

## Introduction

This volume starts from the clear premise that, first, literacy is a contested concept and, second, that acquiring literacy is a complex process. The manifestation of difficulties in literacy does, in fact, help us to understand the acquisition of literacy far more helpfully than if no difficulties existed. In cases where literacy is acquired unproblematically, the process can, beguilingly, appear almost developmental. But when, in a society which places a high value on literacy (whatever its specific definition), literacy is acquired with difficulty, we begin to scrutinize the process to see where the barriers are being constructed: we do not pause to analyse something which poses no challenges. It is within this scrutiny that acquiring literacy is seen to be complex and, hence, that difficulties in literacy parallel this complexity. This volume considers the complexity of literacy difficulties and, in so doing, shows how research into literacy difficulties has to be multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary and involve a range of research approaches and methods. This research brief is necessary to accommodate the wide range of issues that can, potentially, explain literacy difficulties and suggest strategies and interventions to ease those difficulties.

It is significant that in the collection of articles in this volume, no one commentator or researcher claims dominance of the field in understanding literacy difficulties. The articles are evidence-based but remind us that any research has its limitations—not least because any good research study has a very precise, focused research question. Even if the research is robust and rests on a secure methodological approach, it can yield ambiguous findings or the findings can be misinterpreted. When this misinterpretation or ambiguity becomes enshrined in policy, then trouble follows. We find, in this volume, suggestions of how literacy research, and the neglect of the recognition that research always takes places in a context, may, ironically, have contributed to literacy difficulties in that unhelpful strategies and interventions have been implemented. The authors in this present volume commonly show how a previous research study needs revisiting or a single finding needs specific focus in order to refine it; or how the choice of methodology affects the findings; or how the findings must be read in the light of other considerations. In some cases, more seems to have been learnt about literacy as the years have progressed—and, here, the rare longitudinal studies are particularly welcome. In others, the same points are being made as were made previously—not always to revitalize or confirm them but because previous lessons have not been heeded or political imperatives have not had time to gather up the existing evidence.

The volume is divided into five sections, each of which focuses on one of the functions involved in addressing literacy difficulties.

Part 1 asks the ‘So What?’ question which is indispensable for linking theory to practice. It is important to remember that this linkage is a two-way process. Theorists have a duty to point out the implications for practice, while practitioners have a duty to challenge and evaluate their practice in the light of theory and research findings. However, it is in the day-to-day observation of practice that flaws, or lack of refinement, in theory can be detected and practitioners can thus participate in theory generation and refinement by considering ‘what fits’ and ‘what does not fit’. Theorists then have an obligation to listen to them.

## 2 Approaching Difficulties in Literacy Development Assessment, Pedagogy and Programmes

Part 2 turns to the assessment of literacy difficulties. The articles do not consider assessment merely as a skill but, rather, as an activity inextricably linked to pedagogy. While how an assessment is undertaken is of critical importance—mismanagement can generate frail or misleading data—yet assessment is only of value if the ‘So What?’ question is asked and acted upon. And this ‘So What?’ goes far deeper than is implied in assessment for categorization (‘dyslexic’ or ‘not dyslexic’; ‘extra time in exams’ for ‘normal treatment’) which may be about access and equity but is not directly about literacy difficulties.

Part 3 takes the next logical step: Pedagogy and Planning. But planning inevitably has to take account of the external environment. The vast majority of practitioners operate within a set of parameters dictated not by ‘pure theory’ (what practice would be like in an ideal world uncontaminated by variables) but by political frameworks, themselves designed according to political, socio-economic and cultural requirements and values. In this third part, thus, the relevant issues widen to embrace ethnicity, culture, and issues within education such as the ‘specialness’ of special educational needs teaching, and ‘learning styles’. Each of these begs the question what are ‘literacy difficulties’ and gives a reminder of two more important points, which reinforce the complexity of ‘literacy’ and ‘literacy difficulties’—that literacy does not exist in a vacuum and that teaching literacy will be influenced by a range of classroom practices that have been generated through other lineages.

It is easy to allow media attention to restrict the consideration of literacy difficulties and to create the impression that it is a phenomenon mostly resident in primary or lower secondary education. Part 4 widens the scope, bringing in articles from Scotland and New Zealand, a study which examines the persistence (or otherwise) of literacy difficulties as the environment changes, and an article which increasingly challenges the understanding of ‘literacy’ (and hence literacy difficulties) the further that learners proceed from the relatively confined school curriculum and enter higher education.

Finally, but, arguably, of most importance, Part 5 examines how changes in practice are brought about and asks the uncomfortable question of for whose benefit ‘labels’ are attached to learners who find acquiring literacy difficult. There are no answers here. The only way that the reader can arrive at a resolution is to ponder over all the articles in this Reader and its companion volume and come to his/her own decision, grounded in the evidence presented and his/her evaluation of the robustness of that evidence.

