What is literacy? An investigation into definitions of English as a subject and the relationship between English, literacy and 'being literate'

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Contents

1 Introduction

This discussion document explores different models of 'English' as a subject, with some consideration of historical perspectives, and how representations have changed over time. Different definitions of literacy, what it means to be literate and how views of literacy are evolving, in a period of considerable social and economic change, are also reviewed. The relationship between English as a subject and notions of literacy is explored and some recommendations offered about aspects that might be considered further in reconceptualising English and literacy for the 21st century.

The prime focus is on views of English and literacy within England, although there is also consideration, particularly in relation to views of literacy, of the perspectives of other countries, including Australia, the USA, New Zealand, Canada, Singapore and Finland.

This paper attempts to draw out some key themes and ideas rather than offer a systematic and comprehensive review of all the relevant literature.

2 How definitions of English as a school subject have evolved

2.1 English in the 20th century

English as an academic subject is a relatively recent arrival: it has only had a 'prominent place in schools and universities since the late 19th century' (Goodwyn, 2006) and it was 1920 when F.R. Leavis joined the newly founded school of English at Cambridge.

There seems to be widespread agreement that English is a difficult subject to define (Limbrick and Aikman, 2005) as it covers so many areas from the 'aesthetic (literature)' to the 'functional (skills)' (Laugharne, 2007) and views have been polarised about where the emphasis should lie. These views may be politically driven, and shift as different ideologies come into play (Laugharne, 2007):

> … there have been broad oppositional shifts since the beginning of the twentieth century from reading (literature); to speaking and listening, language across the curriculum and the use of English in the 1970s and 1980s; to a focus on writing in the National Writing Project (NWP) (1985–1989) and grammar in the Kingman Report (1988). The strong legacy of the last two can still be seen in the National Curriculum English documents (DES and WO 1990; PfEE and WO 1995; DfEE 1999) and more recently, in England, in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (1998) and Literacy Framework. (p.65).

It is also a subject, as Raban-Bisby et al (1995) assert, which has always attracted controversy.

Holbrook (1961, p.22) declared that there were two broad aims of English as a subject – the 'practical aims' (literacy skills) and 'English as means of achieving wholeness' (a broader view of the subject). He specified minimum and maximum aims for each aspect. He also placed emphasis on the importance of 'the use of English for practical purposes' being developed 'culturally', that is 'from the pleasure of the organised word in writing'. He summarised this as follows: 'The way to develop mastery over English is to live within a rich context of its lively use, by reading, listening, and talking' (p.23). Holbrook also recognised the significance of English as medium and message, an aspect which contributes to the complexity of the definition process, and coined the well-known axiom '*Every teacher is a teacher of English because every teacher is a teacher in English*' (p.21) (italics in original). Although writing with particular reference to English in secondary modern schools, his views have relevance to English as a subject for all pupils.

Burgess (2005) reminds us of the work of James Britton in the 1960s and 1970s and in particular the impact of Vygotskyan theory on English teaching: 'Britton's book on Language and Learning (1970) and the central theoretical chapter of the Bullock report (DES, 1975), the major post-war report on English

teaching in the UK, in which Britton played a substantial part, are both Vygotskyan in their orientation … The focus was on how the immediacy of learning contributed to the sociocultural development of mind', what Burgess calls English as an 'intellectual project'. Burgess notes that Britton was working in a context where the 'efforts of a generation of educators' were to 'use the base of universities to put the cutting edge of work in social sciences and in educational research at the disposal of teachers' (p.18). The emphasis at the time was to 'develop the intellectual base of teaching' rather than manage the system through 'targets and objectives'.

Burgess also argues that the Kingman and Cox reports, produced after the Education Reform Act in 1988, 'carried forward much from Bullock.' He adds: 'It is forgotten sometimes how much the making of the National Curriculum owes to earlier work, in its emphases on the processes of speaking and listening, reading and writing, and in its detail' (*ibid*).

The Cox Report (1991) summarised 'five views' or models of English:
- Personal growth view
- Cross-curricular view
- Adult needs view
- Cultural heritage view (appreciation of literature)
- Cultural analysis view (critical understanding of the world and the cultural environment).

It was Cox's claim that English teachers gave these models equal weight but this is challenged by Goodwyn (2006), whose research suggests that it was the 'personal growth view', which many English teachers considered pre-eminent, with the 'cultural analysis view' given more weight than the 'cultural heritage view'. Marshall (1998, p.111) argues that there has been more debate around 'cross-curricular, adult needs and cultural heritage views of English' because they 'form the basis of any discussion about standards, and more particularly, the way in which they are always described in terms of their decline'.

Cox (1991) describes 'literacy' as being embedded in these views but placed in a broader context: 'They [the five views of English] acknowledge the utilitarian functions of English teaching, and yet place these in a wider cultural and imaginative framework' (*ibid*, p.22). He notes that English might encompass: 'Language use, language study, literature, drama and media education' and that it 'ranges from the teaching of a skill like handwriting, through the development of the imagination and of competence in reading, writing, speaking and listening, to the academic study of the greatest literature in English.' It was his view that this 'broadness poses problems, both for the identity of English as a distinctive school subject, and for its relations with other subjects on the school curriculum'. He also raises the question of continuity in English – what it looks like as a subject at different phases within the school curriculum, and indeed beyond.

