Connecting Literacy to Curriculum Ideologies

Majed Harb

College of Education, Zayed University, Dubai, UAE;

Hanada Taha Thomure

College of Education, Zayed University, Dubai, UAE;

Corresponding Author

Dr. Hanada Taha Thomure

Hanada.thomure@zu.ac.ae

Biographical notes

Majed Harb is the Associate Professor of curriculum and instruction at the College of Education in Zayed University, UAE. He has a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from The University of Jordan-Jordan. Dr. Harb has a long experience in teaching at several Jordanian universities. His research interests include curriculum theory, queer theory in education, postmodernism, and teaching Arabic, teachers' image in Arab cinema and art-based educational research as an emancipatory tool.

Hanada Taha Thomure is the Endowed Professor of Arabic Language at Zayed University. She has published many books on the teaching of Arabic language and authored several children's literature books. She authored the first Arabic text levelling system that is currently used by more than a 100 children's literature publishers in the Arab world. Her research is mostly focused on Arabic language teaching and learning. She served as a judge on the Etisalat children's books award. She holds a PhD in Education; M.A. in Educational Psychology and Counselling; B.A in Social and Behavioural Sciences and diploma in elementary education**.**

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Abstract

Curriculum is an ideological act. Ideologies in education are seen as belief systems that provide tools which help us determine what and how to teach. They influence what is considered as problematic and nonproblematic in our educational practices (Eisner, 1985). Schiro (2008), after an intensive review of the works of Posner (1992), Schubert (1996) and Kliebard (2004), articulated four curriculum ideologies: Scholar Academic, Social Efficacy, Student Centered, and Social Reconstruction. This article aimed at investigating how thinking about literacy and teaching it vary when considering the assumptions embedded in each of those ideologies. It, moreover, reflected on the importance of choosing ideologies that are aligned with societies students live in so that they are truly prepared for "the word and the world" (Freire, 1973) and so that they become more autonomously persistent and cognitively involved in tasks they are undertaking. Based on that assumption, we argue that teacher education programs that are still skills-oriented or competence-based (by the technical meaning of a skill or competence) are no longer appropriate in a world that is so uncertain, fluid, money-driven, diverse and disconnectedly connected. We advocate for alternative programs that prepare teachers who are able to play the role of both literacy teacher and social activist.

Keywords: Literacy, literacy education, curriculum ideology, teacher education, critical pedagogy

Introduction

When we asked Fatima[1], one of our students, to parse a sentence in Arabic into its grammatical components, she seemed extremely reluctant to do so although her parsing was accurate. Fatima stated that her reluctance or resentment stemmed from the notion that she was reading a sentence and then parsing it without understanding the social values it included and without understanding why in the first place she was doing it. Fatima described this as an incomplete reading experience.

What Fatima articulated was that literacy cannot be reduced to simply learning how to read, write, listen or speak (Giroux, 1992). She was unhappy with the task we gave her because she realized that literacy consisted of more than the sum of pronouncing letters and syllables and parsing a sentence correctly. However, Fatima did not know the main reason why she was not able or empowered to practice a real reading act.

Kozak and Recchia (2019) insisted that reading is an experience that is related to social understanding and linked to skills underlying that kind of understanding. Fatima would have been interested in what Erickson and Wharton-McDonald (2019) had called "autonomous motivation", a state in which individuals become more autonomously persistent and cognitively involved in tasks they are undertaking.

Fatima had learned to read through a curricular approach that sees the correct pronunciation of words as the goal of teaching literacy albeit the reader is incapable to determine the implicit meanings of the text. This invites us to realize how a curricular approach can radically transform both the meaning and the purpose of literacy and consequently how literacy is understood when considering a particular approach. Based on that notion, this paper will address the assumptions of the most prevalent curriculum approaches, then follow up with how the understanding of literacy as a concept changes in terms of definition, function and purpose according to each approach.

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[1] Fatima is a pseudonym chosen to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of a student who has given the researchers consent to including her story in this study.

