

Conceptualisations of literacy and literacy practices for children with severe learning difficulties

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Abstract

Literacy is traditionally narrowly conceptualised as a set of skills related to accessing and generating written or printed text. For children designated as having severe learning difficulties (SLD), who are unlikely to develop these 'conventional' literacy skills, such a conception implies their semi-literacy or non-literacy. Although conceptions of multimodal literacy and multiliteracies have rarely been applied to this group, broader understandings of literacy that include a range of activities, modes and media provide greater opportunities for including these learners in literacy practices. Drawing upon our research with teachers of this group of children and young people, we illustrate these literacy practices. We note, however, that such practices are often haphazard, not coherently thought through, and that there is much confusion regarding any distinction between communication and literacy. We argue for literacy as a specific form of communication, but conclude that broader models of literacies should be utilised to guide and support practitioners in developing interactive practice and in making reasoned and principled approaches and decisions about literacy practices, routes and progression for children with SLD.

Key words: inclusion, severe learning difficulties, conceptualisations of literacy

Introduction

Technological advances enable us to represent and share meaning in a myriad of multimodal ways and there are opportunities to explore and exploit these through school curricula (for example, see UKLA/QCA, 2004). For some practitioners and in much policy documentation, however, the teaching of literacy is still firmly focused on promoting reading and writing as traditionally conceived; as a set of skills related to accessing and generating written or printed text (Concannon-Gibney and Murphy, 2010; DfES, 2006; Rose, 2006). In this paper, we use the term 'conventional literacy' as defined by Kaderavek and Rabadoux (2004), drawing on Kaderavek and Sulzby (2000):

"Conventional literacy describes those reading and writing behaviours that the members of a culture have implicitly or explicitly agreed upon as denoting traditional reading and writing" (p. 238).

For children designated as having severe learning difficulties (SLD), who may not learn to read and write in this conventional sense, aims and practices of literacy teaching have altered over recent decades. Confusion and uncertainty remain, however, about the nature and purpose of literacy, its possible distinctiveness from communication and notions of progression within literacy for this group of learners (Lacey et al., 2007; Watson et al., 2004).

There have been attempts to present models to support this area. Browder et al. (2009), in the US context, for example, promote literacy as a goal for pupils with 'severe developmental disabilities'. They present a conceptual model of literacy based on "the expectation that every student receive the opportunity to learn to read" (p. 271) with two outcomes – increasing access to literature and increasing independence as a reader. Their conceptualisation of literacy, however, does not go beyond written text.

Viewing literacy as a socially situated and interactive practice (Barton et al., 2000), we support the, now mainstream, argument for a conceptualisation of literacy to include a much broader range of activities, utilising different modes, artefacts and drawing on diverse skills and abilities (Bearne, 2003; Kress, 2000). This emphasis on multiliteracies and multimodal literacies is widespread (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Flewitt, 2008; Marsh, 2005), though it is rarely extended to children designated as having SLD. One notable exception is the work of Flewitt et al. (2009) who examine "inclusive multimodal literacy practices" (p. 222) for one pre-school child with learning difficulties through an ethnographic video case study. In this paper, we discuss evidence from The Inclusive Literacy Research Project, which was designed to explore new ways of conceptualising literacy and developing literacy practices for children with 'severe learning difficulties'. We examine what literacy, as a specific form of

communication, might mean for these pupils and consider how its advantages can be extended. We suggest ways of conceptualising literacy that may support this work and consider the implications for teachers' practice.

Severe learning difficulties (SLD)

'Severe learning difficulties' (SLD) is a term used in England to describe children and young people who have significant cognitive impairments and who experience significant difficulties in learning. In some parts of the world, they may be described as having severe intellectual disabilities. The majority are educated in special schools or units, with a smaller proportion fully included in mainstream schools (DfE, 2010). Most pupils with SLD will only learn basic elements of conventional reading and writing. For example, some may learn a sight vocabulary of common words and some individual phonic sounds, but most find it hard to generalise these skills beyond simple written text. Few students with SLD are likely to learn to read and write written text for pleasure, work or study (Lacey et al. 2007).

