

New Literacies:
Reconstructing Language and Education

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Edited by

Ambigapathy Pandian, Christine Liew Ching Ling,
Debbita Tan Ai Lin, Jayagowri Muniandy,
Lee Bee Choo and Toh Chwee Hiang

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P U B L I S H I N G

New Literacies: Reconstructing Language and Education,
Edited by Ambigapathy Pandian, Christine Liew Ching Ling, Debbita Tan Ai Lin,
Jayagowri Muniandy, Lee Bee Choo and Toh Chwee Hiang

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PREFACE

The notion of change is central to this book. Across the globe, there exists a pressing need for transformation in the way teachers teach, in the manner by which learners learn, and in our approach towards defining literacy in the 21st century. Historically, the term ‘literacy’ has been used to primarily denote reading and writing abilities, a designation which is today largely considered both quintessential and overly simplistic. The field of literacy, like many others within the realm of education, has a tendency to evolve and shift from one paradigm to another, vacillating between the demands of globalisation and the implications brought forth by the advent of new technologies.

Reading and writing – communication, in essence – is happening in very different ways and via varied avenues; blogs, podcasts, online news, and tablets coupled with countless applications. These new tools are not only disrupting older modes of communication, but have also effectively dictated a redesigning of conventional classroom tools. Such changes are increasingly borderless and rapidly accelerating, and are bound to impact the nature of literacy itself as well as how it is perceived in diverse contexts in different parts of the world. This calls for a reorientation with regard to how researchers, educators and stakeholders view literacy in today’s terms, as well as the deconstruction and reconstitution of language and education on the whole.

The collection of book chapters in this volume deals with the multifaceted nature of literacy, and brings together ideas relevant to the paradigms and possibilities of language and education. In doing so, this collection highlights not only interesting initiatives and realities from all over the world, but also critiques and insights pertinent to the issue at hand.

The first section of this book takes a close look at the issue of new literacies affecting those in academia. **Franco Vaccarino, Margie Comrie, Niki Murray, Frank Sligo and Elspeth Tilley**, in the opening chapter, attempt to define what literacy means in different contexts. They seek to trace the development of the term ‘literacy’ since with advances in information technologies and an increase in globalisation; it has evolved considerably from its original sense of denoting reading and writing. Such

changes have an impact on the nature of literacy and how it is perceived in diverse contexts in different parts of the world. In their chapters, **Shatha Naiyf Qaiwer** and **Marie Grace Dela Cruz Reoperez** attempt to link social and linguistic practices. **Qaiwer** attempts to deconstruct covert ideology which is “hidden” in the text stemming from the assumption that critical discourse analysis seeks to reveal how texts are constructed so that particular perspectives can be expressed delicately and covertly. The main analytical tool, reflecting the three dimensional method of discourse analysis, are namely the language text, spoken or written, discourse practice and the sociocultural practice. On the other hand, **Reoperez**, employing ethnography as a key research method, looks at the culture of second-hand bookselling and how it serves as informal literacy training. Focus is specifically placed on the experiences and motivations of the booksellers, and how these were incorporated in their worldviews and world knowledge. It also looks at how it challenges the preconceptions of the trade.

The next three chapters provide insights on literary literacy development. **Nazima Versay Kudus** and **Agelyia Murugan**’s chapter discusses the linguistic assessments of four texts from the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, namely *Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rapunzel* and *Snow White*. Stylistic analyses of the lexis in the texts are undertaken and then assessed to evaluate how they shape and nurture children’s literacy development and their formative minds. **Bita Naghmeh Abbaspour** also looks at the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, but here the focus of the textual analysis study is to describe and explore the strategies which translators applied on culture-bound elements in the translation of children’s literature. The study is restricted to the comparison of culture-bound units collected from Persian translations of the texts and within the period of the first forty years of the 14th century (solar calendar: 1300-1340/1920-1960); a period of time when Western culture was not well-known in Iran. Selected units of translation were compared both in the target and source language texts, and findings showed that the domestication/foreignisation strategies applied are more acceptable nowadays. **Shirin Khabbazzashi**, **Thomas Chow Voon Foo** and **Ambigapathy Pandian** take a critical look at textual characteristics and differently focalized narratives of *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) by Hemingway, to elaborate the underlying linguistic structures towards a fuller appreciation of one of the most popular genres of his writing.

In their chapter, *Developing Literacy and Knowledge Preservation Skills among Remote Rural Children*, **Souba Rethinasamy, Norazila Abd. Aziz, Fitri Suraya Mohamad, Mohd Hafizan Hashim** and **Dayang Sariah Abang Suhai** propose the need to empower remote rural children to become heritage preservation agents of orally told stories that have been passed down from one generation to another via a collaborative project involving 40 children of the community of Bario Highland in Sarawak. This will serve not only to enhance their language and ICT literacy skills, but also to ensure the continued survival of the orally told stories and the knowledge imparted through them.

