, literacy rates have served as a barometer of society such that illiteracy takes on symbolic significance, reflecting any disappointment not only with the workings of the educational system, but with the society itself. An assumption often expressed is that if educational institutions cannot manage the simple task of teaching basic decoding and encoding skills, they cannot prepare future generations to deal with more complex questions of technological change (Kozol 1985). However, literacy needs to be seen as providing not just technical skills but also a set of prescriptions about using knowledge. In this sense literacy is a socially constructed phenomenon, not simply the ability to read and write. As this book demonstrates, by performing the tasks that make up literacy, we exercise socially approved and approvable talents. Literacy as socially constructed is both a historically based ideology and a collection of context-bound communicative practices.

An historical view of literacy begins in early modernity when literacy became regarded as a virtue, and some elements of such moral virtue still seem to attach to its use. A literate person was not only a good person, rather someone capable of exercising good or reasonable judgment, for a literate person's taste and judgment

depended upon access to a written tradition – a body of texts – reflecting centuries of collective experience. Even today it is denigrating to describe someone as being 'illiterate'. Such words suggest not a lack of specific skill, like failure to have musical ability, but a lack of proper judgment (this term is rarely, if ever, used to describe an inability to read). Thus, by any criterion literacy has much more than a simple descriptive meaning. To claim, as the US one penny stamp does: 'the ability to write, a root of democracy' (the ability to read, it should be noted, appeared on the four penny stamp) is to put forward a view of the sociopolitical value of literacy. Does such literacy represent a different phenomenon from that measured in standardized reading, writing and comprehension tests? Can literacy as a social virtue and as a root of democracy be evaluated in the same way as the functional literacy that underlies school and work placement tests? Some of the problems that arise in discussing any contemporary concern with literacy may well derive from the complex issues that surround attempts to define literacy itself.

Much of the literature of the past decade speaks of a multiplicity of literacies, and we have come to appreciate that literacy has many facets (Collins 1995; Gee 1996). From this perspective we see that earlier research took an exclusively Western-centric view, so failing to take into account the true diversity of the world's literate cultures (Collins and Blot 2003). By treating Western social development and uses of literacy as central to the history of literacy itself, it distorted the idea of what it meant to be literate. Much of this previous discussion saw the presence or absence of literacy as an individual attribute that either transforms a person's life chances or exists as a sign of social and personal failure.

However, looking at the issues from a global position we become aware that reading, writing and speaking in everyday life and in formal instructional situations require us to ask how literacy affects people's everyday uses of language; not how people are judged literate but how they use or negotiate literate resources. What is more, a non-Western dominant perspective makes it possible to recognize more clearly the ideological components at work in any commonly used conception of literacy, and to see how much of what we take to be an essential part of literacy is actually shaped by specific biases in the study of language. Is it the case as Sylvia

Scribner pointed out two decades ago, that an ideologically charged view reveals literacy as made up of a collection of metaphors describing the power of language as a sociopolitical phenomenon (1984)? Or as Street (1984; 1993) in a similar vein has commented, past research has juxtaposed what he called the autonomous view of literacy as a reified, decontextualized construct with the ideological view that conceives of literacy as a collection of socioculturally embedded activities.

From an ideological perspective we can recognize that literacy is both a set of practices for understanding the world around us, in which written and spoken language form a continuum, and a set of statements about the value or necessity of these activities. Emphasizing the textual dominance of contemporary life in which all kinds of daily bureaucratic transactions depend on written records and the ability to construct written arguments, shows the limits of the argument that contextual dependence could be considered to limit oral language use (Silverstein and Urban 1996). From a sociolinguistic view oral and the written literacy are different but supporting facets of language use. Literate and oral practice cannot be considered as opposites, rather it is our definitions of literacy that have had at their center conflict between oral and written disciplinary traditions, which are directly traceable to our own cultural history. As socially constructed, literacy is best regarded as part of an ideology of language, a sociocultural phenomenon where literacy and orality coexist within a broader communicative framework not as opposites, but as different ways of achieving the same communicative ends (Cook-Gumperz 2005).

