Children begin to make meaning from the moment they are born. Their emerging abilities to communicate are central to the development of their thinking and imaginations; expression of their feelings and emotions; access to their cultural heritage(s); and growth of their own unique identities. Learning how to mean and becoming literate continues to be critically important in shaping children and young people’s life chances. Yet it does not follow the same pattern for all children and cannot be reduced to a simple, linear hierarchy of skills (Ewing, 2020) or a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching those skills. Perhaps because of its centrality to our lives and learning, becoming literate remains a complex and challenging area in education broadly and, particularly in the primary classroom, is riddled with controversy. This book is underpinned by research and practice and reflects our serious commitment to every child’s entitlement to a rich and creative English and literacies education in the primary classroom.

Every primary teacher must be knowledgeable about how language works as a resource to make meaning and how we learn to use it; able to teach oracy, reading and viewing and writing using a wide repertoire of appropriate strategies; and possess a love of literature that they are able to engender in learners. They must be able to model and share how to use and create texts (texts used here in its broadest form) in inclusive ways that meet the needs of all learners in their care. In time, learners will understand that meaning-making is about the interactions between the speaker, reader or viewer and the text, rather than solely through the text itself. In addition, they will know and experience how different texts will be interpreted differently by different individuals, depending on their experiences, backgrounds and the specific time and place. These understandings will inform their own text creation.

Teaching subject English and helping learners become literate are thus intricately interrelated. Learners in primary classrooms need to work with meaningful texts on relevant and purposeful activities and simultaneously learn about how to use language for multiple purposes in diverse contexts across a range of media. As the English Teaching Association of New South Wales (2004) states:

> English is essentially the study of language as a social and cultural semiotic in its multiplicity of textual forms. Historically, English has been about the shaping of the ‘self’. This has meant the promotion of humane values, the enrichment of the imaginative life and the development of aesthetic sensibility through engagement with literary texts. It has also meant a concern with the personal growth of the individual. Today, this includes a kind of self-reflexivity that enables students to understand how their ‘self’ is located within social and cultural contexts, and constructed through language and text … Above all, English makes possible the (re)imagining of other ways of being. (n.p.)

At the same time, however, ‘literacy’ is deemed a general capability in the Australian Curriculum: each subject or discipline area has a specific set of ‘literacies’. We frequently talk about ‘historical literacy’, ‘mathematical literacy’, ‘financial literacy’ or ‘multiliteracies’, for example. It is clear that literacy cannot be characterised as a single or unitary global skill acquired once and therefore for always ‘in a lifetime using a “one size fits all” instructional recipe’ (Ewing et al., 2016, p. 2). All our children ‘must be able to engage in and understand and analyse an ever-increasing range of ways’ language and image are shaped, used and applied (Ewing et al., 2016, p. 2).
This book explores the teaching of both English and literacy in the primary classroom. It can therefore be seen as a companion to Language and Literacy Development in Early Childhood (Ewing et al., 2016). Written for pre-service and early career primary teachers and interested parents, caregivers and community members, it is based on the following ‘passionate creed’ (LaBoskey, 1994):

- honouring of the many diverse cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds of learners through providing an inclusive learning environment that builds confidence and self-efficacy
- nurturing the imagination and creativity inherent in all learners
- learners needing to be actively engaged in the meaning-making processes
- developing genuine literacy partnerships with parents, caregivers and the community is critical
- requiring that all forms of authentic literary and information texts play a central role in the English and literacy classroom
- authentically integrating quality creative arts processes and experiences (dance, drama, media, music and visual arts) in the English and literacy program given they are different literacies—different ways of making meaning
- providing adequate time and resources to engage in playful language experiences and activities
- underpinning becoming literate with talking and active listening
- developing dispositions of empathy, risk-taking, experimentation, collaboration and flexibility as important in understanding and creating texts
- enjoying learning to be literate
- realising feedback and assessment should be explicit and authentic and a tool for facilitating progress in learning
- fostering learners’ reflective practice for the development of confident literacy learners.