Exploring Malaysian undergraduate students' English language academic literacy and competency, and how they acquire them in their quest to meet the demands of their tertiary education, **Wahiza Wahi, Marnie O'Neill** and **Anne Chapman**'s study revealed key findings on issues relating to students' technical difficulties and pessimistic outlook on their academic literacy practices and competencies in English. **Ong Cheng Teik**, whose chapter attempts a critical discourse analysis (CDA) predicated on Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework, explores a study on grammar of transitivity that entails various processes such as material, relational, mental and verbal processes. This study demonstrates the importance of critical literacy in general and CDA in particular in providing teachers with a tool to contextualise the teaching of grammar in relation to current issues, both locally and globally.

Numeracy literacy is gaining popularity and research into this area has gained momentum all over the world. **Jan Brown, Mohan Chinnappan** and **Lorraine Sushames** highlight the significance of literacy and numeracy skills. To participate fully in a modern, technology-based economy, one needs to have the necessary literacy and numeracy skills, but according to **Brown**, 43 percent of adults in New Zealand do not have the necessary skills mentioned with the indigenous Māori population having lower literacy and numeracy skills than the general population in New Zealand. Therefore, the onus is on tertiary education providers to improve productivity by embedding literacy and numeracy skills into the delivery of vocational training, especially since New Zealand intends to compete globally using a workforce with improved levels of generic and technical skills. In the same vein, **Mohan Chinnappan** articulates issues on numeracy and literacy, and identifies potentially productive approaches for classroom practices and literacy reforms across Asia and beyond. **Sushames** too profiles pedagogical approaches to implementing a work-

based literacy and numeracy project. Strategies employed are discussed while challenges encountered in the implementation are addressed. In their chapter, **Leong Yong Pak** and **Gitu Chakravarthy** discuss the major problems and issues that arise with the introduction of the use of English for the teaching of mathematics to non-native speakers in year one in primary schools in Brunei. Learners' diverse needs and literacy practices are also examined.

Digital literacy, which is relatively new compared to other literacies, is accorded some prominence in this book. **Nejat Al-Juboury** touches on skills considered to be the new bases of the 21st century, such as autonomy, active learning, critical thinking, cooperative learning, and digital learning (AACCD). Where second language education is concerned, she stresses that with the revolution of technology in the 21st century, to excel, both teachers and learners need to adopt new roles and be equipped with new skills and competencies that go beyond the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The author also explores university teachers' attitudes towards utilising digital learning.

The next section of this book delves deeper into how education and language are being reconstructed to suit the present needs, learning styles and composition of learners. Chapters in this section deal mainly with issues on curriculum design and approaches to language enhancement. **Peter McDowell** and **Joan Wang, Vincent Pang** and **Jason William Vitales**, as well as **Shatha Alsaadi** explore curriculum design and propose recommendations on curriculum implementation. McDowell's chapter is on designing a pre-service teacher education unit with the sole aim of introducing pre-service teachers to the principal curriculum requirements of their intended levels of schooling and preferred teaching areas. By means of a vital combination of literacy-based teaching strategies that involves the application and elaboration of the notion of 'parallel pedagogy' (Leander, 2009), he further describes how pre-service teachers' initial reluctance to consume and create digital texts is being overcome. Reviewing and evaluating the Department of Polytechnics' (Malaysia) newly introduced curriculum with an emphasis on Outcome-based Education (OBE), Wang, Pang and Vitales utilise Stake's Countenance Evaluation Model to propose a framework for the evaluation of the implementation of this curriculum change in Politeknik Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. On the other hand, Alsaadi examines practice teaching as a core education programme to provide basic links between college academic courses and the world of actual practice in schools.

With the main focus of the primary English Language Curriculum being building basic literacy among pupils, **Regina Joseph Cyril** describes how language arts activates pupils' imagination and interest as well as provides an opportunity to integrate, experiment and apply what they have learnt in fun-filled meaningful learning experiences. Language arts, a new component added to the Standard-Based Curriculum for primary schools, provides pupils with the opportunity to practice language skills learnt through songs, plays, drama as well as express personal responses to literary works. **Indranee Liew**'s chapter, based on a series of successful lessons carried out with six- to nine-year-olds, focuses on explicit teaching of interpersonal and interpersonal literacy skills using traditional tales that often offer a wealth of material for fun, as well as experiential teaching and learning through the performing arts – storytelling, choral reading, puppetry, drama and singing.

The next two chapters look at the role of graphic organisers in enhancing students' writing skills and the teaching of English using video technology. **Hj. Muhammad Amir bin Y.M. Shariff** and **M. Shyamala Rajamoney** carried out a study which investigates the usage of graphic organisers (GOs) in the teaching of essay writing skills and the perceptions of the students with regard to the usage of GOs and came up with findings that support the usage of GOs not only as an effective tool to enhance writing skills but also as a fun and interesting way to promote writing skills. Similarly, to make learning fun and interesting, **Shirin Shafiei Ebrahimi** looks at how video recording can help to promote the learning of English among students at tertiary levels. She concludes that video recording is entertaining and can help students evaluate their own oral performance, especially in student-centred situations.

