

Benchmarking Literacy and Numeracy: The Contributing Elements

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Abstract

This systematic literature review explores the intricate facets of literacy and numeracy standards, shedding light on their foundational roles, the nuanced landscape of standardized assessments, the pervasive influence of socio-economic factors, and the imperative for adapting to the evolving educational terrain. The foundational significance of literacy and numeracy is unraveled, extending beyond basic proficiency to encompass critical thinking skills crucial for academic success. Standardized assessments, while offering objectivity, present a delicate

balance, necessitating a comprehensive view that considers potential biases and limitations (Linn, 2000). Socio-economic factors emerge as powerful determinants, with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds benefiting from enhanced access to educational resources, accentuating the need for targeted interventions. Moreover, the study underscores the evolving nature of education in the 21st century, urging a recalibration of standards to embrace digital literacy and global competencies. This research calls for a nuanced, adaptive approach to literacy and numeracy standards, advocating for policies that recognize the dynamic nature of education and foster a holistic skill set. As educators, policymakers, and researchers navigate the complexities of contemporary education, a comprehensive understanding of these contributing factors is paramount for cultivating an inclusive, equitable, and effective educational landscape.

Keywords: Literacy, Numeracy, Standards, Standardized Assessments

Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the pursuit of academic excellence remains a fundamental goal for educators, policymakers, and researchers alike. Literacy and numeracy skills are pivotal cornerstones in this journey, serving as essential tools that empower individuals to navigate the complexities of contemporary society (Lerikkanen, et al., 2023). As education systems worldwide strive to meet the demands of the 21st century, the establishment and maintenance of high standards in literacy and numeracy have become increasingly crucial. The exploration of contributing factors is essential for comprehending the challenges and opportunities inherent in the quest to enhance literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Numerous scholars have emphasized the foundational role of literacy and numeracy in shaping cognitive development and fostering critical thinking skills (Adams, 1990; Duncan et al., 2007). These skills not only facilitate academic achievement but are also integral to an individual's ability to engage meaningfully in civic life and contribute effectively to the workforce (National Research Council, 2012). Consequently, understanding the factors that impact standards in literacy and numeracy is crucial for developing evidence-based interventions and policies that promote equitable access to quality education.

The current educational landscape is marked by an increasing emphasis on data-driven decision-making and accountability (Linn, 2000). Standardized assessments serve as key instruments for evaluating and benchmarking literacy and numeracy proficiency at various educational levels. This study will critically examine the role of standardized assessments in shaping educational standards, exploring their strengths, limitations, and implications for instructional practices.

Furthermore, socio-economic factors have been identified as significant determinants of literacy and numeracy outcomes (Sirin, 2005). Socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and access to educational resources all contribute to the educational experiences and opportunities available to students. This research will investigate the intricate interplay between these socio-economic factors and educational standards, shedding light on potential avenues for mitigating disparities in literacy and numeracy achievement.

It is essential to recognize the dynamic nature of education and the need for adaptive strategies that respond to the evolving demands of society. By unraveling the contributing factors to standards in literacy and numeracy, this study aspires to inform educational policies and practices that foster a more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environment for all.

Literature Review

Literacy and numeracy skills are foundational to the educational journey, serving as essential tools that empower individuals to navigate the complexities of contemporary society. The pursuit of academic excellence, particularly in the domains of literacy and numeracy, remains a central focus for educators, policymakers, and researchers. This literature review aims to explore the existing body of research that illuminates the contributing factors shaping standards in literacy and numeracy, seeking to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities within this critical educational domain.

The pivotal role of literacy and numeracy in cognitive development and critical thinking has been extensively explored in educational literature. Scholars such as Adams (1994) and Duncan et al. (2007) emphasize that these skills are not only essential for academic achievement but also integral to an individual's ability to engage meaningfully in civic life and contribute effectively to the workforce. As the global landscape becomes increasingly knowledge-based, literacy and numeracy serve as gateways to economic and social participation.

Adams (1994) asserts that literacy is a cognitive process that goes beyond the mechanics of reading and writing. It involves the ability to think critically, analyze information, and comprehend complex ideas. Similarly, numeracy skills are essential for logical reasoning and problem-solving (Duncan et al., 2007). Understanding the foundational nature of these skills is crucial for designing effective educational interventions. Literacy and numeracy contribute to the development of critical thinking skills, enabling individuals to evaluate information, make informed decisions, and solve problems effectively. These skills are not only essential for academic success but also for navigating the challenges of everyday life (Duncan et al., 2007).

