18th Annual Symposium | October 19-21, 2022

LESLLA Defines Literacy

Nicole Pettitt
Youngstown State University

Abstract

Literacy is a central interest of LESLLA practitioners, researchers, and learners, and our definitions of literacy shape what and how we teach, research, assess, and advocate. As such, it is relevant to explore the meanings we attach to the concept of literacy. This paper takes up interpretive content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016) to examine how literacy was defined or conceptualized in the 196 LESLLA proceedings papers from symposia held 2005-2019. Analyses show there were five overarching genres of proceedings papers, and their definitions or conceptualizations of literacy mainly mirrored common scholarly definitions of literacy from the last few decades. It was more common for papers to *imply* a definition or conceptualization of literacy than to *explicitly* state one; it was least common to *not* define/conceptualize literacy. Additionally, many LESLLA symposium papers utilized more than one definition or conceptualization of literacy, at times combining theoretical traditions that some scholars consider incommensurate, perhaps indicating that some LESLLAers take an eclectic approach to developing their definitions of literacy. An unexpected research gap was found, that is, few papers shared LESLLA learners' perspectives, and fewer made these the main focus of their inquiry. Finally, questions for reflection are posed.

Keywords: literacy, adult literacy, content analysis, LESLLA, LESLLA proceedings

Literacy is a central interest of LESLLA practitioners, researchers, students, policy makers, and other stakeholders. Sharing knowledge and research on literacy development, issues, approaches and policies was also a primary motivation for LESLLA founders to begin holding yearly symposia. In his Foreword to the proceedings from the inaugural LESLLA symposium, held in 2005 at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, Roeland van Hout (2006) wrote, "The primary goal of the workshop was to establish an international forum on research and classroom issues pertaining to the second language acquisition and *literacy development* [emphasis added] of adults with little or no native language schooling" (p. 5). Over a decade later, when LESLLA was formally established as a non-profit organization, its vision statement became, "LESLLA aims to support adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in their lives in a new language" (LESLLA, n.d., para. 1).

The LESLLA community is not unique in this respect: scholarly, pedagogical, governmental, and personal interest in adult literacy have undergirded countless activities to promote literacy, or explore questions surrounding literacy. Many of these activities involve significant financial and human investment. A few examples include national literacy campaigns (e.g., Arnove & Graff, 1987); decades of U.N.-led literacy initiatives around the world (UNESCO, n.d.); in English-dominant contexts, years of scholarly debate surrounding theories of reading (Goodwin & Jimenez, 2021; Kim, 2008; Pearson, 2004), appearing in countless research studies, journals, journal articles, books, and conference presentations; in the U.S. context, well-intentioned but misguided policies resulting in billions spent, as well as millions spent every year on testing, curriculum, and teacher development. Many more examples could be provided. With so many literacy stakeholders around the world, operating at different social scales and with different kinds of power to effect educational change, it is logical that stakeholders' definitions of literacy would also be diverse and shift over time.

Given the diversity of professional backgrounds, experiences, and training represented in LESLLA, it is worth examining the definitions and meanings that members of our professional community attach to the concept of literacy, which is so central to our work. Therefore, this paper asks: *In what ways is literacy defined or conceptualized in LESLLA proceedings publications*? The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the importance of examining the definitions and conceptualizations we bring to our work; they reveal our ideologies and thus shape *what* and *how* we teach, research, assess, and advocate, as well as the language we use to talk about learners, classrooms and pedagogy, scholarship, and other LESLLA issues. My hope is that this paper will provide an opportunity for collective and individual reflection and, in cases where individuals desire to shift their thinking or practices, motivation and some direction for doing so.

Defining literacy

It can be helpful to look at how literacy is understood outside of LESLLA. LESLLA members bring diverse professional experiences to our work, shaped by academic communities of practice, our experiences, and local, regional, and national policy making. Below I briefly highlight a few theoretical perspectives on literacy from recent decades and from English-dominant scholarly outlets. My intention is to provide a very broad and concise introduction for any readers for whom one or more of these perspectives is new or not well-known. It is important to note that there are not necessarily firm boundaries around each of these theoretical perspectives, although there has been debate between scholars who take up

psycholinguistic/cognitive theories and those who take up theories focused on social and cultural aspects of literacy, e.g., what people do with literacy, who gets access to literacy and why, etc.

