

A Literate Culture Index
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The relationship of culture to literacy has been well documented (Courts, 1991; Cunningham and Allington, 2003; Freire and Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1991; Luke and Elkins, 2002; Meek, 1991). The relationship has usually been described in terms of literacy reflecting culture. However, culture also reflects literacy. In 2000, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador released a Strategic Literacy Plan (Words to Live By, 2000) and identified three goals it wished to accomplish for the province, one of which was to promote a culture of literacy. The description of what this would consist of is rather sketchy and no data have been forthcoming as to whether the goal has been attained. The authors basically equated a culture of literacy with a culture that values literacy and believed this could be promoted by engaging in public awareness campaigns and making books and print materials more available. However, this tells us very little of what is happening within a culture to be classed as literate. The purpose of this paper is (1) to describe an index for assessing a literate culture, and (2) to test that index on two groups of subjects.

Establish a Referent of Literacy

The use of the word "literacy" has mushroomed within the past twenty years. At the 1989 annual convention of the International Reading Association (the largest organization of professionals in reading/writing/literacy) a panel of five experts "known internationally for their scholarship, leadership, and many other contributions to the field of literacy education discussed the future of literacy education (The Reading Teacher, p. 302). When the panel were asked to define literacy, their responses were vague: "Defining literacy is not an easy matter because literacy is really continuous"; "Reading and writing, I believe are what we would consider as literacy, and there are all shapes and forms of literacy and ways to talk about literacy" (The Reading Teacher, p.305).

There are many stakeholders with investments in literacy: politicians, policy makers, program developers, literacy providers or instructors/facilitators, community groups, researchers, learners, and funders. Such groups must understand that literacy is not just reading and/or writing. It is about interacting through reading and/or writing with

people in a way that affects one's thinking or present or future course of action. For example, this interaction may be directed at oneself in relation to others, such as when one reads a letter from an official from the health sector and decides how it affects her/his life and how best to respond. Or the interaction could be between a person and text, as for example, when a person reads for enjoyment or writes a journal. Such exercises usually provide greater insight and understandings of the person's world.

A Literate Culture Index

In order to develop a knowledge base for what a literate culture might look like, the author contacted 207 individuals. These were selected based on accessibility with an attempt to sample people from a range of backgrounds and educational levels.

Respondents were either contacted personally or through an e-mail list in which the author participated. They were asked to think about what makes up their culture, the educational, political, social, and media organizations, and their roles vis à vis these organizations and to list any behaviours that are positive or conducive to literacy. Of the number contacted, 102 provided input. These came from many walks of life: students entering their professional year in a Faculty of Education, community groups, arts community, blue collar workers, social welfare recipients, list serv participants, church goers, conference attendees. If a behaviour was mentioned at least 10 times, it was chosen as part of the Index. Based on the input from these individuals, the following literate culture index was constructed.

1. Parents take a prominent role in immersing their young children into literacy activities.

Parents are their children's first teachers. Parents must be recognized for this role and must be provided the necessary expertise and resources to fulfill that role. Parents are by and large dedicated to the educational progress of their children. Once government or schools begin to take this role from parents there is a large gap in promoting a literate culture.

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2. There is parental involvement in schools.

If parental involvement in the literacy development of their young children is fostered, then it follows that parents will want to follow the progress of their children through school. But there must be meaningful roles for parents in schools. For parents who volunteer, duplicating worksheets and doing secretarial work should be minimal.

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3. Several times during the week, families share stories, events in their lives.

There is an old saying, "You don't know what you've got 'till it's gone" which typifies the situation with regard to family talk time. In days gone by, without television and the pressure to work two jobs, families usually sat around the supper table and talked and shared events of the day. There must still be times during the week when this kind of talk and sharing happens in families.

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4. Public libraries are accessible to all people.

Every school-based community should have a public library. Not only must there be a public library for every school-based community, the hours when these libraries are open must be generous and flexible to meet the needs of patrons.

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5. There are viable bookstores in all large town and cities.

When literacy is valued, bookstores are essential. Every large town (about 15,000 population) and city should be able to support bookstores where a range of children's and adults' books are available. Books are encouraged as presents for different occasions.

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6. Youth engage more in reading than in watching TV or playing computer games.