Conceptualisations of literacy

Globally, literacy's associations with prosperity and social status are deep rooted and equated with being able to read and write in a conventional sense. Furthermore, these skills are widely regarded as synonymous with being 'educated' as indicated in publicity surrounding the UNESCO Literacy Decade (2003–2012) (<http://www.unesco.org/education/litdecade>) and in the UNESCO *Education for All* report (UNESCO, 2010). The process and status involved in 'becoming literate' (Merchant and Carrington, 2009, p. 63) are frequently unavailable for pupils designated with SLD. From a realist perspective, they may be considered nonliterate or, at best, perhaps, semi-literate. Following a more constructionist argument, however, if the meaning of literacy and the enactment of literacy practices and interactions are challenged and extended, the process and status of 'becoming literate' might be opened up to these pupils.

What is literacy?

The definition of 'conventional literacy' given by Kaderavek and Sulzby (2000) above implies, firstly, that the selection of "reading and writing behaviours" (p. 238) (literacy activities and practices) to define literacy is a matter of cultural influence. It is therefore to be expected that the defining features of literacy are not immutable but reflect and respond to the prevailing culture. Furthermore a failure to regard the literacy attempts of all people as culturally significant amounts

to the marginalisation of certain individuals in relation to that culture (see Hannon, 2004).

'New Literacy Studies' proponents have challenged narrow concepts of literacy, raising questions about its essential features and viewing literacy as social practice (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Gough, 1995; Street, 1984). From this perspective, the meaning of literacy practices is seen to change in response to current contingencies and needs, and literacy is regarded as emerging out of the negotiation between people and society; literacy practices are thus socially embedded.

Concurrent with this view of literacy as social practice is an acknowledgement that literacy is now also multimodal, expressed through multisensory and/or electronic media, for example, audiovisual 'texts' of television, film and Internet (Anstey and Bull, 2006; Kress, 2000) and that there are different 'literacies' required for participation and communication through new technologies – digital literacies (Coiro et al., 2008). Thus, "what constitutes literacy and literate practices in a constantly changing, socially and culturally diverse, globalised and technological world" (Anstey and Bull, 2006, p. 19) is increasingly complex. These understandings around literacy practices have, however, rarely been examined in relation to learners with SLD (for example, Flewitt et al., 2009) and not, to our knowledge, in a school context.

Literacy and children with SLD

We have noted the 'literate invisibility' (Kliewer et al., 2006, p. 172) of children and young people with SLD. Assumptions that certain cognitive levels are required before reading can commence have resulted in some children with SLD being denied access to literacy teaching (Porter, 2005). This "denial of literate citizenship" (Kliewer et al., 2006, p. 165) is frequently regarded as a "natural manifestation of organic defects" (p. 164) for this group of learners rather than being in need of social, cultural or political examination.

Historically, for this group of children, at school age and sometimes beyond, there have been two emphases; first, teaching "prerequisite skills for literacy", such as picture-matching or joining the dots on a zig-zag line, and second, a functional approach, for example, through the teaching of common social sight words, such as 'Exit' or 'Toilets' (Browder et al., 2009; Fletcher-Campbell, 2000).

Although the teaching of communication skills has frequently been prioritised (through multimodal channels, for example, speech, sign and symbol; Fergusson, 1994), the teaching of conventional literacy was not routinely offered. In England, the introduction of an entitlement orientated National Curriculum in 1989 and the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE, 1998a) influenced curricula and teaching

practices, and literacy teaching began to be generally practised for these pupils. Conventional models of literacy and conventional ways of teaching literacy have tended to be used, including synthetic phonics teaching (currently advocated in England as the principal approach to the teaching of reading; Rose, 2006), despite teachers' experience that the vast majority of children with SLD would not progress to conventional reading (Fletcher-Campbell, 2000; Porter, 2005). There have been changes to the NLS and its successor, the Primary National Strategy Framework for Teaching Literacy (DfES, 2006), and a range of guidance has been published (DfEE, 1998b; DfES, 2002, 2003). However, the continual direction for children designated as having SLD has focused on *access to* conventional literacy. This involves the use of multimodal resources, including pictorial symbols (for example, <http://www.widgit.com>), to access literacy and has emphasised the logistics of access and differentiation, for example, 'tracking back' within the learning objectives of the NLS. The conceptualisation of literacy as reading and writing, and literacy learning as a linear sequential acquisition of a set of skills (Syverson, 2008), however, has generally remained unchallenged.