Literacy and education are deemed crucial for one's self-improvement, more so for those attempting to reintegrate into their communities. In an interesting case study, **Franco Vaccarino** and **Margie Comrie** examine the perceptions of a prisoner in a prison's self-care unit in New Zealand on the significance and importance of literacy, education, and employment. In another part of the world, **Sakil Malik** and **Marium Kawser** focus on the fundamental issues of environmental education in Bangladesh. With high levels of illiteracy and school dropouts jeopardising mass environmental education, their chapter highlights the need to deploy environmental expertise in both public and private sector management systems as the focus of government policy shifts from a short-term one on

self-sufficiency to the pressing issues of sustainability within the environmental opportunities and constraints offered by the environment.

Sarab Kadir Mugair and **Nawal Fadhil Abbas** present a stylistic analysis of Sillitoe's novel, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, providing examples of the foregrounding of structural patterns as well as the grammatical forms used by the characters. The study is an attempt at examining the style and language of the text by focusing on the overall structure of the said novel. Meanwhile, in their study on literacy, **Dahlia Janan** and **David Wray** illustrate the definition of 'readability' and provide interesting background on readability research. They point out that research on readability in general focused on the development of practical methods in terms of matching reading materials to the reading abilities of students and adult readers. These efforts squared in on the development of easily applied readability formulae for teachers and librarians to utilise. More recent readability studies have, apparently, involved a period of consolidation in which researchers sought to learn more about how the formulae worked and how to improve them. In their chapter, Janan and Wray describe major paradigms used by scholars in readability research, the impact of these paradigms on research into readability, and possible solutions to problems created by the application of these paradigms to research into readability.

On-going research on learner support and gauging performance continues to be at the forefront of language and literacy education. Many researchers and practitioners are also concerned with workplace readiness of learners. **Jeanne Dawson** underlines that in order to produce graduates who will be sufficiently prepared for ongoing professional success, universities need to develop their students into lifelong learners who are able to analyse, explore, interrogate, speculate and make sound critical judgements. Dawson's chapter explores the potential of one pedagogic strategy: the setting of experiential learning journals as a significant component of assessment. The chapter focuses on the role of the university educator in facilitating students' engagement with and performance in journal-writing tasks, drawing on an experiment at an Australian university. **Marilyn Kell**, **Marian Davis**, **Ruth Warwick** and **Janice White**, in their chapter on preparing international students for professional placement in Australian workplaces, highlight a case in which an add-on programme was created and taught when industry providers objected to hosting a number of international students because of their poor English communication skills. The students were surveyed on their experience,

and this chapter utilises the survey data garnered as a framework for discussing this type of add-on programme in terms of pedagogy and adult learning. The chapter also includes recommendations for future similar programmes (including many provided by the students) as well as suggestions for further research.

Pramela Krish and **S. Nagarajan** draw attention to the potentials of effective tutor feedback in supporting distance learners. According to them, distance learners need more customised support in their learning and the use of new technologies offer many fresh possibilities of providing feedback to learners. In their study, ‘feedback’ encompasses intellectual, social, managerial and technical support provided by online tutors. **Felicidad Galang-Pereña** underscores the key features of focus group research, paying specific attention to the benefits of interaction and group dynamics. Apart from pointing out the challenging role of the moderator/facilitator, the chapter also highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the method.

This book closes with a chapter by **Ambigapathy Pandian, Shanthi Balraj** and **Vivien Chee Pei Wei** who provided an in-depth description on literacy in science based on their investigation on secondary school students in Malaysia. Views of most stakeholders; pupils, teachers and school administrators were sought in their research resulting in a detailed description on how students study the Science subject in secondary school.

The wide-ranging issues on *New Literacies: Reconstructing Language and Education* covered in this book provide readers with not only fresh insights into nurturing and equipping individuals with multiliteracies but also helpful tips based on success stories of literacy projects of researchers and educationists from different parts of the world. It is therefore, without a doubt, that this book is a must-read for language practitioners, students, researchers, policy and decision makers, concerned educationists or any interested individuals.

Editors

Ambigapathy Pandian, Christine Liew Ching Ling, Debbita Tan Ai Lin,
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CHAPTER I

DARING TO DEFINE LITERACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

FRANCO VACCARINO, MARGIE COMRIE,
NIKI MURRAY, FRANK SLIGO
AND ELSPETH TILLEY

The term 'literacy' has been used for many centuries, but its meaning has evolved considerably from its original sense of denoting reading and writing. This evolution has been particularly noticeable with advances in information technologies and an increase in globalisation, significantly changing how individuals go about their day-to-day personal and working lives. Such changes have an impact on the nature of literacy and how it is perceived in diverse contexts in different parts of the world. This study seeks to trace the development of the term in order to try to define what literacy means in different contexts. It includes reflections from participants in adult literacy programmes, employers, and secondary school teachers involved in a literacy and employment project in New Zealand. It highlights what these participants think literacy is and their attitudes towards this term which often can have a negative and exclusionary effect on people. Finally, the paper attempts to draw some conclusions about this contestable area.