TV and video games have usurped time that normally could be spent reading. People, including youth, prioritize what they engage in. If youth are imbued with the value and enjoyment of reading in school, then they will make time for reading, in spite of the lure of TV and video games.

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7. Internet is used frequently by youth and for accessing print information versus participating in chat rooms, etc.

Computer time is not all empty time when it comes to reading. The internet is a valuable source of print information on all topics. This use of internet for this purpose should be encouraged.

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8. People are critically informed of local and world events, particularly through the print media and radio.

Knowledge is the backbone of theory. In order to discuss, read, and write intelligently about local and world affairs, people must be familiar with events. Print media and radio focusing on the medium of language, provide such information and insight. However, all information must be approached from a critical rather than a passive or accepting perspective.

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9. People know and respect history and tradition.

A statement by Cluett (2001) best explains this: "History is exhibit A of the human failure to know how to live, to seek the common good, honesty, truth and beauty. These ideals have to be taught; they are not, at least in our time, acquired by some process of natural absorption." Without a sense of history, Cluett maintains, there is likely to be a pragmatic, a band-aid or quick-fix solution to global (or even local issues). History is knowledge, the foundation of literacy.

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10. There are many letters to the editor, challenging policy, promoting action, etc.

Letters to the editor are a mirror of the literacy activity of the people in knowing and addressing concerns, and public matters. The more literacy active are the public, the more letters to the editor will be generated. However, the quality of the letters in terms of addressing issues with a knowledge of facts also reflects the level of literate culture.

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11. The print media is prominent in addressing literacy issues.

Literacy should be news. This should cover a wide range, from description of actual literacy programs and experiences, to reporting literacy surveys, awards and literacy events, to critical analysis of policy, to investigating and reporting of literacy issues.

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12. Background experience and expertise in the area of literacy are necessary for people who take leadership positions in literacy.

There is a myth that anyone who can read can teach reading. Yet, by the same reasoning, we would hardly accept that anyone who speaks can provide speech therapy, or anyone who walks can deal with problems of the feet. The International Reading Association, the largest body of reading professionals has clearly set down standards for people engaging in different roles involving reading responsibility. These must be recognized in hiring people for reading positions.

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13. Research and expertise form the basis for literacy decisions.

Literacy policy should only be formulated on the basis of research and expertise. Literacy programs should be developed on a similar basis. Expertise should not be self-acclaimed but should be based on the International Reading Association standards. Pertinent data for policy and practice should be widely researched and research should be publicized, and critically evaluated to determine its validity and reliability.

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14. There is freedom from cell-phones in places of relaxation and socialization, such as restaurants, concerts.

Literacy involves a respect for language and the appropriate context and use of language. In certain locales, such as restaurants, concerts, etc., a particular kind of language is expected and respected. Those who use cell-phones at inappropriate times, show little knowledge or regard for these language events.

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15. Drivers follow the rules of the road and posted signs.

Drivers engage in literacy practices that involve the safety of the public. Ensuring safety is based on drivers engaged in literacy practices of knowing the rules of the road and following posted signs.

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16. The Provincial/Territorial/State Government invests sufficient funds in sound literacy policy and effective practice.

Literacy cannot be developed on the backs of volunteers. Certainly, volunteers do and can, play a key role in the development of reading and writing skills. There must be sufficient funding for the implementation of programs which offer children and adults effective reading and writing programs based on sound policy and research.

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17. There is a Government in power than encourages and accepts opinion, constructive input, proposed action.

A secretive, closed, or threatened Government constitutes an interference in developing a literate culture. A Government that tries to defend the indefensible, or addresses key issues via language circles only hinders the formation of a literate culture. Governments are highly visible by their actions. They will foster a literate culture by entertaining opinion and viewing all input as constructive. They will admit to poorly thought through policy or practice, investigate challenges to existing policy or practice, and welcome the voice of the public via language in furthering literacy development.

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18. In discussion and debate, issues and not people or personalities are addressed.

Focus is an important characteristic of a literacy event. A discussion of an issue must focus on that issue and not on peripheral matters, particularly the people or personalities involved.

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19. Decisions about people are based on first hand knowledge and not on hearsay.

