

Tensions Between Policy, Practice and Theory: International Perspectives on Adult Literacy

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Abstract: *Nearly three decades of empirical research and theoretical discussion have helped us to understand literacy as not merely a discrete and autonomous skill, but as situated, social, multiple, complex—as ‘literacies’. During this same period policies that inform literacy education have become increasingly narrow, aligning to the OECD’s large-scale international literacy surveys that offer ‘evidence’ of a nation’s capacity to compete. This symposium considers the range of responses from policy-makers, researchers and practitioners in Scotland, England and Canada to this environment, highlighting complexities and tensions but also offering hope for alternative perspectives and strategies that could reinvigorate the field.*

Far From Perfect But Full of Promise: Literacy and Numeracy Policy in Scotland

Audrey Gardner

The Scottish adult literacy and numeracy policy (ALN), established in 2001, seemed to step away from the conventional deficit framework and move toward doing adult literacy education in a unique way. It affirmed a learner-centered and literacy-as-social-practices approach. I was encouraged by the idea that a national government had invested in creating a system that saw literacy as multiple, complex and socially situated. It felt like Scotland’s policy fully supported what many practitioners know and experience: that a learner-centered and social practices approach is most relevant and respectful of students and their learning intentions. Like others in the adult literacy field I

viewed the Scottish ALN strategy through “rose tinted spectacles” (Maclachlan, 2006, p. 1).

The ALN has successfully developed a framework in which communities have built capacity for a literacies system of programming. Its successes include a national public awareness and learner recruitment campaign, numerous local and regional partnerships, practitioner research, an evolving practitioner training and qualifications system, formative and learner-centered assessment, and a flexible curriculum framework. A growing body of qualitative research has emerged that connects social practices with issues such as learner identity, assessment, teaching and learning, and social inclusion (Sliwka & Tett, 2008; Tett & Maclachlan, 2007; Tett, Maclachlan, Thorpe, Edwards & Garside, 2006). This research has produced evidence of the positive impacts of engaging in literacies learning, and has contributed to alternative ways of measuring progress and building knowledge.

However, the ALN has not gone unchallenged (Maclachlan, 2009). After the first three years of the national strategy, an evaluation by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIe, 2005) concluded that learner performance measurement and program evaluation were inadequate. A second, more extensive, evaluation found a need for further development in assessment but highlighted the extensive progress achieved. It recommended that the government continue its commitment to strengthening a social practices framework (Tett, Maclachlan, Thorpe, Edwards

& Garside, 2006). A number of practitioners and researchers penned their concerns about underlying ideological tensions in the original ALN policy: Ackland (2006) asserted that a “managerialist discourse is dominating and recontextualising the more radical discourse of social practices” (p. 39); Parkinson (2006) zeroed in on the problematic influence of IALS to question what is “underpinning Scotland’s literacies policy” (p. 928); and Maclachlan described the IALS “shock statistics” (2004, p. 200) that over time would challenge the original commitment to a social practices model.

In 2007 the right-of-centre Scottish National Party became the official government and introduced a Single Outcomes Agreement Concordat that reduced the power of local authorities to make decisions about how to meet community literacies needs (Scottish Government 2007). It also built upon the prior government’s plan to conduct an IALS structured national survey in 2009. Politically, what is at stake with this type of measurement that can only produce a partial snapshot and does not directly measure learner progress? The innovative ideas that the ALN grew out of were being trumped by the importunate political need for “quantification of gains” (HMIE, 2005, p. 1). However, I hold onto the promise that the ALN field in Scotland has grown deep and strong literacies roots to withstand the gales of political impatience, roots that will yield meaningful changes at the local level.

From Margin to Mainstream: Lessons from England’s Skills for Life Strategy

Mary Hamilton

The *Skills for Life* strategy introduced into England¹ by a New Labour administration in 2001 has transformed the field of Adult Literacy from an informal and fragmented field highly dependent on volunteer labor to a professionalized subject area within the further education sector. As in other OECD member nations, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) has played a significant role in justifying and shaping this policy. Despite extensive scholarly critiques of its assumptions, methodology and findings (see for example Hamilton & Barton, 2000) the survey continues to be influential. A challenge for

literacy policy analysis is to identify the ways in which the effects of the IALS play out across different countries, teasing out specific, local characteristics from the broader effects of international interventions.

What causes change to local practice is not always clear on the ground, particularly in situations where practitioners feel outside of processes of consultation and decision-making so that policy simply “arrives” without explanation (Hodgson et al., 2007). I will draw on historical research of adult language, literacy and numeracy (ALLN) policy in England between 1970 and 2000 to identify a number of specific features in the UK literacy policy environment that have mediated the effects of the IALS. I will outline the shifting representations of learners, teachers and learning during this period; trace the various roles played by different actors in the policy process. I will also present some recent empirical research that documents how the IALS framing, as part of a wider, currently pervasive culture of audit and accountability, is transforming teaching in England and fundamentally shifting the focus of language, literacy and numeracy learning.

Without doubt, the *Skills for Life* policy has raised the profile of adult literacy and the professionals who are part of it. This transformation took place as an integral part of an all-age National Literacy Strategy within a specifically ‘New Labour’ version of neo-liberalism that knits together a range of discourses promoting social inclusion and economic prosperity. A technocratic approach to governance is employed, involving micromanagement of practice and the imposition of high stakes targets. New Labour has made great efforts to respond to social policy issues in the round through ‘joined up’ government and has had a close and tense relationship with the media in pursuing its policies. Literacy has been strongly linked with other current concerns and moral panics such as the effects of digital technologies, loss of community and perceptions of young people as ‘out of control’. We have, therefore, to see the IALS as part of a bigger constellation of discourses and governance practices.