Since the Cox report, there have been two revisions of The National Curriculum Orders for English, based, it has been argued, less on research evidence and teacher consensus than on ideology and political imperatives (Marshall, 1998, Goodwyn, 2006). However, it is The National Literacy Strategy, introduced in 1997, and the 'standards agenda' which have been the main influences on the model of English taught in

schools in the last fifteen years. This has heralded a shift from English as a broad-based subject, reflecting Cox's five views, to one dominated by notions of 'literacy' and 'standards', which has left English as a subject in a state of some confusion about its identity, an issue which is pursued in more detail in the next section.

Limbrick and Aikman (2005) summarise the complexity of the situation as resulting from 'the range of interpretations of what subject English is, and what it is for', the 'multiple conceptualizations of literacy, and what is involved in becoming literate' and the fact that for some people 'it seems that English and literacy are almost interchangeable, for others they are distinguishable fields of learning.'

2.2   The impact of The National Literacy Strategy

The National Literacy Strategy was established in 1997, based on the work of a Literacy Task Force, set up in 1996, which set out details of a 'steady, consistent strategy' for raising standards of literacy, which could be sustained over a long period of time, and be made a central priority for the education service as a whole (Beard, 1998). The NLS drew on successful initiatives in the USA and Australasia, and research evidence from different jurisdictions. The rationale for such a specific strategy was based on concerns that research showed that standards of reading had not changed for many years and that there was a 'greater tail of underachievement' than was evident in many other countries (Beard, 1998). It was recognised that literacy is important 'in the lives and personal development of individuals and to the strength of the economy as a whole' (*ibid*).

There are different views of the efficacy of the NLS in raising standards of literacy, which will be considered in the section on 'standards'. Some academics have, however, argued that this focus on literacy has distorted the teaching of English so that it has been subverted to the cause of literacy goals:

> Literacy now dominates the English curriculum, with a consequent loss of equilibrium
> between the whole (English) and its constituent parts (one of which is literacy), between
> the bigger picture and the details which it frames but which give it definition.
> (Laugharne, 2007).

There is also a view, perhaps partly because of the focus on 'literacy' and partly because of the focus on standards – as demonstrated by examination results – that there is a loss of clarity among the teaching profession about the *purpose* of English. This is highlighted in two recent reports by Ofsted outlined in the next section.

2.3   Current concerns about English

The Ofsted report *English at the Crossroads* (2009), identified the lack of clarity among English teachers about what English as a subject is or should be: 'Teachers need to decide what English should look like as a subject in the 21st century and how they can improve the motivation and achievement of pupils who traditionally do less well in the subject. To engage them more successfully, schools need to provide a more dynamic and productive curriculum in English that reflects the changing nature of society and pupils' literacy needs.'

This comment is repeated in the subsequent Ofsted report on English, *Moving English Forward* (2012) and the following point added: 'That report [*English at the Crossroads*] has been effective in generating a debate about the nature of the subject. The *English / Media / Drama* magazine, published by the National Association for the Teaching of English, recently devoted an edition to a series of articles debating the role and identity of English in the 21st century. Elsewhere, there is an initiative called *Looking for the heart of English* which aims to stimulate a national discussion to "explore what are the central principles which should drive English teaching in the 21st century". This debate had not yet had a significant impact on the schools visited as part of this survey. Indeed, as Part A states, too many of the schools visited had failed to refresh or redesign their Key Stage 3 curriculum following the end of the statutory Year 9 tests. Instead, what too many had done was simply to increase the proportion of time spent practising selected GCSE skills and thereby limiting the range and creativity of the English curriculum. If standards are to rise at the end of the GCSE course, many schools will need to improve the creativity, breadth, relevance and engagement of the Key Stage 3 programme that they offer to students.'

The English Association (2012), following participation at a Westminster briefing, added their voice to the debate and identified some key principles which should underpin a model of English:

- English must be described and understood as an integrated subject: its current fragmentation inhibits pupils, students, teachers and assessors from seeing English as a holistic discipline … English must not be treated as essentially a skills-based, service subject.
- The needs of the English curriculum should determine the forms of assessment and not vice versa. Much of the value that English as a subject adds to a child's progress, individuality and maturity, is simply not susceptible to measurement against levels of attainment and assessment objectives.
- English is a subject in which reading for pleasure is fundamental to effective study and learning.
- Above all, therefore, English needs to reclaim its identity by making the heart of the subject that specialism which only English teachers teach: that is, the teaching of literature.

At the same time, Barton (2012) reports that the subject is declining in popularity among pupils, while understanding of the critical link between enjoyment and attainment in reading and writing is ever more firmly established (Clark and Douglas, 2011).

As indicated in the report by Ofsted (2012), The National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) produced a series of articles exploring what English in the 21st century should look like, and a national project to stimulate discussion about English, *Looking for the heart of English*, is also investigating similar questions. Defining – or perhaps redefining – English is very much a current topic – and establishing clarity and consensus is vital because of its importance in the curriculum. As Myhill (2011, p.38) says:

> English is an absolutely critical subject in the curriculum. Not only does English help
> young people learn about themselves and their world, and explore communication,
> culture, creativity and critical thinking, but it also enables learning and engagement
> across the curriculum.'

