What's "new" in New Literacy Studies?
Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice

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The Context and Background

A rich vein of articles and books has recently addressed some critical issues in the field of New Literacy Studies, both in terms of theoretical perspectives and of their implications in educational and policy contexts. I address some of these critiques as a way of both updating NLS and of addressing its implications for practice.

What has come to be termed the "New Literacy Studies" (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1996) represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985). This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power. NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant.

To address these issues ethnographically, literacy researchers have constructed a conceptual apparatus that both coins some new terms and gives new meanings to some old ones. My own work, for instance, begins with the notion of multiple literacies, which makes a distinction between "autonomous" and "ideological" models of literacy (Street, 1985) and develops a distinction between literacy events and literacy practices (Street, 1988). The standard view in many fields, from schooling to development programs, works from the assumption that literacy in itself--autonomously--will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. Introducing literacy to poor, "illiterate" people, villages, urban youth etc. will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their "illiteracy" in the first place. I refer to this as an "autonomous" model of literacy. The model, I suggest, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have these benign effects. Research in NLS challenges this view and suggests that in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions. The autonomous approach is simply imposing western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures or within a country those of one class or cultural group onto others.

The alternative, ideological model of literacy, offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model--it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people

address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. It is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always "ideological", they are always rooted in a particular world-view and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others (Gee, 1991; Besnier & Street, 1994). The argument about social literacies (Street, 1995) suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that "literacy" can be "given" neutrally and then its "social" effects only experienced afterwards.

It follows from this distinction that researchers in NLS employing an "ideological" model of literacy would find it problematic to simply use the term "literacy" as their unit or object of study. Literacy comes already loaded with ideological and policy pre-suppositions that make it hard to do ethnographic studies of the variety of literacies across contexts. So we have found it helpful to develop alternative terms. I have developed a working distinction between "literacy events" and "literacy practices" (Street, 1988) that I suggest is helpful for both research and in teaching situations. Barton (1994) notes that the term literacy events derived from the sociolinguistic idea of speech events. It was first used in relation to literacy by A.B. Anderson et. al. (1980), who defined it as an occasion during which a person "attempts to comprehend graphic signs" (pp. 59-65). Shirley Brice Heath, further characterized a "literacy event" as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes" (Heath, 1982, p. 93). I have employed the phrase "literacy practices" (Street, 1984, p. 1) as a means of focusing upon "social practices and conceptions of reading and writing", although I later elaborated the term to take into account both "events" in Heath's sense and of the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (Street, 1988). David Barton, in an introduction to his edited volume on Writing in the Community (Barton & Ivanic, 1991, p.1) attempted to clarify these debates about literacy events and literacy practices and in a later collaborative study of everyday literacies in Lancaster, England, Barton and Hamilton begin their account with further refinements of the two phrases (1998, p. 6). Baynham (1995) entitled his book Literacy Practices: investigating literacy in social contexts. Similarly Prinsloo and Breier's volume on The Social Uses of Literacy (1996), which is a series of case studies of literacy in South Africa, used the concept of "events", but then extended it to "practices", by describing the everyday uses and meanings of literacy amongst, for instance, urban taxi drivers, struggle activists in settlements, rural workers using diagrams to build carts and those involved in providing election materials for mainly non-literate voters. The concept of literacy practices in these and other contexts not only attempts to handle the events and the patterns of activity around literacy events, but to link them to something broader of a cultural and social kind.

Recently, I have further elaborated the distinction with respect to work on literacies and

multilingualism, in an important edited volume by Martin-Jones and Jones (2000). As part of that broadening, for instance, I noted that we bring to literacy event concepts and social models regarding what the nature of the event is and makes it work, and give it meaning. Literacy practices, then, refer to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts. A key issue, at both a methodological and an empirical level, then, is how we can characterize the shift from observing literacy events to conceptualizing literacy practices.

