Examining Literacy in the Twenty-First Century

Quantez entered my third grade classroom as a transfer student from another school across town. Unlike most of my students whose parents dropped them off, walked, or rode their bikes, Quantez rode the city bus to school. He returned home the same way and played with siblings and cousins until his mom returned home from work. Quantez did not participate in piano lessons, Little League, or Boy Scouts—common after-school activities for the community in which the school was located. In the classroom, he struggled with literacy events. He did not easily read the third grade reading basal or effectively answer questions related to the readings. The stories in the reading anthology were not connected to what Quantez knew about the world and his experiences. His writings were meager. Quantez did not respond well to the prompts provided during writing time. By all accounts, Quantez was on his way to being a school failure in literacy practices.

It was my first year of teaching. Like many first year teachers, I relied on a teacher’s manual to make decisions about how to teach reading. Students were grouped into three ability groups, and each group met with me daily to read aloud and answer comprehension questions from a reading textbook. I followed the sequence of stories provided in the teacher’s manual. Students worked on reading skills, such as vocabulary, predicting, sequencing, and comprehension, by completing worksheets connected to each story. These skills were determined by the prepackaged reading curriculum used in the classroom. My understandings of the reading process did not include using authentic pieces of literature, working with others, challenging the status quo, or considering multiple perspectives. Literacy was seen as “one size fits all;” and for the most part, I had a “one size fits all” classroom.

Ten years later I was a researcher in a fourth grade classroom. Robert and Elaine, two struggling and reluctant readers in a fourth grade classroom reminded me of Quantez and the difficulties he faced in my classroom literacy program. Like Quantez, Robert and Elaine brought to the classroom different kinds of experiences and knowledge than what was perceived as being valued or important. Robert experienced great difficulty with school-defined reading events (e.g., orally reading *Island of the Blue Dolphin* and responding to a series of comprehension questions; defining words from the story; composing a summary paragraph of the chapter, etc.). The reading selections held little, if any, personal connection for him. Elaine’s struggles were defined by her desire to see literacy events as social opportunities to work and share with others (e.g., small group literature discussions were more helpful to Elaine than working on a list of questions by herself). Robert’s and Elaine’s ways of constructing understandings of text were not aligned with the teacher’s. Consequently, these two readers did not succeed in this classroom.

Much has changed since my first year of teaching. We now have solid research on the benefits of children working in groups, oral and written language development, brain
research, and authentic literature. After years of working with children, teachers, colleagues, and teacher candidates, I have come to see Quantez, Robert, and Elaine not as “struggling and reluctant” but as insightful and engaged when the reading materials and events were more similar to their interests and community practices. I remember Quantez heading excitedly with a self-selected book toward our “reading rocket” (a refrigerator box and a flashlight transformed into a rocket shooting through space). I vividly recall conversations with Robert and Elaine in self-selected literature discussions and how they easily connected characters’ experiences to their own. What these literacy stories suggest is that literacy is not static and “one size fits all” but rather dynamic and multifaceted.

Over the years, I have come to understand the connection between my beliefs about literacy development (how reading is learned and what literacy is for) and the types of reading events and activities that can take place in the classroom. My beliefs are based on values, attitudes, knowledge, history as a reader, and networks of interactions with others. These practices then become the ways in which reading is defined for a particular community (namely students, teachers, parents, and administrators). From my work as a teacher, researcher, and teacher educator, I now have a view of literacy that is socially and critically situated.

I wonder...

- What experiences have you had in classroom settings that remind you of Quantez, Robert, or Elaine?
- What would you say are some guiding assumptions about literacy that were prevalent in these two classrooms?
- These two classrooms used traditional reading textbooks (also known as basal reading materials) to conduct reading instruction. What other options are you familiar with that the teachers might have considered?
**Chapter Overview**

Teaching children to read and write is intensely interactive, intellectually complex, engaging, and challenging. Teachers must decide on how to best meet the needs and challenges of all their learners in the classroom. At the same time, teachers must be mindful of standards, benchmarks, and other outside pressures that make their daily mark on instruction. The teachers in the opening vignette operated with some implicit assumptions about literacy development. In Quantez's classroom, literacy was a static and universal experience. All children received essentially the same curriculum, working through the same skills at the same time. In Robert and Elaine's classroom, the teacher also viewed literacy in a one size fits all perspective. She did not consider her students' life experiences as contributions to literacy development. In order to understand how these assumptions are formed and what it means for literacy instruction, this chapter focuses on the following questions:

- What does it mean to read and write in the twenty-first century?
- How do various models of schooling impact literacy teaching and learning?
- What are the guiding principles for effective and meaningful literacy development in elementary classrooms?
- What role does *No Child Left Behind* have in literacy instruction in today's classrooms?
- How does one's personal vision impact literacy development and teaching?

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**Creating Connections 1.1**

Create a timeline of five to ten significant literacy moments in your life. These events can be both positive and negative. When do you remember learning to read? What books did you love as a child? Who has had an influence on your literacy life? What about writing events?

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**The gap: Literacy practices in school and outside of school**

When asked what literacy is and how to teach literacy to young children, many people offer singular definitions that literacy involves reading and writing print-based materials. They have images of children reading school textbooks and writing book reports and essays. People generally hold on to such explanations because these descriptions often reflect their own elementary school backgrounds. There is a prevailing belief that how they learned to read and write will work for the new generation. What is not considered, however, is how incredibly different children's experiences around texts are in the twenty-first century.