One of the leading reasons that motived us to investigate how literacy relates to curriculum approaches had to do with the extensive list of definitions, processes, and components of literacy. According to Eisner (1991), literacy is not limited to text, rather it is related to the ability to construct meaning. The concept of multiple or multiliteracies stems from such a claim whereby the brain uses its knowledge of symbols to convey meaning (Meece, 2002). Meece (2002) concludes that multiple literacies that include written text, musical, artistic, theatrical and visual arts texts are dependent on our cognitive ability to use symbols in order to make meaning and represent our experiences.

Traditionally, literacy can be thought of a set of language-based skills (Meece, 2002). Considering this definition means that the ultimate goal of literacy is to enhance an individual's competencies in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This narrow definition was extended later to include other skills and competencies that widen the nature, purpose, and functions of literacy. Gestwicki (2014) recognized seven key functions to literacy including the acquisition of vocabulary and language, phonological awareness, knowledge of print, knowledge of letters and words, comprehension, awareness regarding books and text in general and realizing that literacy is a source of knowledge.

According to the first traditional definition treated here, literacy is understood as a set of universal and decontextualized skills (Abdulatief et al, 2018) that are applicable to any context and for any text. The second definition, discussed in Gestwicki (2014), is concerned, to a large extent, with seeing literacy as a social practice rather than merely a set of universalistic skills that are applicable everywhere and that work for everyone. The function of the former definition is de facto to enable individuals to read and write correctly with no attention given to what is hidden or implicit in the text. The function of the latter is to help them be socially and culturally efficient.

Let us consider a third approach or view of literacy stemming from Eisner's (1991) idea of "constructing the meaning" through literacies. Neither reading and writing nor being efficient in a society is the function of literacy, but rather it is to actualize one's self. Literacy is something that occurs when students learn in a place with plenty of activities and experiences that respond to their abilities, attitudes, and interests. This "literacy environment" (Thomas,

2019) is what motivates students to read, write, and express their ideas in order to construct meaning. Skills and society are not at the heart of the process, the student is.

On the other hand, Freire (1973) and Freire and Macedo (1987) viewed literacy as a means to reading the word and the world. This fourth approach to literacy, known as critical or emancipatory, established what we call now "critical literacy" (Bishop, 2014; Gregory and Cahill, 2009; Lee, 2011) or "participatory literacy" (Brown, Schell, and Ni, 2019). The best clarification of the function of critical literacy was put by Giroux (1992) who thought of it as a practice of developing awareness and reflection to the purpose of writing and the audience it is targeted to. What is of importance then, is how literacy helps people understand the world in which they live and how this understanding will make them more conscious and aware of social, political, and economic contexts that influence and shape their identities.

What has been characterized as traditional literacy refers to reading as a neutral language activity (Webster et al, 1996), where no thinking space is left for interpreting meaning. The transition from this traditional approach to other more significant ones came as a result of the remarkable works of The New London Group (1996) that emphasized the concept of multiliteracies and provided critical insights to include cultural, linguistic and technological diversity in classrooms.

The main concern of The New London Group was how to respond to changes taking place in the world in particular in the area of communications environment and, thus, how literacy teaching and learning would be changed as well (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009). Linguistic diversity and forms of linguistic representation new technologies- internet, multimedia, and digital media- are crucial factors to be considered. The process of constructing meaning from texts will be better handled when we consider Cope and Kalantzis's (2009) claim that these changes are transforming the way we communicate and the way we teach literacy as well.

The differences between the four approaches did not come about haphazardly. There are philosophical assumptions and curriculum ideologies underlying each of them and framing what literacy should be in curriculum and how it is practiced in classrooms.

