

# Redefining Literacy from an Egalitarian Perspective

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## **Abstract**

*The equality framework developed in the Equality Studies Centre, University College Dublin (UCD), provides a useful base for thinking about literacy from an equality perspective. Neo-liberal, critical and situated approaches to literacy have made minimal impact in the Irish context where only 6 per cent of those with unmet literacy needs participate in learning. This paper explores what an egalitarian theory of adult literacy might have to offer by way of explaining this low participation and also indicating an alternative way forward.*

## **Introduction**

Mainstream literacy discourse since the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) studies in the 1990s has been dominated by crises of falling standards and their economic implications for individuals and States. By comparison, the social, cultural and political consequences of unmet literacy needs have received only marginal attention and considerations of the affective dimensions of equality in relation to literacy remain embryonic. The alternative, predominantly deconstructionist approach of New Literacy Studies (NLS)<sup>1</sup> is making an important contribution to challenging the mainstream message but does not, as yet, explicitly address the structural inequalities that continue to reproduce educational disadvantage. Altogether, neo-liberal, situated and even Freirean critical theories of adult literacy have made little impact on the reality of persistent basic educational inequalities. In practice, despite much government rhetoric, funding for adult literacy research and adult learn-

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<sup>1</sup>New Literacy Studies (NLS) brings together a range of theoretical and empirical writing that challenges hegemonic, mainstream views of literacy. Often associated with the 'Lancaster School', NLS proposes that literacy is not fixed but rather an evolving socially situated phenomenon that is deeply interwoven with historical and power-related societal patterns. Main proponents of NLS include Mary Hamilton, David Barton, Paul Gee, Brian Street, Roz Ivanič, Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel.

ing programmes remain relatively low and participation rates continue to be stubbornly unrepresentative of measured need. This relative stagnation may be rooted in a state of denial that it is layered structural inequality that perpetuates unmet literacy needs, rather than the repeatedly cited failure of individuals or educationalists to meet the literacy challenge.

This paper will examine the scope for social change in the diverse conceptions of literacy and explore the transformative potential that might be offered by an egalitarian theory that contextualises literacy within a wider equality project. The challenge posed here for both egalitarians and the State is to embrace the political grounding that was consistently at the heart of Freire's pedagogy for real radical literacy work (Freire, 1970; 1972; 1985; 2000; 2003). I suggest that using the *equality framework* developed in the Equality Studies Centre, UCD (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004) may provide the theoretical basis for more closely and usefully associating notions of literacy and equality. The paper is informed by ongoing ethnographic research exploring the impact of affective aspects of inequality on marginalised groups in Irish society.

### **Mainstream literacy discourse**

By far the dominant literacy discourse for the past decade has been one of 'falling standards' and the perceived inability of the education system to furnish the market with sufficiently flexible and productive workers (CEC, 2001; DES, 2000; OECD, 1992; 1995; 1997). The now well-thumbed International Adult Literacy Study (IALS – OECD, 1997) of twenty countries, situated Ireland second last to Poland in the functional literacy league tables. These measurements revealed that 23 per cent of the Irish population aged 16-25 had not reached the level of prose literacy that would allow them to carry out the most basic reading tasks (OECD, 1997). Of these estimated 500,000 adults in Ireland with unmet literacy needs, only 6 per cent have since engaged in any formal literacy learning in the past five years and with largely unrecorded outcome (DES, 2006; NALA, 2005).