There is an old expression that a person should only believe half of what one sees and nothing of what one hears. Yet, people who "profess" to be literate may formulate opinion, make decisions, and base judgments on what they hear. If such people were asked to document what they know firsthand of the person/situation, they would be able to list nothing. Such kind of behavior, the opposite of being literate, is unfortunately, the basis of prejudice and bigotry.

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20. People distinguish between "what is" and "what might be".

We must distinguish between what others say or write, and what we think they said or wrote. Confusing "what is" with "what we think there might be", is often due to people being emotionally charged about an issue so that their feelings provide an interpretation of a case rather than understanding the case as presented. Being literate means understanding with the "mind" rather than with the "liver". Confusion between what is and what may be, may also be due to a superficial understanding of a situation.

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21. There is freedom from fear in raising opinion, different viewpoints, etc.

While we maintain that we have freedom of speech in the Western World, the perception of speakers is often otherwise. Certainly, a person is legally free to comment on public matters, to offer opinion. But some people believe that if they do, this freedom comes with a price. People feel that if they adversely comment on matters affecting an employer or authority, such as Government, they may suffer consequences, whether of losing a promotion, a job, a bonus, a contract, a grant, etc.

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22. There is simultaneous literacy leadership across government, labour, business and education sectors, which models and promotes literacy.

Literacy is everybody's business. All facets of society have an obligation to display, support, and promote literacy. This is not just in terms of providing funds. Just as significant is modeling of literacy by the leaders of the various sectors of society. Such involvement includes such actions as responding to correspondence, recognizing literacy achievements of public figures, providing sufficient role models for girls and boys in schools, providing for workplace education/literacy programs both prior to and during employment.

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23. The impact of different sectors in promoting literacy is marked by partnerships.

All members of society must work together in supporting and promoting literacy. Literacy needs, whether space for an adult literacy program, or resources for schools, should be a concern for all society sectors. There is often considerable empty space in buildings (particularly in the evenings) and resources that could easily be made available for providing reading and writing programs for adults and children. There must also be partnerships within the literacy field.

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24. People take control of print/language that affects their lives.

A final characteristic of a literate culture is that people take control of print/language that affects their lives. This, is perhaps, a culmination of many of the points made above. People who have developed the ability to think, analyse, construct, challenge, focus on issues, base decisions on research and first hand knowledge, and are free from fear in engaging in this manner, control the print/language that affects their lives.

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Seven of the respondents, who possessed a Master's degree in literacy were chosen to develop an Interpretation for the different points on the scale. The result was:

5: Absolute: This behaviour occurs to the ultimate. There are no omissions or exceptions.

4: The behaviour occurs more often than not. There are instances when it doesn't.

3: The behaviour occurs on a 50-50 basis. For every instance that a behaviour is present, one might expect one in which it is non-existent.

2: There are instances of the behaviour but on a hit and miss basis, with more misses than hits. There is little expectation that the behaviour will be present to any consistent degree.

1: Rare. It is unusual to find instances of this behaviour.

The seven literacy experts choose five other colleagues and this group of 12 determined what rating on the scale would constitute a literate society. The consensus was that there should be a rating of at least 4 for the different items.

Applying the Literate Culture Index

The Index was submitted to two groups of respondents, a group (N = 26) of undergraduate students in their professional year (final year before graduation), and a group of graduate students (N= 26), whose teaching experience ranged from 5 to 30 years. The Index was administered in April for the undergraduate students, and in July for the graduate group. Eight of the undergraduate students were administered the Index after a three month period and their initial ratings did not change, which is some indication of the reliability of the Index. The reliability coefficient for the responses on the 24 items was .8406.

The respective means for the graduate and undergraduate students were 2.55 and 2.87, both below 3 and so below a 50-50 probability of the occurrence of a literate culture behaviour. The respondents did not rate the literate culture of the province highly. In order to get a better sense of what the groups felt were the strongest and weakest literacy behaviours in their culture, the five highest and five lowest ratings were identified. Three of the five highest rated items were the same for both groups, as were three of the items rated lowest. This also lends some reliability to the Index in terms of the two groups' agreement on the degree of presence or absence of literacy behaviour. In terms of the highly rated factors, both groups believed that people are informed of local and world events (means: graduate = 3.33; undergrad = 3.38); that literacy background experience and expertise are essential for literacy leadership (means: 3.54/3.69); and that expertise forms the basis of literacy decisions (means: 3.31/3.27). In addition, the graduate students believed that drivers follow the rules of the road (mean: 3.0), and that parents take a prominent role in immersing their young children in literacy activities (mean: 3.0). While these two are higher compared to ratings of other items, they do not really indicate a strength in these two literacy behaviours as they are considered to occur on a 50-50 basis. The additional beliefs of the undergraduate group were that people take control of print/language that affects their lives (mean: 3.46), and that people distinguish between "what is" and "what might be" (mean: 3.25). None of the means for the highest rated factors reached 4.0.