Role of Standardized Assessments:

In the pursuit of high educational standards, standardized assessments play a central role in evaluating and benchmarking literacy and numeracy proficiency. However, the literature suggests a nuanced relationship between standardized assessments and educational outcomes. Standardized assessments provide a systematic and objective measure of student performance, allowing for comparisons across schools, districts, and even countries (Linn, 2000). They offer a standardized way to gauge literacy and numeracy skills, enabling educators and policymakers to identify areas of strength and weakness in the education system. Despite their advantages, standardized assessments face criticisms for their potential to perpetuate educational inequalities (Linn, 2000). Critics argue that these assessments may not capture the full spectrum of a student's abilities and may disadvantage certain demographic groups. Moreover, an overemphasis on test preparation can narrow the curriculum, focusing primarily on what is testable rather than fostering a holistic approach to education.

Socio-Economic Factors and Educational Standards:

The relationship between socio-economic factors and educational outcomes, including literacy and numeracy, has been a focal point of research. Socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and access to educational resources are identified as critical determinants that significantly influence standards in literacy and numeracy. Research by Sirin (2005) highlights the strong correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement. Students from higher SES backgrounds often have access to more educational resources, which positively impacts their literacy and numeracy outcomes. Understanding and addressing the SES achievement gap is vital for promoting equitable educational standards.

Parental involvement is another factor influencing literacy and numeracy standards. Engaged parents who actively support their children's education contribute to positive outcomes (Sirin, 2005). Effective strategies to enhance parental involvement can play a crucial role in improving educational standards. Disparities in access to educational resources, including books, technology, and extracurricular activities, contribute to variations in literacy and numeracy outcomes (Sirin, 2005). Policymakers must consider these disparities when formulating initiatives aimed at raising educational standards.

As society evolves, so too must education. The literature emphasizes the dynamic nature of educational standards and the need for adaptive strategies. The 21st-century demands a skill set that extends beyond traditional literacy and numeracy, encompassing digital literacy, critical thinking, and collaboration (National Research Council, 2012). This evolution necessitates a reevaluation of educational standards to ensure relevance in a rapidly changing world. The integration of technology in education has ushered in a new era of literacy. Digital literacy, encompassing the ability to navigate and critically evaluate digital information, is now recognized as a vital component of modern literacy standards (National Research Council, 2012). Understanding the evolving nature of literacy is essential for educators and policymakers striving to establish comprehensive standards.

In addition to traditional literacy and numeracy, the literature underscores the importance of fostering global competencies, including intercultural understanding and collaboration (National Research Council, 2012). Educational standards must reflect the broader skills required for success in a globalized world.

This literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the contributing factors to standards in literacy and numeracy. The foundational role of these skills in cognitive development, the influence of standardized assessments, the impact of socio-economic factors, and the dynamic nature of education underscore the complexity of the educational landscape. As we navigate the challenges and opportunities in this domain, it is imperative for educators, policymakers, and researchers to collaborate in developing evidence-based interventions and policies that promote equitable access to quality education and foster a more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environment for all.

Methodology

The research aimed to conduct a systematic literature review to investigate the contributing factors to standards in literacy and numeracy. The primary objectives included identifying key themes, synthesizing findings, and discerning patterns across the existing body of literature on this subject.

A comprehensive search strategy was devised to ensure a thorough exploration of relevant literature. Electronic databases such as PubMed, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were systematically queried. The search terms encompassed variations of "literacy standards," "numeracy standards," "factors influencing literacy," and "factors influencing numeracy."

Inclusion criteria were established to focus on scholarly articles, books, and reports published in the English language between 1990 and 2023. Studies addressing the foundational role of literacy and numeracy, the impact of standardized assessments, the influence of socio-economic factors, and the dynamic nature of education were prioritized. Exclusion criteria involved non-peer-reviewed sources and publications not directly related to the identified themes.

The initial screening involved assessing titles and abstracts to determine relevance to the research objectives. Subsequently, full-text reviews were conducted for potentially relevant articles. The screening and selection process was carried out independently by two researchers, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus.

A standardized data extraction form was developed to systematically collect relevant information from each selected source. Data extraction encompassed key details such as author(s), publication year, research methodology employed in the source, main findings, and key conclusions (Abendan, et al., 2023). The quality of each selected source was assessed using established criteria appropriate for the type of publication (e.g., peer-reviewed articles, books, reports). This step ensured that the final body of literature included high-quality and rigorous studies.

The synthesized findings were organized thematically to address the research objectives. Key themes emerged, including the foundational role of literacy and numeracy, the impact of standardized assessments, the influence of socio-economic factors, and the dynamic nature of education. A critical analysis was conducted to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the selected studies, considering factors such as sample size, research design, and generalizability. This analysis provided a nuanced understanding of the literature and guided the interpretation of findings.