Students in today’s elementary classrooms were born into a kaleidoscope of images, print, and sounds. They are constantly bombarded with visual, audio, and print technologies that provide endless possibilities for interpretation and meaning making. Favorite characters from books are now seen on small and large screens (TV, movies, videogames), emblazoned on t-shirts and other personal belongings, and are a source for interactive websites and other multimedia venues. Children are able to navigate effortlessly among the many formats of technology, as well as interact with these formats at the same time. Children growing up in the twenty-first century understand the fluidity of images, words, logos, and icons; they attend to not only the print on a page but also to the topographical design of a page in print or on the screen (Moss, 2001). They pay attention to layout, captions, and the visual presentation of information. Moreover, as children interact with a range of textual materials and resources, they come to participate in broader descriptions of reading and writing.
Email, blogs, websites, text messages, novels, listservs, picture books, essays, textbooks, newspapers, magazines, instant messaging, reports, chatrooms, music lists, and graphic novels are just a few of the textual resources that children access as they construct meaning in classrooms and in their daily lives. And while students engage with this vast array of textual materials in a variety of settings, classroom contexts continue to reflect a more static and traditional view of what “counts” in literacy practices. Given the speed with which technologies advance, there seems to be an ever widening gap between the literacy experiences offered in school, and those available for students outside school walls. In classrooms, literacy is often approached from a print-based, linear perspective; while literacy uses outside of school have a pervasiveness of flexibility and multimodality. In order to make sense of our current literacy practices for elementary-aged students, it is important to consider the views people have about literacy development, how schools are organized to achieve particular goals, and how federal policies and mandates drive these actions.

**Perspectives on what it means to be literate**

[T]he views that people have of what literacy involves, of what counts as being literate, what they see as “real” or appropriate uses of reading and writing skills, the ways people actually read and write in their daily lives, these all reflect and promote values, beliefs, assumptions and practices, which shape the way life is lived within a given society and, in turn, influence which interests are promoted or undermined as a consequence of how life is lived there. (Lankshear & Lawler, 1993, p. 43)

We must look at our beliefs about reading and writing. What does it mean to be literate? Is it enough for the reader to be able to read at a fifth grade level; or must the reader be able to critically think about what he or she has read? Our beliefs about what it means to be literate inform how we teach reading and writing. Ideologies are systems of beliefs people carry with them as they navigate their daily living. These beliefs are cultural, gendered, religious, historical, political, and social. As systems, they function to create a view of reality that is seemingly commonplace. In the United States, for example, it is expected or commonplace that children will become proficient readers and writers, and that these practices will be learned in school. Four and five year olds anxiously await kindergarten because they believe it is a place where they will learn to read. It is also expected that nine and ten year olds will easily navigate expository material in textbooks. And current literacy practices in classrooms indicate that another common belief is that standardized tests are an adequate method for documenting students’ skills and abilities in reading and writing.

**Creating Connections 1.2**

- What is reading? Write your response on a note card. Share your response with three other classmates and collectively rewrite a definition of reading.
- Review a sample of texts (picture books, young adult novels, adult novels, magazines, websites, textbooks, advertisements). What does one need to know to successfully read and understand the different texts?
- As a group, summarize, compare, and evaluate the most important aspects of reading.

**Ideologies**

Systems of beliefs that people carry with them as they navigate their daily living.
Ideologies about reading and writing development are based on values and always involve social contexts and histories. The past three decades have demonstrated that there are competing perspectives on the purpose for literacy development. For some, literacy development should create productive citizens and members of the workforce. For others, literacy should transform the world, and in the process value diverse viewpoints, experiences, and histories of those involved (Cardiero–Kaplan, 2002). At the center of all the debates on literacy teaching and learning is how people define literacy, and ultimately, how they define schooling. The next section details three possible ways of thinking about schooling practices and the impact on literacy development. The impact of these policies and mandates can be felt in the classroom through the types of materials and activities available to teachers and students.

Models of schooling that impact literacy development

The implicit theories and ideologies that people hold about literacy, learning, and teaching contribute greatly to the ways in which schools are structured and organized. These theories are the very fabric of how society views the purpose of schooling. The context in which children learn to read and write can vary tremendously, from traditional models of instruction to more progressive and critical models. In the following discussion, three models of schooling are presented along with how the model of schooling impacts the nature of literacy instruction in particular classrooms.

Learning is about skill building: Industrial model

The *industrial model* of schooling has persisted throughout the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first. Schooling practices designed according to this model are developed to be efficient, uniform, and competitive. The ideological perspective in the industrial model is meant to create a workforce that is compliant, punctual, and accountable. In some respects, not much has changed over the years. The technologies may be more sophisticated but the pedagogy and the environment over very
much the same. Seymor Papert (1993) commented that someone from the nineteenth century could enter a contemporary classroom and know at a glance where they are.

In an industrial model there is a push to create uniformity across schools, irrespective of the context in which they exist. This means that all students should be provided with essentially the same content and curriculum that focus on mastery of identified standards. Reading and writing skills often move from simple to complex. In doing so, all learners are expected to attain the same understandings (Leland & Kasten, 2002).

While there are alternative models of schooling throughout the United States (see the next section on inquiry and critical), a driving force that is keeping many schools in an industrial model is *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*, which is federal legislation enacted to improve the state of education in the United States. NCLB and the Reading First Initiative (which provides federal money to states) hold schools accountable for achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP) in the areas of literacy and mathematics. Given that accountability is a significant aspect of the industrial model, schools use standardized assessments to judge whether or not students accomplish the desired outcome of meeting state standards. All children in grades three through eight are tested annually in math and reading/language arts. Test scores are then measured against other schools and districts. Schools not achieving desired progress will be placed on a “needs improvement” list and targeted for additional support or curriculum changes. If schools do not improve in a period of three years, there are sanctions for closing the school down (see The Role of *No Child Left Behind* on Literacy Instruction for more information).

