Introduction

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This book is one of two readers adopting a cross disciplinary approach to understanding and working with those who experience difficulties with literacy. Both readers highlight current political and research based issues in an area of education which is currently under intense political, professional and public scrutiny. This book, *Understanding Difficulties in Literacy Development: Issues and Concepts*, adopts a broader view of difficulties in literacy and related educational and curriculum learning issues across a range of ages, phases and settings.

The authors of the chapters challenge ways of thinking about current policy and research based debates and issues related to the addressing and assessment of literacy difficulties. They argue for practices that take into account the need to build bridges between learners' experience and wider political concerns and tensions when determining the efficacy of literacy programmes and curriculum policy. They also cover current debates and concerns in relation to socially negotiated ideas, programmes and policies intended to address literacy and literacy difficulties across the phases and ages from early childhood to adulthood. The book's authors draw upon different disciplinary and methodological perspectives to bring together policy analysis, research and professional perspectives from different international educational settings and contexts to raise and address the background and broader questions and issues related to recent developments intended to address literacy difficulties.

Brought together in one volume, these chapters demonstrate that educators, professionals, policy makers, and the public need to move beyond a focus upon the acquisition of individual skills and views of the teaching of reading as a neutral technical process. These chapters also collectively provide a greater understanding of the political and socially embedded nature of literacy and literacy difficulties and associated curriculum policies and programmes, and how they impact upon the identity and agency of literacy learners. The companion reader, *Approaching Difficulties in Literacy Development: Assessment, Pedagogy and Programmes,* takes up the themes raised in this book to examine in greater detail the implications of these issues for specific pedagogies, literacy programmes, and assessment.

The first section of the book considers 'What is literacy?' and 'What are difficulties in literacy?' These questions are examined in chapters which unpack the contemporary and changing understandings of literacy and the nature of learning to read in relation to developments in technology and understandings related to literacy difficulties and dyslexia.

The first piece is the introductory chapter from Naz Rassool's seminal book *Literacy for Sustainable Development in the Age of Information* (Rassool, 1999). In this chapter, he explores the 'multidimensional' nature of literacy in order to reveal the social purposes which underpin literacy and can be seen to drive everyday practices and the way people engage with literacy. Rassool highlights the way literacy studies has provided answers to the question 'What is literacy?' which stretch beyond viewing literacy as a set of neutral

skills related to the decoding and production of text. He highlights the need to understand literacy in relation to social practices linked to ideology, culture, knowledge and power. This enables him to explore the politics and interdisciplinary struggles between experimental psychologists, psycholinguists and New Literacy Studies and critical literacy theorists. In this chapter, and in the original book, Rassool demonstrates how the use of an interdisciplinary approach enables us to view literacy in relation to both the individual and broader contextual issues which are key to shaping both policy and practice.

The second chapter in this section is by David Johnson and Gunther Kress who are founding academics in the emerging field of 'New Literacy Studies'. This chapter draws upon three central themes within New Literacy Studies to argue that we need to re-evaluate how literacy is conceptualized, taught and assessed. Johnson and Kress examine the way in which assessment is increasingly driven by unitary standards with an emphasis on 'basic skills', rather than meaning and understanding in an age when we are experiencing immense changes in our work and everyday life, increasing diversity and plurality and rather than 'basic literacy skills' currently highlighted in our literacy curricula. The chapter concludes by considering how new understandings of cognition and learning can be drawn upon to redesign pedagogy and assessment.

The last chapter in Part 1 uses a very different disciplinary lens to illustrate the different ways we may examine, understand and conceptualize literacy. This chapter has been specifically written for this book by Janet Soler. It draws upon a social history perspective to trace the development of current definitions and understandings of dyslexia and to reveal how their historical construction and changing and contested definitions of dyslexia have had an impact upon public and professional views in the higher education sector. Her chapter relates the historical development and changing definitions of dyslexia to social justice issues that are emerging in higher education. This is an area where assessments and the diagnosis of dyslexia has come to the fore, with recent legislation resulting in funding being linked to the diagnosis of dyslexia.

The second section of this book considers the major issues and concepts in public debates which arise from differing conceptions of literacy. The teaching of reading and the improving of literacy standards are currently the subject of intense national and international interest, which has led to high profile public and professional debates. Concerns over how to address difficulties in literacy have become the focus of government, policy makers and the public in general, as attention over the past decade has increasingly focused on the raising of literacy standards. This has given rise to specific policy initiatives, national literacy strategies, interventions and programmes related to preventing and addressing literacy difficulties and developing reading skills.

The authors of the first chapter in this section; Morag Stuart, Rhona Stainthorp and Maggie Snowling, are arguing for the 'Simple View of Reading' as a new framework. The Rose Report in England recommended the 'reconstruction' of the Searchlights model which underpinned the National Literacy Strategy. Stuart et al. relate the Simple View of Reading to the Searchlights model of reading, and argue that the Simple View of Reading can account for, and contribute to, understandings of reading as a complex activity.