A wealth of "ethnographies of literacy" has emerged deploying and developing these and other key concepts in a variety of international contexts, including the U.K. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998); the U.S.A. (Collins, 1995; Heath, 1983); South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996); Iran (Street, 1986); India (Mukherjee and Vasanta, 2003);
 Mexico (Kalman, 1999); South America (Aikman, 1999); and multiple development contexts (Street, 2001). The strength and significance of the approach and the considerable literature it has generated is attested by a recent spate of critical accounts that have addressed some of the problems raised by it both in general theoretical terms and, more specifically, for practice in educational contexts. I firstly summarize some of the theoretical critiques and then turn to the applications to policy and practice that they entail.

Theoretical Concerns
 In terms of theory, Brandt & Clinton (2002) have recently commented on "the limits of the local" apparent in many NLS studies. They argue that NLS ought to be more prepared to take account of the relatively "autonomous" features of literacy without succumbing to the autonomous model with its well documented flaws. This would involve, for instance, recognizing the extent to which literacy does often come to "local" situations from outside and brings with it both skills and meanings that are larger than the emic perspective favored by NLS can always detect. Whilst acknowledging the value of the social practice approach, they:

> wonder if the new paradigm sometimes veers too far in a reactive direction, exaggerating the power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes. Literacy practices are not typically invented by their practitioners. Nor are they independently chosen or sustained by them. Literacy in use more often than not serves multiple interests, incorporating individual agents and their locales into larger enterprises that play out away from the immediate scene. (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 1)

They also point out the important and powerful role of consolidating technologies that can destabilize the functions, uses, values and meanings of literacy anywhere. These technologies generally originate outside of the local context; they cannot be undertood simply in terms of local practices. Whilst the field has learned much from the recent turn to "local literacies", they fear that "something [might] be lost when we ascribe to local contexts responses to pressures that originate in distant decisions, especially when seemingly local appropriations of literacy may in fact be culminations of literate designs originating elsewhere" (p.2).

I would agree with most of Brandt & Clinton's characterization here of the relationship

between the local and the "distant" and indeed it is the focus on this relationship, rather than on one or other of the sites, that characterizes the best of NLS. Brandt & Clinton's account here provides a helpful way of characterizing the local/ global debate in which literacy practices play a central role. But, I would want to distinguish between agreeing with their caveat about overemphasizing "the local" and labeling the "distant" as more "autonomous". The "distant" literacies to which Brandt & Clinton refer are also always ideological and to term them autonomous might be to concede too much to their neutralist claims.

Brandt & Clinton's concern with the overemphasis on the local in some NLS accounts; their recognition that for many people the literacies they engage with come from elsewhere and are not self invented; and that there is more going on in a local literacy than "just local practice", are all important caveats to deter NLS from over emphasizing or romanticizing the local, as it has been accused of doing (cf response by Street to McCabe, 1995 in Prinsloo & Breier, 1996). But this important debate can be continued without resorting to terming "distant" literacies as "autonomous"--as Brandt& Clinton imply in their attempt to address certain "autonomous" aspects of literacy without appealing to the "autonomous model" of literacy. The features of distant literacies are actually no more autonomous than those of local literacies, or indeed than any literacy practices: their distantness, their relative power over local literacies and their "non-invented" character as far as local users are concerned, do not make them "autonomous", only "distant", "new", or hegemonic. To study such processes we need a framework and conceptual tools that can characterize the relation between local and "distant". The question raised in the early NLS work concerning how we can characterize the shift from observing literacy events to conceptualizing literacy practices does, I think, provide both a methodological and empirical way of dealing with this relation and thereby taking account of Brandt and Clinton's concern with the "limits of the local".

NLS practitioners might also take issue with the apparent suggestion that distant literacies come to local contexts with their force and meaning intact. As Kulick & Stroud (1993) indicated a decade ago in their study of new literacy practices brought by missionaries to New Guinea, local peoples more often "take hold" of these new practices and adapt them to local circumstances. The result of local-global encounters around literacy is always a new hybrid rather than a single essentialized version of either. It is these hybrid literacy practices that NLS focuses upon rather than either romanticizing the local or conceding the dominant privileging of the supposed "global". As we shall see when we discuss practical applications of NLS across educational contexts, it is the recognition of this hybridity that lies at the heart of an NLS approach to literacy acquisition regarding the relationship between local literacy practices and those of the school.