Introduction

Literacy is a social construct overloaded with an immense array of implications, so defining this seemingly easy term becomes a much contested and debated endeavour. This paper stems from a longitudinal community-based investigation into adult literacy and employment in

Whanganui, a town in the North Island of Aotearoa, New Zealand funded by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science, and Technology (FRST). This study grew from a community-identified need for a better understanding of the impact of literacy on employment and community development. The full four-year project entailed many linked studies, but here we concentrate on a range of participants' understanding and interpretation of the term 'literacy'. A UNESCO report states that "at first glance, 'literacy' would seem to be a term that everyone understands. But at the same time, literacy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 147). In our research project we soon became aware that the various stakeholders in the community all had different perspectives on literacy.

Review of the Literature

Most dictionaries simply describe literacy with minor variations as the "ability to read and write", but educators, scholars and various government agencies define the term in different and even contradictory ways. Furthermore there has been an explosion in the number of 'literacies' deemed important in contemporary society. It is therefore important to explore the evolving nature of the term and to ask whether more encompassing definitions for the 21st century are required and whether these can be appropriate in many contexts in a global community. This brief review of the literature discusses the evolution of the term and current debates about its nature. Our study hoped to throw light on this discussion by comparing such definitions with those of our participants, who were asked quite simply what literacy meant to them.

Etymologically, the term *literacy* derives from the Latin *litteratus*, meaning learned (Ford, 1993). The word *literate* was only used to mean 'familiar with literature' or more generally, 'learned, well-educated, instructed in learning, lettered'. Historically, literacy existed in a tiny minority of the world's societies. Materials associated with literacy were very expensive and only the rich could afford them. The industrial revolution, however, produced cheap paper and therefore cheap books became available to all classes in industrialized countries in the mid-nineteenth century (Laqueur, 1976). During much of the twentieth century literacy has thus been broadly defined as *the basic ability to read and write*.

Until the mid-1960s, literacy was seen as a set of technical skills: reading, writing and calculating, so mass literacy campaigns emerged in order to assist with the eradication of illiteracy. These campaigns were not successful as literacy cannot be sustained by short-term operations and the contexts and motivations of learners need to be taken into consideration. In 1965, the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy held in Tehran emphasised for the first time “the interrelationship between literacy and development, and highlighted the concept of functional literacy” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 153). Functional literacy marked a turning point in the history of education, and “it allied education and especially literacy with social and economic development and expanded the understanding of literacy beyond the imparting of basic technical skills” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 9). A functionally literate person “can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development” (UNESCO, 2002, ¶1). Functional literacy therefore necessitates a certain competence level in literacy, rather than a specific type of literacy.

Paulo Freire also contributed to an expanded understanding of literacy by highlighting the political dimension of literacy. His teaching method of “conscientization” incorporates cultural actions immediately relevant to the learner, and encourages learners to question why things are the way they are, and consequently take action to change them for the better (Freire, 1972). Central to his approach is critical literacy, which moved “literacy beyond the narrow socio-economic confines ... and located it squarely in the political arena, emphasizing connections between literacy and politically active participation in social and economic transformation” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 9).

Hiebert (1991) takes an explicitly constructivist perspective on the definition of literacy and says that over some time a new perspective on literacy has emerged, which entails “a profound shift from a text-driven definition of literacy to a view of literacy as active transformation of texts” in which “meaning is created through an interaction of reader and text” (p. 1). Ntiri (2009) adds that the conventional definition for literacy is no longer adequate, and “literacy is now subjected to constant redefinition to reflect criteria for social, political, religious, and economic relevance and expectations” (p. 97).

Street (1984) provides a distinction between ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ literacy models. In autonomous or ‘functional’ models, literacy is regarded as a measurable individual attribute, is considered separate from context, is largely print based, with its underlying purpose being “to imbue into individuals an acceptance of the dominant ideologies and its explicit purpose is to enhance the economic productivity of the nation” (Lonsdale & McCurry, 2004, p. 7). In contrast, the ideological or ‘social practice’ models argue for multiple, learner-centred literacies in which critical thinking skills are important, to be assessed through ethnographic tools. These models have a strong focus on social context and “a consequent shift from narrow vocational outcomes for individual learners to more holistic outcomes related to empowerment and capacity-building for both individuals and communities” (Lonsdale & McCurry, 2004, p. 8).