Literacy as a psycholinguistic process

Early scholarly definitions of literacy in the last 50 years centered on reading and, in particular, on the psychological and linguistic processes involved in reading (e.g., Pearson, 1976). From these perspectives, literacy has been understood primarily as decoding and encoding print, and as an individual, cognitive, and neurological process – although some scholars from cognitive traditions expand into sociocognitive perspectives of reading. It is beyond the scope of this article to review the numerous cognitive models that have been proposed to explain reading processes, but their varying foci have included the roles of phonemic, phonological, and morphological awareness; vocabulary knowledge; and much more (see e.g., Alvermann, Ruddell & Unrau, 2013). More recently, research that incorporates brain imaging has been important in shedding light on the complexity of reading processes (Goswami, 2008).[1]

New Literacy Studies, multiliteracies, literacy as social practice

Scholarly shifts in the psycholinguistic understanding of literacy – at least in publications released in English – began in the 1980's and are now associated with a body of scholarship known as New Literacy Studies, or NLS (Gee, 2015; New London Group, 1995). NLS emphasizes the ways people use languages, (digital) texts, (digital) images, (online) spaces, gestures, and more to make meaning in social contexts. Due to understanding literacy as involving more than reading and writing print on a page – but rather as involving multiple languages, text types, genres, and modalities – NLS tends to pluralize the term *literacy*, leading to terminology such as *literacies*, *multiliteracies*, and *multiple literacies*. Additionally, since NLS tends to focus on what people *do* (with writing, digital technologies, images, etc.), not on what people *have* (e.g., whether readers/writers have certain skills), scholars who align with NLS tend to describe literacy in terms of "literacy practices" rather than "literacy skills." However, in the LESLLA context, these terms are sometimes used together, as described in the Findings section.

Note that, although NLS and "social practice theories of literacy" (see e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 2010), have a good deal in common, these two theoretical perspectives do differ. Specifically, NLS tends to account for multimodal, digital, and multilingual communication, while social practice theories of literacy – at least in their earlier days –tended to focus on reading and writing only (e.g., not multimodal, digital, or multilingual communication).

Critical Literacy

The NLS view that literacy is informed by values (Gee, 2015, above) – and thus, that literacy is always ideological (Street, 1984) – complements the perspectives of Critical Literacy scholars who focus on issues of literacy and power (e.g., Freire, 1970). Luke (2012) described Critical Literacy as "an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological, and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum. It is focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities" (p. 5). In this way, Critical

[1] For the sake of space, I focus this paragraph on reading. However, theoretical orientations in writing research tend to mirror those of reading research, when the two are not theorized in tandem.

Literacy understands literacy practices as embedded in social contexts like NLS, but with an overt focus on working to dismantle various kinds of injustice.

Social Semiotics perspectives of literacy

Social semiotics focuses on "the use of a *semiotic resource* [emphasis added] for purposes of communication," (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 285). What, then, is a semiotic resource? According to van Leeuwen (2005), semiotic resources are

> the actions and artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physically – with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions and gestures, etc. – or by means of technologies – with pen, ink, and paper; with computer hardware and software with fabrics, scissors, and sewing machines, etc. (p. 3).

Therefore, writing, speech, images, gesture, gaze, posture, clothing, color, music, the use of space, and more could all be considered semiotic resources – and *how* these are used for communication is the focus of social semiotics. For instance, the way medicine bottle instructions are laid out in print and images – including what is listed first, second, third on a page, or that the instructions are part of a small fold-out that is still stuck to the bottle vs. printed on a bottle, etc. – might all be of interest to a scholar taking up a social semiotics perspective of literacy. Additionally, Social Semiotics perspectives align with both NLS and Critical Literacy perspectives in that all three focus on the social and value-laden nature of meaning-making surrounding texts. It is not difficult to see how this perspective could shed new light on psycholinguistic perspectives of reading and writing, as well as on the increasingly complex ways people use images, video, speech, digital tools, and more to make meaning.

Methods

This study takes up interpretive content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016) to examine how literacy was defined or conceptualized in the LESLLA proceedings papers from symposia held in 2005 through 2019 (see Table 1 in Findings section for years symposia were held vs. years resulting proceedings were published). Drisko and Maschi describe content analysis as consisting of three main types: basic, interpretive, and qualitative, with some overlap between these. While basic content analysis focuses on manifest content, or "what is overtly, literally present in a communication" (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 2), interpretive and qualitative approaches expand analyses to include latent content, or "meaning that is not overtly evidenced" (p. 4).

The present paper is also situated within a social constructionist paradigm, which Crotty (1998) describes as the view that "...meaning is not discovered but constructed" (p. 42) as humans interact. Crotty explains:

> Obviously, it is possible to make sense of the same reality in quite different ways…. Moving from one culture to another…provides evidence enough that strikingly diverse understandings can be formed of the same phenomenon…. constructionism drives home unambiguously is that there is *no* true or valid interpretation (but rather interpretations that are) useful, liberating, fulfilling, rewarding (p. 42-43).

This framework allows us to understand the definitions or conceptualizations of literacy appearing in LESLLA proceedings as interpretations of literacy phenomena – not as "true" or

"valid" interpretations, but rather as more or less "useful, liberating, fulfilling, rewarding" as Crotty (1998, p. 43) described.

Data Collection

The corpus for this study was chosen in line with Mayring (2014) and includes all articles in LESLLA proceedings published 2006 through 2020, minus editor introductions, which totaled 196 papers. First, these papers comprise the largest repository of LESLLA scholarship; although greater numbers of LESLLA-oriented articles have appeared in research publications in recent years, this was not always the case. Second, these papers include LESLLA perspectives from genres that are uncommon in many academic research outlets, i.e., LESLLA authors who don't typically target their work to such outlets are included. Third, proceedings papers represent work that has been vetted twice by LESLLA colleagues – once for inclusion in a Symposium, and again for inclusion in the Symposium proceedings.