Collins and Blot (2002) are similarly concerned that, whilst NLS has generated a powerful series of ethnographies of literacy, there is a danger of simply piling up more descriptions of local literacies without addressing general questions of both theory and practice. In exploring why dominant stereotypes regarding literacy are so flawed, such as the notions of a great divide between oral and literate, and the now challenged assumptions of the autonomous model, they invoke NLS, but then want to take account of its limitations and to extend beyond them:

Such understanding also has a more general intellectual value for it forces us to explore why historical and ethnographic cases are necessary but insufficient for rethinking inherited viewpoints…although ethnographic scholarship has demonstrated the pluralities of literacies, their context--boundness, it still has also to account for general tendencies that hold across diverse case studies. (pp. 7-8).

They argue, then, for "a way out of the universalist/particularist impasse" which had troubled Brandt as we saw above, "by attending closely to issues of text, power and identity". These are issues that are at the heart of current developments in NLS, from Bartlett and Holland's concern with identities in practice (see below), to Street's attention to literacy and power in the ideological model and Maybin's refinement of Bakhtin's "intertextuality" with respect to literacy practices. Writing in Situated Literacies (2000), Maybin, also links NLS to wider strands of social-critical work, offering a way of linking Foucauldian notions of Discourse, Bakhtinian notions of intertextuality and work in Critical Discourse Analysis with the recognition from NLS of "the articulation of different discourses [as] centrally and dynamically interwoven in people's everyday literacy activities". Gee (2000), in the same Situated Literacies volume, also located the "situated" approach to literacies in relation to broader movements towards a "social turn" which he saw as a challenge to behaviorism and individualism--a challenge which NLS has also pursued. Janks (2000), located in South Africa, likewise links literacy studies to broader social theory, invoking the concepts of "Domination, Access, Diversity and Design" as a means of synthesizing the various strands of critical literacy education. Freebody, writing from Australia, but like Janks taking a broad theoretical and international view, likewise writes of the relationship between NLS and "critical literacy", an approach to the acquisition and use of reading and writing in educational contexts that takes account of relations of power and domination (Freebody, forthcoming).

Bartlett & Holland (2002) likewise link NLS to broader social theory. They propose an expanded conception of the space of literacy practices, drawing upon innovations in the cultural school of psychology, sociocultural history and social practice theory. In locating literacy theory within these broader debates in social theory, they build, especially, on the concern of Bourdieu to characterize the relationship between social structures (history brought to the present in institutions) and "habitus" (history brought to the present in person) and suggest ways in which NLS can adapt this approach:

> Bourdieu's theory suggests that we can analyze literacy events with an eye to the ways in which historical and social forces have shaped a person's linguistic habitus and thus impinges upon that person's actions in the moment (p. 6).

However, they argue that Bourdieu's theory is itself "limited by his tendency to underplay the importance of culturally produced narratives, images and other artefacts in modifying habitus" (p.x). It is here that they suggest ways of extending both Bourdieu and literacy studies by putting them together with other key concepts in their work:

We propose to strengthen a practice theoretical approach to literacy studies by specifying the space of literacy practice, examining in particular the locally operant

figured world of literacy, identities in practice, and artefacts (p. 6).

Applying their concept of "figured worlds"--"a socially produced and culturally constructed realm of interpretation"--to literacy practices, they suggest that 'a figured world of literacy might include "functional illiterates", "good readers" and "illiterates" any of which might be "invoked, animated, contested and enacted through artefacts, activities and identities in practice" (p. 6). In the world of schooled literacy in particular, scholars have noted the tendency to invoke and deploy such figurings and identities to characterize children and their attainment--Holland and Bartlett enable us to see such characterizations as themselves part of what we should be taking into account when we try to understand literacy practices in context: we should be wary of taking them at face value, a skepticism that will prove useful as we move towards applying social literacy theory to education in general and schooling in particular.