This volume presents a range of perspectives and approaches. The articles were selected because they demonstrated the complexity of literacy difficulties, were up to date, and were ‘arguable with’. For literacy evolves and transmutes: in a decade there will be new considerations untouched in this volume. We hope that readers will be motivated to participate in, and contribute, to this evolution.

## Part 1

Goswami uses recent developments in neuro-science to answer ‘old’ question about approaches to reading across languages. The data presented here reinforce the idea of complexity and the need to have multiple approaches to literacy difficulties. There are messages in this article that can be transferred outside the field of neuroscience. For example, the importance of oral language is easy to forget when focusing on script-based difficulties and

Goswami gives a timely reminder about the importance of rigorous research methods and the fact that as research methods develop, so new findings can be presented.

Learning to read is not like suddenly being able to ride a bike—once you have the skill, a few wobbles and you are off for life. Learning to read is, as the title of OU course E801 reminds us, a developmental process—not an event—and this process involves proximal abilities and skills. In chapter 2, Scarborough draws attention to this and also presents evidence that reading difficulties persist through an individual's life: early intervention may be necessary but not sufficient. And 'predictors', often courted by policy-makers, are frail: often, all that can be done is to identify instances of 'high risk' and remember that there are always exceptions. Again, here is one of our recurrent messages—simplistic interpretations of data must be avoided: for example, it is not enough just to identify 'family history' as a 'cause' of difficulties in a child; difficulties in previous generations may have been rooted in genetic factors or may have been rooted in socio-cultural factors.

The next chapter, by Ellis, gives an indication of what happens when data are misinterpreted by being taken out of context and dissociated from other paradigms: 'any study driven mainly by one paradigm can only offer limited insights'. The fact that one group of learners made exceptional progress with a particular method of teaching reading does not mean that other groups will fare similarly. Ellis points to other areas of educational research—specifically, what is known about the management of change and curriculum innovation. She points out that the background features of a particular study must be examined in full before the process of that study is implanted elsewhere—for example, any curriculum innovation is affected by such factors as related staff development, support structures, management and leadership from above, and the availability of advice during implementation.

The report of Cain et al. is a useful example of, first, what can be achieved in a carefully conducted small-scale investigation and, second, how assessment tests can be used in a focused way to answer a very specific research question (rather than just to produce a cumulative assessment of an individual). This is a lesson well worth heeding.

Finally in this section, the focus turns to adult literacy and large scale research. Purcell-Gates et al. adopt a social practice perspective and discuss the importance (and greater efficacy) of 'authentic' practice—that is, practice grounded in learners' day-to-day context and concerns—as opposed to decontextualized skill acquisition.

## Part 2

In this part, the usefulness of two assessment instruments (PhAB and DEST) in common use in English schools is discussed before attention turns to literacy assessment more generally.

In chapter 6 Wheldall and Pogorzelski question the value of making distinctions between dyslexic low-progress readers and non-dyslexic low-progress readers. This raises issues about when distinctive pedagogy for groups of learners displaying different behaviours with regard to literacy difficulties should be applied. Does the cause of reading difficulties matter or should attention focus on imaginative and effective interventions? The chapter questions whether categorization can be predictive of response to an intervention programme and addresses the critical question of whether learners 'just catch up' without specific

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systemic intervention. In passing, it might be noted that Wheldall and Pogorzelski's proportion of severe dyslexics is low—just three to five per cent of the 25 per cent of learners with difficulties (and thus about one per cent of the total population). Some of the criteria that the authors use in relation to PhAB can be transferred elsewhere—for example, PhAB gives a diagnosis but is deemed less informative for practice. There is the suggestion that it may not be necessary to use PhAB to categorize learners in order to determine interventions as interventions may be effective for all learners in this study. There are challenges for teachers in this chapter as there are in the chapter 7, which considers DEST's usefulness as a predictor in comparison with other school-based assessment. The authors consider that individual items in the assessment instrument may serve a better purpose than the test as a whole. This suggestion relates to expert practitioners' ability to focus on one specific learner behaviour within the administration of a test and produce another test to look at that particular behaviour in detail. This places assessment under the Assessment For Learning banner rather than as a means to the ends of categorization for administrative purposes. One message for teachers may be that they should have confidence in tried and tested school-based assessment (provided that evidence to prove its efficacy has been collected systematically) rather than assume that a commercial test is superior.