The lowest rated items for both groups included the belief that youth are not likely to engage in reading more than watching TV and playing computer games (means:

graduate = 1.69; undergraduate = 1.62); that the Provincial Government does not invest sufficient funds in sound literacy policy and practice (means: 1.77/2.88); and the Government does not encourage or accept difference of opinion, constructive input, or suggested action (means: 1.96/2.50). The graduate students also believed that there was little parental involvement in schools (mean = 1.96), and the print media does not do an adequate job of addressing literacy issues (mean = 2.19). The undergraduate students believed that there is a lack of bookstores in large town and cities (mean = 2.38), and that cell phones are used inappropriately in public places (mean = 1.81). It is interesting that graduate students who are experienced teachers believed there was a lack of parental involvement in schools.

Discussion

The low rating of particular descriptors of a literate culture in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador will be discussed below.

Reading is not a priority for youth versus video and computer games and the lack of viable bookstores in large towns and cities are similar in that they address the notion of independent reading and enjoyment. Christie, Enz and Vukelich (2002) "suggest that the best way to become a good reader is to do lots of reading" (p. 202). A respondent noted that a previous Government of Newfoundland and Labrador initiated a campaign to promote more reading. However, there were no data to indicate the impact of this campaign on the reading habits of children and whether children were more inclined to increase time spent on reading and decrease time spent on video games. There were no data on whether the sale of children's books increased or whether the number of book stores in the province increased. The issue of those children who cannot read at an independent level was not addressed. Children who cannot read cannot relate to ads from a campaign about the importance of reading, and are only more likely to become frustrated.

If children are to read, then they must have books and other material to read. For low-income families this is a luxury they often cannot afford. Such families also usually do not have transportation to a public library. There are some areas of the province where there are no public libraries. One such region not far from the capital city consists of two central schools and covers a distance of 80 kilometers. When families do not have access

to books, then the school must compensate for this. Christie, Enz and Vukelich (2002) state there should be a classroom library in addition to the school library and they recommend that the classroom library should contain from 5-8 books per child. For a class of 25 students, the number of books would be between 125 and 200.

Government is not providing sufficient funding for sound literacy policy and practice. People believe there is never enough funding. However, in recent years, the Government has abolished school fees and provides free textbooks to all students. However, different schools levy fees on children for special events such as field trips and special food days. For those without money for the field trip, they must remain in the classroom and soon acquire the stigma of "being poor". Children without money for field trips and food days are less inclined to be excited about school and motivated about learning.

Curriculum can be an expensive item within schools. Different language arts and math programs are being introduced. However, there are no data as to the guidelines on which these are selected nor any information on an on-going evaluation of the extent to which they meet the goals for which they were introduced. In the case of language arts programs, there is no indication as to how they meet the guidelines for choosing programs as stated by the International Reading Association. There are no data on the "turn-around" of children who are performing poorly, especially children who have been designated as needing additional help (formerly Pathways 2) and Pathways 3.

Government does not encourage or accept difference of opinion, constructive input or suggested action. Evidence for this statement is often personal or heard from others. Newfoundland and Labrador is a small province, population-wise, and everyone is likely to know someone in a position of influence. One respondent suggested that the best source for identifying discontent with Government policy or practice is on Open Line shows. The respondent noted that callers were usually for or against Government policy or practice and those against felt their impact with Government was minimal as they had "cut ties" through speaking out. Another respondent said it was best to keep your discontent to yourself as it would only be to your disadvantage in the long run. The feeling was that if a group (eg. NLTA) spoke out on a matter, they would be more inclined to be listened to than if an individual spoke out, even though she/he was an

expert on the particular matter. However, the feeling was that if a group were headed by a person with a different political philosophy than the present Government, that group would have a less chance of being heard.