Pahl (2002a and b) has built upon Holland and Bartlett's use of habitus in relation to figured worlds in order to help her describe the multi modal practices of young children at home in her research on London families. Drawing also upon Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) for multi-modality and Street 1988; 1995) for literacy practices, she describes the ways in which young children take from and adapt family narratives as they do drawings, create three dimensional objects and write graffiti on walls. The work of figuring these family worlds is done through a combination of oral, visual and written artefacts through which over time key themes--such as a family's connection with the railways in India or with a farm in Wales--become sedimented and persistent. Through these narratives, embedded in material and linguistic form, the identity of family members is constructed and adapted over time. Again, there is a pedagogic message regarding how schools might recognize and build upon such home practices, but there is also an important theoretical contribution to NLS, namely that Pahl shows how any account of literacy practices needs to be contextualized within other communicative modes. Also, like Bartlett & Holland (2002) and Collins (1995), she develops a sophisticated analysis of how such practices relate to concepts of textuality, figured worlds, identity and power.

Another update and extension of NLS is to be found in Hornberger's edited volume (2002) in which authors attempt to apply her conception of the "continua of biliteracy" to actual uses of reading and writing in different multilingual settings: biliteracy is defined as "any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing" and is described in terms of four nested sets of intersecting continua characterizing the contexts, media, content, and development of biliteracy. A number of the authors, as in the Martin-Jones & Jones (2001) book, draw out the links of NLS to such multilingual settings.

Applications to Education
The next stage of work in this area is to move beyond these theoretical critiques and to develop positive proposals for interventions in teaching, curriculum, measurement criteria, and teacher education in both the formal and informal sectors, based upon these principles. It will be at this stage that the theoretical perspectives brought together in the "New Literacy Studies" will face their sternest test: that of their practical applications to mainstream education. Hull and Schultz (2001) have been amongst the first researchers

to directly apply insights from NLS to educational practice and policy. They build upon the foundational descriptions of out-of-school literacy events and practices developed within NLS, to return the gaze back to the relations between in and out of school, so that NLS is not seen simply as "anti school" or interested only in small scale or "local" literacies of resistance. They especially want to use the understandings of children's emerging experiences with literacy in their own cultural milieus to address broader educational questions about learning of literacy and of switching between the literacy practices required in different contexts. They

> are troubled by a tendency…to build and reify a great divide between in school and out of school and that sometimes this dichotomy relegates all good things to out-of-school contexts and everything repressive to school. Sometimes it dismisses the engagement of children with non-school learning as merely frivolous or remedial or incidental (Hull & Schultz, 2002; p. 3).

In contrast to this approach and drawing strongly on work in NLS, they argue for "overlap or complementarity or perhaps a respectful division of labor". They cite Dewey's argument that there is much we can learn about successful pedagogies and curricula by foregrounding the relationship between formal education and ordinary life.

From the standpoint of the child" he observed, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside of the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school (Dewey, 1899/ 1998; pp. 76-78).

But how are we to know about the experiences of the child outside of school? Many teachers express anxiety that the children in their classes may come from a wide variety of backgrounds and it is impossible to know them all. Hull & Schultz (2002) respond by invoking the work of researchers "who have made important contributions to understanding literacy learning through ethnographic or field-based studies in homes, community organizations and after-school programs" (p. 14). Their edited volume consists of accounts of such research in a variety of settings. They are aware of the criticism of such approaches that might over-emphasize the "local" or even "romanticize out-of-school contexts" and aim instead to "acknowledge the complexities, tensions and opportunities" that are found there. Nor is their aim to provide an exhaustive account of such contexts--teachers are right to argue that this cannot all be covered. Instead, they aim to provide us all, but especially those responsible for the education of children, with understanding of the principles underlying such variation and with help in listening to and appreciating what it is that children bring from home and community experience. Indeed, the book consists of both articles about such experience and comments by teachers and teacher educators on their significance for learning. Here, then, NLS meets educational practice in ways that begin to fulfill the potential of the approach, but through dialogue rather than simply an imposition of researchers' agendas on educators.