Finally in this section, Johnston and Costello locate literacy assessment in society, pointing out that literacy involves democratic interaction. Any focus on a narrow sample of 'literature behaviour' will distort teaching. Different instruments will have different meanings according to different cultural and societal assumptions and values which may give more information about power relations than anything to do with 'literacy skills'. The messages here are timely, following the more technical considerations of the specific instruments in the first two chapters in this section.

### Part 3

Mortimer's chapter warns against making ungrounded assumptions about the capacity of other general interventions (here, the case of preferred learning styles) to enhance the learning of students with dyslexia. We must always look at the quality of the evidence before we incorporate any intervention into our pedagogy. This highlights the close relationship between practice and theory. Practice that is not theoretically justified is dangerous.

Challenging assumptions further, Norwich and Lewis question the notion of a 'common curriculum' (where 'curriculum' includes 'pedagogy'). Their chapter shows an argument in action and, usefully, it is an argument which does not arrive at answers easily, following our Reader theme of complexity and supporting the hypothesis that continua of teaching approaches may be the most appropriate model for those with literacy difficulties, giving the opportunity for different weights and balances using common ingredients rather than a choice between distinctive diets.

The focus then turns to a specific policy example with the chapter by Goodwyn and Findlay, which powerfully illustrates that literacy is a contested concept, driven as much by politics as research into the acquisition of skills which literacy needs. The authors here also show not only how official rhetoric around literacy policy can be internally inconsistent and espouse different philosophical positions, but also how the policy, in all its manifestations, can be variously interpreted by the practitioners

involved in its implementation. This is a reminder that, as researchers into literacy difficulties, we must always clarify what ‘version’ of literacy is practised in the context in which we are working.

This reminder is apposite for Meacham’s chapter from the US which examines the construction of literacy in a richly diverse, multi-ethnic environment. In addition to the insights it gives us about ‘literacy’ and ‘literacy difficulties’, the article has two important features. First, it shows the workings of a research project that was very complex on account of the vast range of intervening variables. Second, it shows how extended metaphor can be employed to support data analysis.

## Part 4

In chapter 13 Tett explores the manifestation of different literacies in different cultures, noting how one ‘literacy’ can predominate to such an extent that it disenfranchises those whose identity is grounded in a culture with a different literacy. Those using the dominant literacy can adopt a medical perspective regarding users of other literacies, seeing them as deficient in their language use. The article shows the relationship between pedagogy and the content of the curriculum, and suggests that an emancipatory pedagogy is needed to free some learners of their lack of confidence in themselves which results from their self-perception of being a user of what they have been taught is a ‘deficient’ literacy. The author’s insistence on ‘authenticity’ can be transferred to a myriad of contexts in which small-scale practitioner research is conducted at masters level.

The chapter by Glynn and McNaughton investigates both the cultural influences on literacy and the implementation of a specific programme for literacy difficulties, emphasizing ‘the inseparable linkages between language learning and cultural learning’. Interestingly, these authors are able to use a methodology first tried in a study they conducted nearly three decades previously. Research which is able to build on experience and test conceptual frameworks over time, in changing contexts, is extremely valuable. Similarly, Hurry and Sylva can ‘look back’ as they report a longer term investigation of Reading Recovery. The importance of this time frame comparison is highlighted by the fact that, while immediate gains were reported for children engaged in the intervention, longer term effects were far less distinct. This reminds us that, as researchers, we can ‘construct’ evidence by virtue of the methodological frames that we use. Early intervention, however, good, may be inadequate on its own and support may need to be available to some students for a far longer time. If we relate this practical finding to what we know about the causes of literacy difficulties (see, for example, chapters in the companion volume to this), this may not surprise us.

The final chapter in this part gives evidence of variation within a literacy or related literacies—in this case, academic literacies. Students can be confused by the very different sets of expectations and conventions assumed by different members of staff and subject areas within higher education—largely because different fields of investigation have their own cultures and histories. Different perspectives, representing different statuses in the power hierarchy, validate different responses from students and render these responses acceptable or unacceptable.

## Part 5

The final part starts with a chapter taking up the theme of inclusion, exploring the dilemma between ‘labelling’, following identification, as, on the one hand, in useful gaining access to resources and helping the learner to position him/herself; and, on the other, promoting ‘learned helplessness’ on the part of those identified, so that the label becomes an instrument of disempowerment and strengthens the suggestion of a fixed state of inability. This is the dilemma faced by numerous teachers in a wide range of contexts day by day. Finally, Melhuish et al. report a large-scale study of the effects of learning activities in the home. This study goes far beyond those which suggest a link between a child’s achievement and socio-economic background. It focuses on the learning activities (which can include activities which teach the child how to learn) and suggests that it is these, rather than the background characteristics themselves, that influence a child’s level of achievement. This is important in terms of planning effective interventions (which it suggests should be collaborative).