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Literacy: A Multidimensional and Ever-Present Entity

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Literacy is defined as “the ability to read and write” or “knowledge that relates to a specified subject” (Literacy, 2015). While at first glance this definition appears to be atomistic, in order to learn about all of these varied subjects, people must be well-versed in multiple dimensions of literacy. For example, most patients, regardless of education level, must know how to read medical information, complete written forms, communicate important details about symptoms, listen to complex diagnoses, and navigate Internet documents in order to receive adequate healthcare. In order to be successful in the dominant culture, students must know how to traverse rigid, academic literacies in schools while simultaneously becoming savvy, critical consumers of the Internet. Teachers must oppose attitudes toward “value added” educational models and strive to garner appreciation for all students’ familial experiences with literacy in an effort to promote empathy for and an understanding of all humankind. Hamel, Shaw, and Smith Taylor (2013) highlight the importance of the literacies of homes and communities as an impetus for the “development of self” (p. 428). Literacies help people to understand the world around them. The urgency for finding ways to utilize these multiple dimensions of literacy as catalysts for creating a more compassionate world cannot be understated.

This issue of the journal focuses on research and practical applications that show the impact of multiple dimensions of literacy in families and communities. From qualitative studies to literature reviews to perspectives from the field, the current publication addresses the value of community and family cultural literacy, the dimensions of literacy that are often overlooked or undervalued, the power of literacy to provide a voice for the underserved, and the value of health literacy in the community. By understanding multiple dimensions of literacy, readers can better address the distinct needs of individuals, families, schools, and local and global communities.

Traditionally, the perception of literacy has been narrowly defined. Literacy in the 21st Century is no longer confined to academic reading and writing. “Literacy practices are intimately connected to the economic, social, cultural, educational, and intellectual dimensions of our lives” (Bloome & Enciso, 2006, p. 296). To prepare individuals to participate in a democratic society, including all of its strengths and weaknesses, literacy has to be viewed as multifaceted (Bloome & Enciso, 2006). It is important to understand that there are dimensions to ways that we communicate and express ourselves daily.

The Varied Dimensional Strands of Literacy

In this issue, readers will discover how Kucer (2015) classifies four dimensions, which help us to see the broad categories of what literacy is, and what it can and cannot do, today. Providing an introduction to this theme of multidimensional literacy, Kucer (2015) contends that one must “understand the very nature of literacy itself” (p. 1). In his manuscript, “Literacy: Varied, Dynamic, and Multidimensional,” he first explains the dimensions of literacy and how these dimensions work alone and together to assist in building meaning. Then, each dimension is explored in depth to help the reader fully understand what goes on during individual literacy experiences. These dimensions include: a linguistic and other sign systems dimension (the reader and writer as code breaker and code maker); a cognitive dimension (reader and writer as meaning maker); a sociocultural dimension (the reader and writer as text user and text critic); and a developmental dimension (the learner as scientist and construction worker). “Economic status, the educational level of the parents, and teacher and curricular responses to the language form” play a role in literacy development (Kucer, 2015, p. 8). “The...challenge...is to maintain complexity for all...regardless of the communities to which they belong” (Kucer, 2015, p.22). In this issue, authors explore components of two of these dimensions.

Global and Community Literacies

One component, arising from Kucer’s sociocultural dimension, is the impact of literacy on global citizenry and community engagement. In their perspective from the field, Birchak et al. (2015) share examples of multiple methods of engagement with the community through literacy. Upon receiving funding for a multifaceted project utilizing a culturally sensitive common text, a team of five teachers and researchers developed plans for engaging in a university collaborative with various community members. The authors “...valued the opportunity to exchange ideas with partners as [they] explored innovative ways of presenting the book, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and its themes to diverse audiences” (Birch et al., 2015, p. 20). The importance of the fluid nature of literacy and its power to promote cultural sensitivity is evidenced through their interactions with university and public school students, parents and children living in displaced or homeless circumstances, and urban neighborhood centers. The power of intentional and purposeful interactions with the many facets of literacy is clearly expressed through their work, and this work serves as a guide for directing those who seek to use literacy as a platform for promoting positive community change and growth. “Exploring social issues through the

literary arts...encouraged dialogue intended to bridge the borders between people and increase literacy” (Birch et al., 2015, p. 20).

