

## Introduction to literacy materials

### **What is meant by literacy**

We will be using the term literacy very broadly here to incorporate signs, language, reading, writing, spelling, texting, comprehension, numeracy and IT. Literacy involves the use of a symbol system to represent meaning and is based on activities that people engage in naturally, such as talking and thinking. Literacy is a recent tool in our history and the vast majority of human beings in time lived without it. Unlike learning to talk and think – which children learn to do naturally without any formal teaching – literacy skills have to be taught.

### **Teaching literacy**

Literacy is taught in a formal way in schools, and particularly in primary schools. The programme is systematic and curriculum-centred and the children are not usually consulted about what or how they learn. The comprehensive curriculum moves in a series of graduated stages, from introducing the nature of print, through developing sight vocabulary, explaining the alphabetic code, developing decoding and encoding skills, giving techniques for word study, building vocabulary, attending to punctuation, focusing on meaning and comprehension and addressing issues of style. Adult literacy teaching does not start with a curriculum but with what the learner wants to learn, and is therefore a more learner-centred and unsystematic approach. Youthreach participants have features in common with both groups: with school students in that they are attending a centre on a full time basis usually for a couple of years and so have time and a learning context available to them; and with adults in their need to be actively engaged and motivated. Elements of both approaches can therefore be borrowed to good effect when working with these young learners.

### **Literacy: communication and power**

Literacy skills are not essential for communication. In practice, most interaction between people takes place in immediate settings and uses gesture, facial expression and oral language to convey meaning. There are also very effective ways of communicating across distances of time and space that do not require written language per se but means of communication or media such as phones, television, radio, art, music and film. In a contemporary industrialised society like our own however, access to information, knowledge and ideas is largely through media using forms of written language – directories, manuals, newspapers, books, internet, emails. The ability to use these media – to write as well as to read – gives a person a way of expressing their ideas with the possibility of influencing and persuading others. In a knowledge society like ours these skills bestow economic, social and political advantage. That is why the aim must be to help learners become as good at literacy as possible.

**Literacy: motivation and shame**

Acquiring literacy skills though is hard work and this will only be done if the motivation is strong enough. Past experiences of failure and shame may make the learner anxious to avoid paying attention to reading or writing in any formal way and reluctant to even try to improve their skills. For this reason the way literacy teaching is approached in the centre should be based on what the learner wants to learn and to be done in a way that is effective while building confidence and encouraging effort. It may be useful to challenge the belief of a learner that their failure to acquire literacy skills in the past was due to a lack of intelligence rather than to poor attendance or a specific learning difficulty.

**Specific learning difficulties and literacy**

There are a number of specific learning difficulties that can make the acquisition of literacy skills more difficult. These can be distinguished from a general learning or intellectual disability which is likely to interfere with comprehension but which does not necessarily impinge on learning the mechanics of reading and writing.

A difficulty with focusing attention and concentrating, as in ADHD, hinders the consideration of the detail within words that is needed for reading and spelling accuracy. Specific speech and language disorders which affect pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary can make written language harder to access. Dyslexia frequently hampers the processing of phonology (the sounds within words). Dyspraxia can interfere with perception of shape and position and with the mechanics of writing. While Asperger's syndrome usually has no effect on the decoding and encoding of written language it may cause difficulties with interpretation and comprehension of what is read.

**Purpose of literacy section**

It is hoped that the literacy section of the website will be a resource to staff in centres by providing a range of information and materials. The focus will be on the provision of practical ideas and resources and on the sharing of experiences between centres. We invite you to tell us what approaches or products you have found to be helpful or effective in your own work.

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