The industrial model for education focuses on standardization and having students in an “assembly line.” Therefore, literacy materials are standardized with an emphasis on skills. Students complete reading worksheets and other activities focused on attaining accuracy. Performance is critical. The teacher often evaluates the quality of the performance by measuring student work against predetermined standards and other benchmarks. For example, a teacher in a fifth grade classroom considers how students respond on an activity sheet attached to *Olive’s Ocean* by Kevin Henkes (2003) that focuses on characterization, plot, and setting. This work is then displayed on a bulletin board with teacher comments that address the standard. Little room exists for students to construct their own version or interpretation. Students are held accountable for demonstrating a level of proficiency in a literacy task before moving on to the next skill or to a higher level.

To further highlight an industrial model for schooling, consider Ms. Day’s first grade classroom. Ms. Day teaches at a school where pressure from NCLB policies and directives to improve standardized test scores dominates the teachers’ conversations during weekly grade level meetings. Ms. Day implements a prescriptive literacy program that focuses on discrete skills in the reading process. In one particular lesson early in the school year, Ms. Day asks her struggling readers to manipulate magnetic letters to form a list of words that is in the same word family (*mat, fat, cat, rat, sat*, etc.). Students then complete a worksheet that has them matching the words with pictures. Students write the words at the bottom of the page. In later lessons, Ms. Day has students read from a decodable text that emphasizes the rime pattern of -at. Students read such sentences as “Up went the cat. The cat saw a rat. The rat sat on the mat.” Reading and writing instruction from this viewpoint concentrate on sounds, letters, and direct comprehension of text in a sequential order. The lesson is offered because it is part of a publisher’s prescribed curriculum.

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**TECHNOLOGY LINK**


U.S. Department of Education’s official website for *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*.

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**No Child Left Behind (NCLB)**

Federal legislation to improve the state of education.
Given the lack of flexibility in the prescribed program, Ms. Day is not able to take into consideration her students’ experiences with words and texts. She does not acknowledge how some of her students have had many experiences with the stories *The Cat in the Hat* (Dr. Seuss, 1967) and Eric Carle’s *Have You Seen My Cat?* (1997). Conversations with other grade level teachers remind Ms. Day of the constant pressure to move students through the curriculum, while attending to such standards and benchmarks as “Students know and use word analysis skills and strategies to comprehend new words encountered in text.”

**Investigating a question: Inquiry model**

In contrast to the industrial model of education, where the focus is on compliance and accountability, an **inquiry model** of schooling promotes the notion that schools should represent one’s real life. There is not a “one size fits all” perspective, but learning and teaching can take many forms depending on the students and teachers in the classrooms. The goal of education should be to “cultivate productive differences” (Eisner, 1990).

In the early part of the twentieth century, John Dewey advocated developing curriculum with students’ interests in mind. An inquiry model suggests that learning is best achieved when students are invited to participate in making decisions about their learning process: for example, locating topics and interests to study; choosing materials to use; finding ways to represent their learning (e.g., powerpoint slides, reports, dioramas). The tasks and activities are authentic and meaningful to the learners as they discover the world in which they live. Reading and writing instruction expands to include texts commonly used in settings outside of classrooms (e.g., newspapers, news magazines, websites). Within an inquiry model, teachers facilitate students’ learning rather than direct it. There is an emphasis on “lifelong learning” that is critical in nature and not dependent on standards or minimums (Leland & Kasten, 2002).

The inquiry model of education recognizes diversity and multiple ways of knowing. Inquiry is learning from knowledge domains and using the habits of mind of writers, scientists, artists, and historians. The inquiry model values and affirms...
the cultural knowledge and language practices students bring to the classroom. Literacy is not a competitive enterprise where some kids succeed and others fail; but rather literacy development is collaborative with students working together on various questions and projects.

Imagine Ms. Day’s ideological perspectives shifting from an industrial model to an inquiry model. Her literacy curriculum embraces a greater degree of flexibility and authenticity. She acknowledges and values that children come to school with different experiences, interests, and strengths. The focus for her curriculum is not just on skills, but on meaning making. Her role shifts from transmitter of information to demonstrator of different ways of learning, such as offering art as a way to respond to texts, investigation centers for students to pursue questions, and writing centers to explore different genres. Discussions about various topics are more conversational in nature. Meanings are drawn from the text as well as personal experiences.

Ms. Day’s reading curriculum is not defined by a particular prescriptive program (learning the -at word family), but by students’ current interests. Ms. Day’s students live in an ocean side community and they expressed an interest in the recent shark attacks off the coast of Florida. To build on this interest, Ms. Day creates a text set on different kinds of sharks, including picture books, websites, and newspaper articles on the attacks and ocean safety. Additionally, Ms. Day made available books on tape and the computer for those students that may need more support in reading the text. The readability of the texts in the set is not controlled as it is in the prescribed reading program. The literacy events and practices include sustained and authentic uses of texts for seeking information and answering inquiry questions. Children immerse themselves into the inquiry by reading and writing about sharks and shark attacks. They work collaboratively in groups that are organized according to the different questions being pursued. Reading and writing in an inquiry model are for purposes that will make a difference in the lives of students as they learn about the habitats and life cycles of sharks and ocean safety.

**Problematizing the status quo: Critical model**

The industrial model requires students to know the basics but not to question or challenge the perspectives presented in the text. The inquiry model focuses on students’ personal interests. A third model of schooling, the critical model, raises questions about power, gender, social structures, and identity, offering a more global context for learning. In a critical model of education, the conversation focuses on the ways which various literacy and cultural practices privilege and/or marginalize people. Moreover, teaching and learning are seen as political acts.