This book attempts to address these questions not by looking at a global perspective per se, but by exploring in greater detail the social and linguistic practices that add up to literate activities within the institutionalized process of transmission. When we describe literacy as a socially constructed process we are not looking solely at the history of the literacy–schooling relationship, as Ian Hacking's criticism of this book as a fashionable exercise in studying children's reading and writing abilities suggested (Hacking 1999), rather at a complex of situated, context-embedded communicative practices. To this end the studies reported on here set out to develop a sociolinguistic perspective on literacy and on its acquisition within the context of contemporary schooling.

While no single volume can take into account all the complexity of factors that enter into the ways we define, evaluate or assess literacy, we claim that a sociolinguistic perspective will focus on the processes by which literacy is constructed in everyday life, through conversational exchanges and the negotiation of interactional meanings in many different contexts of schooling. It is through the processes of classroom exchanges, learning-group formation, through informal judgments and standardized tests and all the other evaluative apparatus of schooling that a *schooled literacy* is formed. Whatever historically formed value judgments about literacy may be implicit, when we use the terms 'functional literacy' or 'literate consciousness' in present-day contexts, the reference is always in large part to a school-taught and classroom-learnt collection of skills. These skills reflect a particular theory of pedagogy developed over the past sixty years, that is the period in which the expectation of universal literacy has begun to be fully realized in many nation states. Over this period educational institutions have come to play an ever larger role as the arbiters of personal, socioeconomic opportunity. In learning to be literate in contemporary schools children are involved in processes central to the social transmission of knowledge in society. This view highlights the inherent selectivity that pervades contemporary educational systems; from choices of career pathways to access to everyday learning opportunities in classrooms, and in turn to later career opportunities.

However, while acknowledging the overall macro-view of social reproduction, this book looks in detail at the actual processes of transmission within the communicative contexts of classrooms and at the selectivity that results when children are evaluated in what appear to be similar school settings. From the interactional sociolinguistic perspective we see that the selection–reproduction cycle arises as a function of detectable decisions that involve evaluations and judgments of children's performance in classrooms and how a series of sociolinguistic activities lead to what later become institutional assessments of their learning potential. The social perspective on literacy looks at literacy learning not only as the acquisition of cognitive skills but rather as a means for demonstrating knowledgeability. Literacy involves a complex of socio-cognitive processes that are part of the production and comprehension of texts

and talk within interactional contexts that in turn influence how these literate products will be valued. Psychological and linguistic theories alone cannot account for the essential conditions for learning written or spoken language; the value placed on features of language use, such as coherent argumentation, narrative skill, and rhetorical style, are part of a cultural inheritance that comes from lives lived in the company of others that recognize and value these uses.

However questions remain: how and by what means do children and adults learn to be literate? In what settings does this learning take place? Is it not only in schools and through school-like instructional programs, but through a multiplicity of experiences outside of school, beyond school textbooks and school curricula that a meaningful sense of the uses of literacy becomes established? The problem that several decades of research on literacy in schools have wrestled with is also an evaluative one: how is literacy best acquired? The fact that this question is asked reflects the very social character of what is meant by being literate. This in turn affects what is viewed as learning itself.

The research in this volume that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s was influenced by three controversies within the, then, newly emerging field of literacy research:

1. How is literacy acquired, what is the role of the nature/nurture debate in its acquisition; if social environment is an essential influence on language and literacy learning what role do home and school play?
2. Is access to learning opportunities a problem in home or school acquisition?
3. If literacy is a school-based skill dependent on decontextualized uses of language as part of conceptual, intellectual growth, can this take place outside of specialized learning institutions?

A major feature of the schooling–literacy controversy focused on a debate over whether literacy learning is exclusively school based; and whether it is based on school learning or on a set of activities taking place wherever written inscriptions are used. In response to this debate, the linguist Wayne O'Neill suggested literacy acquisition '*properly*' (his emphasis) takes place outside of formal institutions

of learning, and that schools do not have the best methods for literacy practice because of the way they conceive of literacy:

> Schools render their S's able to read – some of them – and in the process destroy their 'proper literacy'. Before they go off to school children have engaged in five years of bringing coherent (unspoken) explanations to the world of experiences, linguistic, social, etc. that they face. They're doing pretty well at it, too. The school tries to tell them, and generally succeeds in telling them, that common sense explanations won't do ever. It's really much simpler, the school says, experience should be understood linearly not hierarchically; it's all there on the surface, not deeply and complexly organized. O' Neill 1970:262

