Tracing the Definition of Literacy and Making Out-Of-School *Literacies* Visible in Ghanaian Schools

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Abstract

This paper explores the changing definition of literacy to *literacies* and discusses how out-of-school *literacies* can be made to positively impact school literacy in Ghana and other communities. Recent research has shown that there are multiple literacies in addition to school literacy that individuals use to negotiate their lives as members of any community. Using published literature, the paper develops an argument that the definition of literacy has changed and that out-of-school literacy has a functional place in the development of school literacy in Ghanaian schools and schools elsewhere.

The traditional definitions of literacy have been considered largely to refer to reading and writing that are gained from school and school-related activities. The value of school and school-related reading comes from the traditional division of societies into oral and print societies and the common assumption that oral societies are less developed and civilized than print societies. Most Ghanaians describe people who cannot read and write in English as illiterates. Such designations do not take into account the concepts of multiple literacies and the issue of making out-of-school literacy as important as reading and writing. In recent times, the traditional definition of literacy has drawn attention to itself as a simple and ineffective way of defining the concept of literacy. It has been necessary for researchers and educators to review the definition of literacy because what it meant to be literate some years past is different from being literate in our contemporary world. Schools have changed, societies have changed and the practices for reading and writing too have changed. There is therefore the need for a careful look at the changing definitions of literacy so that schools can benefit from other forms of literacies.

Defining Literacy Traditionally

Literacy has been defined traditionally as an ability to engage in the use of print and numeracy (Venezky. 1990); "the ability to decode and comprehend written language at a rudimentary level" (Kaestle. 1985); and as "mastery over the processes by means of which culturally significant information is coded" (Castell & Luke. 1983), among others. Most of these traditional definitions point to the fact that literacy is related to language. However, the link between literacy and language is always set to equate literacy to reading and writing, thus making print societies those that practise literacy. Goody and Watt (1968), in their classical essay on the consequences of literacy explain that the print and oral societies have different ways of processing literacy and that the print society is more literate because it has a way of transmitting history and culture by permanently recorded version of history whereas the oral society transmits its history and culture by word of mouth. According to Goody and Watt literacy is also linked to civilization because the print societies were able to record their past experiences that is why they were able to develop the alphabet and writing, a mark of civilization.

Ong (1982) also contends that oral societies did not engage in reading and writing because such societies permanently recorded thoughts culture and history before using mnemonics and formulas to recall and retain thoughts. The oral tradition of storing information is therefore not seen as an activity of developed people. Kaestle (1985), however, explains that linking literacy to these concepts and drawing binaries between oral and print societies is only a concept projected by historians because historians created this image by linking literacy to democracy, technology, economy and circuit models. The historians also asserted that print societies read books, used technology and had a lot more economic power than the oral societies. This perception, that literacy is a practice of print societies, has created an image of print society as more developed than oral society, and defined literacy as basic reading and writing skills needed for development and civilization, thus investing print societies with some cognitive advancement.

Scribner and Cole (1981) question the speculations that there is cognitive consequence that comes out of print and reading. They find no truth in the statement that reading and writing entail fundamental cognitive restrictions that control intellectual performance in various domains. They

explain that literacy is not just about reading and writing or English because literacy practices are created by social organizations. The authors assert that even in what is usually labeled as oral societies, there is some form of print. Their classic study of the Vai people of Liberia showed that the Vais used three different languages for different literacy practices. For the Vais, the various functions in the different languages served as literacy practices.

The example of the Vais shows that what the society, whether print or oral, creates as literacy practices carries values in those societies. The study of Scribner and Cole takes away the binaries that the historians in Kaestle's work put the two societies. Defining literacy in terms of reading and writing skills does not fully address the problem because there is a fundamental question of what reading and writing should be used for. If reading and writing are only for the sake of acquiring the skills, then there is a question with how the skills translate into civilization and development. The question of defining literacy answer to all the facets of language use has led many researchers to the use of metaphors to describe literacy.

As a way of moving from the single definition of reading and writing, literacy has been metaphorically explained as adaptation, power and a state of grace (Scribner, 1984); as economic capital and power (Bourdieu, 1977; Stromquist, 2002), as resource (Brandt, 2000) and as identity (Kramsch, 1998). Each of these descriptions is informed by particular motivations and orientations. But as Knoblauch (1990) says, what makes any definition of literacy powerful is the ability of the people to make literacy visible. Making literacy visible means bringing other literacies that otherwise may not be recognized as legitimate literacies to the fore of education and research.

