Defining Literacy – Research Excerpts

Purpose

This document was developed by the Agency of Education (AOE) to support the Advisory Council on Literacy (Council) in performing their duties as defined in Act 28 of 2021. What follows is a set of excerpts from research and resources to support the development of a definition of literacy to guide the Council's work.

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.

Research Excerpts

From *The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)*

- "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).
- 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).
- "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

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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).

- "Ultimately, an effective literacy learning environment immerses children in a language 'bath' that includes regular opportunities to learn and use various forms of oral and written language as a means of drawing on their background knowledge in support of classroom learning and to fulfill a wide range of purposes with a variety of audiences in different (sociocultural) settings" (NCTE, 2019).

- "Literacy refers to the practices of engaging—creating, consuming, and critiquing–with all kinds of multimodal texts…Literacy assessment refers to decision-making processes resulting in an examination of students' performance on literacy tasks as described above; literacy assessments, which include all aspects of such assessments, range from formative response to student writing to the design of higher-stakes assessments" (NCTE, 2018).

- "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. In addition to content-area literacies, adolescents rely on out-of-school literacies in their identity development. Part of the belief system underlying this statement is that students often have literacy skills that are not made evident in the classroom and teachers must make special efforts to include them (Morgan, 1997)" (NCTE, 2018).

- "Literacy is a dynamic interaction of the social and cognitive realms, with textual understandings growing from students' knowledge of their worlds to knowledge of the external world (Langer, 2002). All students need to go beyond the study of discrete skills and strategies to understand how those skills and strategies are integrated with life experiences. Langer et al. found that literacy programs that successfully teach at-risk students emphasize connections between students' lives, prior knowledge, and texts, and emphasize student conversations to make those connections" (NCTE, 2018).

- "Effective literacy programs move students to deeper understandings and greater independence of reading texts while increasing their ability to generate ideas and knowledge (Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997). Utilizing a model of reading instruction focused on basic skills devoid of meaning can lead to the mislabeling of some secondary readers as 'struggling readers' and 'non-readers' because they lack extensive reading experience, depend on different prior knowledge, and/or comprehend differently or in more complex ways. A large percentage of secondary readers who are so mislabeled are students of color, newly arrived students, and/or students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Abundant research suggests that the isolated skill instruction they receive may perpetuate low literacy achievement rather than improve their competence and

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engagement in complex reading tasks (Allington, 2000; Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Brown, 1991; Hiebert, 1991; Hull & Rose, 1989; Knapp & Turnbull, 1991; Sizer, 1992). In addition, prescriptive, skills-based reading instruction misidentifies the problem as the students' failure to learn, rather than the institution's failure to teach reading as the complex mental and social activity it is (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001)" (NCTE, 2018).

From *Common Core State Standards for ELA*

- Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts describes "a portrait of students who meet the standards set out in this document. 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).

From *Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive Systems of Services, PreK through Third Grade*

- "Literacy – Generally defined as the ability to read and write well. In the Vermont Early Learning Standards, Literacy includes several components: Foundational Reading Skills; Reading (Engagement with Literature and Informational Text), Writing, and for English Learners/Dual Language Learners, Literacy in English."
- "According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, one in three children starts kindergarten without the necessary foundational literacy. Reading rates by third grade are the best predictor of high school graduation, but alarmingly, two-thirds of children in the United States fail to develop reading proficiency by third grade. 80% of these children fall below the poverty line" (Blueprint for Early Literacy, p. 14).
- "[S]upporting student early literacy requires evidence-based instructional practices employed by highly skilled teachers" (Blueprint for Early Literacy, p. 15).
- "Research clearly supports the use of a range of instructional approaches in supporting literacy development for students during the PreK through third grade period... To build code-based skills, explicit instruction, especially in phonics, is very effective. To build meaning-based skills, some explicit instruction is effective, but so is exposure to language and reading through other approaches" (p. 15).

From *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*. Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2015

- "In close collaboration with content and technical experts, including Smarter Balanced work groups and staff, and authors of the CCSS, the Consortium developed claims for English language arts/literacy learning: an 'overall claim' corresponding to performance on the entire assessment of English language arts/literacy, and four domain-specific claims corresponding to performance in different areas of the assessment." These are related to the four CCSS strands, but there is not a one-to-one correspondence.