I worked with a graduate research assistant to download from the LESLLA website one copy of each LESLLA symposium proceedings 2006-2020. We placed all documents into a shared Google Drive, and organized them by year.

Data analysis

Each paper was cataloged in a shared Google spreadsheet, with the headings: symposium year, publication year, author, title. Next, we added columns for "defined literacy" (yes/no) and "notes."

First round analysis

This was undertaken in fall 2020 by a graduate research assistant. In the column "defined literacy," she recorded "yes," "no," and, when uncertain what to code, I instructed her to include "whatever else makes sense." In the column "notes," she recorded the excerpts from each article that informed her decisions. She did not read every paper in its entirety, but rather stopped reading once a definition of literacy was apparent (if one was). Specifically, I instructed her to begin by reading the Abstract and Introduction of the paper. If she did not see a definition of literacy in those sections, she was to also read the Literature Review. If she still did not see a definition of literacy, she was to read the entire paper.

Second round analysis

I undertook this analysis in spring 2021 and added the following codes: genre; how literacy was defined; and evidence (i.e., excerpts I used for coding decisions). I also created a codebook for "how literacy was defined."

Third round analysis

This was undertaken by me and the research assistant together later in fall 2021. We compared and revised initial coding; re-read select papers to negotiate coding; collapsed codes for "how literacy was defined"; began to generate themes; and I clarified for her how to find "latent content" (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 2). Specifically, while re-reading papers, we asked, "*What is the rhetorical purpose of this sentence, paragraph, or section*?"

A code of "yes" (i.e., the paper explicitly defined literacy) was assigned when an excerpt contained manifest content and its main purpose was to define or describe literacy or LESLLA learners' competencies. For example, van de Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten (2006) wrote,

"Low-literate: an adult who has attended school, *but who has a reading level below the average primary school level* [emphasis added]" (p. 8), thus tying literacy to reading level. Another example of the code "yes" comes from Altherr Flores (2017) who wrote,

> The definition of literacy I use for this research extends beyond just reading and writing. Per New Literacy Studies, literacy is embedded in a social context…; it is also the ability to interact with and understand a variety of text forms including "visual images and their relationship to the written word" (New London Group, 1996, p. 61) (p. 11).

This paragraph explicitly stated the paper adopted definitions from New Literacy Studies.

The code "yes - implied" was assigned when an excerpt contained latent content; that is, although the excerpt's main purpose was not to define or describe literacy, there are other clues as to definitions of literacy used in the paper. For instance, Strube (2007) wrote of LESLLA learners, "...the written word is not available to them" (p. 227), linking literacy to having access to writing. The code "yes - implied" was also assigned in cases when papers utilized terminology that described groups of students as "literates," "illiterates," "non-literates," etc., *with no additional explanation* as to the meaning of these terms, as the use of the terms themselves can imply an understanding of literacy as primarily encoding and decoding print, as seen above.

A related area of negotiation centered on papers that engaged with questions of literacy, did not explicitly or implicitly define literacy, but might be interpreted as reflecting a particular orientation toward literacy. For example, hypothetically, a paper that recommends the use of certain apps in language learning could indicate a lens of multimodality or semiosis. However, in these papers, there were no excerpts that alluded to literacy per se, or described LESLLA learners, or provided other ways for readers to ascertain with any certainty the paper's conceptualization of literacy. These papers were coded as "no."

Final analysis

I undertook this in fall 2022 and early 2023. I added the seven proceedings papers published in 2020 to the corpus. I reviewed the codes and codebook, re-read extracted excerpts and certain papers, revised coding, and did counts.

Note that all papers were included in analysis, regardless of language used. For papers in Spanish and French, I carried out coding and analysis alone. For the papers in Italian, I made preliminary analyses and then consulted with a colleague who is an Italian teaching and learning scholar in order to test and refine analyses.

Researcher positionality

I am a white, cisgender, middle-class, politically progressive, highly educated woman, born with U.S. citizenship, and who undertook all but 1.5 years of formal education in English. My dominant language is English, although I maintain personal and professional relationships in Spanish and French. I understand my knowledge base as narrower than those of colleagues who regularly use two or more languages in their work. I have never experienced forced migration, or the need to learn another language or a non-Roman script due to such migration. My knowledge of literacy, education, and policy outside of the U.S. are primarily informed by work with adults learning English in the U.S. post-migration, conversations with colleagues, and reading. I understand my positionalities as informing all facets of the research process (Holmes, 2020), including what questions to ask, and what I can and can't see in the data.

Findings

In order to contextualize the main findings of this study, in this section, I first present an overview of the full dataset, including a description of paper genres and how many papers defined literacy. I then turn to definitions of literacy taken up in the corpus.