In Australia the work of Peter Freebody and Allan Luke, provide powerful examples of the application of new theoretical perspectives on literacy, including NLS, to education, especially work on curriculum and assessment in Queensland (cf Luke, and Carrington 2002; Luke and Freebody 2002.

In a forthcoming edited volume (Street, forthcoming) a number of authors from a variety of international contexts likewise take on this challenge and attempt to follow through such practical applications of the NLS approach. As with Hull & Schultz's work, the authors are conscious of the links between theoretical debate and the work of teachers in school addressing literacy issues. The collection of case studies ranges from formal education, including elementary, secondary and higher education and informal sectors such as community associations, international development programs and workplace literacies. Across these educational contexts, the authors are concerned not just to apply the general principles of NLS but with offering practical critiques of its application that force us to refine the original conceptualization: the volume, then, is intended to be not a static "application" of theory to practice, but a dynamic dialogue between the two. In attempting to work through the implications of these approaches for different sectors of education, the authors find limitations and problems in some NLS approaches--such as the "limits of the local" in educational as well as theoretical terms--that require them to go back to the underpinning conceptual apparatus. Theory as well as practice is subject to the critical perspective being adopted there and researchers and practitioners will have to either adapt or even reject parts of NLS as it engages with such new tasks.

Such a challenge is raised by current research by Baker, Street and Tomlin (2002) applying literacy theory to the understanding of numeracy practices in and out of school (Baker et al, 2002; Baynham & Baker, 2002). Numeracy even more than literacy has been seen as a "universal", "context free" set of skills that can be imparted across the board, irrespective of children's background experiences and prior cultural knowledge. Recent approaches to "situated learning", when allied to those from situated literacy suggest that such a "banking" model of education, as Paulo Freire termed it, is inappropriate especially in the multilingual, multicultural situations that characterize contemporary hybrid cultural contexts. The question that Street & Baker address is how far such a culturally-sensitive approach can be applied to numeracy education: can we talk of multiple numeracies and of numeracy events and practices as we do of literacy? Can we build upon cultural knowledge of number, measurement, approximation etc. in the way that Hull & Schultz and those in the Literacies across the Curriculum volume believe we can do for cultural knowledge of literacies, scripts, languages? Again, the questions being raised by NLS, when applied to new fields such as this will lead to critiques not only of current educational practice but also of the theoretical framework itself. As with the critiques by Brandt, Collins etc., NLS will be forced to adapt and change--the validity and value of its original insights and their applications to practice will be tested according to whether they can meet this challenge.

In an international context the application of NLS to both schooling and adult literacy has likewise raised new questions and faced new problems contingent on the nature of the particular context. The aim of such "applications" has not been to simply impose a pre-given template on to local work in the field but to enter a dialogue (cf Street's 2001 edited volume of essays on literacy and development in a dozen different countries for detailed examples). A telling case of such work is the Community Literacies Project in Nepal (CLPN, 2001) supported by the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID) and based in Kathmandu. CLPN provides a resource for supporting local literacy initiatives, be they women working in credit groups, Forestry User Groups, or

people setting up wall newspapers and local broadcasting. Such organizations come to CLPN for support when their members need to enhance their literacy but instead of sending them to sit in formal classes--to be "infantilized", treated like their children with desks, grade levels and demeaning assessments--the CLPN team attempt to work with them in the local context and to build upon what they already know as a way of developing what else they want to know--to create better forms for the credit group, to read and write minutes for the Forestry Users Group, to makes tape recordings for broadcast .