Curriculum ideologies

Curriculum is an ideological act (Apple, 1979; Harb, 2017). We have to acknowledge that the literacy curriculum has long been seen as a political instrument (Harb, 2017; Mills and Unsworth, 2016). It is impossible to imagine a curriculum that is built through a neutral perspective. It is believed that through the process of curriculum design, curriculum workers reach the stage of platform (Walker, 1971, 1990) where they deliberate many alternatives based on their values and belief systems. Those belief systems are called curriculum ideologies (Harb, 2017). They influence our insights and vision regarding what is considered a good practice in schools. Although "curriculum ideology" and "curriculum theory" are used interchangeably, Eisner (1985) claimed that there is a crucial different between the two expressions: "The purported difference is that ideologies are typically regarded as value-laden commitments, while theories are frequently idealized as merely descriptions of the world rather than expression of what is to be valued" (p. 50)

Schiro (2008) distinguished four main curriculum ideologies: Scholar Academic, Social Efficacy, Learner Centered, and Social Reconstruction. Each ideology has its own hypothesis and assumptions regarding aims, knowledge, learner, learning, teaching, and evaluation. In the following section, the researchers will consider Shiro's (2008) work to articulate how each ideology views each of these elements.

The aim of curriculum in Scholar Academic- also called Academic Rationalism (Eisner, 1974; Schubert, 1996), Traditional and Structure of Discipline (Posner, 1992), or Intellectual Traditionalist (Shubert, 1996)- is to transmit what is considered as scientific knowledge to students (Table 1). Knowledge here is objective, absolute and seen as a tool to cultivate minds by maintaining the traditions of academic disciplines. Considering the assumptions of behavioristic theory, the learner in Scholar Academic is passive whose main task is to acquire pre-packaged facts and concepts. The teacher in Scholar Academic is seen as a knowledge transmitter interested merely in delivering knowledge to the students that does not necessarily link to any real-life skills and needs including vocational needs. S/He evaluates them through objective assessments with a focus on group norms. In this ideology, students are usually immersed in studying the classics, the great works in philosophy and literature and are occupied with the pursuit of beauty, truth and goodness.

While the academic disciplines shape the aim of curriculum in Social Academic ideology as well, it is society, however, that determines the aim in Social Efficacy (Table 1) also known as Technology and Cognitive Processes (Eisner, 1974) Behavioral, (Posner, 1992) and Social Behaviorist (Shubert, 1996). This ideology sees education as a tool to serve society's needs. Like the previous ideology, it derives its assumptions regarding learning from behaviorism but with a different purpose aimed at changing behaviors rather than cultivating minds. Teachers, according to this ideology, must equip their students with a set of skills they have to perform appropriately in society. Accordingly, those who prefer this ideology tend to use objective assessments represented in criterion-referenced tests which are tests that use test scores to compare students to standardized set of criteria that they are expected to meet (Taha-Thomure and Speaker, 2018; Weiss and Davison, 1981).

Unlike the above-mentioned ideologies, Learner Centered ideology-also known as Self-actualization, (Eisner, 1974), Experiential and Cognitive (Posner, 1992), Experientialist (Shubert, 1996) and Child Study (Kliebard, 2004)- is built on the constructivist assumptions (Table 1). The most crucial aim here is to meet students' needs and interests and respond to their developmental demands by exposing them to appropriate learning experiences. Teachers are seen as engineers of learning environment and intermediaries between students and curriculum. Students are active learners who are viewed as having prior knowledge that enables them to construct meaning. Teaching is well implemented when teachers consider all aspect of interactions between students and the learning environment. Unlike what Scholar Academic and Social Efficacy claim about assessment and evaluation, Learner Centered ideologies invite educators to use subjective assessments with informal evaluative instruments including portfolios, project-based assignments, written samples. Informal assessments evaluate students' own progress individually. Cooperative learning and collaborative action research are of importance for a successful learner-centered ideology.