Shifting Definitions of Literacy

The need for a shifting definition of literacy is because the complex and diverse society of our contemporary times demands a new kind of knowledge and competencies that cannot be achieved only through the basic skills of reading and writing. Communication has changed to include advanced technological and media methodologies. Again, our changing societies have taken on different contexts for literacies other than school and there is the need to expand the definition of literacy to include these new developments (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Kalantzis, Cope & Harvey, 2003; Gee, 2000; Street, 2004).

The multiple definitions of literacies or multiliteracies started with the New London Group, a group of scholars and literacy researchers that first met in New London in September 1994 to discuss the trends in literacy and pedagogy in relation to their special cultural backgrounds and needs. Their theory of multiliteracies indicates that there are multiple channels of communication, diverse cultures and languages that need to be incorporated into pedagogy in order for pedagogy to be representative (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). "Multiliteracies" is used by the New London Group to refer to different multiple modes of meaning that have been redesigned from available historical designs of meanings to incorporate new and changing meanings from texts. It includes the multiple differences in communicative channels, the diverse nature of culture and languages, and the relationship between traditional meaning of literacy and broader meanings associated with the use of language and text.

The new definition of literacy therefore expands its meaning from the traditional definition to include other practices such as visual, audio-visual, and spatial patterns of meaning that originally were not thought to be literacy practices. In most of these new definitions, literacy has been described as a socially situated construct.

Barton and Hamilton (2003) define literacy as a social practice that is situated in times and places. They refer to literacy practices as cultural ways of using language; literacy events as activities where literacy has a role and involves text, and text as a key tool in any literacy. This social practice involves participants, setting, artifacts, and activities. For Barton and Hamilton, literacy changes over time and in different places, meaning each society has activities in different domains that it considers to be literacy practices. These domains may include school literacy, but that is not the sole domain for literacy. Heath (1983) explains that literacy is represented differently in different societies because the notions of literacy differ by different variables including race, social class, community, and even towns. Literacy therefore cannot be equated to how one group of people use language; thus, questioning whether the traditional definitions are tenable.

The New Literacies Studies group, which also came up due to the changing definitions of literacy also advocates redefining literacy as a social activity. However, they go further than the New London Group to include applying discourse analysis to the research. The main research focus for this group is a link between home and school literacies. Like the New London

Group, the New Literacies Studies group places literacy in a social context as a component of everyday social life of a given society, thus taking away the question of universality of reading and writing skills. Situating literacy in societies shows that literacy does not exist on its own as school-based skills, but it also exists in ordinary everyday lives of individuals and communities. In order for school literacy to be part of students' lives, there is the need to incorporate it into students' own cultures by learning how their cultures prepare members from childhood into adult literate life (Willinsky, 1990).

Adults as Sponsors of Literacies

The concept of multiliteracies validates the diversity of different literacies and promotes the inclusion rather than marginalization. Expanding the definition of literacy to multiliteracies means including the practices and events of adults, which invariably are usually out-of-school literacies. In Ghana, such literacies would include the use of language in libation, for proverbs, folktales and even dirges.

Public and media descriptions of adults in most communities have mostly dwelt on adults as non readers (Hull, 1993). In Ghana, when educators talk about reading, they focus on students rather than adults. The reason why we do not concern ourselves with adult reading is that we perceive reading to be an activity for school. This perception does not account for other literacy practices that adults engage in. Adults engage in home literacy practices, community practices and events, church activities, and many other social practices where they use language and text (Brandt, 2001). If the definition of literacy has shifted to multiple and socially situated literacies, then educational researchers and the general public need to look at these areas too as domains for literacy practices and events because these domains are also capable of informing and shaping the lives and identities of the younger generation who are in school.

Research has shown that these same social domains provide a foundation for the child before the child even goes to school (Purcell Gates, 2000; Brandt, 2001). Brandt (2001) tells the stories of 80 Americans and how they gained literacy. The stories show that literacy is not gained from only school and that there are other institutions and people in the society who sponsor the literacy of others. Brandt defines sponsors as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model,

as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it someway". The sponsors, she continues may include "older relatives, teachers, religious leaders, supervisors, military officers, librarians, friends, editors, influential authors", among others. If one looks at the list of literacy sponsors that she identifies in the lives of the people she studied, one can say that literacy learning is done in our everyday lives.