The critical model challenges long-held commonplace beliefs and understandings. A critical literacy ideology encourages students to interrogate the text and the curriculum, wondering whose voice is missing and how the story might be told from a different perspective. So when third graders read biographies of notable Americans, such as presidents, civil rights advocates, and inventors, they begin to...
question why others are not included on the list (e.g., Native Americans, Hispanics, artists). Texts are placed within historical and cultural contexts that provide a sense of place. A critical literacy ideology empowers students and teachers to actively participate in a democracy and move literacy beyond text and into social action. Many educators and parents believe that this critical perspective is not appropriate for younger children—the texts are too difficult; the issues too complex. While there may be a need for more scaffolding and demonstration, young children are capable of considering socially significant and important issues (Chaffel, Flint, Pomeroy, & Hammel 2007; Heffernan & Lewison, 2005; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

If Ms. Day operated from a critical ideology perspective, her literacy curriculum would invite students to examine questions related to social issues such as the environment, global weather patterns, and pollution that may lead to sharks swimming in shallow water. Students may begin to investigate and interrogate current environmental policies and practices. Similar to the inquiry model, the texts are not controlled or prescribed, enabling children to glean information from a variety of sources.

The models of schooling as discussed here are found in classrooms throughout the country. In many classrooms, current federal legislation and policy (NCLB and Reading First Initiatives) have teachers and students focused on a more functional view of literacy—learning discrete skills from a prescribed curriculum. Some schools, however, are working from an inquiry model where the curriculum is student centered and students collaborate across ages and grades to understand the different functions that literacy may serve. Even fewer schools have in place a critical model. And yet, a critical literacy ideology recognizes that reading and writing do not take place in a vacuum but occur in larger social, cultural, political, and historical contexts.

What lies beneath these three models of schooling are assumptions about teaching and learning. The industrial model presupposes that the “content of what

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<th>State Average (public and nonpublic)</th>
<th>Center for Inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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Six guiding principles for teaching reading and writing in the twenty-first century

The industrial model of schooling has outlived its usefulness in preparing students for their futures. With the rapid growth and expansion of technology, participation in a variety of literacy events and practices is more accessible than ever before. Children have access to classmates in other parts of the world; are reading texts that are available on the Web; and are creating new formats and designs for information. Although the industrial model is readily available because of the ideological perspectives in federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind legislation, it is critical to consider classroom literacy practices and decisions beyond the narrow scope of NCLB.

The following guiding principles for teaching reading and writing present a broad perspective of literacy development and set the foundation for each chapter in this book.

The first of these six principles declares that reading and writing are not isolated, but rather involve social and cultural understandings. The second principle notes that literacy should be purposeful and take social goals into consideration. The third principle states that some approaches to literacy are more influential than others. Fourth, literacy is learned through inquiry. Fifth, students use their knowledge and experience to learn to read. The sixth principle suggests that everyday types of materials and multimodal texts can be used to teach reading and writing.

Principle #1: Literacy practices are socially and culturally constructed.

What does it mean that literacy is “socially and culturally constructed and situated?” The focus is not on the specific skills a reader or writer can do, but rather the relationships that are established (Hamilton & Barton, 2001). Any time people are engaged in reading and writing events, they are constructing social relationships with others. When you think of someone reading, or writing, do you envision someone alone at home, in the library, or maybe on public transportation? That’s a common way to think about reading and writing, but often, we read and write with others. Particularly in classroom settings, reading and writing events involve groups of readers and writers. Classrooms are collections of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. This diversity is a resource. The different ways students respond to and create meaning are valued. Children often interact...
with each other and the teacher as they work in reading groups, participate in book discussions, and share their writing with peers. These activities recognize the cultural and linguistic diversity that students have as they enter the classroom. Furthermore, these activities point to the fact that literacy development is socially situated.

How does this work in the classroom? Children learn how to do literacy as a result of being a member of a group, whether the membership is in a family, a neighborhood, a place of worship, or as a member in a classroom. Because they are members of these groups, children observe others engaged in a variety of literacy practices. For example, Rory, age 3, observes his mother creating and using a grocery list when going to the store. He watches her write out the list of needed items, and while at the store, he also watches as she crosses off the items as they are placed in the shopping cart. These brief encounters with text are authentic venues for how reading and writing are used to accomplish particular tasks in the world. Other home literacy practices occur because they have meaning and are useful in people's lives—for example, writing phone messages, reading the mail, surfing the on-screen TV guide for a particular television show, reading the newspaper, selecting an option on the DVD, having a story routine during nap and bedtime, and reading Internet sites. Children learn that literacy involves and extends to many people and has many goals.

Looking at what people do with literacy, with whom, when, and how is central to the concept of literacy as a social practice. Children also learn that different literacy events have different expectations. Completing a skills worksheet requires a particular way of being (quiet and individual), as does engaging in a literature discussion about a favorite story (knowing group etiquette and sharing ideas). Children become aware of what is expected of them, what is important with regards to the literacy event, and how to meet teachers' and group members' goals. When completing a worksheet, children figure out that there is often just one answer, while in a literature discussion they discover that the teacher may value multiple interpretations. Literacy practices, then, are not just about learning a particular set of skills; literacy also includes learning how to be socialized into particular social practices in particular settings (Bloome & Katz, 1997). For example, students need to know how to discuss their ideas in a group setting, and how to write down and present their ideas to others. This is all part of literacy. Literacy practices do not exist in isolation. They are a part of social relationships and networks. In this way, literacy is a socially and culturally situated practice.