Findings and Discussion

Foundational Role of Literacy and Numeracy:

The systematic literature review conducted for this study illuminated a unanimous agreement within the scholarly community on the pivotal and foundational role played by literacy and numeracy in the realms of cognitive development and critical thinking. Key contributions by Adams (1990) and Duncan et al. (2007) underscored the multifaceted nature of these skills, extending far beyond mere proficiency in reading and mathematics.

Adams (1990) asserted that literacy is not merely the mechanical ability to decode written symbols but a cognitive process that underpins the development of critical thinking skills. Literacy, as highlighted in the literature, involves the capacity to think analytically, interpret information, and engage in complex cognitive tasks. This perspective aligns with Duncan et al.'s (2007) emphasis on literacy as a tool that goes beyond basic reading, serving as a cognitive catalyst for broader intellectual development.

Similarly, the foundational role of numeracy was consistently underscored. Duncan et al. (2007) emphasized that numeracy skills encompass more than the ability to perform mathematical operations; they form an integral part of cognitive development. Numeracy is portrayed as a conduit for fostering critical thinking, logical reasoning, and problem-solving abilities essential for navigating academic challenges and participating effectively in societal contexts.

The synthesis of findings from various studies affirmed that literacy and numeracy serve as cornerstones for cognitive development and critical thinking, providing individuals with the intellectual tools needed for academic success and active engagement in diverse societal roles. These skills are positioned as catalysts that empower individuals to analyze information, make informed decisions, and contribute meaningfully to their communities (Vestal, et al., 2023).

The literature review consistently demonstrated that literacy and numeracy are not isolated competencies but dynamic elements deeply interwoven with cognitive development. Recognizing the foundational nature of these skills has profound implications for educational policies and practices, urging stakeholders to view literacy and numeracy as more than academic milestones but as essential components fostering cognitive growth and critical thinking prowess.

Impact of Standardized Assessments:

The examination of standardized assessments within the systematic literature review revealed a nuanced duality, emphasizing their role as valuable tools for benchmarking literacy and numeracy proficiency while also shedding light on inherent criticisms and challenges (Linn, 2000).

Linn (2000) contributed significantly to the understanding of the strengths of standardized assessments. These assessments emerged as essential instruments providing objective measures for evaluating educational performance. By employing standardized metrics, educators and policymakers gain a systematic and comparable overview of literacy and numeracy proficiency across various educational levels. This objectivity is crucial for identifying areas of strength and weakness in educational systems and tailoring interventions accordingly.

However, the literature review also drew attention to the criticisms surrounding standardized assessments. Concerns were raised about their potential to perpetuate educational inequalities and inadvertently narrow the curriculum. By emphasizing test preparation and focusing primarily on assessable content, standardized assessments may fall short in capturing the full spectrum of students' abilities and the richness of educational experiences (Kilgus, et al., 2023). This perspective aligns with the broader debate on the impact of assessments on teaching practices and the potential unintended consequences associated with a narrow focus on testable outcomes.

Moreover, the literature underscored the importance of addressing biases within standardized assessments that could disproportionately affect certain demographic groups. Issues related to cultural bias, socioeconomic disparities, and language barriers in assessment tools were identified as potential contributors to inequitable educational outcomes (De Gracia, et al., 2023).

While recognized for their objectivity and utility in benchmarking literacy and numeracy proficiency, concerns about perpetuating inequalities and narrowing educational experiences cannot be dismissed. Acknowledging this duality is essential for educators and policymakers as they navigate the complexities of assessment strategies, aiming to strike a balance between standardized measures and a comprehensive, equitable educational experience.

Influence of Socio-Economic Factors:

The examination of socio-economic factors in literacy and numeracy outcomes, as illuminated by Sirin (2005) and reinforced by the systematic literature review, unveils a compelling narrative about the influence of economic status on educational achievement. The consistent pattern across studies highlights that students hailing from higher socio-economic backgrounds often experience more favorable literacy and numeracy outcomes, primarily due to enhanced access to educational resources.

Sirin's (2005) research provides a robust foundation for understanding the socio-economic dimensions of educational disparities. Students from affluent backgrounds tend to have access to a plethora of educational resources, including books, tutoring, and educational technology. This heightened access equips them with advantages that extend beyond the classroom, positively impacting their literacy and numeracy skills. The findings underscore the pervasive influence of socio-economic factors on shaping educational trajectories.

The literature consistently affirms that socio-economic disparities contribute significantly to divergent educational outcomes. Students from economically advantaged backgrounds benefit from enriched learning environments and supplementary educational support, which, in turn, correlates with heightened proficiency in literacy and numeracy (Kilag, et al., 2023). The disparities in access to educational resources amplify the need for targeted interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of socio-economic factors on educational achievement.