In their analysis of the IALS for Ireland, Denny, Harmon, McMahon and Redmond (1999) suggested that Ireland's relatively poor literacy performance is merely an *age cohort effect* where the scores of less-schooled, older participants, lowered the overall mean. Subsequent studies do indeed show overall Irish literacy trends in schools improving in relation to other EU countries but radically declining in schools in the most disadvantaged areas (Cosgrove, Sofroniou, Kelly and Shiel, 2003; DES, 2005; ERC, 2004; Shiel, Cosgrove, Sofroniou and

Kelly, 2001). So it becomes apparent that wider social patterns of inequality, and not just age, are reflected in the distribution of one of the most basic forms of educational currency. It is this currency that in turn unlocks the larger coffers of other forms of capital: economic, social and cultural, in its embodied, objectified and credentialised states (Bourdieu, 1997). The Dublin-based Educational Research Centre (ERC, 2004) report confirmed that 30 per cent of children in Ireland who attend schools that are designated 'disadvantaged', have serious unmet literacy needs. The then Minister's immediate response was to suggest more frequent testing in schools. In this, he is pursuing a wider neo-liberal agenda that (instead of tackling causal structural inequalities) sees stringent, prescriptive national curricula and literacy tests as the 'cure-all'. This approach has already been met with sharp criticism from literacy practitioners in the UK (Hamilton, 2000; Barton and Hamilton, 2000).

Mainstream measurements like OECD surveys, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>2</sup> and other such standardising approaches to literacy are contested both by critical literacy theorists and proponents of New Literacy Studies. Although they are based on an unproblematised definition of literacy, such quantitative studies continue to determine the dominant discourses that inform educational and wider social policy and expenditure. Not only do these instrumental views fashion meaning about the nature and value of literacy, they also (without meaningful consultation) attempt to frame our understanding about the nature and value of those who are literate or otherwise. Consequently, the implication is allowed to persist that unmet literacy needs are caused by dysfunctional families and groups rather than by a failure on the part of the State (in its duty of care role) to facilitate basic educational equality for all (Hillyard, Pantazis, Tombs and Gordon, 2004).

### **Critical literacy**

Prior to the 'invention' of the literacy crisis in the 1970s in post-industrial US and the growth of a socio-cultural perspective in studies of language and the social sciences, *literacy* was a term reserved for historical and global reflections about economic and social development (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). The now well-known work of Paulo Freire and his associates propelled literacy into the consciousness and vocabulary of western educators. Ahead of his time, his was a perspective that articulated the links between illiteracy and oppression

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<sup>2</sup> PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment, a three-yearly survey (2000; 2003; 2006) of 15-year-olds in the principal industrialised countries, tests how far students near the end of compulsory education have progressed in reading, maths and science.

and the futility of endlessly obsessing with the mechanistic side of literacy (e.g. Freire and Macedo, 1987).

In contrast to detached, instrumental approaches to literacy, both feminist and Freirean educationalists cite the significance of emotions and personal experiences as a basis of critical reflection and truth-making about the direction of social change (Hooks, 1994). Freire saw this *seeing* and *naming* the world as a vital precursor to meaningful, authentic literacy practice (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Words only took on relevance and authenticity as they were used to 'name the world' and describe the action for change, the praxis that was needed to make that unequal world more just. The *denunciation* of dehumanising, countering oppressive aspects of everyday reality, was inextricably linked to the *annunciation* of the path to transformation. This dual relationship was pertinent for oppressor and oppressed alike, both of whom are dehumanised by a continued, unequal relationship (Freire, 1972; 2000).

Critical literacy is therefore about the *practice of freedom* and the antithesis of the *banking* form of literacy named and discredited by Freire (1972) but still alive and well in standardised/standardising educational practice and assessment. Critical learning requires a progression from ideology to pedagogy and then ultimately and importantly to agency. It is only by taking us to the point of action that words exercise their full power to help shape a more equal society in which literacy will cease to be so unequally distributed (Barr, 1999; Hooks, 1994). Yet, despite much optimism around critical theory, translation into practice proves problematic. Freire stressed that his pedagogical practice could not be automatically transposed to other circumstances but needed to be part of a wider transformational context where conscious struggle for change is a present reality (Freire, 1972). For the most part now, adult literacy work in Europe takes place under the shadow of the Lisbon Strategy<sup>3</sup> and critical aspirations are consequentially restrained by funding imperatives and the demands for a core curriculum. Structural change is definitely not on the agenda. In the parallel context of women's community-based education, Joanna McMinn concluded that while feminist and critical pedagogies:

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<sup>3</sup>The European Council adopted the Lisbon Strategy in 2001 with the expressed aim of making the EU "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion and respect for the environment, by 2010" CEC (2001).