In addition, in terms of resources, we argue that every primary classroom needs to include a reading corner with a rich collection of picture books, novels and poetry, including the learners’ writing in self-published books. Non-fiction, information and instructional works, persuasive texts and dictionaries are also important. Dress-ups, puppets and craft areas are also highly recommended. Access to iPads and computers is essential for drafting, editing and, eventually, publishing.

Our book draws on international and Australian research and aligns with both the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2020a, 2020b) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). While it centres on the Australian context, we believe many of the topics and issues have relevance for broader international audiences, and the book considers some of the relevant histories and controversies that have dominated English and literacy learning over our years in the field. All chapters include easy access to a range of case studies, weblinks and further reading and resources, as well as opportunities to question and reflect. Key terms and concepts are defined. A list of the literature used throughout the book is also included.
INTRODUCTION

It is not necessary to read the book in a linear fashion: the reader may read chapters of interest in any order and related sections in other chapters are noted where appropriate. However, the chapters are sequenced so that the book intentionally starts with providing a context and overview of the key strategies and instructional approaches presented in the book.

In Chapter 1, Rachel Burke defines what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century as ‘being an empowered receiver, user, and producer of diverse text types, communicated across multiple and rapidly changing modalities’. She explores the changing understandings of text, how the foundations required for literate practices begin at the moment of birth, and how inclusive, carefully scaffolded teaching approaches and repertoires are a must for primary classrooms.

Chapter 2 follows with Siobhan O’Brien’s careful mapping of the knowledge and understandings of English and literacies education as represented in Australian policy, research and curriculum. Siobhan examines both the EYLF and the Australian Curriculum: English before explaining the literacy capability and the National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (National Assessment Program, 2016).

Chapter 3 provides an overview of authentic assessment and effective reporting strategies. Kathy Rushton and Robyn Ewing explain that assessment and reporting should be about facilitating optimal learning for all individuals: assessment as a tool for learning. The chapter provides principles and examples of rich assessment in primary English and literacy, although these principles and terms can be applied in all key learning areas.

How children become competent oral communicators in the home, early childhood and school contexts is discussed in Chapter 4. Siobhan O’Brien also considers the role of story in First Nations Australian cultures before providing a range of teaching and learning strategies educators can use to foster children’s speaking and listening.

Some of the possibilities and complexities of recognising the communicative repertoires and resources that learners bring to the classroom are explored in Chapter 5. Rachel Burke examines how to support learners to develop expertise in literate practices in and outside school. She underlines that it is not possible to think about one approach to literacies education, and that different approaches will be relevant in different contexts and at different stages of each learner’s journey.

In Chapter 6, Robyn Ewing defines the terms ‘reading’ and ‘viewing’ as social practices with meaning at their core. She notes the importance of oral language as a precursor to becoming literate. She then focuses on how children learn to read and how teachers can help through a rich repertoire of reading strategies involving a wide selection of texts and resources. A brief snapshot of the history of reading and its associated controversies is also included.

In Chapter 7, Deb Brosseauk shows how children’s literature should be at the heart of English and literacy programs. She demonstrates how teachers can enable primary learners to experience the joy of language, literature and literacy so that they will continue to deeply immerse themselves in quality texts long after they finish their schooling.

In Chapter 8, Robyn Ewing builds on Chapters 6 and 7 to explore how learners can respond in creative ways to all kinds of texts and, in the process, deepen critical understandings of texts that go beyond literal or surface readings.
The importance of ensuring both teachers and learners enjoy creating texts is addressed in Chapter 9. Robyn Ewing and Kathy Rushton look at how substantive conversations need to underpin the development of writing and they investigate different aspects of learning to write within the teaching and learning framework. A range of examples of children’s writing are used throughout the chapter to illustrate the concepts discussed.

