What is this research about?
In this article, the researchers distinguish between two types of literacy: functional and critical literacy. While literacy can be understood as the skill of learning how to read and write in order to gain employment (functional literacy), another view is that literacy can empower and liberate students by promoting an understanding of societal power relations and encouraging students to challenge the inequities of current labour conditions (critical literacy). The purpose of this research was to examine the different ways in which the concept of literary is portrayed in educational policy documents related to secondary career education in Ontario.

What did the researchers do?
The researchers used discourse analysis to examine various provincial curriculum documents related to career education.

What you need to know:
An analysis of several Ministry curriculum documents related to career education illustrates that the current Ontario framework continues to promote the functional view of literacy—that literacy is an employment skill rather than a skill for democratic engagement. Educators are encouraged to fill in the gaps through the use of activities that emphasize democratic participation and critical literacy where students see themselves as political agents of social change.

Each document was analyzed for evidence of the three principles of democratic learning: 1) opportunity for students to critique the curriculum content, 2) exposure to alternative viewpoints on vocational choices, and 3) recognition of students right to transform the labour market through democratic
participation (Hyslop-Margison & Graham, 2001).

The documents analyzed included: the 1998 Ontario Secondary Schools Detailed Discussion Document; a Ministry brochure titled Literacy in Ontario: The Rewards are for Life; the policy document Choices into Action: Guidance and Career Education Program Policy for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools; the Think Literacy: Cross Curricular Approaches Grades 7-12 document; and various secondary education curriculum documents such as Business Education and English.

What did the researchers find?
The document analysis in this study revealed that the Ministry’s vision of literacy is primarily rooted in workplace application, to prepare students for the world of work rather than democratic citizenship. Curriculum activities included writing resumes, investigating employment trends and preparing for job interviews with little to no focus on the three principals of democratic learning. Literacy skills were presented to students as employability skills rather than citizenship skills.

How can you use this research?
Teachers and administrators may wish to consider whether functional and critical literacy are both being addressed within their schools. The researchers suggests that students should be encouraged to develop literacy skills in order to critically examine current economic and labour conditions and to become informed and engaged citizens in a democratic country.

Other ideas that teachers may wish to consider are:

- Providing students with opportunities to learn about civic issues that concern them directly and to read and write about current civic issues from multiple perspectives.

- Providing students with opportunities to exercise their democratic voice through in-class dialogue and debates on economic and labour issues, hiring practices, or through writing formal letters to local members of parliament to support or raise concern about current civic issues.
Original Article:

About the researchers
At the time of this research study, Emery J. Hyslop-Margison was a Tier II Canada Research Chair, Associate Professor and Director of the Institute for Democratic Learning in Career Education in the Department of Education at Concordia University.

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Other References

Keywords: career education, critical literacy, democratic citizenship, secondary education

About this summary
The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary has been adapted from the ResearchSnapshot series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.

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