Earlier research conducted by three of the present authors (Lacey et al., 2002) found that teachers in mainstream settings were committed to including pupils with special educational needs in literacy learning. However, the overwhelming majority of teachers upheld the rather narrow Literacy Strategy definition of literacy as "uniting the important skills of reading and writing" (DfEE, 1998a, p. 3). Thus, their efforts were towards teaching this conventional literacy and the skills that support it. For example, one phonics activity for pupils designated as having SLD involved a bag being passed around the group containing objects beginning with the initial sound 't' (tambourine, toy, telephone, teddy); children took it in turns to select an object from the bag and name it. For some pupils, teachers' interpretations of pupils' needs also led them to focus on communication skills (for example, looking, listening and responding). There was often no clear distinction between activities and goals relating to communication, literacy and access to/experience of literature. In generally understanding literacy as conventional literacy, teachers either pursued conventional literacy goals or, for some pupils, precluded the possibility of teaching literacy and, instead, focused on the development of communication skills.

Inclusive literacy research project

Reflecting on these findings, we noted that literacy opportunities and participation may be fairly peripheral for some pupils with SLD. It seemed to us that other options could be available and so we set out to investigate activities and resources that appear to fulfil similar functions to conventional literacy and to share some of its key characteristics. Further, we aimed to

challenge narrow, curriculum- and school-based views of literacy, and to reflect on how literacy might also be more broadly conceptualised and literacy practices developed for pupils with SLD.

Design of the project

The project (Layton et al., 2006) ran for a total of 15 months, during which time we visited 35 schools, most of them special schools, in the Midlands, Greater Manchester and the south-west of England. In the first phase of the study, we observed 122 lessons, involving the teaching of literacy to pupils designated as having SLD with a range of ages from 5 to 19 years. Observations included lessons where literacy was the prime focus and other lessons where literacy was incorporated (for example, science or food technology). Observation data included an audit of the literacy environment in terms of resources available in the classroom and used in the observed activity; a description of the observed activity and teacher-pupil behaviour and interactions. These data were analysed from the perspectives of what the child was experiencing and what the adult was intending, and the literacy opportunities and affordances presented by the learning context. We also interviewed 61 teachers for their perspectives on the meaning of literacy for this group of learners, how it may be distinguished from communication, and their understanding of the potential of individual learners to acquire conventional literacy. Additionally, we asked teachers about their training or preparation to teach literacy to pupils with SLD. In the second phase of the study, 67 teachers and other professionals (for example, speech and language therapists, teaching assistants) from 10 host schools participated in focus groups to debate issues that had emerged. The practitioners were first asked to respond to a series of statements about literacy, drawn from the teacher interviews and national policy documents. Discussion then involved an exploration of the nature of literacy, teaching about phonics and the use of symbols.

Findings

Teachers' experience of teaching learners with SLD ranged from 2 months to 32 years but few had undertaken any formal training that focused on teaching literacy to this group of learners. Many had taken ideas from courses in Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS; Bondy and Frost, 2001) and Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH; Mesibov et al., 2004) or from continuing professional development courses. From these they stated that they gained many ideas about using symbols and software, for example, but few about teaching literacy. For those teachers who had undertaken any in-depth study of literacy development, this had been via courses in dyslexia or

those related to the Literacy Strategy and its adaptation.

Full details of the methodology and findings are available in other publications (Lacey et al., 2007; Layton et al., 2006). In this paper, alongside theoretical frameworks around multimodal literacies (Flewitt, 2008) and artefactual literacies (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010), we discuss three aspects of our findings: firstly, the widespread use of multimodal literacies and artefacts in addition to print and written language; secondly, the limited principled rationale for the selection of different literacy teaching approaches; thirdly, the perceived and implied conceptualisation of literacy for pupils with SLD and its relationship with communication.

Multimodal and artefactual literacy activities

Flewitt's (2008, p. 123) definition of *multimodal literacies* encompasses "spoken, printed, visual and digital 'literacies'". She includes modes contained within different texts – "such as words, images and sounds in printed and electronic media and in face-to-face interaction" – and also the modes and combinations of modes people use "to make and express meaning (such as gesture, gaze, facial expression, movement, image, music, sound effects and language)". Literacy activities in our study were frequently multimodal – teachers used the following range and this range was often used by a single teacher:

1. Traditional orthography: phonic session, letter of the week, identifying parts of letters, writing name, handwriting.
2. Conventional literacy: library – choosing a reading book; lots of pens, pencils; stories, genre; guided reading and writing.
3. Social sight recognition: literacy out in the environment; preparation for everyday living.
4. Literacy artefacts (non word based): puppets; Bag Books (<http://www.bagbooks.org.uk>); story sacks; objects (to support Big Books); photographs; dressing-up to take on a character; making marks to note-take.
5. Pictorial symbols (for example, <http://www.widgit.com>): symbol matching, books with symbols, sequencing with symbols in wider curriculum areas, labelling a picture with symbols to tell a story, some children had symbol books but often did not use them spontaneously.
6. Speech, language and communication: speech and language sessions with a speech and language therapist, PECS cards to make requests for things, oral skills – blowing, mirrors, facial movements.