Moving beyond multiple literacies in the local community, Pohl and Beaudry (2015) present information about using critical literacy to enhance social studies in the classroom to promote higher level thinking about global issues. In their manuscript, “Critical Literacy in the Social Studies Classroom: A Case for the 21st Century,” they offer a review of literature supporting critical literacy and its use in the global society. The authors suggest that social studies learning specifically can be enhanced by “promoting critical considerations of citizenship and democracy that support equity, justice, and tolerance while seeking to develop sustainable living for all global inhabitants” (Pohl & Beaudry, 2015, p. 9). Pohl and Beaudry (2015) suggest that students study various perspectives on globalization from different places that reflect both “positive and negative effects” (p. 9). The authors conclude that critical approaches can assist students in making educated decisions, as well as provide experiences in learning that afford meaningful connections to view the world around them.

Cultural Literacies

Another area of Kucer’s sociocultural dimension is cultural responsiveness, specifically honoring students’ social nature through varied literacy responses. Peeples, the 2015 National Teacher of the Year, offers a perspective from the field that highlights the importance of culturally relevant teaching. Her work with refugee students serves as a guide for teachers who, in the near future, will likely lead the learning of students who have been displaced from their own countries. Peeples’ (2015) article in this issue, “‘What Is Essential Is Invisible to the Eye’: Culturally Responsive Teaching as a Key to Unlocking Children’s Multiple Literacies,” offers strategies for viewing literacy through a broad lens, as opposed to the narrow lens of a person’s ability to *successfully* read and write about academically classic works. Peeples shows teachers how to encourage students to question the issues that they worry about, fear, desire, etc. and how to respond to those questions about life through nontraditional literacy processes. These varied responses honor the diverged lives of students, expanding the definition of literacy to include modes of expression that allow students to reflect upon and tell the stories about their lives.

Following the theme of engaging in culturally relevant literacy practices, Piña et al. (2015) share their research using Professional Dyads in Culturally Relevant Teaching (PDCRT) to investigate the multiple

dimensions of literacy in culturally-rich classrooms. By studying teacher-educator/early childhood teacher dyads, the authors use critical ethnography to evaluate how two practicing teachers of color engage in literacy teaching that honors the culture of students and parents who are multilingual, of color, and/or of varying cultural backgrounds. Data were triangulated and themes emerged, showing classroom practices that include: “honoring family and cultural identities through student names and getting to know families, culturally relevant and authentic assessments, translanguaging, ...building curriculum around student interests, highlighting families’ home and community literacies, and going beyond traditional notions of ‘family involvement’ through the use of multi-modal texts...” (Piña et al., 2015, p. 9). Students in the study moved from being non-English readers to reading proficiently and on grade level within the course of one school year. They also consistently demonstrated alphabetic knowledge and concepts of print, and met all of the assessment objectives for three and four year olds. The implication is that utilizing multiple literacies to promote cultural responsiveness does result in academic gains.

López-Robertson (2015) also shows readers how to utilize cultural literacy to increase parent/school relationships and how to utilize a student’s culture to enhance literacy learning. She worked with five Latina mothers and their children over the course of a school year. “No sabía que tenía valor”: Uncovering Latina Mothers’ Multiple Literacies” (2015) focuses on discussions with these mothers regarding particular books from their home language and culture. These books focus on experiences and themes with which the mothers could relate. The mothers’ children joined in during the last thirty minutes of each session. López-Robertson also made a point to explore with these mothers the contributions they make to their child’s development through literacy learning.

López-Robertson describes literacy for each session in one of five ways: Familial Capital, Linguistic Capital, Social Capital, Navigational Capital, and Resistant Capital. One session focused on Familial Capital where participants were asked to share their best part of the book. One of the mothers “shared that the little girl in the book who wrote ‘my hair’ reminded her of [her] daughter and a recent incident that had taken place at a national retailer...employees at this national chain were threatening the Latino shoppers with deportation” (López-Robertson, 2015, p. 8). The mothers discussed how it felt to receive threats and their responsibility to keep their families safe. During another session that focused on Linguistic Capital, mothers discussed a book called, *Pepita Talks Twice*. The mothers “referred to the important job that their children had as translators

for them and their community” (López-Robertson, 2015, p. 9). Overall, mothers were able to make connections with the literature and their own lives. The sessions encouraged mothers to talk openly and form relationships with others. The stories showed the mothers that they have something valuable to offer their children. As López-Robertson (2015) suggests “all families have something to offer schools” (p. 18). It is important for schools to create environments that reciprocate that sentiment.