There is lack of parental involvement in schools. The significance of parents' involvement with their children has long been recognized. One of the conclusions of the report of the Commission on Reading, set up to study the state of reading in the US was that avid readers come from homes where reading is encouraged (Anderson et al., 1984). "Children know a great deal about literacy when they enter school" (Cox, 2002, p.118). Heath (1983), who is recognized for her research on the impact of community factors on learning, identified the importance of social status, economic levels and race/ethnicity. Yellin and Blake (1994) state that since community is such a powerful force in affecting children's reading development, then schools must capitalize on what the community has to offer in providing support for schools and for children. Christie, Enz and Vukelich (2002) agree that "Helping parents become successful language and literacy models is one of a teacher's most important tasks. To fulfill this responsibility, teachers at all grades must interact with parents constantly" (p. 407).

In spite of the recognition of the importance of parents, families, and community, there is still an "inside-outside" attitude toward parent involvement. Schools or government, which represent the "inside" tend to believe that they have all the expertise and their key role is to assign tasks or tell parents what to do. Some respondents felt that even though parents chair school councils, these are largely run by the school principals. A paper by UNESCO, *A World Fit for Children* (2003) recognizes the importance of the role of parents and community. "Parents, families, legal guardians, and other caregivers have the primary role and responsibility for the well-being of children and must be supported in the performance of child-reading responsibilities" (p.11), including education.

Print media does not do an adequate job of addressing literacy issues. A number of respondents made reference to the power of the press. Fowler (1991) points out, the "vaunted independence of the press is an illusion" (p.231). People believe the press has the power to address literacy and that it has the power to determine what position it shall take on the matter. At a local level the press is in control of whether it accepts letters to

the editor or editorial columns from different writers. One respondent felt that the media could take a major role in informing the public through critical insight on many literacy matters, such as the latest policy of government and school boards, funds available for literacy projects, and the nature and significance of literacy projects for improving literacy/reading/writing. One respondent pointed out that since it is unlikely that newspaper staff are literacy experts, that a literacy expert be employed to provide an critical analysis of literacy issues. However, the press may not be as independent as people think. The press is influenced, if not controlled by its philosophy and its funders, and may not print material which it feels is not agreeable or in harmony with these.

Fowler (1991) also has concerns over the interpretation of readers, particularly those whom he terms the "comfortable reader", the ones who read a newspaper that support their personal philosophy and complacently absorb what is printed. He believes that schools should provide programs for developing critical reading skills. While Newspapers in Education (NIE) encourages the use of newspapers in the classroom, respondents felt that the success of this program must go beyond encouraging students to become readers. Students who respond critically to newspaper articles/editorials should share their thinking in letters to the editor. A measure of success of NIE is how many published letters to the editor are by school students.

Cell phones tend to be used in inappropriate places, like theatres, restaurants. The fact that a group of respondents noted this behaviour, indicates their awareness of the relationship of culture and literacy (language). Halliday (1976, 1978), some years ago, promoted the notion of language functions or the appropriate use of language according to context. One respondent expressed her concern this way: "I find it frustrating when I go to a restaurant to relax after the end of a stressful week, and a person at the next table gets or makes a phone call and loudly engages in a phone conversation." The respondent felt that the person was ignorant of the place of literacy (language) in different cultural venues.

Conclusion and Implications

The Literate Culture Index can be used in various geographical or political jurisdictions to rate the level of literate culture. Hopefully, this would lead to action where particular literate culture behaviours are rated low.

Within a language arts/literacy curriculum, literacy and reading/writing must be clearly understood. Reading and writing are necessary but not sufficient conditions for literacy. Teaching reading and writing is not teaching literacy. There are people who can read but do not read or read very little. Their literacy involvement is low. Certainly, how to read and write must be taught. But the use of reading and writing (literacy) must be recognized, fostered, and supported. This means documenting and reinforcing the involvement of children in reading and writing activities outside of school. Reading and writing are usually school focused but literacy is part of a child's world.

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NOTE: A suggestion for a Master's thesis is to use the Literate Culture Index to assess the literate culture of various groups of respondents, or of respondents in different geographical or political regions.