As Lacey (2006) notes, the categories 1–3 include conventional approaches to literacy using words and written texts, whereas 4–6 include some activities that would not necessarily be regarded as literacy practices

with typically developing pupils of all school ages. We will consider category 6, communication, later in this paper. Here, we briefly discuss the use of literacy artefacts and pictorial symbols.

Literacy artefacts

Pahl and Rowsell (2010) define an artefact as having the following qualities:

- "physical features that makes it distinct, such as colour or texture
- Is created, found, carried, put on display, hidden, evoked in language, or worn
- Embodies people, stories, thoughts, communities, identities, and experiences
- Is valued or made by a meaning maker in a particular context" (p. 2).

There were many examples in our study of the use of nonwritten literacy artefacts in addition to written-text-based artefacts. Some of the former, for example, story sacks and puppets, are frequently used with young typically developing children to support literacy development. In many of our study schools, pupil timetables were portrayed using photographs or objects of reference (Ockelford, 2002) (for example, a wooden spoon to indicate cooking). All of these conform to Pahl and Rowsell's definition (above). In School 15, pupils made a record of their visit to a farm by photographing baby animals and other aspects that took their interest. At School 30, pupils attended to an interactive white board photo story of a family visiting Mumbai, India and some were able to respond to questions relating to the differences between Mumbai and their own home town.

Pictorial symbols

Pictorial symbols are a specific type of literacy artefact. According to a survey conducted by Abbott and Lucey (2005), 96 per cent of schools for children with SLD reported using symbols; a finding confirmed by our observations. Of course, the use of pictorial symbols or ideographs as literate practice would be very familiar to readers of Mandarin, Cantonese and other Kanji-based written languages. In English schools, these symbols typically take the form of 'rebus' symbols, where a pictorial symbol is used to represent a single word or concept, readily available through software packages (for example, <http://www.widgit.com>). The symbols are usually accompanied by the written word. For example, at School 25, pupils made cauliflower and broccoli soup referring to a symbolised recipe that they had made by cutting and sticking symbols or, for some, writing out the recipe with symbol prompts. Pupils in School 3 built up an information board about 'today' by picking up a 'Monday' symbol and an appropriate weather symbol, and attaching both to the board. At School 22, pupils

wrote news from the weekend on a computer using Clicker (a supportive writing and multimedia tool enabling writing with whole words, phrases or pictures; <http://www.cricksoft.com>); choosing symbolised text from a selection of words and printing out their text for insertion into their own news book.

One thing that was not clear was whether the symbols were actually being used to teach pupils to read (or to progress to) written text. We saw occasional examples of storybooks with symbolised text in parallel with the traditional orthography and we saw many instances where symbols were being used to support communication. There were, however, few examples of teaching symbols *systematically* as part of a reading programme or as a bridge to conventional reading (Fletcher-Campbell, 2000; Lacey et al., 2007; Sheehy and Howe, 2001).

We suggest that this use of a wide range of multimodal artefacts suggests a broader interpretation of literacy beyond conventional understandings. As Kendrick and McKay (2004) maintain, literacy is inherent in any mode of representation; it encompasses “a variety of representative forms” (p. 110). Different modes have different affordances (Flewitt, 2008) and using “artefacts that resonate with students” (Bartlett, 2005, p. 7), especially those that are “sensory, tactile, and felt in everyday life” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p. 7) may enable greater meaning making for these learners.

Rationale for selection of literacy teaching approaches

There was unanimous agreement among the teachers that teaching literacy to all pupils, regardless of their level of need or ability, was essential. It was evident, however, that teachers lacked a principled approach for reinterpreting the government’s literacy strategy for learners with SLD. In the absence of a clear authority to disregard central components of the Primary Strategy (DfES, 2006), most teachers included some phonics teaching, that is, teaching the sound value of written letters, although the balance between teaching phonics and focusing on other book-based activities varied from school to school. We have described, above, the range of multimodal and artefactual literacy activities that teachers used. They tended to dip into many aspects of teaching literacy (for example, phonics, pictorial symbols, social sight recognition, access to literature), without necessarily having a considered progression route, apparently trusting that some element would result in a degree of learning in most pupils. For example, one teacher said that she “plucked elements from national curriculum areas and IEP [individual education plan] targets”.