Many Western governments operate from functional models as does the influential International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)¹. IALS defines literacy skills as “the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (OECD, 2000, p. x). This definition and resulting government strategies, such as New Zealand’s *Adult Literacy Strategy* of 2001, are clearly rooted in an autonomous approach and lead, as Isaacs (2005) mentions, to deficit approaches in policy development. In its *Adult Literacy Strategy*, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2001, p. 4) uses the expanded definition of literacy provided by Workbase, the National Centre for Workplace Literacy and Language: “a complex web of abilities in reading, writing, speaking, listening, problem-solving, creative thinking and numeracy”. In the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s *Tertiary Education Strategy* (TES) (2002, p. 37) literacy is incorporated within *foundation skills*, which are defined as “a bundle of skills such as literacy, numeracy technological literacy, communication skills, teamwork, ‘learning to learn’ and self-confidence skills”. The TES states that “these foundation skills are the same core skills that are described by other names in different nations, for example, ‘key skills’, ‘basic skills’, ‘essential skills’, ‘literacy defined broadly’”. Furthermore, the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s *Learning for Living* document (2005, p.1) talks about ‘foundation learning’ which:

¹ Kirsch (2001) states that IALS was “the first-ever comparative survey of adults designed to profile and explore the literacy distributions among participating countries. It was a collaborative effort involving several international organizations, intergovernmental agencies, and national governments” (p.1).

...covers competencies in literacy, numeracy and language. In practice, foundation learning for adults may be defined as the application of a complex web of reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, problem solving, numeracy skills and communication technology so that people can achieve their own goals in meaningful social, cultural, vocational and/or learning contexts.

Importantly, this Ministry document also says that foundation learning may be in English or in Te Reo Māori (an official language of New Zealand).

Currently, in some contexts, the term *literacy* appears to have been extended from its original link with reading and literature to any body of knowledge, and a multitude of perspectives have emerged. A variety of descriptive adjectives are often added to the term *literacy* to provide a clearer description of the term, depending on the context. One therefore finds information literacy, visual literacy, workplace literacy, health literacy, ancestral literacy, financial literacy, to name a few. Johnson (2007) now talks of “functional Internet literacy”, and De Valenzuela (2002, ¶6) points out that in academia “the definition of *literacy* has ... evolved from an exclusive focus on reading and writing to encompass a more inclusive and expansive perspective”. Dubin and Kuhlman (1992) assert that “the word literacy itself has come to mean competence, knowledge and skills” (p. vi).

In terms of workplace literacy, Hull (2000, p. 650) points out that “it’s become customary to characterize literacy in the world of work as reading and writing to mediate action and to contrast that purpose for literacy with school-based ones”. Some researchers have categorized literacy at work as “reading to do” whilst school-based literacy is primarily “reading to know” (Diehl & Mikulecky, 1980). Mikulecky, Lloyd, Kirkley, and Oelker (1996, p. 8) state that:

the demands made on skills of workers are increasing all the time. As part of teamwork, planning, and quality control, workers need to be able to solve problems that often involve the application of several skills. Literacy in the workplace requires a combination of prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy.

Workers need prose literacy when accessing manuals, or reading or writing newsletters and memos. Document literacy includes tables, forms and charts, while quantitative literacy includes calculating, and solving problems with numbers. Mikulecky et al. (1996) continue by saying that very often in order to perform a workplace task, different types of skills are required together, for example, calculation, reading charts or technical

material, handling data, and problem solving. Verizon (2003) states that “literacy is the foundation for other basic skills, yet large numbers of people in the labour pool are tagged as illiterate. ... however, illiteracy probably is not the inability to read anything at all, but rather the inability to read well enough to fully understand important written material” (p. 2).

As Aotearoa New Zealand is a bicultural country, it is important to have a very brief overview of what literacy means to Māori. Rawiri (2005) states that:

While literacy has always been valued by indigenous peoples as a means of achieving economic prosperity, within indigenous and First Nations understandings, literacy skills function in a more fundamental and critical way. Literacy is the means with which to express, understand, provide for, and make sense of, one’s self and the ‘whole’ richness of one’s self in its widest cultural, spiritual, intellectual and physical sense (p. 5).

The publication of *Te Kāwai Ora* in 2001 was a defining moment in addressing the aspirations of Māori in respect of literacy. The report provided a comprehensive Treaty-based² perspective on literacy. It demanded that literacy be understood within actual social and historical contexts but also as incorporating “the competencies that the literate person is able to demonstrate” (Māori Adult Literacy Reference Group, 2001, p. 5). In this way *Te Kāwai Ora* made it clear that literacy policy must be grounded in social and historical realities and, on that basis, should be designed to enhance people’s literacy capabilities. We believe *Te Kāwai Ora* is the key national document which can provide a bicultural vision to inform ongoing governmental strategy development for literacy. In *Te Kāwai Ora*, Wally Penetito stated the following regarding what it means to be a literate Māori. First he said it should include competence in reading and writing in both Māori and English but also:

having the capacity to ‘read’ the geography of the land, i.e. to be able to name the main land features of one’s environment (the mountains, rivers, lakes, creeks, bluffs, valleys etc.), being able to recite one’s tribal/hapū boundaries and be able to point them out on a map if not in actuality as well as the key features of adjacent tribal/hapū boundaries and being able to ‘read’ Māori symbols such as carvings, tukutuku, kāwhaiwhai and their context within the wharenui (poupou, heke etc.) and the marae (ātea, ārongo etc.). (Maori Adult Literacy Reference Group, 2001, p. 7).

² The Treaty of Waitangi is a treaty signed between Māori and the British Crown in 1840 and is considered the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand as a bicultural nation.