The corpus: LESLLA symposium proceedings papers, 2006-2020

Over the first 15 years of LESLLA symposia, a total of 196 individual papers, totaling 2,079 pages, were published in resulting proceedings, as seen in Table 1. The number of papers published each year varied from 7 (St. Augustine and Pittsburgh proceedings) to 25 (Palermo proceedings), with a mean of 13 papers, median of 12 papers, and four modes, i.e., 7, 8, 9, and 12 papers were each produced on two occasions. This data demonstrates that there has been variety in how many papers are produced each year and, as a result, perspectives from some symposia are more frequent in the dataset. For instance, there are more definitions of literacy from the Palermo symposium represented in the data than from the Pittsburgh symposium.

Table 1: Number of papers and pages in LESLLA Symposium Proceedings, by publication year

Symposium #	Year held	Year proceedings published	Symposium Location	# of papers	# of pages
1	2005	2006	Tilburg, Netherlands	8	156
2	2006	2007	Richmond, Virginia, US	13	234
3	2007	2008	Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England	12	139
4	2008	2009	Antwerp, Belgium	20	237
5	2009	2010	Banff, Alberta, Canada	9	110
6	2010	2011	Cologne, Germany	8	116
7	2011	2012	Minneapolis, Minnesota, US	13	293
8	2012	2013	Jyväskylä, Finland	9	171
9	2013	2015	San Francisco, CA, US	14	320
10	2014	2015	Nijmegen, Netherlands	17	303
11	2015	2019	St. Augustine, FL, US	7	76
12	2016	2017	Granada, Spain	22	285
13	2017	2019	Portland, OR, US	12	203
14	2018	2021	Palermo, Italy	25	488
15	2019	2020	Pittsburgh, PA, US	7	146
			TOTAL	196	2079

Paper genres

Five overarching genres were found in the dataset and, perhaps unsurprisingly, they loosely mirror the kinds of papers listed in some editors' calls for papers (e.g., San Francisco, Portland, Pittsburgh, and perhaps others). The overarching genres, and the criteria used to determine each paper's genre, were as follows:

- **Empirical/Research:** Papers that included research questions, data collection, and data analysis, or those that laid out research agendas or research dilemmas. This included papers that reported on research-in-progress.
- **Pedagogical/Practice/Program**: Papers focused on sharing classroom practices, program design, curriculum design; did not include data collection or analyses of the effectiveness of the models shared.
- **Policy**: Papers that answered questions like, "What are the policies surrounding X phenomenon?" and "What impact have policies had?"
- **Literature Review**: Papers that answered the question, "What does scholarly research say about X phenomenon?"
- **Country Profile**: These papers were listed as such in the Table of Contents of the proceedings in which they appeared.

Table 2 shows how many papers appeared in each genre, by number and overall percentage. The data show that the largest number of papers falls into the 'empirical/research' category, followed by 'pedagogical/practice/program' and 'policy.'

Table 2: Number and percentage of paper genres

GENRE	#	%
Empirical/Research	103	52.6%
Pedagogical/Practice/Program	65	33.2%
Policy	18	9.2%
Lit Review	6	3.1%
Country Profile	4	2.0%
TOTAL	196	100.0%

Not reflected in these data is the fact that some papers overlapped two or more genres, as expected in a professional organization that has focused on ways that pedagogy, research, and policy co-inform. We can think of papers less as always belonging to one particular genre category, and more as sitting at the intersection of various genre continua. For instance, an author who discusses curricula or pedagogical practices may spend significant space situating their paper within national or local contexts, thus sharing characteristics with the genre of country profile, as well as with policy papers, as in Vink (2017).

As Table 2 shows, the genres of policy, literature review, and country profile have very small sample sizes. For this reason, in the next sections, I include raw numbers for counts and in columns where total percentages are calculated (e.g., what percentage of total papers were coded as "yes," etc.), but I do not include percentages for the genres themselves (e.g., no calculation for

the percentage of policy papers that imply a definition of literacy vs. that explicitly provide a definition of literacy, etc.)

How many papers defined literacy or did not? Were there differences by genre?

As described above, three major codes were used to categorize each paper: "yes," "yes - implied," and "no." As seen in Table 3, papers were most likely to imply definitions of literacy (61.7%), followed by explicitly stating definition(s) (24%). Papers were least likely to not include any mention of literacy (14.3%).

Table 3: Number and percentage of papers that defined, implied a definition, or did not define literacy

	# of papers	%
YES	47	24.5%
YES - IMPLIED	121	61.2%
NO	28	14.3%
TOTAL	196	100.0%

For the sake of space, the remainder of the analysis will zero in on papers that were either coded "yes" or "yes – implied." Table 4 shows the number and percentage of papers that were coded "yes" or "yes - implied" by genre. For empirical/research papers, there were 29 papers that contained explicit definitions of literacy (i.e. coded "yes," 28.2%), and 57 papers that implied a definition of literacy (55.3%). Rows with low raw numbers do not show related percentages, as those do not offer additional insights or could be misleading.