We also observed practice that, whilst using multimodal artefacts, did not appear to have a clearly

thought out rationale. For example, in School 32, pupils were prompted to find the written word corresponding to a sign with a symbol support. For instance, the adult signed ‘cat’ and showed a pictorial symbol for ‘cat’ and the pupils were encouraged to find the word ‘cat’ from a selection of written words. All indications were that this was beyond the capabilities of the class. This suggested to us that teachers need to be very clear about how far literacy forms such as symbols can provide a bridge to traditional orthography and conventional literacy.

One school used a ‘Literacy Profile’ to map a series of pathways, from nonconventional forms towards conventional literacy targets that included making phonic links and building a bank of sight-words. Most teachers, however, were haphazard in their choice of activities and did not have a principled approach about literacy practices, routes and progression for children with SLD.

Whilst we were unable to find any confirmation that teaching approaches were based on a coherent view of the demands that acquiring literacy skills and knowledge placed upon these learners, this should not be interpreted as a criticism of schools or of individual teachers. Teachers’ commitment to providing appropriately for pupils was not in question. Interview data suggested that teachers get their ideas for teaching from the pupils and what they enjoy-from “knowing the pupils” and “working with the pupils and their individual learning styles and needs”. Many teachers adapted or customised resources to meet individual children’s literacy needs as they understood them. There was thus a bank of experience but no coherent framework to understand progression or within which to evaluate and develop practice.

Conceptualisations of literacy and communication

For some pupils, literacy was interpreted as communication. In order to contextualise the range of teaching approaches and resources that we had observed we asked teachers to articulate their views on what literacy entails, in short, what the meaning of literacy is for these pupils and how, if at all, it differs from communication. Only 21 respondents, or one-third of the total number, judged that there was any difference between the two concepts that could influence teaching:

“Communication can be without words. Literacy is something you’ve spoken, read, written – has a format, is a composition”.

Another one-third believed there was no difference, implying that the terms are synonymous. A further 13 respondents suggested that literacy and communication are on a continuum:

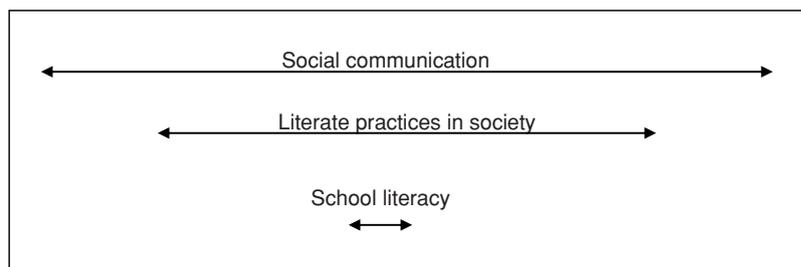


Figure 1: Communication and literacy (from Avramidis et al., 2010, p. 396)

“I find it difficult to tease literacy and communication apart. All literacy involves some sort of communication, and communication may involve literacy. There are so many overlaps”.

We agree there is overlap, but are concerned that literacy, for some pupils, is *only* being interpreted as communication. Thus, teachers of pupils with SLD may be overlooking wider properties of literacy(ies) and focusing solely on teaching communication. Skills developed for the purpose of communication may support conventional literacy (Watson et al., 2004), for example, the use of words, pictures and symbols through systems such as the PECS (Bondy and Frost, 2001). However, we believe that literacy is a goal in itself and should be given an explicit focus in the learning experiences of all children. Avramidis et al. (2010, p. 396) portray a possible relationship between communication and literacy, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Here, school literacy, which we might regard as conventional literacy given current policy emphases (Rose, 2006), is regarded as a narrow conceptualisation of literacy compared to wider literate practices in society (see Dowdall, 2009). As Pahl and Rowsell (2010) note, “the literacy found in schools is actually just one type of literacy” (p. 3). Moreover, literate practices are viewed as a sub-section of social communication; literacy activities are thus expected to be associated with special features. We suggest that a focus on these features can help us conceptualise literacy in ways that are helpful in planning provision for children with SLD.