Although the three ideologies differ from each other, they share a fundamental factor in that they are all decontextualized. None of them gives the cultural, political, and economic contexts of learning due considerations. The Social Reconstruction ideology, however, does. The aim of curriculum in Social Reconstruction ideology- also called Critical Constructionist (Shubert, 1996) and Social Melioristic (Kliebard, 2004)- is to enable students to reconstruct their societies (Table 1). This is done through understanding individuals' histories and illuminating all contexts that shape their identities, education could be a very helpful tool that assists people

to transform and build their societies. Students here are seen as active learners who are quite aware of their society's concerns and interests. Teachers are social activists rather than transmitters of knowledge or facilitators of learning. They use subjective assessments with informal evaluative tools like we find in Student Centered ideology but the difference here is that the tools used by proponents of Social Reconstruction are, to a great extent, contextualized. Students are engaged in project-based assignments just like in learner-centered ideologies, but through those projects they seek to confront local and global issues that are of importance to them including global warming, labor laws, racial divisions, immigration laws and other key topics. Students within this ideology might also benefit from storytelling that uses folktales as tools for social justice and student activism (Phillips, 2012).

Table 1: Curriculum Ideologies		
Curriculum Ideology	Alternative Names	Main Concepts
Scholar Academic	Academic-rationalism; Traditional; Intellectual-Traditionalist; Structure of Discipline	-Education as a tool to transmit knowledge. -Aims to transmit what is considered as scientific knowledge to students.
Social Efficacy	Technology & Cognitive Processes; Behavioral; Social-Behaviorist	-Education as a tool to serve society's needs. -Aims to equip students with skills to help them perform appropriately in society.
Learner-Centered	Self-actualization; Experiential; Cognitive; Child-Study	-Education as a tool to expose students to appropriate learning experiences. -Aims to meet students' needs and interests and respond to their developmental demands by exposing them to appropriate learning experiences.
Social Reconstruction	Critical- Constructionist; Social Melioristic	-Education as a tool to assist people to transform and build their societies. -Aims to Enable students to reconstruct their societies.

While we investigate these four types of curriculum ideology, two questions arise: are these ideologies measurable, and can an educator adopt more than one ideology? The former was answered by Schiro (2008) who had developed a Curriculum Ideologies Inventory consisting of six parts that addressed curriculum purpose, teaching, learning, knowledge, childhood, and evaluation. Each part included four statements that measured educators' beliefs. Based on another instrument developed by Schiro (1978) for the same purpose, Marulcu and Akbiyik (2014) investigated pre-service teachers' curriculum ideologies in Turkey. The participants of their study consisted of 242 pre-service teachers in their senior year at college of education in a Turkish university. The study revealed that Social Reconstruction ideology was the most popular ideology among teachers. This might be a reflection that they perceive society as problematic and in a state of suffering.

As for the second question, the answer may be yes, but this depends on several factors among which, and probably the most important, is the nature of students' characteristics. Some students learn by focusing on knowledge domains only, while others learn through learning situations that respond to their attitudes and interests. Teacher experience is another factor through which teachers select an ideology because it fits a particular part of the curriculum and select another one believing that it fits the other parts.

Literacy: Changing definitions, altering functions

Adopting a Scholar Academic ideology means seeing the function of literacy as providing students with a set of reading and writing skills. The most famous approach that serves this function is the basic skills approach. Those skills are universalistic and do not vary according to students' interests or society needs. The approach, known also as the bottom-up or building block (Abdulatief et al., 2018), is built on linear steps including letter formation, recognizing letter sound, vocabulary, sentence grammar, and paragraph. Phonological awareness is of great importance in this approach and is considered as a base to acquire tangible skills, in particular, those of reading and writing (Taha, 2017).

Teaching literacy is a profession and teachers are seen as transmitters of a consented knowledge. Students are not invited to critically examine what they read and write, rather they

are asked to master specific skills that may help them read and write correctly. They are graded according to the extent to which they use these skills regardless of the social context of learning (Taha, 2017; Taha-Thomure and Speaker, 2018). From a pure technical perspective, objective evaluative tools are highly recommended when assessing students' literacy skills.

Similarly, Social Efficacy ideology adopts the same skill-based approach but for a different function. Its ultimate goal of teaching literacy is to prepare students who are able to use literacy as applied in real-life situations and as practiced in society (UNESCO, 2005). Thus, teachers use several instructional methods to model these situations. One of the most preferable methods is programmed teaching where specific content is split into small fragments that students have to master. The aim of teaching literacy skills is not to develop students' intellectual abilities, but rather to reshape their behaviors to make them more productive individuals in society.