Learning about grammar in context is explored in Chapter 10. Kathy Rushton shows how understanding grammar is about understanding how language works in a range of contexts and thus informs the choices we make when we are speaking and writing. The works of some contemporary First Nations Australians are used to examine how to develop knowledge about language and grammar in context.

In Chapter 11, Kathy Rushton examines the diversity of Australian primary school communities and how teachers must build on the individual linguistic and cultural resources of every learner. She especially examines the learning needs of those learning Standard Australian English as an additional language or dialect.

Lucy Stewart further explores the diversity of learners in Chapter 12 by focusing on learners with additional needs. She provides opportunities for teachers to reflect on how they can build positive and inclusive learning environments, especially for learners with disability and gifted and talented learners.

Chapter 13 examines the challenges of spelling as both a valuable and complex topic for primary learners. Lucy Stewart looks at the four different kinds of knowledges needed in learning to spell and considers a range of strategies and approaches during the early and later primary years.

A brief account of the history of handwriting begins Chapter 14. Lucy Stewart then provides a rationale for the importance of teaching both handwriting and keyboarding in primary classrooms. She looks at the interrelationships that exist between oral language, reading, and handwriting and keyboarding development; the cognitive and physical components involved to support the teaching of handwriting; and key approaches and teaching strategies to support handwriting development.

Chapter 15 aims to increase knowledge and awareness of why literacy is one of the seven general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum. Siobhan O’Brien considers how the literacy capability is designed to be incorporated into planning and teaching across all key learning areas and the use of strategies for writing genres, including the teaching and learning cycle, tiered vocabulary for word knowledge and vocabulary.

In the final chapter, Chapter 16, Siobhan O’Brien examines the imperative of literacy partnerships and how they support literacy learning. Approaches and strategies that will support teachers in engaging parents with their child’s literacy development are a special focus.

It is our hope that this book will enable you to:

- understand the importance of ensuring all children have the time and resources,
- the scaffolding and explicit teaching, and
- the opportunities to engage in imaginative play, wondering, creative exploration, storying, reading and viewing, embodying, enacting, creating, questioning and reflecting. Through these processes they will come to understand multiple ways of meaning-making in our ever changing world.
Enabling children to become deeply literate is perhaps the most important life skill of all.

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References


CHAPTER

6

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

After working through this chapter, it is anticipated you will be able to:

• consider changing definitions of text and literacies
• reflect on what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century
• explore your own literate identities and practices
• examine the importance of the early years for literacies
• contemplate connections between home and school literate practices
• analyse the nexus between literacies, equity and access to education.

Rachel Burke

Literacies learning in the early years
Fundamental concepts of text, identities and access to education

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978-1-009-15403-1 — English and Literacies
Robyn Ewing, Siobhan O’Brien, Kathy Rushton, Lucy Stewart, Rachel Burke, Deb Brosseuk
Excerpt
More Information
Introduction

From the moment of birth, we are immersed in text. Images, sounds and sensations combine to provide the vast array of sensory input that informs our understandings of the world. Historically, the word ‘literacy’ was typically associated with the ability to read and write. Yet, throughout our lives, engagement with meaning occurs across a range of modalities, including aural, visual, digital, kinaesthetic and numerical. Being literate in the twenty-first century means being an empowered receiver, user and producer of diverse text types, communicated across multiple and rapidly changing modalities. Foundations for the complex cognitive repertoires, skill sets, sociocultural knowledge and textual understandings required for such literate practices are established in the early years, a period of remarkable growth that forms the basis for a lifetime of textual engagement.

This chapter provides an introduction to some of the fundamental concepts of literacies, commencing with a brief exploration of changing understandings of text and what it means to be literate within the increasingly dynamic and complex communicative environments of the twenty-first century. The chapter explores the importance of the early years in the development of literate practices, and the impact of literacies on lifelong patterns of educational inclusion and attainment, employment, and health and wellbeing. The significance of literate practices to identities and community connections is considered, together with the need for responsive, carefully scaffolded learning experiences that value diverse literate repertoires while offering inclusion in the textual practices embedded within schooling. Overall, the chapter provides a context for the key strategies and instructional approaches presented in the remainder of the book.