Table 4: Number and percentage of papers with *definitions* or *implied definitions* of literacy, by genre

GENRE	# overall	# yes	% yes	# implied	% implied
Empirical/Research	103	29	28.2%	57	55.3%
Pedagogical/Practice/Program	65	12	18.5%	45	69.2%
Policy	18	3	n/a	12	n/a
Lit Review	6	1	n/a	5	n/a
Country Profile	4	3	n/a	1	n/a
TOTAL	196	48	24.5%	120	61.7%

The percentage of papers containing explicit definitions of literacy dropped slightly for pedagogy/practice/program papers (18.5%), while the percentage of these papers that implied definitions of literacy were slightly higher than for empirical/research papers (69.2% vs. 55.3%).

Overall, the data show that, regardless of genre, papers implied definitions of literacy more than they contained explicit definitions of literacy and, amongst empirical/research papers.

Definitions of literacy

This section zeroes in on papers coded as "yes" or "yes - implied," which account for 168 of the 196 papers in the corpus. As described earlier, the themes presented below are the result of thematic coding. A paper could be, and frequently was, assigned more than one thematic code, for instance, when a paper contained multiple perspectives on literacy; represented the literacy perspectives of various entities (e.g., government vs. teachers) or of research participants (e.g., how do participants understand literacy); or discussions of tensions or power imbalances (e.g., policy-makers vs. researchers/teachers/students). In these cases, papers were included on counts for *each* thematic code assigned, i.e., papers could be counted twice or even three times.

THEME 1: "literacy" as decoding and encoding print

Papers in this theme numbered 130 out of 196 total in the corpus, that is, 66% of papers understood literacy through a lens of encoding/decoding print. Some examples of language that appeared in papers include:

– "reading level"

– "reading and writing in any language"

– "reading and writing alphabetic script"

– "decoding, comprehending, producing print"

– "having access to the written word"

– "using written information"

– mentions of component(s) of reading (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, grapheme-phoneme correspondence, etc.)

Although papers in this theme tended to align most closely with psycholinguistic perspectives of reading (see "Literacy as a psycholinguistic process" above), they frequently contained additional themes, or allusions to additional themes, as well. An example of this comes from Aberdeen and Johnson (2015), who described a learner placement process focused on reading, writing, and numeracy, then shared how an image-based needs assessment was developed for use with LESLLA learners. The authors do not mention a particular definition or conceptualization of literacy associated with the needs assessment, but the paper's 3.5-page discussion of why and how the authors chose particular images aligns closely with semiotic theories of reading images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

THEME 2: "literacy" as a practice – social, multimodal, semiotic, digital

Papers in this theme numbered 52, that is, 27% of papers made reference – either explicitly or implicitly – to literacy as a kind of practice, e.g., social practices, multimodal literacies/practices, digital literacies, semiotic meaning-making, etc. Descriptions of literacy in this theme tended to be lengthier than in Theme 1, perhaps due to the more complex nature of conceptualizing literacy in these ways. Some examples include:

– "Focusing on the multidimensional aspect of literacy is key to describing the importance of digital literacy for LESLLA learners. Literacy practices are embedded in work, school, and life and exercised differently in each context…" (Reder, Vanek, & Wrigley 2012, p. 48)
– "Thus, we consider literacy as a component of the communicative language competence and the learning to read and write (*alfabetismo* in Italian) by adults, as an enrichment of the resources on which they can rely while acting in the world…. (This) helps to focus attention on the written language as semiotic code and on literacy learning as an appropriation of this code" (Rocca, Minuz & Bori, 2017, p. 209)
– "In our project, literacy was not limited to reading and writing only. According to Luukka (2003, 2013), texts as multimodal entities can also consist of or include visual or auditory elements such as voice, pictures, or movement; the ability to construct meanings is the most important feature of a text" (Tammelin-Laine et al., 2021, p. 472)
– "Images, mathematical symbols, multimodal texts, and technological system management are also seen as important aspects of individuals' literacy skills" (García & Mavrou, 2021, p. 129)

THEME 3: "literacy" as an instrument of power

Papers in this theme understood literacy as contested, an ideological tool that can serve to oppress or liberate, and to demarcate exclusion or belonging. This is in line with approaches that adopt critical lenses, such as (but not limited to) Critical Literacy, NLS, and social semiotics. In most cases, authors who took up this perspective aimed to demonstrate how entities with power (like funders, employers, and governmental entities) *covertly conceptualize* and *overtly utilize* literacy as a "gatekeeper" (Cooke in Simpson, Sunderland & Cook, 2008, p. 29) by tying literacy development to particular social and economic benefits, such as access to legal residency, to ESOL courses, and to employment. One author, Kaiper-Marquez (2020), showed some of the outcomes when language learners internalize broader social messages surrounding gatekeeping what "counts" as literacy.