... provide valuable insights into pedagogical processes, neither seems to offer a strategy that can be grounded in a wider political context for remedying the inequalities of women's condition.

(McMinn, 2000, p.86)

I would contend that this also holds true in the field of critical conceptions of adult literacy.

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (1996) argues that neo-liberal discourses with all their talk of modernity are merely creating another ideology to be used by the dominant classes, which in turn cunningly silences counter-hegemonic challenges. Evidence on the ground suggests that valiant and often voluntary efforts in adult literacy have produced little more than a 'trickle-up' effect from literacy to higher levels of education or economic advantage. Unsurprisingly, for the most part, educationally disadvantaged adults remain unattracted to participate in existing learning opportunities.

### **New Literacy Studies**

Since the early 1980s a critical, socio-cultural or eco-cultural approach to literacy has led to an accumulating body of research and theory known as New Literacy Studies (NLS). This movement is part of a wider 'social turn' in literacy away from behaviourism and cognitivism (Gee, 1999). Using ethnographic research to explore and challenge the hegemony of the perceived, dominant literacy, NLS works to carefully build a picture of the diverse vernacular or 'local literacies' (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) that are deployed in people's lives. A core task of NLS continues to be bringing together ethnographic accounts of local community experiences "that disturb the global homogenisation of literacy" (Clarke, 2002, p.120). New Literacy theorists question the validity of studies like IALS and the extent to which such studies provide really useful knowledge about literacy events in peoples' lives. Mary Hamilton illustrates one of the core concerns of NLS when she argues that we should be doing more to contest the solidifying international 'regimes of truth' that are fed by standardised assessment and testing procedures (Hamilton, 2000, p.7).

NLS suggests that imposed, dominant definitions and assumptions about the meaning and usefulness of literacy may help explain many adults' reluctance to participate in learning (Street, 2001). The view of literacy as an autonomous gift to be given to people is questioned and a shift is proposed to an ideologi-

cal understanding of literacy as a set of variable social practices that must be defined 'locally' and dialogically in the context of protagonists' lives (Hamilton, 2000). This involves a naming of diverse evolving worlds and the place of literacy therein. Indeed NLS looks at the wide-ranging formal and informal literacy practices that exist and proposes that there is not one literacy but many literacies (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; 2000; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1987; Street, 2001).

Through contextualising and deconstructing literacy practices, NLS have sensitised us to the historical and power parameters in which literacy and the uses of literacy are defined. Their studied concentration on what people do and are required to do during literacy events is useful and counterbalances the growing *literacy deficit* narrative. Nevertheless, we are left to some extent circling in deconstructive mode while a vast number of people, young and old, are denied the most basic benefits of learning and all that comes with it.

### **Literacy and inequality**

Literacy has historically reflected wider inequalities in society. In the past the rich, the religious, the cultural and political elite and the merchant classes have all used literacy to assert their dominant position and to maintain the subjugated position of others (Clanchy, 1979; Graff, 1981; Mace, 2001). Today literacy also mirrors widening regional and global inequalities - one billion people are deprived of the right to any education and, at the turn of this century, Latin America counted 30 million more illiterate people than twenty years previously (Chomsky, 2000). These dismal global figures reveal further gendered inequalities, with clear evidence that women have a lower literacy rate than men in most societies (see United Nations Development Report, 2002, Table 22).