Penetito also speculated that perhaps even the ability to 'read' body language should be part of 'literacy' in Māori terms.

From this brief review of the literature, it is evident that there is no clear universal definition of literacy, but rather implications of what literacy entails within diverse contexts at different times in the history of humanity. Thus, when working within the literacy field, it is imperative to formulate a clear description or definition of what literacy entails within that specific context (Vaccarino, Comrie, Culligan, & Sligo, 2006). As De Valenzuela (2002, ¶5) states, "the definition of 'literate', depends on the skills needed within a particular environment". In addition, Dubin and Kuhlman (1992, p. vii) highlight that the last few decades have been marked by

significant new directions in literacy research brought about by questions which seek to discover how literacy functions in families...in communities...and in workplaces... What does it mean to be 'literate' as a member of a particular culture? What are the patterns of literacy use within fields of work, within professions, within age-groups?

The question this raises is whether we can still refer to literacy as a singular entity, or whether we need to think in terms of *literacies*.

The Knowledge Network (2002, ¶1) talks of 21st century literacies which "refer to the skills needed to flourish in today's society and in the future. Today discrete disciplines have emerged around information, media, multicultural, and visual literacies". Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan (2006, p. 8) add that "literacy today depends on understanding the multiple media that make up our high-tech reality and developing the skills to use them effectively", and this begs the question whether we all live in a "high-tech reality".

Method

During the four years of this project, we interviewed a wide range of people from the Whanganui community (including those attending adult literacy courses, employers and secondary school teachers) in order to hear their perspectives on various aspects of literacy, including what the term means to them.

First was a series of in-depth interviews with 80 participants selected to be representative of students across all the adult literacy programmes in Whanganui. This exploratory, qualitative interview process was chosen to hear their stories and obtain rich data. We were particularly concerned

that participants were free to tell their story and that the interviews should not spring from a ‘deficit model’ of literacy. Second, an employer e-survey was presented on the survey software website Zoomerang (www.zoomerang.com) where 256 potential participants, comprising the vast majority of the town’s employers, were invited to take part in the study. Fifty-six employers completed the e-survey (a 26% response rate). In addition, eight employers, representing businesses from the manufacturing, accounting, printing, land transport, plumbing, joinery, hospitality/accommodation, and energy sectors were asked to define literacy as part of a longer interview about literacy and employment issues. Third, 13 secondary school teachers, representing staff most involved in literacy support and school link-to-work programmes, from all of the city’s five secondary schools took part in open, unstructured interviews. Care was taken to avoid specific, structured questions, using instead an interview guide and open-ended prompts. Again the aim was to obtain rich, detailed clarification of issues, with as many relevant, local examples as possible.

Through an awareness of the wide-ranging definitions of literacy, and approaching the research from a strengths-based, multi-literacies perspective, we sought to encourage all our interviewees to speak from their own perspectives and perceptions of the term. Interview data were analysed using qualitative analysis (supported by the use of HyperResearch software), chosen to more fully realise the potential information contained in the interview responses.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the survey and interviews conducted in Whanganui with participants in adult literacy programmes, employers, and secondary school teachers are presented in this section with a brief contextualising discussion.

Participants in Adult Literacy Programmes

Participants were asked what the word ‘literacy’ meant to them. More than a quarter of the adult literacy students saw literacy as meaning strictly 3-R type functional skills, with a number adding references to ‘English’, ‘spelling’ or ‘grammar’ and ‘dictionaries’. There was a clear association with school and formal learning, and in some cases this was directly mentioned. Sixteen participants expanded this definition and gave broader responses that included additional kinds of learning to the 3-Rs; with two of these 16 participants including the idea of “being able to speak and

converse properly”, and of also being able to “actually understand it and to know what it means”. Others mentioned understanding as important – having others understand you and being able to communicate. Twelve respondents said they did not know, or were not sure what literacy meant. Some, even when prompted for a response to a 3-R type definition, still replied that it made no sense to them, or said, “I still don’t know what it means to me”. Six respondents gave responses based on a deficit model, and two immediately brought up the word “illiterate”, with one saying that literacy meant: “Starting again. Literacy was that you were illiterate.” Another participant answered: “People that haven’t learned much in their lives, reading and all that.” A further response was: “To me it’s a problem of learning, comprehension, and understanding”. Another spoke of someone who might have difficulty with reading and writing and another said it meant needing to study and study hard.

While some respondents, however, saw literacy as extending slightly beyond these functional skills, for example to include computer literacy, very few if any respondents perceived the word ‘literacy’ as broadly inclusive of multiple strengths or a wide range of life and employment skills. Some who gave these broader responses also signalled that they were confused about the term. A number of participants’ perceptions were clearly based on a deficit model, and conflated ‘literacy’ with ‘illiteracy’ or described ‘literacy’ as meaning some sort of ‘problem’. They felt implicitly judged (and negatively so) by the very word itself. However, more respondents appeared to find the word itself off-putting, perhaps officious or long-winded. This impression was strengthened by the observation that answers were also often accompanied by a laugh and the interviewer noted that the term made respondents appear uncomfortable, as signified by their body language and delayed responses. This apparent discomfort was also present among those who perceived literacy as meaning strictly functional skills. The skills are linked with formal schooling and a significant number of participants had experienced difficulties associated with school. Other respondents could not provide an answer to the question of what ‘literacy’ meant to them and indicated the term was meaningless for them and did not appear to relate to their lives or their needs. These comments and definitions from participants in adult literacy programmes point to problems with the word literacy as a term.