This theme was more complicated to quantify because many (perhaps all?) LESLLA papers could be described as working for justice in some fashion, and some authors may have had these ends in mind, despite not stating so overtly. Some papers that explicitly examined issues of literacy and power included:
–Simpson, Sunderland and Cooke (2008) problematized the shift toward privatization of literacy courses and funding by the business sector and, by extension, employment-focused literacies in the UK.
– Kurvers, van de Craats and Boon (2013) outlined government policies that tie "integration" to "literacy" in the Netherlands.
– Kaiper-Marquez's (2020) study with female domestic workers in South Africa found that study participants defined literacy as an English-only practice; their abilities to read and write in their mother tongues did not "count" as literacy to them (p. 116).

Discussion

The data above demonstrate that, unsurprisingly, LESLLA authors have literacy in mind as they go about their work: it was more common for papers in the corpus to define or conceptualize of literacy in some way (85.7% of papers), than not to do so (14.3% of papers). It was also more common for papers to *imply* a definition than to state one *explicitly* and, when

comparing genres, Pedagogical/Practice/Program papers were less likely than Empirical/Research papers to provide an explicit definition.

The study also shows that LESLLA proceedings papers 2006-2020 took up theoretical stances surrounding literacy that mirror those of contiguous fields. This is also unsurprising, considering the ways that understandings of literacy have shifted and developed in the disciplines that inform LESLLA, in particular education, literacy, psychology, and linguistics. While some scholars outside of LESLLA disagree forcefully about the definitions and nature of literacy, such disagreements are not a foregone conclusion (Davidson, 2010). Some LESLLA scholars find in-between theoretical spaces that allow them to draw upon multiple definitions of literacy, as in the case of Minuz and Kurvers (2021) who – referencing cognitive theories of literacy and social practice theories of literacy – wrote, "We share the position of those who consider the two approaches complementary and not antithetical, two non-exclusive perspectives from which to look at literacy and literacy learning/teaching…" (p. 461).

The stance of Minuz and Kurvers (2021) appears to mirror the finding that the theme "decoding and encoding print" was frequently accompanied by another theme. For instance, a number of papers in the corpus utilized the terms "illiterate/literate/nonliterate" – which can indicate a print-based, 'literacy-means-reading-and-writing' orientation – and at the same time, the papers explored complex multimodal literacies, which tend to be associated with multiliteracies perspectives. This seems to indicate that some LESLLAers' definitions or conceptualizations of literacy overlap theoretical boundaries that remain tightly guarded in some other scholarly spaces. In other words, some LESLLAers may take an eclectic approach to understanding literacy, without saying so explicitly and perhaps without awareness of their own eclecticism.

Finally, a gap in LESLLA research emerged: few papers shared LESLLA learners' perspectives, and fewer made these the main focus of their inquiry. I draw readers' attention to the following exceptions: Drijkoningen (2015), Gonzalves (2012), Kaiper-Marquez (2020), Love and Kotai (2015), Spotti (2021), Vogl (2019), Wall (2018), and Williams and Chapman (2007), and I echo Gonzalves's (2012) appeal for additional scholarship in this area: "…we must weave the opinions of the students themselves into our practice. Without their perspective, their definitions and their reality, our research is not complete" (p. 105).

Limitations of the study

First, when reviewing these data, it is important to remember that, until the 2019 Pittsburgh proceedings, the principal editors of proceedings were the people who hosted the symposium. There was no standard expectation for how proceedings would be produced, and the call for papers, reviewer rubrics, and other infrastructure helpful for producing proceedings was sometimes passed down from one symposium host/editor to another, or sometimes created from scratch. In other words, as expectations surrounding publishing in LESLLA proceedings shifted from year to year (sometimes in minor ways, sometimes in more significant ways), it is possible that the nature of papers produced also shifted, for instance, whether authors were asked to give greater or less attention to defining core concepts in their papers. Examining any broader shifts from year to year are beyond the scope of this investigation.

Second, although conducting analysis with graduate research assistants was useful in honing codes and themes, I believe the paper would be strengthened if it included the insights of multiple LESLLA scholars, in particular an international team representing diverse theoretical orientations.

Third, although the corpus for this study was large – 196 papers totaling over 2,000 pages – there are multiple LESLLA perspectives missing. Some LESLLA symposium *presentations* never make it to *publication* in the proceedings, and I wondered if this is more common for teachers and other practitioners for whom publication is not a professional requirement. Similarly, the number of LESLLA-oriented academic articles and presentations taking place outside of the LESLLA symposium is growing; we especially see an increase in LESLLA-focused theses and dissertations. To gain more well-rounded insight into LESLLA perspectives on literacy, or any other LESLLA issue, inclusion of publications outside of the LESLLA proceedings could be useful.