School Readiness Literacies

A final aspect of the sociocultural dimension of Kucer’s model could be exemplified through the importance of literacy for school readiness. In their perspective from the field, Finck and Shea (2015) address kindergarten readiness in “More Than a Zip Code: Addressing Home Factors Influencing Kindergarten Readiness Levels.” They write about the importance of young children having a foundation to enter kindergarten. The authors discuss the importance of a home literacy environment and the impact caregivers have on early literacy development. Finck and Shea (2015) suggest that programs fostering early literacy match the values of both the home and caregiver, including cultural influences. For caregivers, programs should offer information regarding cultures and differences in parenting styles across cultures. Policymakers play a role in assisting with school readiness as well. The authors suggest that policies for families include “healthcare, nutrition, stable housing, quality and affordable childcare” (Finck & Shea, 2015, p. 11). These policies, as well as financial support for programs encouraging literacy and early childhood education, are important for helping children and their families become ready for school.

Health Literacies

Another of Kucer’s dimensions of literacy addressed in this issue of the journal is related to linguistics and other sign systems, specifically in the area of health literacies. Hollar and Rowland’s (2015) review of the literature, “Promoting Health Literacy for People with Disabilities and Clinicians Through a Teamwork Model,” addresses “common communication barriers associated with the medical model approach...by introducing an applied biopsychosocial model of health literacy for people with disabilities that places the patient as a member and leader of the healthcare team” (p. 1). Much of traditional health literacy is centered on the individual. The importance is that there are disparities between what a person of disabilities discerns in terms of health care and what is actually

shared with them; e.g. hyper-complicated medical terminology. The authors inform the reader about this relevant issue by providing a definition of health literacy, an overview of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICFDH) biopsychosocial model, a brief history of health literacy in general and for those with disabilities, a discussion of the health disparities of people with disabilities, and research related to decision making. “To detect true health literacy and illiteracy, or shades thereof, our judgments, perceptions, and measurement tools must maximally match the truthfulness and falseness of reality” (Hollar & Rowland, 2015, p. 12). Hollar and Rowland provide an overview of how this literacy can be evaluated and what providers can do to positively impact communication. The ultimate goal is for providers to ascribe to an effective health literacies model. “The impact of lower literacy levels and the capacity of providers to communicate health information for understanding can be implemented within existing patient safety teamwork models” (Hollar & Rowland, 2015, p. 12). The problem is that health literacy is elusive and the models are sparingly utilized. Individuals with disabilities must be provided accommodations when it comes to health care, just like we would provide accommodations for them in schools and businesses. The importance of this review highlights the need for such considerations.

Also related to linguistics and other sign systems, as well as health literacies, is the subcategory of genetic literacies. Using Borman’s (1985) Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) and Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber’s (1998) analysis procedures, Goltz and Acosta (2015) employed narrative analysis to analyze and code strategically selected social media posts. “A Rare Family: Cultural and Conceptual Knowledge in an Online Genetic Support Group” explores the dynamics of an online support group to gain additional insights into specific psychosocial and environmental variables that affect individual genetic literacy. The authors narratively analyzed online conversation “pertaining to genetic risk and sexual and reproductive decision-making” (Goltz & Acosta, 2015, p. 3). A holistic analysis of the content revealed six important categories of conversation related to the social group’s discussions about whether or not two participants should have more children with a carrier/affected partner. A further narrative analysis revealed three important meta-themes: experience of being carriers/affected, the rare family, and genetic health decision making. The vehicle of social networking allows for free dialogue and the formation of a pseudo-family network of support. “[T]his online ‘familial’ context may then exert particularly strong influences on members’ social and health decision-making via co-constructed cultural and

conceptual knowledge of the disorder. When viewed through a scientific or medical lens, individuals with this cultural/conceptual knowledge may lack the genetic literacy necessary for informed and competent health decision-making” (Goltz & Acosta, 2015, p. 10-11). This implies that perhaps health care professionals need training to understand the dynamics of online conversation about genetic disorders, including the support system that it provides and the misconceptions that often arise. This could guide practitioners in understanding why their patients make particular decisions. “Understanding how laypersons interpret and communicate complex concepts such as genetic risk and inheritance are vital to helping health professionals change or develop programs that increase awareness and educate the general public” (Goltz & Acosta, 2015, p. 13).

The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Family Strengths* seek to educate readers about the varied and complicated facets of literacy. Literacy is not just about reading and writing in schools; it is about life. It has relevance to every activity a person undertakes. Literacy plays an important role for each of us and has an impact on daily activities. While the articles address many very important issues related to literacy function and learning, this issue highlights only two of Kucer’s dimensions of literacy. There is much more to explore and understand. “There are many paths to literacy and no one-size-fits-all” (Kucer, 2015, p. 22). We encourage readers to explore the many aspects of literacy in this issue and take time to recognize that literacy is ever-present and fluid.

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