3 Literacy

3.1 Definitions of literacy

As with 'English', 'literacy' or 'being literate' is defined in a number of ways, and these definitions are continually evolving. The term 'literacy', for example, sometimes refers only to reading, sometimes to reading and writing and sometimes, more rarely, to reading, writing and speaking and listening. Inglis and Aers (2008, p.32) note: 'Most children learn to talk fairly easily. In contrast, learning to read and write is a laborious process. It is the ability to read and write which makes a person 'literate', with varying degrees of fluency.' The National Literacy Trust, however, includes reference to speaking and listening in its definition of literacy: 'We believe literacy is the ability to read, write, speak and listen well. A literate person is able to communicate effectively with others and to understand written information.'

Many definitions of literacy focus on the ability to read and write at an appropriate level, eg Blake and Hanley (1995, p.89): 'The attribute of literacy is generally recognised as one of the key educational objectives of compulsory schooling. It refers to the ability to read and write to an appropriate level of fluency.' There is, however, no commonly accepted definition of what 'an appropriate level', 'effectively' or 'well' mean: 'There is no universal standard of literacy' (Lawton and Gordon, 1996, p.138).

The term 'functional literacy' seems to be an attempt to link literacy to purpose, and thus to some kind of level: Lawton and Gordon (1996, p.108) define functional literacy as 'the level of skill in reading and writing that any individual needs in order to cope with adult life'. They acknowledge, however, that this does not necessarily solve the problem of level, as 'it is clearly very difficult to arrive at a satisfactory definition of functional literacy', but go on to cite an incident in the USA where parents have prosecuted a school or school system for failing to provide a child at school-leaving age with 'functional literacy', an action which is premised on the view that functional literacy is a right of all pupils and the duty of schools to provide.

Critics of functional literacy, however, see it as too limited in intention and scope: 'Here, as in Third World contexts, the espoused goal of functional literacy has been overly utilitarian. The aim is to incorporate (marginal) adults into established economic and social values and practices. Functional literacy has been concerned as a means to an end' (Lankshear, 1993, p.91).

Hoggart (1998, p.56) echoes this view and argues that 'we have to adopt the slogan that literacy is not enough'. He posits that 'critical literacy' is important otherwise 'literacy becomes a way of subordinating great numbers of people' by making them susceptible to being 'conned by mass persuaders'. Morgan (1997, p.6) suggests that 'advocates of critical pedagogy define it as a theorised practice of teaching that opposes the dominant ideologies, institutions and material conditions of society which maintain socioeconomic inequality'.

Goodwyn (2006), however, while recognising that what he terms critical literacy together with genre theory 'were interesting developments that foregrounded the power of texts and genres and how these positioned' students, suggests that they have also made them 'suspicious of' and 'angry with' texts and 'displaced too many of the emotional avenues' that need to be explored.

There may, however, be an issue with terminology here: the terms 'critical literacy', 'critical thinking' or 'critical awareness' are widely used in discussions of literacy and being literate but, as Limbrick and Aikman (2005) note, not always in 'a consistent way.' A broader view is taken by McDonald and Thornley (2009) who report that when critical literacy is conceptualised as bringing 'experiences of the world, school and literacy' together, it is 'embedded in the discourses of the sciences, the arts and literature, explored within these content areas and bound in the ability to move in and across school, schooling and the wider world.' They argue that 'critical literacy skills are an essential element in successful adolescent literacy learning.'

Meek (1991, p10) contrasts what she terms 'utilitarian literacy' with 'powerful literacy' and argues that 'until most, indeed all children in school have access to, and are empowered by, critical literacy, including the understanding that reading and writing are more than simply useful, then we are failing to educate the next generation.'

Mackey (2004, p.236) argues that literacy has never been a set of 'fixed' skills and that it must be 'historically contingent'. Meek describes it 'as part of history' (1991, p.3) and notes: 'it changes as societies change.' Bailey, (2004, p.286), summarises Flower's principles, which define literacy not as a static and impersonal state, but rather one which is individuated and enacted as social practice:

1. Literacy is an action. Literacy is not a generalised ability a person possesses (or doesn't possess). Literacy is a set of actions and transitions in which people use reading and writing for personal and social purposes.

2. Literacy is a move within a discourse practice. When people engage in literate action, they are doing more than encoding or producing text. Like any social practice, it has a history with a set of expectations and social conventions. A discourse practice cannot be reduced to a genre or a kind of text; it is a social and rhetorical situation, in which texts play a specialised role.

3. Becoming literate depends on knowledge of social conventions and on individual problem solving.

4. The new 'basics' should start with expressive and rhetorical practices. From this perspective, what is basic is the 'how-to' knowledge [that] goes by various names – heuristics, process plans, rhetorical or problem-solving strategies, critical thinking skills – but in essence they are action plans for carrying out a literate act. In this rhetorical tradition, the basic foundational skills in learning to be literate are the skills one needs to read situations; to plan, organise, revise; to build and negotiate meaning; to use and adapt conventions; and to figure out what new discourses expect and how to enter them.

5. Literate action opens the door to metacognitive and social awareness. In other words, literacy as a social, cognitive act creates some opportunities for strategic thinking and reflection that are absent in the pedagogy of textual conventions and correctness.'