The significance of addressing socio-economic disparities in literacy and numeracy outcomes cannot be overstated. Targeted interventions are essential to level the playing field and ensure that students from all socio-economic backgrounds have equitable access to the resources necessary for academic success (Descartin, et al., 2023). By recognizing the influential role of socio-economic factors and implementing interventions that address these disparities, educators and policymakers can work towards fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

Dynamic Nature of Education and Emerging Competencies:

The systematic literature review unearthed a profound insight into the dynamic nature of education, emphasizing the imperative to recalibrate literacy and numeracy standards in response to the evolving demands of the 21st century (National Research Council, 2012). This dynamic shift in educational paradigms underscores the need for a more holistic approach that transcends

traditional literacy and numeracy boundaries, as digital literacy and the cultivation of global competencies emerge as pivotal themes in the contemporary educational landscape.

The National Research Council's (2012) contributions underscored the evolving nature of literacy and numeracy expectations. The traditional view of these skills is expanding to encompass a broader skill set, aligning with the demands of an interconnected and rapidly changing world. Digital literacy, identified as a critical emerging theme, extends beyond conventional literacy, encapsulating the ability to navigate, critically evaluate, and create digital content. This expansion acknowledges the increasing importance of technology in daily life and the workforce.

Global competencies, another salient theme identified in the literature, highlight the necessity for students to develop skills beyond their immediate surroundings (Kilag, et al., 2023). This includes intercultural understanding, effective communication in diverse settings, and collaborative problem-solving, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the global community.

The identified themes suggest a compelling call for educational policies to embrace a holistic approach. Adapting literacy and numeracy standards to incorporate digital literacy and global competencies is crucial to prepare students for the multifaceted challenges of the contemporary world. This recalibration requires a paradigm shift in educational philosophies, urging educators and policymakers to view literacy and numeracy as integral components of a broader skill set essential for success in an ever-changing landscape (Lumando, et al., 2023). As education evolves, the ability to navigate digital spaces and engage with global perspectives becomes just as crucial as traditional literacy and numeracy skills, necessitating a comprehensive approach that equips students for the complexities of the 21st century.

These four key findings provide a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing standards in literacy and numeracy. They highlight the interconnectedness of cognitive development, assessment methodologies, socio-economic disparities, and the evolving nature of education. The synthesis of these findings contributes valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to enhance literacy and numeracy outcomes in a diverse and dynamic educational landscape.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of understanding the standards in literacy and numeracy and their contributing factors, this systematic literature review has unveiled a rich tapestry of insights into the complex dynamics of contemporary education. The multifaceted nature of this investigation has explored the foundational roles of literacy and numeracy in cognitive development, the dual nature of standardized assessments, the influence of socio-economic factors, and the imperative for evolving educational standards in response to the demands of the 21st century.

The foundational role of literacy and numeracy emerged as a linchpin in cognitive development, extending beyond basic proficiency to encompass critical thinking skills essential for academic success and societal participation (Adams, 1990; Duncan et al., 2007). This insight underscores

the interconnectedness of literacy and numeracy with broader cognitive processes, urging educators and policymakers to adopt a holistic approach in nurturing these foundational skills.

The examination of standardized assessments revealed a delicate balance—while serving as invaluable tools for benchmarking proficiency, they are not without their criticisms (Linn, 2000). The objectivity and comparability offered by standardized assessments must be weighed against concerns of perpetuating inequalities and narrowing the educational curriculum. This duality prompts a reevaluation of assessment strategies, urging stakeholders to consider a more comprehensive view of educational outcomes.

Socio-economic factors emerged as powerful determinants influencing literacy and numeracy outcomes (Sirin, 2005). The literature consistently highlighted the advantages afforded to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, necessitating targeted interventions to bridge existing disparities. Addressing these disparities is paramount for fostering a more equitable educational landscape.

As the literature unfolded, it became evident that education is not static; it evolves in response to societal changes. The 21st century demands a recalibration of literacy and numeracy standards to embrace emerging competencies such as digital literacy and global awareness (National Research Council, 2012). This finding resonates as a clarion call for educational policies that transcend traditional boundaries and prepare students for the challenges of an interconnected and rapidly changing world.

This study advocates for a nuanced and adaptive approach to literacy and numeracy standards. By recognizing the foundational roles of these skills, addressing the dual nature of standardized assessments, mitigating socio-economic disparities, and adapting to the evolving educational landscape, stakeholders can collectively contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational system. As we navigate the educational frontiers of the 21st century, it is imperative to view literacy and numeracy as dynamic elements, integral to the broader tapestry of skills necessary for success in an ever-evolving global society.

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