In Ireland, *illiteracy* generally defines part of the experience of the *other* poor, ethnic minorities, people of colour, Irish Travellers or those with learning difficulties and disabilities. For other groups, illiteracy may be a less visible issue concealing itself by more obvious causes and symptoms of oppression – such as those experienced by survivors of institutional abuse, women who work in prostitution, many Deaf people, young people bullied out of school because of institutionalised homophobia, people with addictions, prisoners, homeless men and women. These are inevitably:

... groups whose traditions and cultures are often the object of a massive assault and attempt by the dominant culture to delegitimize and disorganise

the knowledge and traditions such groups use to define themselves and their view of the world.

(Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.13)

Unmet literacy needs are frequently a by-product of what Katherine Zappone calls this systemic 'weighty disrespect' for otherness (NICE, 2002; Zappone, 2003, p.133) that persists throughout societies; impacts negatively on certain individuals and social groupings; and is reflected in the culture and power structures of our schools. In a 1982 interview in Ireland with Peadar Kirby, Paulo Freire said that "We really don't have pedagogical problems, we have political problems with educational reflexe" (Crane Bag, 1982). Tackling these 'political problems' that result in adult illiteracy is the role of a wider emancipatory project. Although it remains a basic component of full democratic participation and self-realisation, literacy itself will not deliver equality.

The consequential impact of unmet literacy needs is acknowledged in national and international studies and is part of the accepted wisdom that underpins national policy on education, poverty, social exclusion and related issues (DES, 1997; DES, 2000; OECD, 1992). Much less clarity and unanimity exists in relation to causal and transformational aspects of unmet literacy needs. Nevertheless, it should be clear that illiteracy is not something that occurs in isolation, without any recognisable pattern or root in the current organisation of social structures. Research in prisons, with diverse minority groups and excluded men and women, points clearly to the need for a more holistic, contextualised approach to adult literacy work (Corridan, 2002; Morgan, Hickey and Kellaghan, 1997; Morgan and Kett, 2003; Owens, 2000; Ward, 2002).

Kathleen Lynch (1999) names and documents how liberal theories of equal opportunities merely reproduce and sustain inequalities in the Irish education system. State managers, middle class parents' groups, teachers' unions and members have little or no interest in transforming the system that serves their vested interests. Lynch argues that only a radical and emancipatory approach to educational inequalities will be effective in bringing about just learning structures that end the disproportionate favour extended to those who are already privileged in Irish society (Lynch, 1999, pp. 287-309). In other words, as black women also deduced, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Lorde, 1984; Lynch, 1999).

### **An equality framework**

The Equality Studies Centre in UCD has been developing an analytical framework of equality for a number of years (Baker, 1987; Lynch, 1999; Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004). The most recent model (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004) identifies five interrelated dimensions that comparatively describe the differences between individuals and groups in relation to:

- Resources;
- Respect and recognition;
- Power;
- Working and learning;
- Love, care and solidarity.

As well as these *dimensions* of equality, four key overarching social systems are named within which inequalities are structurally generated, sustained and reproduced. These broad *contexts* are:

- The economic system;
- The cultural system;
- The political system;
- The affective system.

They provide the macro, systemic environment within which the complex web of dimensional aspects of inequality are experienced by individuals and groups (see Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004, Chapters 2 and 4).

Equality is not static or inevitable, as suggested by some, but dynamically associated with personal and community history, life experience and agency in relation to these five dimensions (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004). More importantly, degrees of equality are intricately linked to, and determined by the extent to which societal structures across the four *contexts* are justly and fairly designed and administered in the lives of different individuals and groups. Viewed in relation to uneven literacy outcomes, this framework suggests causal and consequential unequal allocations of wealth, status, power and care that need to be defined and addressed.

An equality framework allows us to more accurately understand, describe and elaborate the potential of (radical) literacy work in Ireland and beyond. There is a highly interactive causal and consequential pattern to the way that inequalities impact on literacy. Those who experience resource inequalities in childhood



are more likely to experience unmet literacy needs than those whose material needs are comfortably met. They are consequentially likely to suffer resource (and other) inequalities in adulthood. Those who belong to groups that are less valued in Irish society are more likely than others to have unmet literacy needs and to be consequentially culturally (and economically) disadvantaged in later life. Further, other structural inequalities of power and care will contribute to educational disadvantage and shape political and affective inequalities in adulthood. Many groups and individuals with unmet literacy needs experience all of these aspects of inequality in a generational milieu of injustice shared with their families and communities.