Limbrick and Aikman (2005) point out that debates about literacy have often focused on 'heated dialogue' about 'instructional extremes' rather than 'concepts of literacy and implications of changing interpretations of literacy for literacy education.' They also note that the term 'literacy' has started to replace some of the key terms previously used in government documents about English: for example, 'language'.

Frater (1995, p.3) reminds us that 'in Britain we have always been ambiguous about literacy, but argues that it is central to being human: 'To be released from illiteracy, as many successful literacy students report, is to be released from shame, to feel more human.' As Meek (1998, p.123) asserts, 'literacy is too important to be reduced to a set of basic competences to be taught and learned according to a single pattern of instruction' and must focus on 'full, rich literacy for all' and unleash the 'power and potential of literate behaviour.'

3.2   Literacy across the world

Literacy is not only a concern in the UK but is also the focus of attention across the world, and this is demonstrated in recent initiatives related to literacy, in the attention paid to measuring levels of literacy and in the seriousness with which the outcomes from transnational tests are regarded. The two main reasons for seeing literacy as important are the links with economic stability and individual well-being. Again, however, definitions of what it means to be literate are evolving.

UNESCO (2013) has as one of its mission statements: 'UNESCO is at the forefront of global literacy efforts and is dedicated to keeping literacy high on national, regional and international agendas.' There is reference to 'the uses of literacy' and acknowledgement that these change as technologies change: 'The uses of literacy for the exchange of knowledge are constantly evolving, along with advances in technology. From the Internet to text messaging, the ever-wider availability of communication makes for greater social and political participation. A literate community is a dynamic community, one that exchanges ideas and engages in debate. Illiteracy, however, is an obstacle to a better quality of life, and can even breed exclusion and violence.' As part of its brief, UNESCO maintains statistics on levels of literacy across the world.

In a report about adult literacy worldwide, the OECD (2000) claims that unlike many previous reports, the IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) no longer defines literacy as 'an arbitrary standard of reading performance' but rather 'proficiency levels along a continuum denote how well adults use literacy to function in society and the economy.' The OECD definition of literacy is: 'the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.' They identify three domains in literacy: prose literacy (texts in continuous prose), document literacy (information in different formats) and quantitative literacy (apply arithmetic operations to numbers embedded in printed materials). They also define five levels of literacy – from Level 1, 'very poor skills', through Level 3, 'the minimum for coping with everyday life', to Levels 4 / 5, 'command of higher-order information processing skills.'

Transnational studies – PIRLS and PISA – are increasingly significant in their impact on definitions of literacy, and on participating countries' literacy policies. PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study – fourth graders) defines reading ability as: 'the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and / or valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety

of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment.'

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment – 15 year olds) defines reading literacy as: 'understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.' The term 'reading literacy' is 'preferred to "reading" because it is likely to convey to a non-expert audience more precisely what the survey is measuring. "Reading" is often understood as simply decoding or even reading aloud, whereas the intention of this survey is to measure something broader and deeper. Reading literacy includes a wide range of cognitive competencies, from basic decoding to knowledge of words, grammar and larger linguistic and textual structures and features, to knowledge about the world. It also includes metacognitive competencies: the awareness of and the ability to use a variety of appropriate strategies when processing texts. Metacognitive competencies are activated when readers think about, monitor and adjust their reading activity for a particular goal.'

3.3   Literacy – a high-stakes issue in other countries

Two initiatives, one in Alberta and one in New Zealand, illustrate how countries are placing literacy at the top of the agenda, redefining what it means to be literate and considering the pedagogical implications across the whole curriculum. In the USA, 'cultural literacy', based on the idea that it is the acquisition of 'knowledge' which has a significant impact on literacy development (rather than literacy enabling students to access other areas of the curriculum), offers a different perspective.

In Alberta, Literacy First – A Plan for Action (2010) defines literacy as follows: 'Literacy is acquiring, creating, connecting and communicating meaning in a wide variety of contexts.' In this plan, traditional approaches to literacy are contrasted with the more complex approach required in the 21st century: 'Traditionally literacy development in schools involved a linear progression of learning, often using a series of print-only, controlled vocabulary, basal readers to learn to read, print-only reference books to acquire information, and prescriptive templates for writing … Alberta educators agree that it is more important than ever that we teach and develop a wider set of literacy skills so that students know how to filter, evaluate and make critical judgements as to the accuracy and ethical use of information that they acquire. It is imperative that the education system prepare students for today and also for the ever-evolving future of tomorrow by ensuring students are able to solve problems, think critically and creatively, collaborate and communicate, master digital literacy and know how to learn in diverse environments.' This plan emphasises the need for explicit instruction in how to 'transfer literacy knowledge and skills' and specifies that 'literacy instruction must be embedded across the curriculum … and developed by the growing complexity of content.'

