

An Ethnographic Perspective on Literacy Inequalities: The Power to Name and Define

UEA International Conference on Literacy Inequalities Sept 2009

Brian V Street (King's College London)

Literacy statistics are used as indicators of social inequality (GMR, 2006; Maddox, 2008) and as a basis for policy in improving rights, educational attainment etc. (Nussbaum, 2006). However, recent work on literacy from an ethnographic perspective has questioned the international categorisation of a single uniform thing from which consequences can be drawn and statistics measured and has instead focused on local meanings and cultural variations in what counts as 'literacy' (Street, 2001). From this perspective different literacy practices may be seen as symptomatic of broader inequalities in society rather than as causes. And as Scribner and Cole argued back in 1980, following research amongst Vai peoples in Liberia, it is often education rather than literacy that should be the focus when ascribing causes and consequences of inequality. In this larger context of competing policy claims and definitions, rooted in contested research perspectives, I ask what contribution does an ethnographic perspective on literacy practices have to offer to understanding of 'inequalities'? I will argue that there are two major contributions: 1) that ethnographic perspectives and an understanding of literacy practices as multiple and culturally varied, can help avoid simplistic and often ethnocentric claims regarding the consequences of literacy based on one-dimensional and culturally narrow categories and definitions 2) that an ethnographic perspective can sensitise us to the ways in which the power to name and define is a crucial component of inequality so that it may be the definitions themselves (eg of 'illiterates') that serve to 'marginalise' and disempower. I will elaborate on these two 'contributions', with reference both to theoretical debates in the field in recent years and to examples of practice in literacy programmes in different international contexts.