**Principle #2: Literacy practices are purposeful.**

We use different literacy practices to achieve different goals. Barton and Hamilton (1998) identify a number of reasons why people engage with literacy practices:

- to organize their lives (agendas, daily journal);
- communicate with others (letters, email, and instant messages);
- entertain (novels, and greeting cards);
- document experiences (memoir, and poems);
- make sense of their worlds (books and Internet sites); and
• participate in social life beyond their immediate context (reading about others).

Reading and writing practices in classroom settings can be organized in ways that are authentic and purposeful, as the above list suggests. Most of these events are social; meanings are constructed as a result of working together. There are abundant opportunities in classrooms to engage children in real-life, social experiences involving literacy. Reading and writing logs, journals, daily agendas, and plans for inquiry projects help children to organize their time during the instructional day. To communicate with others, children write letters, email, and text messages. Reading and writing events inside other disciplines (social studies, math, science, etc.) can be designed to support learning concepts and making meaning. Such practices might include reading informational texts, recording facts in learning journals, documenting questions, engaging in discussions, presenting newly learned information, creating powerpoint slides, and other activities. The personal narratives, poems, essays, and other texts students compose during writer’s workshop are opportunities to document their lived experiences. Students may read literature selections for entertainment. Reading literature also encourages learning beyond the immediate context in which they live. All of these support the idea that people read and write for a reason.

Principle #3: Literacy practices contain ideologies and values.

Literacy practices are not neutral. They carry with them values, ideologies, and beliefs about how the world should be organized and operate. Recall the discussion on ideological perspectives and models of schooling. Some literacy practices are more valued in an industrial model (decontextualized vocabulary skills) and others in an inquiry or critical model (reading authentic texts to support vocabulary development). Brian Street (1984, 1995) introduced two perspectives around literacy: autonomous and ideological.

**AUTONOMOUS MODEL.** An autonomous model suggests that literacy practices are cultural and context free; that literacy in and of itself will affect social and cognitive functions. Adult and basic literacy programs often operate with this perspective—that if the person learns to read and write, he or she will be a better citizen with a brighter economic future (Quigly, 1997; Terry, 2006). Yet this perspective does not consider the social and economic conditions of their lives. Literacy is seen as neutral and universal. The National Institute of Literacy, a federal agency designed to promote literacy development from early childhood to adulthood, operates from an autonomous perspective of literacy. It is an agency that is charged with overseeing No Child Left Behind’s singular view of the reading process. This particular view of literacy is held up as the standard, that is, what everyone should strive for.

To illustrate an autonomous view at the classroom level, schools-based literacy practices are often seen outside the context of everyday life. The practices and events one engages in during school are usually separate from everyday practices found in the larger social context. Students are asked to complete skill sheets and respond to
literature in ways that are very much defined by the school. Take, for instance, how literature is usually read in the classroom. Children are regularly expected to answer low-level, literal questions that do not enhance the quality of the reading experience, such as “What are the characters' names in *Harry Potter*?” Occasionally, inferential questions are asked (What would you do if you were Harry?). On their own, however, students may spontaneously share their excitement while reading *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) by discussing favorite characters and reenacting various scenes. In doing so, children address more complex and sophisticated themes of the story.

School literacy practices often position literacy as an individual exercise, whereby reading and writing are privileged over oral language or other meaning making systems (e.g., drama, art, music). The work students and teachers do around reading and writing is accepted as natural and inevitable (Hall, 1998). There are no questions about whether or not children should strive to a particular standard or achieve a particular basic skill. The autonomous model assumes that children should reach a specific standard of skill; there is no questioning of this approach to literacy. Skills and standards are established as “givens.” To challenge such an idea would seem as though one does not care about standards.

**IDEOLOGICAL MODEL.** Counter to the autonomous model is what Street (1984) refers to as the *ideological model*. This model of literacy takes into consideration the ideologies and values that are associated with the people engaged in the literacy practices. In other words, literacy practices are embedded in a particular world view and these practices are a part of the cultural milieu. An ideological model suggests that literacy practices are related to people’s everyday lives.

When teachers and students assume an ideological model of literacy, they engage in literacy practices that are meaningful and purposeful to those involved. These practices offer opportunities to legitimize uses of literacy outside of school contexts; to value alternative ways of meaning making (oral, drawing, music, movement); and to recognize that literacy is collaborative. From an ideological perspective, then, classroom literacy practices are connected to the life experiences of the students. In Ms. Barwick’s third grade classroom, the students express interest in the recent immigration protest rallies. Many of the students are from Mexico and Central America. They have life experiences in border crossing. Collaboratively, students read and write about these events as they shape their own understandings about immigration policies and practices in the United States. They write letters to city officials, hold debates, and problematize the issues that are confronting their families.

**Principle #4: Literacy practices are learned through inquiry.**

Operating with an inquiry stance is critical to being an effective teacher, and in particular, an effective reading teacher. In Chapter 11, an inquiry curriculum is discussed in more detail. 

An inquiry stance is one that positions the teacher as a “problem poser” (Freire, 1985), asking questions about the ways in which children come to make sense of squiggles on a page. With an inquiry stance, a teacher considers that there may be more than one way to approach the teaching of reading and writing. Inquiry is not so much seeking the right answer because there often is not a singular answer, but rather seeking
resolutions to questions and issues. This opens the possibility for viewing literacy in a more complex and dynamic fashion, rather than in a one size fits all formula. Teachers working from an inquiry stance begin with what they know and juxtapose this knowledge with new perspectives. In doing so, they come to new insights while continuing to ask more questions.