Employers

In the e-survey undertaken with employers in Whanganui, one of the questions asked employers directly for a definition of 'literacy' for their organisation. Most employers gave multiple answers to this question. Twenty-three employers noted that reading (a functional literacy skill) was a part of their organisation's definition of literacy. Nearly half of these 23 employers also included verbal and/or written communication as part of the definition. Interestingly, writing was considered to be part of the definition of literacy (third highest), while the ability to understand (and make use of, in one instance) the English language came a close fourth. Spelling, numeracy, the ability to follow instructions and plans, and computer skills were also mentioned as instances of 'literacy' by more than one employer. Other skills that were less readily captured by employers under the definition of literacy were more job-specific skills, including recording data, timesheet completion, proofreading, completing invoices, and working with technical equipment. In terms of defining literacy, therefore, while employers took a functional view, they also focused on the role of oral communication and also defined 'literacy' in terms of particular job contexts (Comrie, Vaccarino, Culligan, Sligo, Tilley, & Franklin, 2006).

In the in-depth interviews, eight Whanganui employers were asked for a definition of literacy in relation to employees' needs. Four defined literacy as reading and writing, but two of those qualified this. One added that literacy for employees also included the need for confidence to continue to improve on their skills. Another employer, while suggesting that literacy is reading and writing, argued that employees must also have the literacy ability of communication, saying: "I don't think it's confined to reading and writing. I think it's more a communication thing; being able to communicate". This was a belief shared by three other employers, with one saying: "We need to be able to communicate with [employees], and they need to be able to communicate with us". One went so far as to state: "Communication is the most important to get it working in the right direction". In fact, although not all employer participants specifically mentioned communication skills, most definitions centred on aspects of communication skills as aspects of literacy they considered necessary among their workforce. For example, two spoke of the need to be able to use basic conversational skills, with one saying that employees needed to be able to transfer those conversational skills to their writing. Two participants counted understanding as a vital part of literacy. One expressed it in terms of being able to write in a way that others can understand: "I try and keep the literacy to a base that people will

understand. I would expect if someone sent something back to me, I could read it without saying, “Well what’s that all about?”

Individual employers had varied definitions of literacy which encompassed the traditional literacy skills of reading and writing, as well as the functional aspects of these skills, including communication skills in different settings, life skills, and workplace literacies. At times literacy and communication skills were treated as complementary and almost synonymous. The need for an increase in functional literacy skills was linked to changes in the employment context. Within New Zealand there is now a greater need for workers to engage in documentation, form filling, and reading and understanding regulations, for example, Health and Safety regulations. Industries where workers could previously function with limited literacy now need higher levels of literacy skills. The changes in the workplace that have resulted in a greater need for functional literacy skills are reflected by the greater number of industries pre-screening job applicants. Perhaps more than any other group, small business employers (who are in the majority in New Zealand) have more direct interaction with and reliance on their staff and so are more aware of the need for literacy, numeracy, and communication skills.

Secondary School Teachers

Thirteen secondary school teachers, representing staff from the five secondary schools in Whanganui, participated in these interviews. The roles these teachers performed in literacy support covered a wide range of activities, including coordinating literacy programmes; planning literacy programmes and timetables to fit the school curriculum; creating individual literacy plans and goals to cater for each student’s needs; identifying and working with students requiring literacy support; and moving literacy into all departments, across all essential learning areas, ensuring that each subject includes a framework for learning that accommodates good classroom literacy practices.

Twelve of the thirteen secondary school teachers gave definitions of literacy, and while each one was different, in content and/or in emphasis, the underlying link between many of them tended to be a view of literacy as empowering through enabling students to function successfully, or, as one participant said, “to survive”, in society. One teacher, for example, preferred to define literacy as “functional literacy” and described this as:

The degree of literacy required to read a newspaper, gain a driver's licence, go to WINZ³ and deal with their forms; read road signs, read a TV Guide, that sort of thing. It's not reading a novel every week or anything. It's just functional literacy.

Two other teachers took an even broader functional view of literacy. One did this through taking a practical approach with students:

I don't take literacy as being able just to read the word. It's reading symbols and understanding symbols, being able to interpret information in a bus time table, anything like that, being able to follow a flow diagram ... It's using your visual skills to gather the information that you require, to then be able to reconstruct it for yourself so you can use it.