The sponsors she lists can be found in the ordinary daily lives of Ghanaian pupils and students, and the practices or events they engage in are most of the time not prescribed by school curriculum. Some years past, storytelling, riddles and other out-of-school literacies were on the school time table and teachers were obliged to teach them. In recent times the literacies have been relegated to the background and most of the time replaced with "examinable subjects". The replacement does not take into account the issue of taking away the culture and social values that these out-of-school literacies inculcate in the pupils. There are different kinds of literacies at home, and the nature and content of these literacies come from the diverse cultural histories and languages that are valued in the home (Gadsden, 2002). These literacies are situated in the cultures of the pupils and the students in the Ghanaian schools.

Defining literacy as socially situated means we must make room for the recognition of other languages and cultures because homes are different, cultures are diverse and multiple languages exist in societies. This is one value of multiliteracies that Ghana should not overlook, especially because Ghana is such a multilingual country. Literacy includes people's awareness, values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships (Street 2004), and home literacy practices are factors that inform these attitudes. For example, the culture of family, family values and family vocations are learned through apprenticeship at home. If home, family and intergenerational literacies are so important in the definition of multiliteracies, how can these literacies which are mostly considered out-of school literacies be made part of school literacy?

School and Out-of-School Literacies

The shifting definition of literacy to multiliteracies is because literacies are embedded in families, cultures of societies and individuals. The question that comes up is why school literacy has become the literacy that is valued? It is because the traditional definition of literacy was based

on school literacy. The forgotten part about literacy is that through communal collaboration elders of most African countries, including Ghana, are able to sponsor the young ones to acquire the knowledge and skills that make them responsible members of their families and community (Miller & Vander Lei, 1990).

The family provides a foundational role for the child and so the child goes to school with a wealth of knowledge on how to use language (Gadsden, 2002; Sheridan, Street & Bloom, 2000). However, school does not continue with the development of this wealth of knowledge because most of the time, the family culture is not recognized by school. Family cultures and learning styles such as the use of story telling are sometimes described in deficit terms and the child is directly or indirectly made to believe that his or her home literacies are not worth learning or keeping. Both parents and children themselves have complex literacy goals, beliefs and values. In recent times, parents have not shown much enthusiasm in the practice of out-of-school literacies such as story telling in schools. Even the use of Ghanaian languages in school is frowned upon by most middle-class parents. Parent would want teachers to use English to teach even the lower classes although research has shown that if children are taught at the early ages in their own language they do better in school. However, some Ghanaian parents still believe that our cultural values should be taught in schools. If there is a complete break between home and school, then the child who should be prepared by school for the community, society, or home, may end up getting education that will not make him or her functional in these contexts.

Another reason why school literacy should be spiced with out-of-school literacies is that contemporary school literacy has been designed to focus on skills, standardized testing, grades, and other skill deterministic methods. School literacy has been designed to prepare children through a form of education that should give them certificates and grades. These are good skills to develop but they are not the only skills needed for real adult life. The question then is, how is school preparing students for lifelong literacy practices? Are students being taught to engage reading the way adults do in real life or are they reading canons for school literacy practices?

There should be a shift from this divergence to make both school literacy and out-of-school literacies work together for the good of the child. This is because cultural discontinuity between school and home affects

literacy learning of children. They end up gaining school literacy and losing their own culture, family vocation, and family values if school does not recognize these. On the other hand, if school literacy is taken out completely from other literacies, then children would keep to their home literacies and lose school literacy.

The focus on literacy as designed by school curriculum alone should shift to include what the society expects from literacy. According to Willinsky (1990), if society expects individuals to perform specific tasks for their personal interest or for society's gain, they should be taught the specific activities directly. In literacy learning, children are being taught to engage in literacy practices that will give them membership of their communities and these literacy practices should include what their communities do with language and text in addition to reading and writing. How literacy is used should be a determining factor in what goes into literacy programmes and not just the acquisition of universal skills.

