

Defining Literacy – A Brief Discussion

Purpose

This document was developed by the Agency of Education (AOE) to support the Advisory Council on Literacy in performing their duties as defined in Act 28 of 2021.

Introduction

Act 28 of 2021 defines its purpose as “to continue the ongoing work to improve literacy for all students in the State [...]” and refers to “methods of teaching literacy in the five key areas of literacy instruction, as identified by the National Reading Panel.” These five areas are phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension. While these five areas constitute foundational reading skills and contribute to the definition of literacy as a whole, they do not constitute a complete definition of literacy for an individual over time. What follows is a brief discussion of how the definition of literacy changes over time to reflect the increasing complexity of what it means to be a literate individual at different developmental stages.

Defining Literacy

There are multiple definitions of *literacy*, many of which go beyond the ability to read. The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) defines literacy as “the practices of engaging—creating, consuming, and critiquing—with all kinds of multimodal texts” ([NCTE, 2018](#)). As referenced in Act 28, the five key components of literacy instruction provide the foundation for movement along the literacy continuum over time.

In a position paper about adolescent literacy, NCTE explains that literacy “encompasses much more than reading and includes writing, and a variety of social and intellectual practices, including digital and interdisciplinary literacies. Literacy learning is an ongoing and non-hierarchical process in which each academic content area poses its own literacy approaches and challenges” ([NCTE, 2018](#)). Furthermore, NCTE describes the intricate and interwoven components of literacy:

Literacy has always been a collection of communicative and sociocultural practices shared among communities. As society and technology change, so does literacy. The world demands that a literate person possess and intentionally apply a wide range of skills, competencies, and dispositions. These literacies are interconnected, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with histories, narratives, life possibilities, and social trajectories of all individuals and groups. ([NCTE, 2019](#))

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The NCTE Standing Committee on Global Citizenship points out that, “While our focus must and should be on providing everyone everywhere with the tools to ‘identify, understand, interpret, create, and communicate in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich, and fast changing world,’ those persistent inequitable power structures dictate that progress will always be lopsided and slow” and goes on to define literacy more broadly as “the way that we interact with the world around us, how we shape it and are shaped by it. It is how we communicate with others via reading and writing, but also by speaking, listening, and creating. It is how we articulate our experience in the world and declare, ‘We Are Here!’” ([NCTE, 2020](#)). Similarly, NCTE says this about reading instruction:

Reading is a sociocultural activity in which readers construct meaning from text through the lenses of culture and personal experience (Barton, 2007; Gutierrez, 2008; Perry, 2012). Contrary to popular conceptions of the act of reading, readers do not merely ‘decode’ or ‘unlock’ meanings encoded by authors... Readers must construct responsible readings (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) that take account of the text, the reader’s assessment of the author’s intentions, the reader’s background knowledge and experience, the sociocultural context, and the activity of which reading is always a part...From this perspective, readers don’t learn to read once and for all as much as they learn to read particular texts, in particular ways, for particular purposes, and in particular contexts (Gee, 1990; Wallace, 2003). The purpose of reading instruction, then, is to expand the range of ways and purposes for which students read. ([NCTE, 2019](#))

In [Reading as Liberation - An Examination of the Research Base](#), Student Achievement Partners describe the focus of an English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum as “learning to read, reading and listening to content-rich texts widely and deeply, and responding to what they read through lively discussions and writing” ([SAP, 2021](#)). The authors go on to discuss what they call the “five essential components of literacy: the accelerators for every student learning to read and use language capably” ([SAP, 2021](#)). These include:

1. Making sure students learn how to read: securing solid foundational reading skills early on in students’ school careers (ideally by grade three) so students can continually develop as fluent readers in every grade level thereafter.
2. Growing knowledge of the world so students develop a trove of knowledge to reference whenever they read.
3. Expanding the vocabulary children bring with them through a volume of reading and word study.
4. Marshalling evidence and communicating it when speaking and writing about what the text is conveying.
5. Deepening understanding of what is read through regular reading of ever richer, more complex text, with supports as needed for universal access and success. ([SAP, 2021](#))

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) explains that at the “heart of the Common Core State Standards is a focus on literacy instruction that centers on careful examination of texts—reading closely and drawing evidence from the text to support inferences and judgments made (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012a, 2012b). The ability to read a variety of text types, including increasingly complex texts, is another key component of being college and career ready” ([SBAC, 2015](#)). According to Wixson and Lipson, “The CCSS-ELA provide an

integrated view of literacy and language, highlighting the areas within the ELA — reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language” (p. 388). Because of this integrated view of literacy, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA describes a “portrait” of students who are college and career ready: “As students advance through the grades and master the standards in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, they are able to exhibit with increasing fullness and regularity these capacities of the literate individual” ([CCSS ELA](#)).

Resources

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (n.d.). *Students Who are College and Career Ready in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language*.

National Council of Teachers of English (2018, July 17). [A Call to Action: What We Know About Adolescent Literacy Instruction](#).

National Council of Teachers of English (2019, November 7). [Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age](#).

National Council of Teachers of English (2018, October 25). [Literacy Assessment: Definitions, Principles, and Practices](#).

National Council of Teachers of English (2019, December 5). [The Act of Reading: Instructional Foundations and Policy Guidelines](#).

Peterson, A. (2020, March 23). [Literacy is More than Just Reading and Writing](#). National Council of Teachers of English.

Pimental, S. & Liben, M. (2021). [Reading as Liberation – An Examination of the Research Base](#). Achieve the Core.

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (2015). [Content Specifications for the Summative Assessment of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects](#).

Vermont Agency of Education (2019). [Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, PreK through Third Grade](#).

Wixson, K., and Lipson, M. (2012). [Relations Between the CCSS and RTI in Literacy and Language](#). *The Reading Teacher*, 65(6), 387-391.