Another described explaining the importance of literacy learning to students at school, by telling them: "Literacy is how you use your skills that you have to be able to effectively work in the community or to speak with others or to use the written text to be able to help yourself in the community". Other secondary school teachers, while taking what at first glance was a seemingly narrower focus on literacy, still expressed it in broader terms. For example, one defined literacy as "the ability to not just read but ... to have a real understanding of what has been read". Two specified literacy as the need to be able "to assess text or evaluate information especially on the internet", and another saw literacy as the ability to take information that had been read and to use it "further in the students' own medium". All three thus defined literacy as enabling students to be critically aware citizens. Further, in some parts of their discussions when thinking about literacy, teachers began to speak in terms of multiple literacies, referring to life skills and specific literacies such as workplace literacy.

A further approach for teachers, rather than defining literacy, was to talk of different levels of literacy. One argument was that schools needed to ensure their students reached a level or standard of literacy that would enable them to function successfully in society. An example was one participant who spoke of "true sorts of literacies" as including the ability to fill in forms for such occasions as medical attention or accommodation, saying, "They've all got to have a literacy standard where they can read and understand". For three participants, literacy was more about having the ability to find or access information or facts through developing both communication and technological skills. One explained:

³ Work and Income New Zealand provides financial assistance and employment services for individuals in need.

Kids are knowledge workers. They don't have to know all the facts. They need to know how to access the knowledge; how to manipulate the knowledge; how to recreate the knowledge, and, importantly for me, there's one other step. And that's about donating the knowledge back, so finding ways to do that ... Core to that are skills development, communication, speaking, listening, ability to use technologies, and to communicate effectively.

Another issue teachers raised in defining literacy was focused on where and how literacy should be taught in the school curriculum. There was an understanding among several participants that, because literacy encompassed more than reading and writing, it should be considered a part of every subject taught and not merely situated in the English department. As one teacher stated, literacy "shouldn't just be in the hands of the English Department: every teacher is a teacher of English and language and literacy". However, it appears that the teaching of literacy does not always have an overall strategy throughout the school because the same teacher added, "departments have their own policies".

Similar to employers, individual secondary school teachers had varied definitions of literacy to offer when asked to define the term. When taken as a group, their definitions encompassed not only the traditional literacy skills of reading, writing, and occasionally numeracy, but also the functional aspects of these skills, and multiple literacies, including communication skills in different settings and life skills.

Reflections and Conclusion

In our Literacy and Employment project, we embraced a multiple literacies philosophy where we viewed literacy from a broad perspective, incorporating the traditional aspects of reading, writing, speaking and listening; yet also to include critical and creative thinking, understanding, problem-solving and decision-making; as well as other forms of receiving and imparting information. We believe that this approach embraces literacy's applicability at home, at work and within a community, without ignoring what individuals value as their own social, political, economic, cultural, emotional, and spiritual components (Comrie et al., 2006, p. 5). The approach of the research team has been to recognise that literacies are multiple and are positioned within individual life-contexts. We also agree with Hamilton and Barton (2000) that prose, document, and quantitative literacy as defined by the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is a narrow approach to literacy. Such approaches, which find their reflection

in government policy, tend to encourage a deficit model (Tilley, Comrie, Watson, Culligan, Sligo, Franklin, & Vaccarino, 2006).

As communication scholars we were also interested in the links with communication, including the blurring of the distinction between communication and literacy. Hunter (2004, p. 248) asserts that the key to social practice approaches is: “The interweaving of activities and modes of communication with reading and writing; the specialized knowledge and skills required for understanding the text; and the interpersonal roles and power relationships”. In a great deal of the literature on literacy, “communication is treated as an outcome of literacy, rather than as a process in its own right. Certainly, the terms are often used as synonyms” (Olsson & Comrie, 2005, p. 4).

Many definitions given by the various groups interviewed focused on *communication* as the purpose or outcome of literacy. There was overall agreement that literacy involves reading and comprehension, as well as writing. However, there was some debate about written communication as some respondents felt this could be seen simply as a form of transmitting oral messages, or, in a broader sense, as an opportunity to formulate and fine-tune thoughts. Literacy was seen by a number as a continuum of skills. Literacy, or communication as some put it, was viewed as dependent on three broad parameters. First was the situation or context within which it takes place. It is important to know what needs are motivating people, for example, are they attempting to reach a long-term goal or address a crisis situation. Second were motivational aspects. Literacy was described as the ability to communicate your thoughts beyond yourself and having confidence in the ability to communicate was viewed as important. The third pertained to participating in and responding to information. The ability to use language as a tool was viewed as crucial to the ability to participate optimally in society.

There were mixed views as to whether the definition of ‘literacy’ should be broad or narrow. If considered in a broader sense, literacy can include visual and oral aspects. Some participants felt there are dangers if the definition becomes too broad, for example, the practical impact of having an unclear or overly academic definition. If the definition of literacy was all encompassing, it would be difficult to determine where a person would fit in a literacy continuum, and thus allow a measure of progress in skills or abilities.

Sligo, Watson, Murray, Comrie, Vaccarino and Tilley (2007) maintain that how to define “literacy” is still contested by academics and others, but argue that the term literacy, as used in everyday discussion in the adult learning community, encompasses both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skill sets. SO-