Changing definitions of text and literacies

_Literacy or literacies_ can be broadly defined as the complex repertoires of cognitive abilities and sociocultural knowledge that we use to engage with text. However, understandings of these repertoires and knowledge, and of text itself, have changed significantly throughout history and vary across and within different cultural contexts. It is important for teachers to be aware of the social, cultural and political factors that impact upon concepts of literacies and text, and the ongoing influences that continue to shape contemporary understandings. As Leu and Kinzer (2000) articulate:

> Literacy, therefore, may be thought of as a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do. As societal expectations for literacy change, and as the demands on literate functions in a society change, so too must definitions of literacy change to reflect this moving target. (p. 108)

**Historical interpretations of literacy**

Historically, in some parts of the world, literacy has been associated with the ability to read and write printed text. In fact, the English word ‘literacy’ derives from the Latin term _litteratus_ meaning to be ‘acquainted with letters or literature’, and Harris (1989) states that this term was used in ancient Roman times to indicate scholarliness and familiarity with Latin,
the language of law, governance and academia. For much of history, in many parts of the world, the ability to read and write was largely restricted to those people in governance roles who were charged with interpreting the content of legal and religious documents and relaying information to the wider population (Kern, 2015). While some members of the working classes could read, few had access to books, which were produced by hand and therefore limited in number. In some contexts, the capacity to read and write was a powerful means of control and a defining characteristic of authority (Gee, 2011), being widely considered to indicate higher social standing and intelligence, in what Graff (1981) refers to as the ‘Literacy Myth’.

With the advent of hand-operated printing presses featuring movable type in approximately 1440 CE (Wyse et al., 2013), written text became more accessible, and people from different social and economic classes came into more frequent contact with books and other printed materials. Kern (2015) cautions against considering the printing press to be ‘the second quantum leap forward after the invention of writing itself’ (p. 150), suggesting that such a view is Eurocentric and foregrounds the importance of the technology (which Kern contends existed across the Asian continent prior to its advent in Europe; see also Wyse et al., 2013) rather than the social and cultural circumstances in which the technology successfully contributed to the wider dissemination of printed text. Among the sociocultural conditions that provided a favourable context for facilitating the wider distribution of printed materials were economic factors, with printing identified as a means of profit, the availability of suitable raw materials on which to print text, and the increasing numbers of people who were print literate (Kern, 2015).

Although far from universal, reading became more widespread in many parts of the world due to these and other sociocultural changes, with exposure to new knowledge via printed materials leading to a democratisation of learning and greater access to documents pertaining to education and governance. As Johnson (2015) articulates: ‘Increased reading ability among the general population increasingly negated the once essential skill of extensive memorization while simultaneously increasing public demand for text and individuals who could read that text’ (p. 111). The wider population was no longer reliant on ruling classes to interpret and convey the written word, and this had important implications for people who were previously dependent on others to access information. In some ways, the impact of these events on popular access to knowledge may therefore be compared to the societal transformation generated by the internet and the advent of digitally accessible text in the late twentieth century.

Often referred to as print literacy, the repertoire of knowledge and skills required to read and write is central to communication within a society in which printed text is afforded great significance. In recognition of the role of print literacy in facilitating access to education, employment opportunities, social mobility and health care, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established the Experimental World Literacy Program in 1966, declaring literacy to be a fundamental human right. Importantly, print literacy is recognised both as a human right in itself and an instrument for attaining other human rights, such as political, health, legal and economic rights (Read Educational Trust, 2020). While this part of the chapter discusses some of the social and historical factors regarding the reading and writing of printed text, as well as contemporary print literacy rates,
it is important to remember that these repertoires do not operate in isolation but are used in collaboration with many other ways of making meaning (New London Group, 1996). We discuss these interrelationships in more detail throughout the chapter and the book.