Those who teach literacy believing in the assumptions of Social Efficacy ideology are considered as clinicians because their main task is, based on their competencies not knowledge, to shape students' behaviors. It's the use of literacy skills in real-life situations that matters not the use of knowledge itself and, thus, students are evaluated based on their reading and writing proficiency in functional societal experiences.

It is obvious that both ideologies Scholar Academic and Social Efficacy stand on the ground of behaviorism and where literacy is understood as a scientific and technical field. On the contrary, Student Centered ideology is based on the assumptions of constructivist theory. From the perspective of this ideology, literacy is a state of interaction between text and student. The aim of this interaction is to help students make meaning rather than reading as recitation (Mills and Unsworth, 2016). Students would construct meanings when they could use contextual clues (Abdulatief et al., 2018) such as titles, illustrations and diagrams and, thus, a bottom-up approach is not as useful as, for example, following a whole language approach or a literature-based approach (also known as top-down) where students process the text as a whole entity.

Literacy according to Student Centered ideology is not a final product, but rather a process through which students make sense of their experiences. Teachers, students, and families collaboratively establish what we can call community of literacy practices which are organic places where language is used to help students express their ideas and feelings. Instead of objective evaluative instruments, diaries and portfolios and observation-based tools are

intensively used with a focus on students' abilities to generate subjective meanings. Teachers who prefer this ideology tend to teach literacy through a variety of student-centered strategies where students are asked to recall their prior knowledge about a topic and use that knowledge to generate new ideas. Because the scope and sequence of literacy curriculum is of an expanding and flexible nature, teachers are prepared to be reflective learners and researchers leaving behind parts of their traditional identities as knowledge transmitter or clinicians.

The common thread the three ideologies share is the disregard or passing over the cultural, political, and economic contexts surrounding students' lives. It is as if those three ideologies represent an autonomous model of literacy (Damber, 2012), not an ideological one. Understanding students' histories is crucial for helping them build their identities. This idea is central in the Social Reconstruction ideology where literacy is seen as socially constructed practice (Myers and Eberfors, 2010). Social Reconstructionism is emancipatory in nature, it looks at learning as a way of making oppressed, marginalized, disadvantaged and labeled people parts of mainstream (Harb, 2018).

The main aim of literacy within the Social Reconstructionist ideology is to enhance students' critical consciousness to be aware of how their historical identities were shaped by various contexts and how they were labeled in light of their race, religious affiliation, gender, and social class. This critical literacy-also called emancipatory, participatory, or transformative-requires different kinds of teachers who keep in their minds the idea of critical consciousness and, thus, are viewed as social activists more than merely literacy teachers.

Accordingly, literacy curriculum needs to be reframed in such a way that stresses what Freire (1970) called generative themes, a concept that refers to a set of issues expressed by individuals who look forward to changing reality. These issues may include power relations, people representations, poverty, youth alienation, equal opportunities, justice and social exclusion (Harb, 2019). It is through dialogue that students can deliberate generative themes. But, dialogue itself is not enough, individuals need to reach Praxis, a Freirean concept that refers to individuals' ability to reflect upon their reality and act together. To sum up, teaching for reading the world or for social change (Naiditch, 2010; Schubert, 1992) is the ultimate goal. We think Morrell (2014) expressed this well when he said that reading the world includes reading all kinds of texts: written, visual, and digital. Morrell (2014) emphasized the importance of understanding, when reading, that everyone is biased in some sense and accordingly, all

information presented to us needs to be set in that frame of mind if readers are to process information in a meaningful manner.

This non-technical and non-functional approach emphasizes the importance of making reading a tool for empowering students to transform their reality. Teachers, who are considered in this approach as social activists, need to enhance students' dialogic skills to take actions in light of what they are reading. This will embody a problem-posing framework, another Freirean idea and a concept espoused nowadays by design thinking. Consequently, literacy could be understood as a shared dialogue of experiences among educators and students (Naiditch, 2010) that requires creating a context where students would be able to deconstruct and reconstruct texts (Gregory and Cahill, 2009) and then take social actions.