In Statement of Intent 2010–2015, the New Zealand government defines literacy in the following way: 'Being literate… [is the ability to] read, write, listen [and] think creatively'. They have developed a set of standards in reading and writing for Years 1 to 8 which define what pupils should be able to do at the end of each year of schooling in reading and writing: 'The national standards for reading and writing are designed to meet the policy that they will "describe all things children should be able to do by a particular year or age at school." Although the standards themselves focus on written forms of language, they take

account of the significant role that oral language plays in students' ability to read and write.' The focus of these standards is on enabling students to participate fully in the curriculum: 'Students need to use their reading and writing in order to engage with all learning areas of The New Zealand Curriculum. Reading and writing are essential tools for many of the teaching and learning activities designed to support students as they develop the key competencies as well as knowledge and skills in all the essential learning areas', though it is acknowledged that 'students learn to read and write for a variety of personal and social purposes as well as instructional purposes.'

In the USA, a movement termed 'cultural literacy', originating from the work of E.D. Hirsch, has gained some momentum and is regarded with interest by other countries, including the UK. Hirsch links issues with reading with lack of knowledge: 'We need to see the reading comprehension problem for what it primarily is – a knowledge problem. There is no way around the need for children to gain broad general knowledge in order to gain broad general proficiency in reading.' This view is based on the premise that 'knowledge builds on knowledge' and that the most important educational objectives – reading comprehension, critical thinking and problem-solving – are functions of the breadth and depth of students' knowledge.

3.4 The limitations of utilitarian definitions of literacy

In attempting to raise standards of literacy, there is a danger that policies can become too focused and practices too narrow and utilitarian: such embedded interpretations and the consequent pedagogical approaches can be difficult to shift, as these three examples, one from Australia, one from Singapore and one from Finland, suggest.

Edwards and Potts (2008) explore how an analysis of policy documents and reports in Australia indicates 'a move from a wide definition of literacy to an increasingly narrow and utilitarian definition, reflecting the predominantly economic focus of the Australian Commonwealth Government.' They identify in particular a shift away from 'language' and towards 'literacy', and using metaphor analysis, present the following representations of literacy:

- Literacy as skill

- Literacy as employment

- Literacy as levels or competences

- Literacy as morbidity.

The emphasis on skill means that 'possession of the tools or skills themselves becomes the primary focus, rather than how the individual person uses the tools or skills' and they note that the 'identification of literacy as skill' resonates with international literacy documents of the time. Literacy as morbidity links literacy underachievement to poor behaviour and lack of well-being. This metaphor also implies 'the concept of a common diagnosis and treatment of the disease', rather than regarding literacy as something which is individuated. Edwards and Potts (2008) note that there are two views of literacy, a 'broad view held by many researchers and educators' and also a narrower view, 'bounded by a focus on the early years of school, assessment and accountability.' They sum up the evolved definition of literacy as 'indicating an

increasing focus on the utilitarian and economic aspects of literacy rather than the cultural, moral or intellectual.'

In the introduction to the Singapore English Language Syllabus (2010), the emphasis is on the acquisition of language – as the title suggests. It is described as a 'Language Use Syllabus' and highlights 'effective communication' as a key aim. Another stated aim is for students to learn 'internationally acceptable English (standard English).' Literature is regarded as a means to this – part of the 'rich language environment' – alongside other 'information rich' texts.

The unintended consequences of this emphasis on the utilitarian are considered in a paper by Allbright and Kramer-Dahl (2009), which reports on a project in secondary schools to develop 'English teachers' capacities to teach literature.' They found that it was difficult to introduce pedagogical changes because of what they called 'a palimpsest of cumulatively added prior policies sedimented in teachers' pedagogy', and 'quasi-official *phantom* policies formed at local level' (italics in original). Singapore has traditionally had an 'efficiency-driven, profoundly transmissionist educational system, characterised by national high-stakes exams and streaming'. Since the 1990s, there has been a set of initiatives to 'shift Singapore from this to a talent-driven education which seeks to identify and develop the talents of each child to the maximum in order to prepare Singaporeans for effective participation in the knowledge economy.' However, this project revealed that previous policies and local pressures to deliver examination results and meet targets led to practices so deeply embedded that they presented an insurmountable obstacle to change.

In Finland, where students perform well in transnational reading tests, it has been noted that they do less well on 'reflective reading', that is, they are not as competent at 'interpreting, questioning, evaluating and making arguments as they were in finding information and comprehending reading' (Korkeamaki and Dreyer, 2011). The core curriculum (launched in 2004) clearly promotes 'purposeful learning in which children are problem-solvers and active participants in their own learning' but Korkeamaki and Dreyer report that there is a gap between what is specified in the core curriculum and what is happening in classrooms: 'lessons were typically teacher-directed' with 'whole-group work using teacher questioning, followed by independent work in small groups'. They suggest that this is because teachers are using work books and text books with teacher guides, which reinforce more transmissionist approaches and leave less room for students to share their ideas, think critically and respond by presenting an appropriate argument to support their opinion. They posit that a core curriculum like Finland's 'requires extensive professional knowledge of both content and pedagogy, particularly if teachers are to feel empowered to move away from prescriptions in instructional guides (see Grundy 1987). The requirement for professional knowledge, judgement and flexibility is very important in the light of research which has shown that traditions, such as teacher-directed, subject-based instruction are very persistent.'

4 Literacy and standards

Literacy has often been equated directly with 'standards' and, in the UK, this is in part a result of the establishment of the NLS, which was specifically designed to raise standards (see earlier section on the impact of the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy).