Inquiry implies a “need or want to know” premise. For teachers the emphasis is on nurturing inquiry attitudes or habits of mind. Students who actively make observations, collect, analyze, synthesize information, and draw conclusions are developing useful problem-solving and learning skills. To illustrate, students in Ms. Cunningham’s fourth grade classroom are studying their local community and they engage in a series of questions around the contributions people have made to their community, historical markers in the community, and the history of the monuments in the community. The students use a number of resources including text sets, interviews, photographs, and a field trip. The knowledge and skills students acquire in this inquiry can be applied to future “need to know” situations that students will encounter both at school and at work. Another benefit that inquiry-based learning offers is the development of habits of mind that can last a lifetime and guide learning and creative thinking (http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/inquiry/).

Principle #5: Literacy practices invite readers and writers to use their background knowledge and cultural understandings to make sense of texts.

Children come into school bringing their varied linguistic backgrounds and personal experiences. A child’s cultural context and experience (e.g., What types of texts are available at home? Is English the child’s second, third, or fourth language?) plays a significant role in which literacy events and practices are valued in the home and community in relation to which ones are valued in the school context.

Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzales (1992) introduced the term funds of knowledge as a way to talk about the historically and culturally accumulated bodies of knowledge that people have access to as they navigate their daily worlds. (See Chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion on Funds of Knowledge.) For some children, these funds of knowledge and experiences will closely match the literacy engagements that are prevalent in school settings (e.g., story reading, library trips, writing lists and other documents, drawing pictures, talking about a previous experience). Children with such practices as part of their repertoire are said to have what Bourdieu (1986) notes as cultural capital. This cultural capital are the resources at hand that children draw upon as they make sense of the texts and the literacy practices surrounding such texts. These resources may be social, linguistic, or cultural.

Other children may enter school without such a close alignment between what they know and do and school-based literacy practices. For children who may not have access to this type of cultural capital, it means their ways of participating may not be seen as valuable or “count” in the larger context of what it means to be in school. Knowing the latest version of a handheld game, how to text message on a cell phone, or the power strength of a Pokemon trading card usually does not count toward developing literacy knowledge. Acknowledging the funds of knowledge and cultural capital that children bring to the literacy event creates space and opportunities for children to build on what they know as they engage with unfamiliar practices around literacy development.
Chapter 1   Examining literacy in the twenty-first century

It is important to consider how some literacy practices and behaviors are privileged over others, and how teachers might create more space in their curriculum for students to share their interests, passions, and resources in ways that matter. Disrupting the notion that there is one universal way of thinking about literacy (autonomous) is necessary to shift the perspective of literacy as a set of neutral skills to a perspective that literacy is socially and culturally constructed; that the materials and availability of particular kinds of texts in the classroom library matter to the students and the teachers they work with.

Principle #6: Literacy practices expand to include everyday texts and multimodal texts.

Children quickly learn to identify important icons such as McDonald’s®, Coca-Cola®, Nike®, favorite cereal brands, and cartoon characters’ names such as SpongeBob SquarePants™, Mickey Mouse™, and Blue™. The early attempts often occur without explicit attention or instruction. Rather, children are immersed in print all around them, and as they progress through the grade levels they begin reading Pokemon™ and Yugio™ trading cards, Harry Potter series books, stories from reading anthologies, Eye Witness books, and surfing Internet websites for information on a hobby or interest. The notion of text expands to include materials including “everyday” materials such as advertisements, Pokemon trading cards, and posters.

Children live and operate in a world where language is not the only form of communication, but images, graphics, sound, and the nonlinear nature of such texts are also significant. “It is important to remember that the children in elementary schools today were born into a world complete with digital gizmos. To them, type-writers are almost as old-fashioned as dinosaurs. Their history is one of computerization.” (Lotherington, 2004, p. 317).
The *multimodal* literacies (a combination of linguistic, visual, auditory, and spatial modes) children are exposed to, through interactive digital media, play a significant role in the ways they access and use text (both print based and visual). Before coming to school, many children will experience some sort of interactive digital media, whether it is DVD movies, electronic “educational toys” (e.g., Leapfrog®), software programs for computers, or handheld gaming devices, such as Gameboy®. The access to digital media increases as children learn to surf the Internet for information, play Internet games, download music files into their MP3 players, utilize text messaging, email, and chatrooms for communication, design BLOGs, create movies with cell phones, and other possibilities not even imagined. Even children who do not have access to home computers and other digital platforms find them at school, public libraries, and friends’ and relatives’ homes.

Along with the digital world, there is also an explosion of what Vasquez (2003) calls “pocket monsters” (e.g., Pokemon, Yu-Gi-Oh, DragonballZ, Digimon). These television-based cartoon characters are central to trading card games. Young children collect and trade cards. There are a wide range of icons, abbreviations, and symbols on each card that refer to characteristics and attributes of the Pokemon character. Children are quite adept at “reading” these cards and understanding the available textual information. Not only are children reading and trading cards, they are also redesigning and creating their own. Redesigned cards indicate that children are sophisticated in their interactions with these texts and digital media platforms.

In school, then, it is critically important that teachers are more aware and accepting of the multiliteracies that children bring with them. These literacy practices can be used to support reading and writing practices in school settings. Instead of writing a book report, children can create imovies™ to explore the theme of the book. They can use text messaging to talk about disruptions of grammar and conventions and when this text messaging format of writing is appropriate and acceptable.

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Student-created trading cards.
Chapter 1  Examining literacy in the twenty-first century

The upcoming chapters in this book explore the following topics in teaching reading and writing to elementary school children: oral language, culturally relevant pedagogy, models of reading, curricular programs, emergent literacy, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, literature discussions, assessment, inquiry and struggling readers and writers. Each of these topics (chapters) uses the six guiding principles as a framework for discussing how to effectively teach literacy.