- "Rather than tapping only isolated skills within one strand, standards-based instruction asks students to integrate skills and concepts across strands; subsequently, Smarter Balanced assessment claims and assessment targets represent the ways in which students may be expected to learn and demonstrate their knowledge."
- "The Smarter Balanced summative assessments sample all CCSS strands with two exceptions. First, Reading Foundational Skills can be assessed more appropriately in the early grades using any of a number of widely available diagnostic assessments for evaluating the developing reading and literacy skills of young children. In addition, as of 2015, Speaking is not assessed in the Smarter Balanced summative assessment system" (p. 16).
- "The overall literacy claim and domain-specific sub claims for Smarter Balanced are the broad statements about the assessment system's learning outcomes; these statements 'identify the set of knowledge and skills that is important to measure for the task at hand' (NRC, 2001)" (p. 22).
- "The summative assessment for English language arts/literacy will produce an overall 'ELA/Literacy' score (a composite score across all four claims) to meet accountability reporting requirements for English language arts/literacy" (p. 25).
- "Regardless of the particular use, however, each of these examples will be based on inferences about the knowledge and skills of individual students and of groups of students supported by performance on the total test, as aligned to the Common Core State Standards" (p. 26).
- "Summative assessment targets do not replace the Common Core State Standards; rather, they reference specific standards at each grade level that test developers will use to guide item and task development and collectively serve the purpose of providing a consistent sampling plan for assessment within and across grades. The summative assessment targets at each grade level represent the prioritized content and skills for assessment" (p. 29).
- **ELA/Literacy Claim #1** "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. In 2006, ACT, Inc. released a report, *Reading between the Lines*, which revealed an important finding: text complexity matters (ACT, Inc., 2006). Being able to read and analyze a variety of complex texts helps students make sense of information, understand diverse viewpoints, and become active, productive, and informed citizens. Students who are college and career ready in reading can, without significant scaffolding, comprehend and evaluate complex texts across a range of types and disciplines, and they can cite and evaluate specific evidence when offering an oral, written, or graphic interpretation of a text." (p. 27-28).
  - Assessment targets: key details, central ideas, word meanings, reasoning & evidence, analysis within or across texts, text structures & features, and language use, both in literary and informational texts

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- o "Assessment targets #1, #2, #4–#6, #8, #9, and #11–#13 provide evidence of critical thinking while reading, including the ability to infer, analyze, compare/contrast, synthesize, evaluate, or critique information presented or the author's reasoning. Assessment targets #3, #7, #10, and #14 provide evidence of understanding of written language use. These items will be text-dependent. To the degree possible, all assessment targets will have at least one test item, but not all texts will have items for every assessment target. The ability to assess a given standard is often dependent upon the specific passage selected. Anchor Standard 1 in Reading (and each grade-specific version of this standard) is also related to Reading Standards 2–9. It focuses on students' use of evidence to support their analyses (claims, conclusions, inferences) about texts. Hence, whether students are asked to determine the central idea, the point of view, or the meaning of words and phrases, Standard 1 (making inferences and supporting those inferences with evidence) is usually embedded within one of the other Reading Standards 2–9. Anchor Standard 10 (Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity) is the foundation for passage selection, rather than being captured under one or more specific assessment targets. Essentially all of the targets reflect the range of reading and text complexity as well as Anchor Standard 1" (p. 33).
  - o "There will be a Total Reading score, based on the student's performance across the items and tasks from the assessment targets for this claim" (p. 33).
  - o "In 2006, ACT, Inc., released a report called *Reading Between the Lines*, showing that what chiefly distinguished the performance of those students who had earned the benchmark score or better from those who had not was not their relative ability to make inferences while reading or to answer questions related to particular cognitive processes, such as determining main ideas or determining the meaning of words and phrases in context. Instead, the clearest differentiator was *what* students could read, in terms of its complexity" (35).
- **ELA/Literacy Claim #2** "Students can produce effective and well-grounded writing for a range of purposes and audiences."
  - o "To communicate effectively, students need to understand why they are writing—for what different purposes and for what audiences. Writing develops the ability to generate, organize, make sense of, and deeply understand information in order to produce new ideas and insights. *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007) and its successor, *Writing to Read* (Graham & Hebert, 2010), argue convincingly for increasing the amount of time that students engage in writing and for teaching writing strategies and processes that have students create texts and write about and reflect on what they are reading" (p. 36).
- **ELA/Literacy Claim #3** "Students can employ effective speaking and listening skills for a range of purposes and audiences."
  - o "Success in college coursework and careers depends heavily on the ability to communicate effectively—demonstrating active listening, interpersonal communication, and the ability to integrate oral/visual/graphic information. 'Besides having intrinsic value as modes of communication, listening and

speaking are necessary prerequisites of reading and writing' (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2006; Hulit, Howard, & Fahey, 2010; Pence & Justice, 2007; Stuart, Wright, Grigor, & Howey, 2002)" (p. 43).