Frater (1995, p.6) points out that concern about falling or inadequate standards is not new: 'Failing standards have been perceived since the dawn of literacy'. He also notes that 'assumptions about literacy change' and that over time, 'progressively but tacitly', expectations are increased. This suggests that definitions of literacy in 2013 are likely to be more complex and more demanding than those in previous years.

At the same time, assessment experts warn that the accurate measurement of standards over time 'has serious limitations and struggles to tell us anything meaningful' because of changes in context, curriculum, mode of assessment and views of what is relevant and important (Cambridge Assessment, 2010).

The National Literacy Trust (updated 2012) in *Literacy: State of the Nation*, which is 'designed to provide a picture of literacy in the UK', gives the following figures:

- Key Stage 2: In 2011, 82% of children achieved the expected level (4) in English (84% in Reading and 75% in Writing), compared with 70% (78% and 54%) in 1999.

- Key Stage 4: In 2011, 65.6% of pupils achieved A* to C in English GCSE (whereas 41.9% achieved A to C in 1988).

These figures suggest that standards of literacy have been steadily improving in the last 10 to 15 years. De Waal and Cowen (2007), however, challenge the inferences drawn from these figures and cite reports from Durham University's Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre which indicate that 'increases in test results, particularly in literacy, were more to do with test preparation than they were to do with any rise in actual learning levels.'

Transnational tests such as PIRLS and PISA have not reflected a similar picture of improvement, as Baird et al (2011) report: 'The quandary for England is how national test results such as key stage tests and GCSEs have shown rising outcomes whilst comparisons with other countries have not changed.' They also note, however, a number of issues with interpreting the results, including 'the measurement model used for analysis, student sampling, domain representation, student motivation, and consequential validity.'

Stobart (2008, p.131) argues that 'score inflation' is a consequence of 'high-stakes accountability testing'. He asserts that it undermines the 'validity of such tests, because it leads to questionable inferences being drawn from results.' According to Stanley (reported in Shepherd, 2008) 'such grade inflation happens in nearly every country in the world' and he reminds us that all educational assessment is based on 'human judgement'.

Many would argue that tests and examinations only assess what is measurable and there are important aspects of English and literacy, which cannot be readily measured by examination. Raban-Bisby (1995, p.59) notes that 'when a desire to raise standards is couched in terms of external forms of assessment, then curriculum statements need to be formulated which can be readily and unequivocally tested.' She gives the example that 'building on oral language and experiences which children bring from home' is going to be more difficult to assess than, for instance, 'saying the alphabet'. She goes on to add: 'It is worth remembering what Ken Goodman has pointed out, that the easier a piece of language behaviour is to assess, the more likely it is to be trivial.'

However reliable or unreliable test results are, The National Literacy Trust (2012) also cites statistics which indicate there are ways in which standards of literacy in the UK are still a cause for concern:

- Adults: According to a report in 2003 (DfES Skills for Life), one in six people in the UK struggle with literacy – ie their literacy is below the level expected of an 11 year old.

- In 2011, a CBI / EDI survey of 566 employers showed that 42% were not satisfied with the basic use of English by school and college leavers.

De Waal and Cowan (2007) argue that the pressure to raise standards 'to close the achievement gap between the privileged and disadvantaged' has led to the uncoupling of the link between 'achievement and learning' so that 'there are too many instances of results attained at the expense of learning.' This view is echoed by Cliff Hodges (2011) who characterises the situation in a similar way: 'The fact that performance and education have come adrift from one another in recent years is a result of excessive attention to narrowly-conceived attainment and punitive pressure to meet targets.'

Alexander (2007, p.104) illustrates this point with a glimpse of the effect of focusing on literacy on the teaching of English in schools:

> The literacy juggernaut appropriates and shapes teaching schemes, learning goals and assessment. Pedagogy is also twisted into a kind of 'service'. The pressure to raise standards can lead to transmission type teaching, to atomised skills which are amenable to measurement and to the proliferation of learning outcomes which can be enumerated and audited.

This situation also obtains in countries other than the UK: Comber (2012) reports that NAPLAN, Australia's National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, had a particular impact on schools 'situated in low-socioeconomic communities' where 'the focus on NAPLAN took time away from other learning areas that are important for students' long term engagement with schooling'. She suggests that 'mandated literacy assessments need scrutiny, in terms of both what they produce and what they remove' (italics in original).

So raising standards of literacy has created the paradox that the very strategies – targets, teaching schemes, tests – which are designed to raise standards of literacy can themselves undermine what they are trying to achieve – both in the classroom and in the outcomes for students.

5 Differently literate?

The difference in performance between different groups in terms of literacy levels is a concern in many, if not most, parts of the world. In a report for the Ontario Ministry of Education (undated), Booth et al summarise 'the findings on patterns of achievement in compulsory standardized tests in literacy from international researchers exploring the dilemmas and debates around the gender gap.' They report that, while there is some evidence that boys' achievement is improving, the situation is complex and they urge policy makers to look carefully at research-based evidence, concluding: 'The futures of students depend on today's mandate for authentic change in literacy education.'

Similarly, transnational tests have foregrounded the difference in performance by different socio-economic and ethnic groups within a country. Rothman and McMillan, (2003), for example, consider the different factors that contribute to differential performance in literacy tests in Australia among young people and report that 'the major area of differences was found between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students'. They conclude that greater understanding of the reasons for differences will enable literacy programmes to be adapted to meet the needs of different groups.