We tentatively contend that these special features include intention, enduring representation and assignation of meaning. That is, a literate practice is evident when an individual makes *intentional* use of some *enduring representation* (an artefact) in order to *purposively assign and convey meaning*. There is an *intention* to communicate, that is, to share the products of thinking, the meaning, with another person, even if that person is oneself at a future date, for example, in a diary. Thus, in our investigation, for example, in School 2, children touched symbols on an interactive white board and dragged them to compile a physical exercise schedule (enduring representation) which was then given to another person to undertake the set of physical exercises (intention to assign meaning). In School 4, a

teacher worked intensively with a boy using a wordless book template with magnetic pictures. The pupil placed the pictures on to the template and the teacher wove a story around the resulting scenario (probable intention to assign meaning). During the plenary, she related the pupil’s story to the rest of the class (enduring representation). In this analysis, we diverge from Flewitt’s (2008) definition of multimodal literacies presented earlier, in not including face-to-face interaction and accompanying gestures, gazes, facial expressions, speech and sounds. Unlike direct communication such as speech or signing, literacy activities involve an *artefact* with distinctive physical features (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) that can cross the barriers of time; the communication assumes a special (frequently permanent) form that can be accessed by other people, remote in place and time.

Implications for understandings of literacy for learners with SLD

An interesting tension can be noted in our study between curriculum requirements as perceived by teachers and an emphasis on interpreting children’s individual needs. Whilst teachers planned activities that linked to school literacy objectives, they often interpreted *children’s needs* in relation to broader individual needs relating to communication. Fluency in conventional literacy terms may be an unrealistic expectation for some learners; however, “separating them [the learners] from literacy experiences”, as Flewitt et al. (2009, p. 213) also argue, “effectively devalues how they construct meaning in the social worlds they experience”. Along with the teachers in our study, we argue that there are good reasons for identifying literacy goals in meaningful contexts for children and young people with SLD, particularly if broader conceptualisations of literacies are encompassed. As Kaderavek and Rabidoux (2004, p. 242) suggest, “participation in activities, valued as part of our culture and human experience requires no definitive level of achievement to make the activity more or less rewarding or significant”. Participating in literacy at any level may “improve quality of life” (Kaderavek and Rabidoux, 2004, p. 242) and was considered by one of the teachers in the study as “a valuable experience in its own right”.

If literacy is acquired through social interaction, as Kaderavek and Rabidoux (2004) suggest, then social construction of the activity as a literate practice by a more experienced literacy user, a literacy partner, is essential. The partner must recognise the literate dimension of an activity or event and exploit its significance for literacy. The teacher, then, plays a crucial role in viewing children as ‘capable sense-makers’ (Kliwer et al., 2004, p. 387), interpreting pupils’ responses and supporting the development of literacies. Gee (1996, cited in Bartlett, 2005) makes a distinction between ‘acquisition’ and ‘learning’ in literacy attainment, arguing that the “discourse” (literacies) is mastered through “enculturation ... into social practices” rather than ‘overt instructing’ (p. 139). Flewitt et al.’s (2009) study found a difference between the provision in two pre-school settings with regard to the child’s involvement in literacy events and practices and the way she was perceived and valued as a “competent member of the literate community” (p. 232). The classroom social environment and space must then also enable participation in a literate community. We argue that this experience can and should be made available to all students.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have confronted the reality that some learners may never achieve independent reading and writing as conventionally understood. In recognition of the worldwide status of literacy as a force for empowerment, we have argued that learners with SLD should nonetheless have access to its benefits. Teachers should not, therefore, be persuaded to abandon literacy as an outcome in favour of communication skills. In viewing literacy as socially constructed, we understand the argument that “the task of defining literacy” may be ‘a red herring’ (Roberts, 1995, p. 429). Along with Roberts, though, we believe there needs to be greater clarity in discussing the nature of literacy(ies), especially for this group of learners. We suggest that the three elements outlined here – intention, enduring representation and purposive assigning of meaning – can provide a starting point for discussions about the nature of literacy goals for children and young people with SLD.

We hope to liberate professionals’ reflections on the meaning of literacy and establish broader and more inclusive concepts of literacy as a social practice. With Avramidis et al. (2010), we argue that a literate person has a much wider range of skills and aptitudes, and makes use of more resources, materials and practices than are made available through school-based learning. For typically developing learners, much of their literacy learning (in this wider sense) is incidental and experiential but, where incidental learning may be compromised, for example, with children with SLD, opportunities and affordances for such learning should be provided. Literacy teaching does not, in this

view, necessarily follow a progression that starts with phonics (or whole sight words), nor does it have to stall if grapheme–phoneme links cannot be grasped. We suggest that provision of multimodal and artefactual literacy environments, along with purposeful principled teaching, provides a next step within broader understandings of communication for those with SLD.

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