Victoria Purcell-Gates debates the 'Simple View of Reading' from a different disciplinary and national perspective. Purcell-Gates argues for 'embracing complexity' given her analysis of socio-cultural factors, and the complexities of literacy development revealed by a socio-cultural view. She is concerned that a 'one size fits all' which is currently being emphasized in the United States does not take into account the diversity of socio-cultural contexts. She

therefore advocates the collection of empirical data that covers cognitive skills related to literacy development and the contexts and interactions within which literacy practices take place in everyday lives.

John Beech focuses upon another issue related to learning. His critique of Ehri's influential four phases of reading development demonstrates, as we have seen in the chapters above, that there can be as many differences amongst literacy researchers based within disciplines as between those from different disciplinary perspectives. Anne Williams and Eve Gregory draw upon a socio-cultural view to provide further insights into the complexity surrounding literacy. While reading difficulties have been attributed to cultural differences between home and school literacy practice, this paper provides evidence of the ways in which literacy practices can also be blended practices which reflect the values of both the community and the school.

Joe Burns and Paul Bracey use case study research to look at the issue of boys' under-achievement. They argue that their evidence shows that raising literacy levels is a key element for all the schools in their case studies. Geoff Payne in the final chapter in this section focuses upon adult education in his exploration of the conceptualization, issues and debates surrounding illiteracy.

The third section of the book explores examples of the development of nationally based literacy curriculum policy initiatives and the way in which they reflect responses to public debates, research and professionally based issues, and conceptions of learning to read for those who experience difficulties with literacy. Roger Beard outlines the research evidence which influenced the 1998 National Literacy Strategy. His paper highlights the research contexts which forged the strategy and the influence of literacy studies research as well as other perspectives, drawn from areas from beyond literacy studies such as school effectiveness based research.

Kathy Hall examines the debates surrounding the role of phonics, which have arisen with the review of early reading in the 2006 Rose Report. Hall's chapter picks up themes related to phonics and synthetic phonics, which have been explored in Part 2. Her analysis in this chapter examines the research literature underpinning the Rose report and associated debates. She balances this with an examination of the policy contexts which have fostered the ascendancy of synthetic phonics.

Janet Soler and Roger Openshaw pick up the themes related to the teaching of reading and early literacy acquisition and provide evidence which clearly indicates that although both countries draw upon the same body of international research, there has been a marked difference in policy responses to the teaching of phonics in England and New Zealand. They argue that the highly politicized debates over the teaching of phonetic knowledge are linked to alliances and struggles between different interest groups in the professional, academic and political spheres. This section concludes with a chapter by Mary Hamilton, Catherine Macrae and Lyn Tett, who provide an overview of the policy contexts which have recently shaped basic adult education (ABE) in the UK and Ireland and relate these to wider issues and themes.

In the fourth section we examine how these issues and conceptualizations of the process of learning to read and becoming literate transcend 'the educational settings and extend into the school/place home and school. This section emphasizes the ways in which experiences of difficulties in becoming literate impact upon agency, identity and participation with others, and the ways in which individual agency and learners' identities can be enhanced and extended to transform the experiences of literacy learners.

Bob Burden reviews the literature to examine issues associated with the identities and self concepts of dyslexic children. He concludes that there is a lack of research into how dyslexic children and adults 'make sense' of their disability. His review shows that there is a clear association between early and continuing literacy difficulties and that these have serious consequences for those who experience reading difficulties. David Pollak draws upon New Literacy Studies in the following chapter to provide a New Literacies based perspective on the themes raised in Burden's literature review. Pollak examines the constituent parts of the self-concept and relates them to dyslexia.

The fifth and final section picks up the themes and issues explored in the previous sections and considers the tensions arising from the social construction and historical development of literacy difficulties as learning disabilities and the implications for social justice and equity. Alfredo Artiles argues from a socio-cultural and cultural theory perspective in this chapter that inclusion in education systems deals with 'difference' in contexts which are 'highly charged' political and cultural climates. In order to infuse a social justice dimension that moves beyond merely addressing disability at the individual level to a much wider social inclusion of disability, he notes that we must take into account the dynamics, complexities and nuances of social and cultural interactions.

Ray McDermott, Shelley Goldman and Hervé Varenne, who are based in the United States, pick up the themes explored in Artiles' *Learning disabilities* chapter and relate them specifically to learning disabilities (LD). Learning Disabilities are the equivalent of specific learning difficulties (SpLD) in the United Kingdom and include dyslexia. Like Artiles, they draw upon cultural theory to explore ways of thinking about LD/SpLD. Their chapter provides us with some insights from a socio-cultural viewpoint regarding the politics surrounding LD/SpLDs and claims that they are a 'middle-class' phenomenon. Above all, their analysis provides insights into the way in which the social production of learning disabilities may be perpetuated by the conditions and culture of the school as an institution and educational setting.

Reference

Rassool, Naz (1999) *Literacy for Sustainable Development in the Age of Information*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.