However, as with other "applications" of NLS (cf Rogers, 1994; Street, 2001), the local context generates it own new problems that force us to rethink and adapt the initial conceptualization. In this case, as in many development contexts, the problem arises as to whether there is a conflict between theory and policy and between the local and the needs of scale faced by administrators? The more those ethnographers explain the "complexity" of literacy practices, the more policy makers find it impossible to design programs that can take account of all that complexity. The more ethnographers demonstrate that literacy does not necessarily have the effects that the rhetoric has suggested--improved health, cognition, empowerment--the harder does it become for policymakers to persuade funders to support literacy programs. The more ethnographers focus on specific local contexts, the harder does it seem to "upscale" their projects to take account of the large numbers of people seen to be in need. So how can contemporary literacy projects bridge this apparent divide between policy and research in general and in particular between large scale needs and micro ethnographic approaches?

The Community Literacy Project Nepal aims to do precisely this. Based on a spirit of engagement between theory and practice, academic and applied concerns, it aims to make a contribution at the interface, clarifying conceptual issues, and enhancing knowledge on the one hand and aiding policy making and program building on the other (cf Rogers, 1992). The participants approach the issues in a spirit of reflective and critical enquiry, less concerned to advocate particular approaches, methodologies and theories than to extend current thinking and thereby facilitate informed local practice. Anna Robinson-Pant's book about Nepal, 'Why Eat Green Cucumbers at the Time of Dying?' Exploring the Link between Women's Literacy and Development (Unesco, 2000), which won the Unesco Literacy Prize, provides some of the answers to the worries about ethnography that some literacy campaigners might express. "Why eat green cucumbers at the time of dying?"--why take on the luxury of new literacy practices when your communicative repertoire seems already sufficient?--because, says Anna Robinson-Pant, "learning to read--like eating cucumber in rural areas--is both a luxury and a challenge when you are old" (indeed, at any age) (p. 1). Taking on reading, new readings, and new literacy practices, broadening the communicative repertoire, and challenging dominant epistemologies are continuing processes, not a one-off shift from "illiteracy" to "literacy", from dark to light, as the early approaches to literacy work would have it. There are always new things to experience and learn and life can always be enhanced--even at the time of dying!

Policy Issues
Despite the willingness of DFID to fund such imaginative approaches to literacy work

overseas, in the UK itself as in the U.S.A., the qualitative and ethnographic--style work that characterizes NLS and underpins such an approach is currently out of fashion in higher policy circles. A recent important political development in the validating and funding of research in education in general and literacy in particular has been the demand that such research conform to "scientific" standards. Key words in this approach include "Systematic Reviews", "Rigor", and "Evidence-Based Policies". In both the U.K. and U.S.A., governments and their agencies are insisting that funding will only be permitted on the basis that programs and the research on which they are based can be proven to be "scientific". A number of commissions and panels have reviewed research on literacy in this light e.g. the National Academy of Science report "Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children" (Snow, Burns, Griffin, 1998); the National Reading Panel set up by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NRP, 2000); and the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) newly formed Institute of Education Sciences plan to evaluate research as part of its web-based What Works Clearinghouse project. For instance, the Clearinghouse, founded in August 2002, aims to become a trusted, one-stop source of scientifically proven teaching practices for educators, policy makers, and the public. It will contain systematically evaluated research to help educators more easily identify scientifically proven teaching methods as required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

Academic researchers, including those active in the field of literacy, are playing a leading role in these developments. For instance, in the USA Robert Slavin, the founder of "Success for All", argued in a recent paper in Educational Researcher that: "the use of randomized experiments that transformed medicine, agriculture and technology in the 20th century is now beginning to affect educational policy" (p. x). He concludes from a survey of such research that "a focus on rigorous experiments evaluating replicable programs and practices is essential to build confidence in educational research among policymakers and educators" (Slavin, 2002, p. x). In particular, this approach suggests ways in which what is known from experimental studies of literacy acquisition can be built into programs and policies for early schooling. In the U.K., the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) has been established at the Institute for Education in London to conduct "systematic reviews" of research in designated fields and the English National Literacy Strategy was justified on similar grounds, although the use of "systematic reviews" etc. was less well developed at the initial stages. Researchers summarizing the research base for the National Literacy Strategy have since claimed that we now "know what works" in teaching initial literacy and that the task is simply to apply this in schooling (Beard, 2000; Harrison, 2002).