By opposing a *schooled* to a *commonsense* literacy, O'Neill is drawing into contrast vernacular and bureaucratic definitions of knowledge in much the same way that recent debates have revived the question of whether there exists such a thing as a standard language (Bex and Watts 1999; Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2005). O'Neill argues that school curricula tend to concentrate on decontextualized language skills that will necessarily separate children's naturally developed (or innate) linguistic competencies from the tasks of verbal decoding and encoding that the school requires. There are two questions here. First, is O'Neill accepting the innateness of language acquisition (nature) and implicitly rejecting the role of the communicative environment (nurture) in children's development? His view juxtaposes the 'natural' development of language with the imposition of schooled instruction. Second, he is arguing against a particular definition of school-based learning and the construction of curricula that focus too narrowly on the genesis of literacy as a skill, thus making any out-of-school knowledge of little importance. His view of schools as having a narrowly decontextualized idea of literacy as a basis for their assessments takes decontextualization in one of two different senses. It can be taken to mean either the linguistic and cognitive processing necessary to acquire the ability to reason abstractly, that from the perspective of formal instruction is usually regarded as one of the goals of literate development; alternatively, he is suggesting that school-specific knowledge outlaws or devalues the commonsense ways of arguing as not making sense in the classroom. And it seems it is this latter meaning that O'Neill intends. These two are similar but obviously not synonymous.

The implication of O'Neill's argument is that we cannot adequately criticize what schools do by depending only on a narrow school-defined notion of literacy. However any attempt to consider the range or extent of literacy without looking at the wider communicative and linguistic contexts in which literacy is acquired in conjunction with the values society assigns to these literate skills, will simplify and distort the relationship of contexts of acquisition to literate practices. No matter how carefully technical the definition, any consideration of the uses of literacy must come back to a social judgment about its uses. It is in the nature of literacy to have this dual character, prescriptive and instrumental, and research on the topic must always take this into account.

Whether difficulties in literacy acquisition in school should be attributed primarily to home or to school learning experiences was one of the key questions raised in the decades preceding this volume (see Chapter 3): whether the home-language usage and learning contexts provided equal access to literacy for all children, or whether some were seen as having a more limited range of communicative experiences, that were judged insufficient in the school classroom (Heath 1983). This first became known as the 'language deficit thesis': the view that some kinds of home-language experiences were less useful as a preparation for literacy shaped much educational research through the 1960s, and later continued to be influential on literacy research as the home–school mismatch hypothesis. In either form the suggestion was that the language of literacy used at home and school was likely to be different for many children. The role of the school in the social-transmission process became critical, and one that raised essential questions of equity of access to literacy. As the historian of education Patricia Graham pointed out:

> To recognize the centrality of the schools in the educational process then is the first and vital step in achieving equity in education. The next is to gain agreement on what the most important tasks of the schools are. The role of the school in increasing equity in education will only be effective if it is able to articulate its purpose, to gain public agreement for it, and to demonstrate that it can fulfill it. This means that the central purpose of schooling must be identifiable, popular, definable, and fair. Literacy is such a goal. Literacy is primarily a cognitive enterprise. By literacy I mean the ability to read, communicate, compute, develop independent judgments and take actions resulting from them. Graham 1980: 127

Patricia Graham's case for studying literacy as a school-based skill suggests that if schools are to be seen to have identifiable, popular and fair goals for all students, then more needs to be understood about the cognitive process by which literacy is acquired. However such a view of literacy fails to see how literacy is not simply acquired in school, but also constructed through a process of tests and evaluations both standardized and informal that are a daily part of life in classrooms and schools. Schooling is not only knowing how to do things, but rather demonstrating this knowing in appropriate contexts. The success of the endeavor, however, can be affected by a number of factors outside as well as inside the classroom. Neither school personnel nor students meet in the classroom without some preconceptions about each other's performance. Classroom and teachers are part of schools, school systems and societal/political educational policy, and students' home-community experience will already have prepared them in some way for schooling. After more than a century of universal education, most have assumptions and expectations about the outcomes, goals and failures of the schooling process. We also need to consider how such assumptions reflect ideologies of learning and of pedagogy that have become established over the past two centuries. Traditionally many factors were seen as important. To quote Graham again:

> For a variety of reasons, school officials traditionally made tacit assumptions about the attitudes, habits and talents that children brought with them into the classroom. Generally teachers believed that children from prosperous families did better than those from poor unstable families. There were always some exceptions to the general rule but research findings and conventional wisdom supported these beliefs about school achievement measured in conventional ways through teacher made tests, standardized tests and course grades. The job of the teacher and of the school was to move the children into the curriculum that was also organized along these assumptions. 1980: 120

As Graham points out, although the principal aim of public education is to overcome the diversity of background experiences by means of an organized curriculum of instruction, this does not mean that implicit assumptions of socially distributed differences will not remain. Inside classrooms many other factors influence and shape the outcome of learning processes, but the one that is

preeminent is spoken, and written language – the medium of all educational exchange. While other factors have been acknowledged as important for school success, language differences were until recently overlooked as incidental handicaps to the learning process. Children come to school as communicatively competent speakers and listeners but the way children are judged, not only in their speaking performance but also in matters of their attitude and motivation, are reflected back within the evaluative context of classrooms as differential language abilities.

The empirical studies collected in Chapters 4–11 of this volume seek to show how the social transmission process works in schooling, by focusing on key classroom activities as ordinary communicative encounters that in turn lead to assessments of achievement. They demonstrate that learning is not just a matter of cognitive processing in which individuals receive, store and use certain kinds of instructional messages organized into a body of school knowledge. Literacy learning takes place in a social environment through interactional exchanges in which what is to be learnt is to some extent a joint construction of teacher and student. It is the purpose of educational settings to make possible this mutual construction. When we look at *schooled literacy* we are concerned with the ways in which skills are developed throughout a student's school career. Whether we agree with the socially formulated definitions and tests of ability, whether the range of cognitive skills that make up school literacy seem too broad or too narrow, the first task of research is to explore in critical detail the workings of these practices; not to make judgments, but to uncover biases when they affect practices, and to deconstruct the many ways that an ideology of literacy enters into our evaluations of educational effectiveness.

Thirdly, one of the most enduring issues of literacy research is the issue of the development of literate consciousness as culturally determined cognitive processes for the production and comprehension of language as written inscription (Olsen 1994). In other words, is acquiring some literate ability the precondition for consistent and logical thought? And if so, does this acquisition require specialized institutional practices, or put simply, what makes the difference, schooling or literacy? A bold experimental attempt to untangle the two sides of this proposition was made by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981). In a major research project

conducted in Liberia they explored literacy acquisition and its socio-cognitive consequences in a cultural context that enabled the two to be separated. Building on Luria's pioneering work in the 1930s (published in English translation in 1976), Scribner and Cole began a comparative research project in West Africa to examine the social and cognitive consequences of literacy in a cultural context that was removed from the ideological pressures of Western urban schools and which provided a natural experimental situation with special literacy in a local vernacular script (the Vai script), reading knowledge of classical Koranic Arabic and some Western-style schooling. In *The Psychology of Literacy* they looked at the different ways that literacy can be acquired both inside and outside the school. Just six months of schooling they found was responsible for changes in the ability to handle complex and abstract verbal reasoning tasks with students literate in a local Vai vernacular language and script, yet not previously exposed to Western-style schooling experiences. Previously, the ability to reason abstractly had been seen as the main consequence of literacy alone. These findings suggested to them that Western-style schooling might be responsible for specific social and cognitive experiences that operate independently of the effects of literacy. They concluded that some of the cognitive changes and benefits in terms of reasoning that are usually attributed to literacy by itself, are more likely to be a consequence of the process of schooling. The learning of local language and scriptural texts did not have these same effects possibly because traditional literacy skills were learnt in contexts that differed from Western-style schooling. However, Scribner and Cole's findings raised as many issues as they appeared to solve about the character of literacy as collection of communicative practices. In the context of the literacy debates in the 1970s and 1980s their conclusions appeared to add to the already identified power of schooling as a reproductive force in society. It is with such research as a background that the contributors to this book began their own investigations of literacy as a socially defined phenomenon, constructed through a process of schooling. While, as chapter 2 argues, historically established conceptions of literacy that inform our sense of a 'literate consciousness' may be complex, part of our intellectual inheritance is a notion of *schooled literacy* as a sociopolitical force that promotes or rejects change.