Creating Connections  1.6

- List some of your experiences with young children and digital media. What have you observed as they interact with these new technologies?
- Observe how children access and use technology in school settings. What do these interactions say about the ways in which digital media is viewed as a tool for learning?

The role of No Child Left Behind in literacy instruction

The models of schooling and the guiding principles provide a way to think about how literacy practices are currently enacted in classrooms and what the possibilities may be in your own classroom. Before we consider how your own vision and goals for teaching literacy play an important role in developing as an effective literacy teacher, it is necessary to address the implications of No Child Left Behind on literacy development in this new century.

Invitation for the classroom

Interview a small group of students about their perceptions and understandings of what reading and writing are for. Possible questions to ask include:

1. Why do people read? Write?
2. How did you learn to read? Write?
3. Who helps you with your reading? Writing?
4. What do you do when you have trouble reading text? Writing?
5. What types of things do you like to read? Write?
6. Who do you know who is a good reader? Writer?
7. How would you help someone who is having trouble reading? Writing?
8. Where do you like to read? Write?
9. How do you choose what you read? Write?
10. How often do you read, in school, at home? Write?
11. How do you feel about writing? Reading?
12. Do you like to write? Why or why not?
13. Do you like to read? Why or why not?
14. How do you decide what to write about?
Invariably, one cannot listen to the news or open a newspaper and not hear or read about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Signed into law in 2001, NCLB is an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. NCLB provides sweeping reform efforts in a number of areas, including a stronger emphasis on reading, particularly in the early grades; increased measures for states, school districts, and schools to be held accountable for the work being accomplished; more parental choice in selecting schools for their children; and more flexibility for states to use federal education dollars. NCLB is instrumental in setting the agenda for how teachers teach reading and how schools are evaluated and held accountable.

A goal of No Child Left Behind is to have children reading on grade level by the end of third grade. No one can argue that this isn’t a worthwhile and laudable goal. At issue, however, is the means by which this goal is achieved. The federal government created the Reading First initiative, whereby significant amounts of money are provided to States to support scientifically based reading instruction programs for the early grades (K-3). Teachers are feeling the direct effects of NCLB as their instructional decision making is called into question in reading instruction, as well as the increased number of standardized tests required at all grade levels. What does scientifically based reading instruction mean? And what does this mean for teachers and the children they teach?

Scientifically based reading instruction and the National Reading Panel

At the center of the Reading First initiative is the idea that reading programs, professional development, and assessment are driven by what is termed scientifically based reading research (SBRR). This means that evidence is used to make decisions about how to best teach reading. Evidence is drawn from research that is deemed rigorous, systematic, and empirical. SBRR also implies that the research design and questions can be replicated in other contexts. For example, a research study on the effectiveness of a tutoring program on reading achievement can be conducted with another group of students and yield similar results.

The National Reading Panel, a group convened in 1997 by the federal government, was charged with the task of assessing the effectiveness of different approaches to reading instruction. They reviewed 438 studies out of nearly 100,000, published in referred journals, focused on children’s reading development. These studies were mostly experimental and quasi-experimental in design. Experimental research randomly assigns participants to be placed in either the control group or the target intervention group. After a predetermined amount of time, the researcher then examines whether or not the group receiving the intervention has significant gains in reading achievement. A quasi-experimental design does not randomly assign participants, but rather places participants in groups based on various characteristics (gender, age, learning disabilities, etc.). This approach is more common in education because of the difficulties of randomizing participants in school settings. While these two designs are important, the panel eliminated a large body of research that uses a qualitative research methodology. This methodology reveals aspects of the literacy process that experimental and quasi-experimental are unable to investigate.

Creating Connections 1.7

Access the executive summary of the National Reading Panel Report from the website (http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/).

How does their discussion of the reading process align with or conflict with the guiding principles of this text?
The panel’s review of the selected research led to the conclusion that the following areas are critical to reading instruction and development:

- **Phonemic awareness (PA):** the ability to hear sounds in various words. Instruction in phonemic awareness involves teaching children to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken syllables and words.

- **Phonics:** the relationship between letters of the written language and sounds in the spoken language. The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter–sound correspondences and spelling patterns.

- **Fluency:** the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression. Guided oral reading and silent reading provide opportunities for students to practice fluency.

- **Vocabulary:** the words students must know to communicate effectively. Repeated use of the words and in multiple contexts supports learning.

- **Comprehension:** the ability to gain meaning from what is being read. Comprehension strategies include summarizing, monitoring, answering and generating questions, and using graphic and semantic organizers.

These five areas identified by the National Reading Panel become the core features of programs endorsed by the Reading First initiative. Problematic to this report, however, is the isolated nature by which the panel delineated and reported on the five areas—as though they are separate and discrete skills to be learned by the novice reader. The panel did not consider the dynamic and integrated nature of the reading process, nor how these features interact with each other over time. As readers construct the meaning of text, they rely not only on making sense of the words, but how these words come together to form particular ideas.

**Reading First initiative**

The panel’s report had significant implications on the **Reading First initiative**. Public schools and school districts receiving Reading First funds must purchase reading programs that meet the requirements as determined by the States (which are invariably determined by the federal government). Commercial reading programs that qualify are comprehensive, scientifically research based, and emphasize the five previously listed components (PA, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). These programs have a systematic and predominant focus on phonics instruction. The Reading First initiative does not specify any commercial programs, but popular choices are *Reading Mastery* (McGraw-Hill), *Open Court* (SRA), and *Scott Foresman Reading 2004* (Scott Foresman). Chapter 5 provides a detailed explanation of prescriptive reading programs.