In the UK, research suggests that socio-economic status has considerable impact on educational attainment. For example, 'white working class pupils (particularly boys) are among the lowest performers in academic achievement' (Sharples et al, 2011) and, while there has been 'extensive' research in the UK about the 'link between poverty and attainment', 'there is much less quantitative evidence available in terms of "what works" for specific interventions and strategies.'

These points remind us that in considering definitions of literacy, it must be remembered that populations are diverse and notions of being literate are also diverse: definitions, teaching programmes and assessment schemes need to recognise this.

6 Literacy in the digital age – multiple literacies

The advance of technology has led to a proliferation of 'literacies' – and indeed the word 'literacy' is often used to mean being generally competent at / having a reasonable knowledge of something (eg assessment literacy).The following terms appear in the literature related to digital literacy:

- Digital literacy / digital information literacy

- Information literacy

- Library literacy

- Computer / information technology / electronic / electronic information literacy

- Media literacy

- Internet / web / network / hyper-literacy.

Newman (2008) argues: 'This area of study is greatly hampered by the many names and definitions used to describe information-seeking and evaluation using digital technologies'. He distinguishes between 'information literacy for the digital age' and 'being literate at using a computer', considers a number of definitions of 'digital literacy' and warns of being too specific in 'the (likely) event of new technologies appearing in the future'. In addition, Buckingham (2008, p.277) asserts: 'The increasing convergence of contemporary media means that we need to be addressing the skills and competencies – the multiple literacies – that are required by the whole range of contemporary forms of communication. Rather than simply adding media or digital literacy to the curriculum menu or hiving off information and communication technology into a separate school subject, we need a much broader reconceptualization of what we mean by literacy in a world that is increasingly dominated by electronic media.'

Becta (2010) summarises digital literacy as: 'the combination of skills, knowledge and understanding that young people need to learn in order to participate fully and safely in an unceasingly digital world.' They describe 'digital literacy' as a combination of:

- functional technology skills

- critical thinking

- collaborative skills

- social awareness

The term 'digital literacy' relates to:

- the functional skills of knowing about and using digital technology effectively

- the ability to analyse and evaluate digital information

- knowing how to act sensibly, safely and appropriately online

- understanding how, when, why and with whom to use technology

There seems to be a lack of clarity about which aspects of digital literacy might be included under the umbrella term 'English' and which under other subject areas, as a cross-curricular concern, or as a discipline devoted specifically to using new technology.

Experts in the field of English are divided over this. While many would agree that 'literacy in the modern age inevitably extends beyond print into media literacies' (NATE, 2011), some argue digital literacy should take precedence over other aspects of English: 'Students should be fully engaged in creating and analysing digital discourses, and seeing how such discourses shape their world' (Beard, 1998); 'whilst the study of literature is still a necessary component of the subject, it should not enjoy the prominence it once commanded. It must be reformulated as merely one of the ways in which textual components interweave in our culture' (Dean, 2011, p.24). Others, however, would endorse the stance taken by The English Association, that literature is what is particular to English and therefore must remain at the centre of the curriculum.

What is more clear-cut, as Myhill (2011, p.38) suggests, is the 'centrality of these [communication technologies] to many young people's lives'. She argues that they must be 'part of the way we think about English … 'not an add-on'. This point is underpinned by research carried out by The National Literacy Trust (2012):

- Children and young people who engage in technology based texts, such as blogs, enjoy writing more and have more positive attitudes towards writing – 57% express a general enjoyment of writing vs. 40% who don't have a blog.

- Technology based materials are the most frequently read, with nearly two thirds of children and young people reading websites every week, and half of children and young people reading emails and blogs / networking websites (such as Bebo, MySpace) every week.

The New London Group, comprising ten academics, has been engaged since 1994 in developing a 'theoretical overview of the connections between the changing social environment facing students and teachers and a new approach to literacy pedagogy that [they] term "multiliteracies"'. Their intention has been to broaden traditional definitions of literacy to encompass 'negotiating a multiplicity of discourses'. They identify two 'principle aspects of this multiplicity': extension of 'the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies' and 'the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies' (New London Group, 1996). Limbrick and Aikman (2005, p.12) endorse this view as

> a cogent and convincing argument that being literate in a multiliterate world is being
> able to access and use a range of design elements in making and creating meaning
> through integrated multimodal texts' and add that 'conceptualizing literacy as
> multiliteracy transforms views of what it means to be literate today.

7 The relationship between English and literacy

Issues surrounding definitions of English as a subject, what literacy and being literate mean, suggest that the relationship between English as a subject and literacy, as a subset of the subject, is unclear. Similarly, the role of literature, the importance of language and the impact of changing modes of communication are also unclear.

There are arguments that literature should be central to contemporary views of literacy, though defining what literature is leads to another area for debate, not covered in this document. Choo (2011) argues, for example, that what she terms a 'Cosmopolitan Literature Curriculum' contains 'both utilitarian and transcendental values' and 'prepares students for global labour markets' as well as developing 'dispositions related to cosmopolitan curiosity, openness and empathy towards each other.'