Instead of creating a gap between literacies by the way we define literacy, the boundaries between school and home need to be taken out in order to encourage exchanges of cultural patterns and practices (Heath, 1983). Bridging this gap will minimize the differences between cultures and promote understanding among cultures. To make literacy a real social process in students' lives, as defined by the New London Group, students should be made to combine school literacy with multiliteracies from the community, home, church and from settings other than school so that they can go through the process of learning to be members of their communities.

Though the New London Group, the New Literacy Studies, and many more educational researchers have situated literacy in society, recent trends in literacy research is asking that literacy researchers and educators look beyond the "local literacies" to distant communities. The terms "local' and "distant" literacies, only bring out contemporary ideological societies in which literacies are situated. The changing technology and communication in the world coupled with new workplaces and industrial capitalism demands a critical look at literacy and new educational responses. The new basics in learning do not mean a change in multiliteracies but rather "a visible example of broader trends within the new economy which suggests the need for new orientations to knowledge" (Kalantzis, Cope & Harvey, 2004). These new discussions in recent research hint on the complexities in

defining literacy and how globalization is changing the definition. As Stromquist (2003) argues, globalization promises education in terms of its importance in everyday life in relation to acquisition of material production and life success and educators need to know that ideology plays a role in shaping education and the changing world. The shift in focus now goes to prove that the definition of literacy will keep changing with time and new experiences. Obviously, not every community is an equal participant in the globalization process. It is laudable that Brandt and others are redefining literacy to include global ideological influences. However, the tendency in drawing binaries (local versus distant) is to categorize concepts into set boxes of either. . or entities.

Implications for Education

Instead of expecting that school literacy should inform home, multiple literacies from other social domains, such as home, family and community too should be brought to inform school literacy.

In order for literacy to include both school and out-of-school practices, there should be a relationship between school and home literacies. Parents should be made partners of school. They should be invited to get involved in the literacy learning of their children in school so that they can provide cultural literacies that will act as funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) and models for students. It gives confidence to parents if they are invited to take active part in their children's school and learning processes, knowing that their own literacies are valued. These visits of parents to classrooms will help teachers to understand and adopt alternative ways of teaching to reach all students For example, storytelling and apprenticeship which are common practices in our Ghanaian culture can be used in collaborative learning.

Also, to help students to engage in lifelong literacies the school curriculum development should be informed by what adults read. There is the need to modify school curriculum to include forms of reading that students will grow up to use. For example, the print media, such as newspapers, advertisements, and other forms of literacies that adults engage in will be useful supplementary readers to the approved textbooks and other readers. Knowing that adults read for leisure, for occupation demands and for community socialization, teachers can help develop these reading skills in students by supplementing textbooks from media and popular culture.

They should also look beyond the community to see what distant ideological and power structures influence their literacy pedagogy so that they can deal with that without affecting what students learn. For example, advertisement is ideological and can be used to control the reader who is a consumer. Students should be taught how to read such material so that in their adult life they can make use of that literacy.

Furthermore, as an extended practice, educators and literacy professionals can work with school districts and libraries to emphasize the relative and lifelong nature of literacy. Students can then focus on reading and writing for social involvement rather than just for the reading to pass examinations.

Conclusion

Looking at the shifting definitions of literacy, Ghanaians need to change their perception of what we consider to be literacy. We should move from defining literacy only in terms of school literacy. It also means schools should incorporate literacies that are based on out-of-school practices in the school curriculum. There are many literacy sponsors in most Ghanaian communities. Sponsors such as chiefs, elders, parents and knowledgeable adults can be invited into schools to communicate such practices to pupils and students. These adults could be used as resource persons for language practices that lead to lifelong literacy practices, for inculcating cultural values and beliefs, for developing the culture of ethnic tolerance among students through providing them with knowledge on the cultural values of ethnic groups other than the students' own, as well as bridging the gap between school and home. The shifting definition of literacy to literacies makes room for these literacy events as part of the curriculum that are as important as the subjects that are examined as requirements for further educational pursuits.

Tracing the various definitions of literacy, one can say that literacy is not an isolated school-based skill of reading and writing (as defined by the traditional definitions) but a social process that involves everyday use of language and text in different settings (including schools), cultures and times. It is therefore more useful to define literacy in terms of multiple literacies.

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