Contemporary Rates of Print Literacy

Print literacy – the ability to read and write – is not one skill or knowledge set but consists of many different microskills (Brown, 2001) or underlying resources and repertoires (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Teachers need to be familiar with the various forms of knowledge required to be print literate and understand how these resources interact to allow us to engage meaningfully with text (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Chapter 6 provides a detailed examination of the various repertoires of knowledge required for print literacy, such as understanding the relationships between letters or characters and sounds, knowledge of vocabulary, spelling and word formation, and understanding how textual features vary according to sociocultural context and author intentions. Chapter 6 introduces the four resources, or roles, of the reader framework (Freebody & Luke, 1990) as a way of conceptualising how these different repertoires work together, and the chapter also explores the interrelationships between print literacy and other forms of engaging with meaning, such as oracy, numeracy, visual, digital and intercultural literacy.

In the twenty-first century, print literacy is more widespread than at any other time in human history (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2018). While it is estimated that only 12 per cent of the world’s population could read and write in 1820, by 2016, 84 per cent of people were print literate (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2018). Yet it is important to recognise that there are still large populations of people who are without access to reading and writing in contexts where these forms of engaging with text are central to life opportunities. Of the 16 per cent of people worldwide without print literacy, women and those living below the poverty line are disproportionately represented (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2018). Given the important correlations between print literacy and a range of quality-of-life indicators, including educational attainment, income, health and nutrition, and rates of unemployment, mortality, incarceration and life expectancy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017), this continued exclusion from print literacy practices for approximately 16 per cent of the global population is extremely troubling. Importantly, exclusion from print literacy can result from, and continue to perpetuate, social inequalities and injustices.

Reflection

1. What would your life be like without print literacy? Think about what opportunities and experiences might be inaccessible. Which professional networks or social events may be closed to you? Would you have other literate practices that might assist you to engage with text? How might your sense of self and identity be affected if you were without print literacy?
In Australia, the rates of print literacy are comparatively high, with most Year 5 learners estimated to have achieved ‘at or above the minimum standards for reading in 2018’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2020). However, despite this high national attainment of print literacy, there are various populations that are disproportionately represented in lower levels of print literacy achievement. In 2018, learners in Year 5 attending schools in ‘remote (85%) and very remote (54%) areas were less likely to achieve at or above the reading minimum’ than their peers who attended school in urban centres (96%) (AIHW, 2020). Learners using English as an additional language/dialect (EAL/D) were also marginally ‘less likely to achieve at or above the minimum standards in reading (93%)’ than their English-language-background peers (AIHW, 2020). Further, Year 5 learners from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds achieved the reading rate by 77 per cent compared with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers, who achieved the rate at 96 per cent (AIHW, 2020). While there are many complex factors associated with the assessment and reporting of print literacy attainment, it is important for all teachers to be aware of these patterns of achievement and to critically consider issues of equity, inclusion and approaches to education.

Chapter 3 explores issues related to literacies attainment and reporting in Australia, reflects on approaches to literacies assessment and evaluation, and emphasises the importance of responding to the diverse strengths and needs of all learners, including those who are required to make complex transitions between home and school literate practices (Curry et al., 2016; Lee-James & Washington, 2018; Lo Bianco, 2013; Oliver et al., 2021; Wigglesworth & Simpson, 2018). Later in this chapter, we consider the ‘home/school connection’ and how some learners may be more familiar with the literate requirements of formal schooling and assessment due to similarities with their literate practices at home (Gee, 2011; Heath, 1983; Schleppegrell, 2008). All learners have ‘primary’ literate practices (Gee, 2011); these ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992) are unique to their cultural and social communities and reflect complex and interconnected identities related to ethnicity, culture and location (Moje et al., 2004; Moll et al., 1989; Vygotsky, 1978). It is important that teachers recognise and value diverse linguistic and literate practices that may differ from those foregrounded in the schooling system, and that they support learners to make connections with the textual practices required for schooling.