Conclusion

I would like to encourage each of us as LESLLA stakeholders to consider making explicit to ourselves the definitions and conceptualizations we hold of literacy – for those who have not yet done so and, of course, many LESLLAers already have. These definitions and conceptualizations form fundamental theoretical lenses through which we each plan instruction, choose curriculum, assess learner competencies, determine what questions to ask in our research, choose data collection and analysis procedures, report findings, advocate for learners and teachers, and more. As with any theoretical lens, we are constrained by what the lens brings into focus and, importantly, what the lens leaves blurry or entirely unavailable for us to perceive. So, as each of us reflects on how we conceptualize literacy – that is, what theoretical lenses each of us is looking through as we go about literacy-related work – I also encourage us to think about what eludes our perception: what might you or I be leaving out of the picture as we teach, assess, research, publish, and advocate?

Relatedly, I encourage those of us who are LESLLA presenters and authors to consider whether our individual and co-authored papers[2] should make explicit to audiences what our theoretical lenses surrounding literacy are, and what we are leaving unexamined by taking up the lenses we do. I do not intend to suggest that every LESLLA paper should include definitions and conceptualizations of literacy. (My own co-authored LESLLA papers do not and, if given the chance, I would only go back and change one.) Rather, I am encouraging us to examine the content of our own papers and reflect on the following questions:

1. Does my topic call for the inclusion of language surrounding my theory or theories of literacy?
2. If so, what theory (or theories) does my paper's content point to?

An example may be useful for the second question. In the data presented above, we saw that papers in Theme 1 ("decoding and encoding print") were likely to include "additional themes, or allusions to additional themes," (see above). For instance, a teacher or scholar may primarily understand literacy as "cracking the code" of reading and writing, but the data or pedagogical practices they share in their paper might include issues surrounding how LESLLA learners make sense of online assessments. In such a case, their paper is not only about decoding and encoding print, but also about multimodal and digital literacies – and such phenomena are well described by New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies, as explained above. The imaginary teacher or

[2]For space and clarity, I will follow the convention of most academic conferences, here: by "paper," I mean both "oral conference presentations" and "published papers." Similarly, "audience" refers to those who hear oral presentations and those who read published papers.

scholar in this example is likely to arrive at a more complete and nuanced understanding of their data or pedagogical practices, and explain those understandings to their audience more clearly, if their theories (or definitions/conceptualizations of literacy) align with their data and practices.

Additionally, I encourage LESLLAers to respond to the research gap described above, specifically, a lack of learner perspectives. It is worth exploring how LESLLA learners describe and explain their experiences of "literacy" in order to shed light on the emic theories they have developed and are bringing to their classrooms and lives. Learner insights are likely to enrich our understandings of literacy not only within LESLLA contexts, but in other educational contexts, as well.

In conclusion, I hope our individual reflections surrounding "literacy," and any resulting shifts in our research or pedagogical practices, will refine and strengthen our collective understandings of literacy, particularly within the unique contexts of LESLLA. The rich diversity and complexity inherent in LESLLA learning and teaching hold great potential to make valuable contributions to understandings of literacy in fields outside of LESLLA, as well.

References

Aberdeen, T., & Johnson, E. (2015). Determining What LESLLA Learners Want to Do in Class: A Principled Approach to Needs Assessment. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *9*(1), 92–111. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8022510

Altherr Flores, J. (2020). Social semiotics and literacy: How refugee-background adult second language learners with emerging literacy make meaning in multimodal assessment texts. [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Arizona]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://repository.arizona.edu/bitstream/handle/10150/642201/azu_etd_18201_sip1_m.pdf?sequence=1

Altherr Flores, J. A. (2017). Social Semiotics and Multimodal Assessment of L2 Adult Emergent Readers from Refugee Backgrounds. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *12*(1), 9–31. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8035875

Alvermann, D.E., Unrau, N.J., & Ruddell, R.B. (Eds.). (2013). *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (6th ed.). International Reading Association.

Arnove, R. F. & Graff, H. (Eds.). (1987). *National literacy campaigns and movements: Historical and comparative perspectives*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315125077

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. Routledge.

Bucca, A. G., & Melluso, F. (2021). Language and Hospitality. The Function of Language in Shaping a Welcoming Setting. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *14*(1), 399–409. Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6266

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations for social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Allen and Unwin.

Davidson, K. (2010). The integration of cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development: Why? How?. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *56*(3).

Dee, T., & Jacob, B.A. (Fall 2010). The impact of No Child Left Behind on students, teachers, and schools. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (pp. 149-207). https://www.jstor.org/stable/41012846

Drijkoningen, J. (2015). Migrant Parents and Their Views on Language and Parental Involvement: The Impact of an Embedded Language Course. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *10*(1), 53–68. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8024369

Drisko, J. W., & Maschi, T. (2016). *Content analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.

Chao Garcia, J., & Mavrou, I. (2021). Acquisition of Writing Skills by Adult Migrant Learners of Spanish . *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *14*(1), 127–149. Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6253

Gee, J. (2015). The New Literacy Studies. In J. Roswell and K. Pahl (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of literacy studies* (pp. 35-48). Routledge.