Student-centered teaching strategies are employed in teaching critical literacy as long as they are contextualized. Thus, constructivist theory is accepted here as a learning theory but with some critical assumptions presented in giving cultural and socioeconomic contexts their due consideration and making students' subjective realities the starting point in the process of reading and writing. In their remarkable work, Johnson and Freedman (2005) discussed the use of literature circles, learning projects, and inquiry in teaching texts that address the issues of power, identity and representation, oppression, and social justice.

Although the area of critical literacy is widely investigated and articulated, it is surrounded by many myths or misconceptions. Lee (2011) stated that critical literacy is not critical thinking, as the former is concerned foremost with sociopolitical contexts. Another misconception Lee clarified is that critical literacy is not an instructional strategy but rather a philosophy that emphasizes how reading, writing, speaking, viewing and representing help students interrogate texts to understand reality and reshape their identities.

What makes Fatima happy?

Let us go back to Fatima's case, who though she parsed the Arabic sentence the researchers gave her correctly, she, however, seemed reluctant and unhappy with that task. That is because she did not recognize literacy as a social act that helps her understand herself. Fatima had learned that the best and most important practice in the area of literacy is to pronounce the

sounds of words correctly, and to know the syntactical rules that govern the structure of Arabic sentences, but she had not learned that reading is a tool for understanding the world and is a real opportunity for reflection, dialogue, questioning, and taking actions.

We have discussed how literacy definitions and functions vary from one ideology to another. We can say that Fatima's knowledge of the nature and reality of literacy did not exceed the process of pronouncing letters and words with some grammar that helps her in this regard. Fatima could be considered an explicit example of students who learned literacy through the Scholar Academic or Social Efficacy ideology.

What would make Fatima and other students in similar situations happy with any reading experience? There is no doubt that it is necessary to pay attention to the Learner Centered ideology so that they have opportunities to be in front of learning situations that respond to their needs and express their feelings. If we want students to be happier, we have to teach them how reading texts may result in looking at the world from vast transparent windows, and how it is a great opportunity to examine many assumptions that help them understand themselves and the changing world surrounding us.

To achieve that, we have to consider, for instance, the scenario put by Morrell (2014). He invited us to allow students to engage, interrogate, and juxtapose texts to their lived experiences to be able to contribute toward making the world better. Students must be trained to read texts from multiple perspectives to enhance their skills not merely in reading and writing, but rather in discovering ways that enable them to examine different values and beliefs.

Implications for literacy teacher education programs

What is the best professional identity of a literacy teacher? Good literacy teachers are those who will support students' literacy development and provide them with opportunities to understand the world they live in (Taha, 2017). From a technical perspective, literacy teachers, as Risko and Reid (2019) claimed, need not only a deep conceptual understanding of the content but also a strong understanding of teaching and learning theories. From a critical perspective, literacy teachers should be prepared to teach diverse students, and this requires equipping them with skills of building authentic practices and self-critique.

Literacy teachers are invited to use culturally relevant texts to help students improve their reading outcomes and affirm their identities. This implies giving more attention to the idea of multicultural literature which refers to texts written by or about people from groups that have been oppressed and marginalized (Harb, 2018; Kibler and Chapman, 2019). Sharp, Piper, and Daymond (2018) discussed the idea of literacy leadership stating that it requires disrupting the traditional notion of a leader and creating an environment for literacy leadership which concentrates on social and situational contexts of the school.

Once this kind of leadership is achieved, we can transform our literacy instructional practices by including some features like those addressed by Brynelson, Fletcher, and Graff (2019). They invite us to give more attention to students' engagement and motivation and focus on their reflections by giving social and dialogic aspects of learning their due considerations. In fact, literacy teacher education programs that are skills-oriented or competence-based (by the technical meaning of a skill or competence) are no longer appropriate in a world that is so uncertain, fluid, money-driven, diverse and disconnectedly connected. We advocate for alternative programs that prepare teachers who are able to play the role of both literacy teacher and social activist.

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