

Agenda for Action: UKLA's vision for future literacy education

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David Reedy, the President of the United Kingdom Literacy Association, mindful of the two recent major reviews of Primary Education by Sir Jim Rose and by Professor Robin Alexander, sets out UKLA's own Agenda for Action. In doing so he reflects on what it means to be literate in today's society, on the role of literature in all its richness in children's learning and on how we might take a more enlightened approach to assessment

This is a work in progress, so comments and responses are welcome via the UKLA website:
www.ukla.org

The literacy of *all* children, young people and families will only improve when policy and practice reflect a broader view of what it means to be literate in an ever-changing 21st century.

What does it mean to be literate?

To be literate is to engage effectively in the many different types of communication that shape and are shaped by the society in which we live. Since literacy is based on language, as well as the essential ability to read and write, being literate must also involve the ability to listen and speak effectively. However, that is not enough. To be literate must include the ability to read literature in ways that broaden the reader's experience of life and sense of the possible. Active and engaged literacy is also fed by different cultural and personal experiences. Now that digital technologies permeate all aspects of life, to be literate means to be familiar with a range of texts communicated through diverse media and to be able to communicate through a variety of media. In addition, critical discrimination is needed in order to cope with the variable authority of many texts encountered today.

Where are we now?

The UK has some of the most effective settings, schools, skilled teachers and productive researchers in literacy education. But there are also have some serious problems:

- For the last ten years countries in the UK have been sliding down the international league tables in terms of both pupils' effectiveness as readers at 9 and 15, and also their liking for reading and writing.
- National league tables of test scores and emphasis on targets have effectively narrowed the focus of schools and teachers, cramping creativity.

- In the UK we have a persistently long tail of underachievement in reading and writing.
- A large number of people in the UK continue to struggle with literacy into adult life.
- Many barriers to children developing secure and productive literacy remain, including inequity of opportunity, material stability, mis-matches between school and home literacies and lack of collaboration between services.

Productive new initiatives

However, recent initiatives indicate a way forward. Partly for reasons of social cohesion, and partly for reasons of equity, in the UK there have been various calls for a more effective and inclusive education system based on need, in which 'the system is moulded around the child, not the child around the system' (OECD 2006, 24). Since then, a range of policy documents suggest the beginnings of a shift away from the standards agenda towards a new and different educational discourse which:

- centres on the whole child
- declares that there is no singular programme or approach that can meet the needs of all children
- moves away from prescriptive, top-down, 'one size fits all' approaches
- acknowledges that learning happens in many contexts across children's lives
- recognises that organisations and groups need to find new ways of working together to improve outcomes for children and to draw parents, families and communities in as equal partners.

UKLA welcomes this, recognising that if we are to make a significant advance in literacy achievements we need a more outward looking and inclusive approach to education. However, there are significant shortcomings in policy and pedagogy concerning literacy which must be addressed rigorously if literacy education is to make

a full contribution to educational advances. This implies an approach to literacy that is solidly based on research evidence.

Professional development

Just as teaching and learning should be founded on robust research, so should professional development. UKLA welcomes the move away from formulaic generic training for literacy teaching towards a more developmental and research-based approach which supports educators in developing a more flexible and creative curriculum and pedagogy. Such effective professional development necessarily raises standards as UKLA research and intervention projects have shown. One potentially strong professional and curriculum development project would be the Ofsted proposal to 'establish national programmes to increase teachers' own confidence as writers so that they can provide better models for pupils and raise standards in this area' (Ofsted, 2009, 4).

UKLA calls for:

- the retention of coherent national and local professional structures and organisations flexible enough to support professional development in different social and cultural settings. Such provision would recognise that time and resources are necessary if professional development is genuinely to move practice forward.

Literacy education in the 21st century

There is overwhelming evidence that literacy empowers the individual and promotes personal development beyond narrow markers of attainment and progress. The question is: how to promote a pedagogical vision that recognises the importance of literacy and the role it plays in social, economic and political life.

UKLA calls for:

- **a more coherent approach to listening and talking as central to the curriculum.** For example, the initiative *Every Child a Talker* developed by the Primary National Strategy has the potential to strengthen the role of oracy as a tool for learning.
- **learning opportunities that engage learners creatively and take account of the multiple modes of learning.** These would draw on the multiplicity of global communications media, include multi-modal texts and on-screen literacies as well as the more traditional forms of text. Several research and intervention projects by UKLA in partnership with other agencies have offered productive ways of promoting multimodal learning. UKLA recommends that these approaches are more widely adopted.
- **wider recognition of the vital role that digital literacy plays in the lives of children and**

young people. Through their experience of digital technology the young are becoming familiar with a wide range of communicative tools and conventions and as such are active participants in changing literacy practices. However, there are significant differences in levels of experience and use of digital literacy both at home and in school environments. UKLA advocates wider access to new communicative tools in home literacy programmes, in community provision, in libraries and in schools as part of a coherent strategy of recognising and using these new literacy practices.

- **greater awareness of the important role of language in learning and intercultural understanding.** This implies a central link between language, languages, and literacy. It also implies the mutually supportive role of knowledge of language, knowledge about language and language learning strategies in developing both additional language learning and also intercultural understanding.
- **a pedagogy and curriculum that is locally relevant and seeks to build communities of learners respecting and valuing home literacy experience and cultural background.** This should build on the everyday family and community literacy events and experiences that children engage with, including the increasingly cultural and linguistic diversity of many communities. UKLA recognises the valuable resource represented by the literacies of different cultural groups.
- **attention to the needs of individual children as well as an integrated approach to interventions in literacy.** Within a coherent and wide-ranging literacy curriculum, the needs of the individual cannot be ignored. UKLA recommends the maintenance and expansion of intervention programmes that explicitly address the needs of children who have made very little progress in literacy after one year of schooling and that have been shown to narrow the gap in attainment (for example, Reading Recovery). This should be an additional provision.
- **a more enlightened approach to assessment and testing.** UKLA supports the fundamental role of assessment in successful teaching and learning. However, the high stakes nature of current testing arrangement in primary schools in particular has led to problems. In addition, the use of the results of the Key Stage 2 tests as a proxy for pupil achievement and a means of judging a school's overall performance has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, an

impoverished approach to literacy learning and a view of literacy that is rooted in the 1950s.

- **a more coherent view of the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment.** Ongoing assessment is essential to productive learning and teaching. UKLA recommends a fuller recognition of the role of assessment for learning and of continuing teacher assessment.
- **greater emphasis on the role of literature in children's development and in the wider landscape of human development and social participation.** Reading literature enables children and young people to extend the boundaries of their personal experiences through a rich range of texts - poetic, narrative, dramatic. It encourages them to explore possible worlds and relate them to their actual lived experiences. It affords opportunities to play with language and take on different voices and roles beyond the constraints of the everyday.

Concluding Recommendation

UKLA recommends the establishment of a national working party to discuss and debate the shape and design of literacy policy, pedagogy and curriculum.

References

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