- **ELA/Literacy Claim #4** "Students can engage in research and inquiry to investigate topics, and to analyze, integrate, and present information."

From "Relations Between the CCSS and RTI in Literacy and Language." *The Reading Teacher*, Wixson & Lipson, 2012.

- "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).
- "The CCSS-ELA document describes mature, effective readers in the form of a 'vision' of what it means to be literate in the 21st century (p. 3) and a 'portrait' of what students who are college and career ready in ELA 'look like' (p. 7). The vision statement emphasizes that students who meet the ELA standards 'readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex' texts, and 'habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today.' Furthermore, 'they actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views'" (p. 388).
- "[T]he emphasis on college and career readiness in the CCSS-ELA raises the bar for what students are expected to know and be able to do at every level of K–12 schooling. This is most evident in terms of more attention to *higher order skills*, *increased content knowledge*, and *ability to engage with complex texts*" (pp.388-389).
- "The integrated view of ELA presented by the CCSS contrasts sharply with the heavy emphasis that has been placed on *reading* in recent years…When reading is part of an integrated model, the emphasis changes dramatically from the 'big 5,' which have dominated curriculum and instruction for the last decade or more—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Within the CCSS-ELA, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency are addressed primarily in the 'foundational skills' addendum to the K–5 standards. Vocabulary is highlighted in the language strand, and comprehension is emphasized throughout the CCSS-ELA. Add to this the emphasis on reading and writing in the disciplines in grades 6–12, and there is likely to be a major shift from an overemphasis on decoding to increased attention to comprehension of and learning with and from oral and written language. This shift will apply to both core instruction and more targeted intervention for students struggling in the areas of the ELA" (p. 389).
- "If [SBAC] assessments do a credible job of capturing the content of the CCSS, many existing measures will not be effective predictors of reading achievement as defined by the CCSS-ELA…ELA assessments [like SBAC] will cover a wider range of knowledge and skills using a variety of measures—including performance assessments…Five Major Claims for the SBAC Assessments of CCSS-ELA (SBAC, 2011) reflects the increase in both the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills to be assessed. According to these claims, students are expected to do the following: Read closely and critically to

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comprehend a range of increasingly complex literary and informational texts; Produce effective writing for a range of purposes and audiences; Employ effective speaking and listening skills for a range of purposes and audiences; Engage appropriately in collaborative and independent inquiry to investigate/research topics, pose questions, and gather and present information; and Use oral and written language skillfully across a range of literacy tasks. Approaches to assessment in RTI will need to encompass a wide range of measures to address the breadth and depth of the content expectations in the CCSS-ELA. Educators should anticipate that many students, even those who are accurate and fluent, might not fare well on these assessments" (pp. 389-390).

- "Higher expectations are likely to result in even greater variability in student performance and increased need for differentiated approaches characterized by RTI" (p. 390).

From *Reading as Liberation - An Examination of the Research Base*. Student Achievement Partners, 2021.

- "Anything that distracts in English language arts classes from the focus on students learning to read, reading and listening to content-rich texts widely and deeply, and responding to what they read through lively discussions and writing—will need to be stripped away. To that end, we describe and provide a brief research synthesis for each of the five essential components of literacy: the accelerators for every student learning to read and use language capably:

  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."

- "It gets little to no attention, sadly, given its instructional implications, but the reading research tells us that texts reflecting a mix of both a students' lived and unlived experiences best support growth in comprehension and building a situation model. Here's why: […] When students read texts more reflective of their lived experience, the bridging inferences needed to tie together the text base both between propositions and to the readers' knowledge are more likely to be automatic and more likely to yield a richer, more nuanced situation model. Those texts are easier to read for that student but important in honoring and affirming their experiences and possibly deepening their knowledge base. This has obvious implications for equitable representation of student identities through text selection. […] When students read texts less reflective of their

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lived experiences, they get to exercise the muscles needed to make the more effortful bridging inferences between propositions and to their knowledge. The reading may feel more challenging, but their inferencing muscles have grown more robust in the process. This has obvious implications for varying both topics and text selections so every student has broad exposure to alternative perspectives and unfamiliar topics."

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*.

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