

in their settings, and research is a cultural practice that reflects local goals and practices. Thus Part II of this *Handbook* recognizes that school is one important setting for literacy, one in which many readers will have special interest, perhaps the reason that most people come to this book in the first place. Part III, however, sets beside school other important contexts for literacy among adolescents, environments that circumscribe a much larger space for learning, knowing, and performing literacy. In Part IV, we see *adolescent* as referring to many different kinds of people—male; female; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ); African American; immigrant; Latina/o; Native American; and others—whose differences must be acknowledged and respected, not just because it is ethically right to do so but because it is analytically and empirically necessary.

That said, in this Introduction, we would like to set out our terms and our three areas of focus within this *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*—that is, what we mean by the *adolescent*, how we define the field of *literacy*, and how we assess the limitations of *research*.

## WHO IS THE ADOLESCENT?

That said, this volume addresses the post-industrial, postmodern Western world adolescent (see both Alvermann [Chapter 2] and Intrator & Kunzman [Chapter 3] in this volume for further exploration). Adolescence is not just a chronological time, often reduced to the span of the teen years, 13–19, with some leeway on either side, most commonly extended as 11–20. Adolescence is also not simply a developmental stage, with its centerpiece as puberty and one of its major psychological tasks independence from adults, particularly individuation from parents. It is also not a temporal zone of sorts after childhood and before adulthood. And, looking at the individual, adolescents are not all the same, nor do they share identical characteristics. Adolescence and adolescents are, as Lesko (2001) notes, characterized by nothing more than their complexity:

Youth are simultaneously young and old, learning and learned, working and in school. This idea of time (that is, of past, present, and future) as holding seemingly opposing identities *simultaneously* is, I believe, a necessary dimension of a retheorizing of adolescence. (p. 197)

And this retheorizing is an ongoing event. Hersch (1999) spent 3 years with eight adolescents and tries, in *A Tribe Apart*, to capture the issues regarding young people. Hersch sees these youth as indeed *apart* but also as those who are connected and even wish to

be more connected simply to study people, and share ally need more lives and need to with them:

It is a population out of control or manipulate and then if they killed, they be disculous. . . . the loss of control, kids, and from understanding c looks like. (p. 197)

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teaching, Christensenbury (2007) found that even apparently straightforward classroom disputes regarding school curriculum were often characterized by her adolescent students as the adult teacher's failure to listen. Adolescents in the first decade of the 21st century are somewhat definable although not, it appears, defined as accurately or thoughtfully as needed. The acceptance of them, both in and outside school contexts, as experts and authorities remains unfinished business. Reverting to stereotype, myth, and fiction, many adults—policy-makers and educators included—would prefer to relegate young people to the status of adults-in-training who have not quite mastered their roles. One of their major roles, of course, is the practice of literacy, a topic to which we now turn.

## HOW DO WE DEFINE LITERACY?

Time was when people were deemed literate when they could indicate their signature with an "X" (Reay, 1991). In today's world, literacy comprises so many competencies that even getting a grip on the construct can be a slippery process. In this section we attempt to review how notions of what it means to be literate have changed over time, and how people conceive of being literate early in the 21st century.

Dictionary definitions can help establish at least a populist sense of word meanings, if not those argued to fine points by researchers and theorists. Our *Merriman-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary* (2003) defines *literacy* as "the quality or state of being literate," tracing the origins of the term to 1883. *Literate*, we then learn, comes from the 15th century and evolved from "Middle English *litterat*, from Latin *litteratus*, marked with letters, *litterate*, from *litterae*, letters, literature." From its origins in a term that references the written word, *literate* then more broadly came to refer to people who are "able to read and write." More recently, the term has come to indicate "having knowledge or competence," such as being computer literate, media literate, workplace literate, or being skilled in some other realm; ultimately, these proficiencies have spawned such terms as *computacy*, *mediacy*, and other neologisms. From this set of defini-

be more connected. Hersch urges adults not simply to study but also to listen to young people, and she insists that adolescents actively need more—not fewer—adults in their lives and need to have a positive relationship with them:

It is a popular notion that adolescents careen out of control, are hypnotized by peer pressure or manipulated by demons for six years or so, and then if they don't get messed up or hurt or killed, they become sensible adults. That's ridiculous. . . . The turbulence of adolescence today comes not so much from rebellion as from the loss of communication between adults and kids, and from the lack of realistic, honest understanding of what the kids' world really looks like. (p. 365)

An adolescents' world has always had its own rules and boundaries and, particularly in this age of texting and instant messaging, is characterized by its own language, both as a traditional defense against outsiders (i.e., adults) and as a group identity-sharing. The latter is something in which most adolescents have historically engaged although the shape of it is varied in different generations. Today's adolescents, though, faces some challenges that were not part of previous generations: earlier physical maturation and later economic (and possibly emotional) independence. In today's schools, adolescents are the most tested group of young people in history, in most middle-class households the most regulated and scheduled, and a group that, as a whole, faces some real insecurity regarding societal stability, expectations, and pressures. For adolescent immigrants, people of color, and those in poverty, the playing field remains uneven. The same is true for teen girls and GLBTQ teens, and some even maintain that for adolescent males the climate is no longer welcoming (e.g., Sommers, 2000).