Meek (1991) argues that notions of literacy and literature should be brought together: 'Until the middle of the eighteenth century, literature and literacy meant almost the same thing. Literature was the books that a literate person read. Now we keep the words apart and give them specialised meanings: literacy for social usefulness, literature for certain selected texts that by tradition or personal taste, are considered to be well written and that are to be read, somehow, differently. I want to bring the two words together again so that literature does not depend for its definition on private opinions of its worth but is simply the writing that people do, while literacy is about reading and writing texts of all kinds and the entitlement of all.' Alexander, however,argues that 'attentiveness to language', in whatever medium it is expressed, is what is 'at the very core of English'(2007 p.113).

Limbrick and Aikman (2005, p.4) assert that this debate about the relationship between English and literacy has 'been common in countries where English is an official language, such as Australia, England, Singapore and Canada, for the last two decades.' They suggest that 'English as an intellectual field is being destabilized by rapid socio demographic and economic, cultural and linguistic change' and that there is an argument that 'a shift towards literacies will be the dominant trend [in the 21st century] … and that literary studies, *per se*, will become increasingly specialised and elitist.' Their conclusions are:

- understandings of literacy are undergoing radical shifts

- greater emphasis is now on the important role that literacy plays in all aspects of effective learning

- there is still disagreement about what literacy skills are and whether they are generic or specific to each curriculum

- a common theme across English speaking countries is that there needs to be a more explicit focus on literacy at upper levels of compulsory schooling.

8 Key points

The key points arising from this investigation are:

❑ There is a lack of clarity about what English as a subject is for, what it should comprise and how it should be taught. Part of this lack of clarity encompasses where literacy sits in relation to English as a whole.

❑ Definitions of literacy and what it means to be literate are similarly varied, divergent and unclear, ranging from 'functional literacy' to 'cultural literacy'. There seems to be some agreement that literacy is not simply a set of static skills, but must involve literacy in action, critical literacy, literacy as a social practice and multiple literacies.

❑ Ideas about literacy are 'historically contingent', they are evolving and have to take account of changes in context and in particular the impact of the digital age, with its new technologies.

❑ Literacy can be regarded as being a subset of English but also a concept that is broader than English. How far literacy skills and behaviours are generic across different curriculum areas, or specific to particular curriculum areas, is open to further debate.

❑ There is also no universal definition of what it means to be literate, though there is evidence that expectations are constantly increasing and that standards of literacy are never deemed high enough. There is an argument that there is no such thing as 'being literate', only 'becoming literate'.

❑ Literacy is high on the agenda for all countries, partly because of transnational studies, and is going to continue to be important as its role in effective, life-long learning is more fully understood.

❑ Literacy as a synonym for standards is widespread: this has led to the paradox that measures to improve and assess literacy have themselves narrowed definitions of literacy and led to impoverished enactments of literacy practice and distorted outcomes.

❑ Focus on measuring literacy has also highlighted the differences in outcomes for different groups of students, including the gender gap and students from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds: there needs to be consideration of what it is to be 'differently literate'.

❑ High-pressure systems which focus on targets can reduce teachers to 'technicians' who 'deliver results' rather than focusing on principles of learning. This diminishes the role of teachers as experts, actively involved in constantly researching and developing their professional skills.

❑ Loss of engagement among students has impacted on motivation and attainment, especially among particular socioeconomic groups, while the link between enjoyment and attainment has been ever more firmly established.

9 Conclusion – aspects for further consideration

In reconceptualising English for the 21st century and deciding what kind of curriculum is going to raise standards of literacy, the following aspects need to be considered:

❑ What model of English underpins the curriculum? Are Cox's five views still relevant and, if so, can their relationship with each other be more fully and specifically realised?

❑ What definition of literacy or being literate should be taken forward and where does it sit with the model of English? Is it solely related to notions of adult needs – functional literacy – or do aspects of literacy, particularly notions of 'critical literacy' or 'literacy in action', pervade the whole sphere of English?

❑ Where does literacy across the curriculum fit with this model of English, to ensure students' experiences are consistent and coherent across different disciplines? Are literacy skills generic or specific to particular curriculum areas or both?

❑ Where does literature – and in particular which literature – feature in this view of English? What proportion of literature – and what of other texts? Where do media and multimodal texts appear?

❑ How does a contemporary view of English take account of digital literacies, the out of school literacy experiences of students and the likely increase in the role of digital media in the future?

❑ How does a model of English at secondary level fit with English at the primary phase and at A Level and beyond?

❑ What is the role of teachers? Should the emphasis be on directives, specific guidelines and targets or on principles and underlying ideas? If the latter, what professional development is needed to engage and animate teachers used to a system which is more directed and managed from the top?

❑ What role should teachers play in the development, evolution and implementation of the curriculum and how can the links between research, policy and practice be strengthened?

❑ How can a curriculum be engaging, relevant, inspiring and aspirational for the whole of the diverse school population? How can notions of being 'differently literate' be balanced against principles of entitlement for all?

❑ How can the polarised aspects of the English curriculum and views of literacy be reconciled and brought together as an integrated subject to enrich the experiences of students?

❑ How can an assessment system be established which samples and supports a rich, interesting and challenging curriculum for all, and does not lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test?

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