The interrelated nature of the dimensions and contexts of inequality suggests that only a cohesive structural approach will bring about the type of ‘root and branch’ change that will impact on persistent educational disadvantage. Because much of what is described as critical literacy practice fails to make the connection to any critical agency, its emancipatory potential remains untapped. Perhaps consequentially, adults are unmotivated to engage or persist in learning that perpetuates and heightens their oppression and so adult literacy programmes remain limited in their appeal, their reach and their impact.

### **Defining literacy in an egalitarian context**

Freire and others have argued that to be meaningful, adult literacy needs to be contextualised in a wider debate and struggle against injustice. In Ireland the equality movement is the most vibrant site of this holistic deliberation and the only initiative that approaches a ‘revolution’ in Irish political thinking. As an integral part of the equality agenda, literacy would become an important tool in the design, construction and development of a just and equal Irish society, vital for all citizens in the enactment of an inclusive, critical and emancipatory project. At the same time, it encompasses a sense of relevance in people’s lives and has the potential to reinstate their rights to full citizenship.

Accordingly, I propose that with the cultural and political insights of situated and critical theory we move forward apace to an egalitarian theory of literacy with a working definition of literacy as:

the full range of language capabilities that facilitate the acquisition of all forms of economic and cultural capital and that are necessary for the full and fair realisation and management of relationships of power and intimacy.

Defined in relational terms of inequality, it becomes clear that unmet literacy needs relegate individuals, families and entire groups to the margins of society. Educational disadvantage limits employment prospects and in turn threatens economic security. As well as being part of the culture of any society, language and literacy is the vehicle through which much cultural activity is developed. Unmet literacy needs stifle creativity and important aspects of self and group actualisation. Critique and dissent is silenced. Those who cannot use literacy are less likely to vote, to take part in community organisations or to influence decision-making processes that affect their lives. At the same time their access to 'equality of condition' with others across all institutions and structures is seriously limited and public and private relationships may be subject to stress and frustration.

Literacy is thus a relational concept. The mnemonic function of literacy facilitates the relationship between the self and the world outside. Through reading we access the ideas and messages of others, whether casually in scribbled notes from loved ones and peers or formally through the printed and published word. We encode messages as a means of creating, recording, exchanging and managing ideas and information with individuals and institutions from the most immediate to the global. Literacy is the vehicle for language that connects across continents and centuries, classes and cultures. We use literacy to move outside our own heads. We use it to connect and communicate, to dictate or to dialogue. We use it to sustain, participate in and critically develop organisational structures, and to uphold and nourish our interdependence. We use it for obedience and compliance as well as for critique, struggle and resistance. If we cannot use literacy we, and our dependents, are effectively disadvantaged and consequently at greater risk of marginalisation and oppression than our literate peers.

### **Conclusion**

By redefining literacy within an equality perspective we are moving the focus away from merely highlighting, and struggling to end an unequal distribution of skills and capital building capacity. This potentially deficit approach forms the basis of most adult education policy and implies that redressing unequal literacy distribution will in turn sort out other dimensions of inequality. Literacy alone, like education in general, is not emancipatory. Such a view fails to look at the wider implications of the relationship between literacy and the complex, interconnected patterns of equality of resources, power, culture and care. Neglecting the wider context in which literacy happens, unwittingly contributes

to the maintenance of inequalities that are rooted in social structures rather than in stigmatised individuals and groups. A radical egalitarian view of literacy could provide the theoretical base upon which to build more meaningful and relevant literacy practice. It would obviously have far-reaching implications for the way in which literacy work takes place but first and foremost, it may mean that the many adults in Ireland who have been denied the right to use literacy would see some point in participating in lifelong learning.

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