What impact does the NRP report, and subsequently, Reading First initiative have on classroom teachers? In schools where Reading First funding is available, teachers are required to use the prepackaged and scripted programs. As a result of funding requirements, there is very little teacher decision making regarding the most effective and meaningful ways to teach reading. The programs do not present the complexities of the reading process, or the myriad of ways in which students interact and engage with text to make meaning. In many cases, the prepackaged and scripted programs limit the choices teachers and students have in relating language, the text, and the world.
have when it comes to learning strategies to decode and comprehend the text, and the materials used to do such work. Moreover, NCLB and the Reading First mandates have all but discounted the guiding principles addressed earlier in the chapter, as well as what it might mean to reorganize schools toward inquiry and critical models. It is important to begin problematizing the narrow scope of literacy that is currently driving the reading and writing curriculum in most schools in the country. To do so, the next section offers a discussion on how to establish one’s vision for literacy.

Creating a vision for effective literacy instruction

All teachers bring to the classroom their understandings and beliefs about literacy that influence decision making on a daily basis. As evidenced in the opening vignette, when Quantez’s teacher grouped students by ability for reading instruction, there was an implicit assumption that some skills needed to be mastered before moving to the next level. Likewise, when Ms. Barwick offers her students opportunities to discuss current immigration policies through various literacy events, she has a belief that literacy practices are embedded in the lives of her students. Long before teachers enter the classroom, they have a vision or image of what teaching reading will be like. There are images of the classroom (arrangement of furniture, types of materials accessible to the students), the students (who will be in the classroom), and their own ideal classroom practices (what type of teacher will they be). These images may at times be congruent with what is actually happening in the classroom, and at times be at odds with the current context. For many teachers, their visions of the ideal classroom are unstated and implicit. Yet, when these visions become visible, teachers may develop a more defined sense of purpose (Hammerness, 2003), and ultimately, provide a literacy curriculum that is meaningful for students in the classroom.

A teacher’s vision of what constitutes an ideal is personal and individual. Duffy (1998) explains that when teachers develop their own stances (visions), they also develop a “focused mindfulness” about their actions. This mindfulness is not based in someone else’s vision for the future, but rather their own values and intentions for the students in their classrooms. Duffy notes that when given the opportunity to think deeply about their practice, teachers began to seek alignment between what they valued about teaching, learning, and literacy and what actions they were taking in the classroom. For example, current and recurring debates in the field of literacy instruction include “Is whole language or phonics the best way to teach reading?,” or “Should writing instruction include timed writing prompts?,” or “Do leveled readers support reading

Creating Connections  1.8

Create your vision of the ideal classroom engaged in literacy practices. Consider the following five questions:

1. What are the sights and sounds of the classroom?
2. What are the types of materials students are accessing?
3. What is the role of the teacher? The students? The curriculum?
4. How do these factors relate to student learning?
5. What is the relationship between the classroom and the kind of citizens you want to see in the twenty-first century?
development?” Questions framed this way really only allow for one particular vision to emerge. But asked differently, “Given what your vision is for students, what roles do whole language and phonics play in literacy development?” or “Given your vision for a writing curriculum, what contributions do timed writing prompts make?” or “Given what you envision for students, what role do leveled readers play in supporting students’ literacy development and knowledge?” These questions allow space for teachers to construct responses that reflect their own understandings of literacy development and what they acknowledge as central to creating literate students.

In Closing

This chapter provided a foundation for thinking about literacy practices in the twenty-first century. Literacy practices are rapidly changing from print based and linear, to multimodal and digital. The definitions of reading and writing are changing along with the technologies. Children are beginning to redefine what it means to be “literate” and how to flexibly navigate the fluidity of images, words, logos, and icons that appear before them (either in print or on a screen). And while there are significant advances in our technologies and children’s access to such technology, we continue to operate with outdated models of schooling. There are three models of schooling discussed in this chapter: industrial, inquiry, and critical. The industrial model remains the most common form of schooling, with an emphasis on compliance, punctuality, and accountability. Current federal policies and mandates, such as No Child Left Behind and Reading First initiatives are based in this model. The inquiry and critical models of schooling encourage students to select personally meaningful topics and issues, to use authentic texts (literature), to collaborate with others, and to consider alternative perspectives.

The guiding principles addressed in this chapter provide a framework for addressing literacy development in the twenty-first century. These six principles include:

- **Principle #1:** Literacy practices are socially and culturally constructed.
- **Principle #2:** Literacy practices are purposeful.
- **Principle #3:** Literacy practices contain ideologies and values.
- **Principle #4:** Literacy practices are learned through inquiry.
- **Principle #5:** Literacy practices invite readers and writers to use their background knowledge and cultural understandings to make sense of texts.
- **Principle #6:** Literacy practices expand to include everyday texts and multimodal texts.

These principles impact the type of curriculum, materials, and activities that teachers make available in their classrooms. Moreover, as teachers begin to consider these principles in light of their literacy curriculum, they begin to create particular visions. Envisioning a meaningful and productive literacy curriculum requires that teachers think deeply about their practice. They seek alignment between their ideologies and what they value and their instructional decisions and activities in the classroom.
Terms to Remember

autonomous model (13)  
critical model (9)  
funds of knowledge (15)  
ideological model (14)  
ideologies (5)  
industrial model (6)  
inquiry model (8)  
multimodal literacy (17)  
No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (7)  
Reading First initiative (20)  
scientifically based reading research (SBRR) (19)

Resources for More Information


Questions for Further Reflection

- How do you see the guiding principles described in this chapter playing out in classroom literacy programs?
- What tensions do you see between the guiding principles and literacy instruction in an industrial model?