The challenges abound as do the proposed solutions. Yet, as Alvermann (Chapter 2, this volume) notes, in order to be effective as educators, we need to view adolescents not as individuals in crisis, and not in deficit, but as those who have a true "degree of agency" and whose expertise is something we can use and foster. Intrator and Kunzman (Chapter 3, this volume) make a case for a true dialogic relationship between adolescents and adults. Certainly in her return to high school

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tions, literacy's origins are clearly in the realm of letters, yet have evolved to refer to competencies of any kind. Although most people would agree that literacy concerns letters in some regard, others dispute any effort to expand the term's meaning to include fluency with other symbol systems or media-tors.

Even within these broad perspectives, there is disagreement. For instance, it is not clear how to determine whether or not someone can "read." President Bill Clinton helped to accelerate the current emphasis on testing when he said during his 1997 State of the Union Address that "we must do more . . . to make sure every child can read well by the end of the third grade," a belief that framed the Reading Excellence Act ([www.ed.gov/init/FY97/1-read.html](http://www.ed.gov/init/FY97/1-read.html)). Among other things, this Act promised to "provide professional development for teachers based on the best research and practice." Yet reading specialists have profound differences on what constitutes the "best research and practice," leading to the highly contentious and divisive Reading Wars (see Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999) over both federal funding and the stature and wealth that follow from a federal endorsement. Given that researchers cannot agree on which evidence suggests that a person can read, which research approaches most usefully identify this ability, and which instruction is most likely to produce it, even the most conservative definition of literacy—the ability to read and/or produce letters—does not provide consensus among those whose careers are devoted to understanding the process people go through in learning to be fluent with written expressions.

Historically, literacy has been determined in different ways. Resnick and Resnick (1977) describe an evolution consisting of four stages in which the definition of literacy has involved different types and levels of performance. First, the *signature* stage simply involved the ability to sign one's name. Next, the *recitation* stage required one to demonstrate an ability to read or recite from memory selected passages, without necessarily understanding the words (more on "understanding" to follow). The *comprehension* stage followed, requiring both the reading or recitation and a literal understanding of the

passage. Next (in the 1970s) came the *analysis* stage, which considered a literate reading one in which the reader engages with an unfamiliar text, both comprehending it and taking a critical stance.

This notion of reading's evolution is interesting for several reasons. First, it is concerned solely with reading; writing is not required beyond the ability to write one's signature. As Kintgen, Kroll, and Rose (1988) have pointed out, reading and writing have not always been considered properties of a literate performance. They provide the example of the 14th-century raconteur Geoffrey Chaucer, who told his stories but relied on others to write them down in an era when writing was the province of a few select scribes. One could count back an additional 2,200 years to make the same observation about the Greek poet Homer. Writing, note Kintgen et al. (1988), has not always been valued, and has even been distrusted and scorned by such luminaries as Plato, who opposed writing because it reduced the demands on memory and so, he believed, weakened the mind.

Second, Resnick and Resnick's (1977) account requires, at the most sophisticated count, requires, "comprehension" of what one reads. Yet it has proven quite difficult to operationally define what is involved in the comprehension of written speech. For the most part, this ability has been measured by students' ability to answer multiple-choice questions that have been devised by researchers or assessment specialists in response to a given passage. We find this narrow means of determining comprehension to be problematic for many reasons. Primarily, it assumes that the questions are uniquely capable of producing information about what students do and do not understand about what they have read. Yet as many researchers working from a transactional perspective have demonstrated, students may find meaning in their reading that is quite different from what a test designer, teacher, or researcher might consider to be important (e.g., Siegel, 1984; Smagorinsky & Copock, 1994, 1995). This meaning often comes through a student's complicity with literary characters' emotions and experiences, something not available through multiple-choice questions

posed by some structive, interacting that emerging response. Finally, each Street (1995) view of literacy, acy out of its so views it as a d mous skill rather eracy can be m tests that we fi still constitute ment in the Uni tice, literacy b host of other grained, small- ine of a few select scribes. One could count back an additional 2,200 years to make the same observation about the omous concepts attention to the context, and c in their reading. Since Kintgen collection of for major shift has that correspond tion involving "competence" in relation other mediator. this conception to the 6th cent Great proposed icted on the w tion of the l masses. In the religious leader that it might learn what boos & Gies, 1994, Ages sculpture etic medium bec and understood educated peasant sculpture an could be "read" and the Bible c was variously k Many centur Perhaps this m with the work





## WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH?

Literacy researchers working within the multiple, complex, and generous understanding of literacy we have described must develop a conceptualization of "research" that is appropriate to the "literacy" they investigate. If literacy is not bounded by correct oral pronunciation of printed words, or by comprehension of printed text, then a researcher attempting to study literacy through methods that capture or measure only those phenomena circumscribes literacy into a smaller space than is appropriate. For if literacy consists of drawing purposefully from varied semiotic resources, and if it occurs in connection with others and in the context of settings, cultures, political relations, identities, and histories, then there is more to examine than the improvement of a statistical sample on a set of predetermined test items.

Like perhaps most educational researchers, we editors value a wide range of methodologies and traditions in inquiry, and we see a plurality of approaches as offering multiple angles on common questions and problems. Across the contributions to this *Handbook*, we see discussions of many different approaches to adolescent literacy research. There is, however, a special value attached to studies that describe systematically the sorts of things that go on when literacy is occurring *in situ*—whether the location is in school, in an after-school program, on the Internet, in homes and communities, or among peer groups. That valuing of context seems to make sense. If you want to study adolescent literacy, you have to go find it and look at its conditions and how it works.

Such an approach to practices of generating knowledge about literacy corresponds to our conception of literacy as "a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it" (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). Among many researchers, this understanding of literacy has contributed to a preference for analyzing descriptions of people doing things together around various kinds of texts. In the research methods that produce such descriptions, one keeps the social context within the picture frame in order to keep looking at a recognizable and legitimate representation

all of these considerations require attention to culture and the ways in which different cultures organize social practices and the means through which social practices involve communication.

This review suggests the importance of Scribner and Cole's (1981) insight that literacy is a social and cultural practice, that is,

a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge . . . [a set of] socially developed and patterned ways of using technology and knowledge to accomplish tasks. . . . [Literacy consists of] a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it. Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use. The nature of these practices, including, of course, their technological aspects, will determine the kinds of skills ("consequences") associated with literacy. (p. 236)

Scribner and Cole's (1981) definition orchestrates many of the ideas we have reviewed into a useful conception of literacy. From their account and from the history of literacy, we can only conclude that the meaning of literacy is local and situated, as Kintgen et al. (1988) argue, "literacy must be defined in relation to a particular society or culture" (p. xiv). To Heath (1983), a culture's organization of its social life suggests different purposes for literacy and different stances toward literacy practices. The fundamentalist Christians in her study, for instance, came to regard the written word of the Bible as literal and unquestionable, resulting in difficulties in school when children were given ambiguous texts to read and discuss.

Although signing an X to represent a signature might have been acceptable for adults a century ago, in today's U. S. schools this ability would not be sufficient for a first-grade student in ordinary school lessons. The degree to which a person is considered literate, then, is not static, but is a judgment based on the local standards that follow from the ways in which particular cultures constitute the purpose of using texts for communication and expression. How and why others then read those texts is a topic taken up in detail by the contributors to this book.

of the phenomenon. The ing so has led to the ad- ment of a wide variety collection and analysis. / cipines, research in ado be historical, philosoph and may not involve dat synchronous practices Among the studies that evidence from human par ers employ such technj think-aloud protocols, co writing, participant jour graphic methods with v participation. They collec classrooms, after-school e nity centers, homes, onlini literacy occurs without the it up. Frames for analyzing from those based on inform to semiotics to critical the chronotopes, among man kinds of data and analysis be taken not only as a p but as an event in the soc world, as something that ne and observed in order to Moreover, situated literacy t the sort of open-ended, thinking that is usually ab dardized assessments. An approach to research t olescent literacy as a real-w non observable in settings research permits something allows researchers to view a cy through the eyes of the r ticipate in it. Many of the have contributed to this bo larly concerned with how ad looks from the point of view we call adolescents. This in perspective is essential to val tive research. If a study of "a acy" looks only at activities meaningful or recognizable cents investigated, then the problems with the study's val fore its applicability to the liveness of the people it is presu to help. Furthermore, such a to find false deficits—that ad some deficiency in their litera looked in the setting where t