Critiques of these approaches have come from a number of well-known qualitative researchers in the literacy field (Gee, 2002; Coles, 2001; Goodman, 2001; Hamersley, 2001; Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002). A special issue of Educational Researcher (Vol. 31, no. 8, Nov 2002) was devoted to the question of "Scientific Research in Education" and a special edition of the Journal of Teacher Education was devoted to teacher preparation research (Journal of Teacher Education 53 (3): May-Jun 2002; see refs below). In the UK the British Educational Research Journal likewise published a number of articles on Systematic Reviews in its Nov 2001 issue (Vol. 27, No. 5, 2001). Hamersley, for instance, writing in that issue, links the trend to "systematic reviews" to a resurgence of positivist epistemology as an alternative to "narrative" ("subjective", qualitative, interpretive?)

reviews. Hamersley comments: "What is curious about the dual (both doing research and producing research reviews) application of the positivist model to the task of reviewing is that it takes little or no account of the considerable amount of criticism that has been made of that model since at least the middle of the twentieth century" (Hamersley, 2001, p. 545). Adam Lefstein (2003) provides a helpful survey of much of this literature, invoking the philosophical terms "techne" and "phronesis" to analyze the difference between "scientific technical rationality" and "practical reason" as they are applied to education and specifically to the UK Literacy Strategy.

In the U.S. likewise qualitative researchers in the literacy field have addressed both the wider epistemological assumptions underpinning the "scientific" move and the specific issues regarding acquisition of reading that are often the focus of such approaches. Ken Goodman has set up an email network (see refs) that circulates details of new initiatives, e.g. the What Works Clearinghouse project, and offer scathing critiques. Joanne Larson's wittily titled Literacy as Snake Oil (2001) has a number of sharp criticisms of the way the Reading Panels have been set up, run and then invoked for policy purposes. The authors demonstrate some of the problems with the "scientific" approach--its inability to engage with the nuances of cultural meanings, the variation in uses of literacy across contexts and the problems already highlighted with the autonomous model of literacy - and attempt to construct more meaningful solutions. (cf , 2001; Coles, 2001). Similarly, critics in a special issue of Educational Researcher, berate the U.S. Dept of Education initiatives for "confusing the methods of science with the process of science" (Berliner, 2002). Erickson and Gutierrez, for example, critique the NRC Committee for taking "an evidence-based social engineering approach to educational improvement" and argue for replacing the "'white coat' notion of science…with a more complicated and realistic view of what actual scientists do" (cited in Lefstein, 2003).

All of this has considerable importance for literacy work, both in terms of the kind of research that can get funded , the kinds of procedures for reviewing research that are considered legitimate and the policy effects of that research which does get through the sieve. The wider political and ideological context of such research is itself part of what counts as engaging with literacy in theory and practice

Conclusion
The effects of these critical engagements with social theory, educational applications and policy is that New Literacy Studies is now going through a productive period of intense debate that firstly establishes and consolidates many of the earlier insights and empirical work and secondly builds a more robust and perhaps less insular field of study. A major contribution arising from the work cited here has been the attempt to appeal beyond the specific interests of ethnographers interested in the "local" in order to engage with both educationalists interested in literacy acquisition and use across educational contexts, both formal and informal, and with policy makers more generally. That practical engagement, however, will still need to be rooted in sound theoretical and conceptual understanding if the teaching and studying of literacy are to avoid being simply tokens for other interests. We still, then, need to analyze and contest what counts as "literacy" (and numeracy); what literacy events and practices mean to users in different cultural and social contexts-- the original inspiration for NLS - but also what are the "limits of the local"; and, as the writers cited here indicate, how literacy relates to more general issues

of social theory regarding textuality, figured worlds, identity and power.

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