Gonzalves, L. (2012). "We Want to Depend On Us": Yemeni Women Name Success. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *7*(1), 92–109. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8019537

Goodwin, A. & Jimenez, R. (Eds.) (2021). Special Issue: The Science of Reading: Supports, critiques, and questions. *Reading Research Quarterly, 56*(S1).

Goswami, U. (2008). Reading, complexity and the brain. *Literacy, 42*(2), 67-74.

Holmes, A.G.D. (2020). Researcher positionality - A consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research: A new researcher guide. *International Journal of Education, 8*(4), 1-10.

Kaiper-Marquez, A. (2020). Education and Literacy as Metonyms for English: Adult Basic Education and Domestic Workers in South Africa. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *15*(1), 108–125. Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6166

Kim J. S. (2008). Research and the reading wars. In Hess F. M. (Ed.), *When research matters: How scholarship influences education policy* (pp. 89–111). Harvard Education Press.

Kress,G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.

Kurvers, J., Van de Craats, I., & Boon, D. (2013). Consequences of the Dutch Integration Policy: Literacy as Entrance Criterion. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *8*(1), 145–163. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8022425

LESLLA (Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults), (n.d.) *Vision.* https://www.leslla.org/our-vision

Love, S., & Kotai, D. (2015). The Invisible Learners in the Classroom: Macrolevel Politics and Microlevel Experiences of LESLLA in Italy. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *9*(1), 30–49. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8022459

Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational notes, *Theory Into Practice 51*(1), 4-11.

Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis: theoretical foundation, basic procedures and software solution*. Self-published. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-395173

Minuz, F., & Kurvers, J. (2021). LASLLIAM. A European Reference Guide for LESLLA Learners. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings, 14*(1), 453–470. Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6269

New London Group (1995). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard educational review, 66*(1), 60-92.

Pearson, P. D. (1976). A psycholinguistic model of reading. *Language Arts, 53*(3), 309-314.

Pearson, P. D. (2004). The reading wars. *Educational Policy*, 18, 216–252.
Penton Herrera, L. J. (2020). Teaching Spanish Literacy to Adult Latinx Learners: Exploring Interest, Impact, and Sustainability. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *15*(1), 62–85. Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6164
Petree, R. (2012). Pragmatics-Based Lessons for Low-Level Adult ELLs. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *7*(1), 235–250. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8019667
Purcell-Gates, V. (Ed.). (2010). *Cultural practices of literacy: Case studies of language, literacy, social practice, and power*. Routledge.
Reder, S., Vanek, J., & Spruck Wrigley, H. (2012). Supporting Digital Literacy Development in LESLLA Learners. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *7*(1), 47–66. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8019495
Rocca, L., Minuz, F., & Borri, A. (2017). Syllabus and Descriptors for Illiterate, Semi-Literate and Literate Users. From Illiteracy to A1 Level. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *12*(1), 207–217. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8059556
Schramm, K., & Feick, D. (2011). Video-Based Teacher Education Materials for German-as-a-Second-Language Literacy Teachers. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *6*(1), 89–102. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8004280
Simpson, J. (2007). Adult ESOL in England: Policy, Practice, and Research. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *2*(1), 197–212. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7996858
Simpson, J., Sunderland, H., & Cooke, M. (2008). Adult ESOL in the UK: Perspectives on Policy, Practice and Research. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *3*(1), 25–31. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8000707
Spotti, M. (2021). L2 learning and togetherness through infrastructures of globalization: exploring the role of socio-technological platforms in conditions of asylum seeking. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *14*(1), 51–67. Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6249
Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
Strube, S. (2007). Teaching, Learning, and Speaking: Observation and Assessing Oral Language Production of the Non-literate Adult Learner in the Second Language Classroom. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *2*(1), 227–241. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8000678
Tammelin-Laine, T., Bogdanoff, M., Vaarala, H., Mustonen, S., & Karkkainen, K. (2021). "Getting a Grip on Basic Skills". Toward Professional Development of LESLLA Teachers. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *14*(1), 471–488. Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6270
UNESCO (n.d.). *Literacy*. https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy
van de Craats, I., Kurvers, J., & Young-Scholten, M. (2006). Research on Low-educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *1*(1), 7–23. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7625232
van Hout (Ed.), R. (2006). Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition: Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *1*(1). Retrieved from https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/article/view/6438
van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics*. Routledge.

Vink, L. (2017). In School, but Not in Education- LESLLA (A) Learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL) in the Context Secondary Schools in the UK. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *12*(1), 251–261. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8059639

Vogl, L. (2019). Indigenous Knowledge and Literacy Acquisition: A Qualitative Study of Low-Literate Elder Refugees' Educational Backgrounds and Cultural Dissonance. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *13*(1), 155–169. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8104765

Wall, T. (2019). Impact of Language and L1 Literacy on Settlement in Canada. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *13*(1), 170–187. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8104770

Williams, A., & Chapman, L. (2008). Meeting Diverse Needs: Content-Based Language Teaching and Settlement Needs for Low Literacy Adult ESL Immigrants. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, *3*(1), 125–136. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8000830