Chapter 18
How Literacy Empowers Us

Maureen Fitzgerald-Riker
Marist College, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the relationship between literacy and social empowerment. The author contends that literacy evolves at an early age through language acquisition. Literacy extends beyond learning to read - it is the basis of critical thinking, shared reflection, and participation in community and political decision-making. Historically, not everyone has had access to the global literacy essential for civic engagement. Implications for the classroom are included in this article to encourage the development of educational systems that advocate for change while promoting social empowerment and civic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a powerful catalyst that sustains personal, economic, and political change. This is one reason why global advocacy agencies such as UNESCO carefully monitor literacy rates of societies throughout the world. But how literacy is defined and measured is not a uniform process. In Niger and Panama, literacy rates are self-reported through household surveys in response to the question, "Can you read and write?"(UNESCO, 2013) In the United States, literacy is defined and monitored by age through annual standardized tests which are designed to evaluate specific reading components such as comprehension, writing, and vocabulary. Before we can proceed to the analysis of how literacy empowers us – the focus of this chapter – we must first create a working definition of literacy. Once we forge this definition, we can then discuss personal empowerment, social empowerment, and global empowerment in the ensuing sections. Each of these sections concludes with relevant classroom practices. A concluding paragraph summarizes the various levels of literacy empowerment and discusses future directions for literacy education.

BACKGROUND

What Is Literacy and When Does Empowerment through Literacy Emerge?

Literacy extends well beyond deciphering letters into sounds, sounds into words, and words into sentences. It is a vehicle for accessing and sharing complex thoughts. Literacy includes reading, writing, and the ability to discuss complex concepts and expands our perception of ourselves, others, and the world. It is by no means a passive process but rather a dynamic social practice which helps us to reflect on and make sense of our world. We question and evaluate our world as we interact within diverse communities on a local and global level to initiate change.

Literacy development begins at birth. Almost immediately newborns realize crying elicits attention from caretakers. By their first birthday, babies associate specific sounds such as "mom" and "bottle" with specific people, responses, or objects. Infants realize they can affect their world through sound, and that specific sounds, such as "cooing" prompt an affectionate smile, while crying, is effective for immediately getting needs met. This awareness and association of meaning with sound is the very start of language acquisition (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009). It is a universal process independent of what language is assimilated. Correspondingly, deaf infants acquire sign language by mapping meaning onto gestures and developing syntactical, morphological, and phonological structure during preschool years. (Goldin-Meadow, 1999; Gutierrez, Williams, Grosvald, & Corina, 2012; Thompson, Vinson, Woll, & Gabriella, 3013).

Literacy development is based on language acquisition. Children first develop familiarity with the sounds, inflections, and words of their native language within a socially interactive environment before they associate sounds with letters and letters with words. Young children need to listen to mature sentence structures in order to arrange words within sentences and comprehend written text. The more caretakers read to and speak with pre-school children impacts how quickly they acquire literacy. Children raised in language rich environments acquire substantially more vocabulary at a quicker rate than children with minimal language exposure. This advantage has a sustained impact on literacy development. Reading and conversing with pre-kindergarten children over a sustained time period impacts how quickly they acquire literacy. Once literacy is acquired, vocabulary and conceptual understanding expands beyond the immediate environment. Literacy empowerment begins before children attend school with the acquisition and development of language.

PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LITERACY

Confidence and Efficacy

Children raised in language rich environments are more likely to come from middle and upper class families (Hart & Risley, 1995). This immediate advantage creates status within educational environments based on class. Students who have been read to and conversed with extensively during their preschool years acquire vocabulary more quickly and can read independently at an earlier age. Students who read well are more academically successful; this allows them to spend more time engaged in reading which has a significant impact on furthering reading proficiency (Allington, 2013). Vocabulary knowledge directly and positively affects reading comprehension and it is an indicator of overall academic success (Hirsch, 2003; NICHD, 2006). Proficient readers learn up to five times more words than struggling

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