The New Labour approach privileges evidence-based policy and quantitative research and has been able to use the IALS findings as a justification for large-scale funding of adult literacy. However, unlike some countries in the OECD and beyond, the UK has a good existing national statistical research base which has been used to generate ‘home grown’ measures of literacy. It is less reliant therefore on international surveys alone for developing curriculum and standards. Furthermore, the OECD is not the only

¹ *Skills for Life* has been formulated by the UK government in Westminster, but only applies to England because education is now the responsibility of the devolved administrations in the other countries of the UK

international agency affecting the UK: we are subject to related pressures from the European Union to harmonize qualifications and measures of achievement and to contribute to European social and economic goals. Such local factors complexify the effects of the IALS as they play out in the countries of the UK.

Key resulting tensions include changes in the relationship between literacy and citizenship, centering around the notion of conditionality (Dwyer, 2004); contradictory developments in assessment; the way in which target culture has skewed participation in unanticipated ways toward the the “low-hanging fruit”—learners who are easiest to reach and support (Bathmaker, 2007); the pulls on literacy between the demands of schooling, employment and lifelong learning. I will conclude by discussing the latest policy development, the conveniently ambiguous notion of *functional skills* which—after all the efforts of the Skills for Life era—may result in the disappearance of adult literacy as a field distinct from vocational skills training.

The Essential Skills Framework in Canada: Mediating Literacy Measures and Learning

Christine Pinsent-Johnson

The Essential Skills framework has become the intermediary between the way literacy is measured internationally and the way it is learned in programs across Canada. Nowhere is this situation more apparent than in Ontario, which is actively integrating the framework into its new adult literacy curriculum. Initially designed to enhance an occupational classification system, the Essential Skills framework and its three components—a list of nine skills, complexity levels used in the IALS, and a series of job profiles—was thought to be of some use to educators involved in employment preparation (Mair, 1997). However, its initial tentative connection to education has been long forgotten. Instead, the framework has been promoted within both K-12 and adult education for “learning, work and life”. One of the reasons for its predominance in education is because projects that receive funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills must use the language of ES, build on the framework or assess literacy development in relation to the framework of ES. However, even before OLES was in place, work was being done in programs and by literacy organizations to promote the use of the framework. Gradually, the Essential Skills framework and IALS has become the dominant curriculum discourse for adult literacy education.

Preliminary findings from a study using institutional ethnography (e.g., Smith, 2006) indicate that people directly involved in adult literacy education in Ontario are using the framework in a variety of ways for different purposes. Sometimes the framework is used because of its perceived appeal and usefulness. Other times students, educators and policymakers are compelled to use the framework because of particular mechanisms, pressures and policies. For example, one educator liked to use an abbreviated checklist of the nine skills when planning activities, to remind her to enhance text-based learning with oral communication and group work. However, the program started using the checklist because they were asked to do so by the funder's field representative. Policymakers and policy consultants appear to be most concerned with the complexity levels and scoring system derived from IALS. At the policy level in Ontario, work is being done in the province's new curriculum to use an IALS-type assessment to measure “learner gains” in addition to an assessment that measures “goal-completion”. One policymaker suggested that adding an IALS-type assessment was the result of pressure to legitimize adult literacy education within a restructured provincial employment service system. Educators are learning to apply the IALS conception of literacy as information-processing when they use authentic materials with learners. At a workshop I attended, the approach was questioned by some educators, and most simply appeared perplexed. The job profiles, the third component of the Essential Skills framework, seem to get the least attention within education. One educator said she spent only two hours during a 500-hour course developing an activity that used the profiles. She explained that, although the profiles appear to be of little use, she felt compelled to introduce the language of the profiles to her students since they may encounter similar terms when reading job ads posted on government websites. Although the Essential Skills framework provides a dominant curricular discourse, teaching practices are not necessarily changing in ways that directly reflect the discourse. It remains to be seen how the framework will be interpreted and incorporated into Ontario's new curriculum.

We need to understand *how* and *why* adult students, educators and policymakers make use of the framework, and *how* and *why* they resist its use. Despite over a decade of some hard-hitting critique (e.g., Darville, 1999; Hamilton, 2001; Hamilton & Barton, 2000; Jackson, 2005a) the use of the framework and related IALS measures are only gaining momentum. To make change from below, critique and alternatives have to

connect with what people are doing, and the reasons they make their choices. Critiques need to be precise, providing clear examples that allow people to see what they are getting into when they use the framework, and alternatives need to respond to everyday concerns and challenges.

Developing Literacy Work?

Richard Darville

These notes express an effort to make sense of how adult literacy work has been developed, and might go on. They begin in a hope for literacy work both built in teachers' and learners' experience, and able to confront how changing literacy is changing social relations. To put the story in the worst way: over the last quarter century we who have held that hope have been dispossessed—through a grand shift in global discourse, and two interlaced governing technologies.

In the global discourse, humanistic, egalitarian ideas about literacy, carried by UNESCO, are supplanted by economistic, managerialist ideas, pushed by the OECD (Rubenson, 2009; LoBianco, 2009). "Literacy" is created as a quantifiable policy object (a chimera existing only through technologies of measurement), in an encompassing project of human capital accounting. Policy-related "investment" in literacy is justified by its expected economic return (cf. St-Martin, 2007); literacy policy is conceived in hydraulic images: pump up literacy levels to raise employment, increase GDP, etc.

The first governing technology is survey testing—IALS and its successors, including the imminent "Assessment of Adult Competencies." This foments literacy-rate competitions among nations, provinces, cities, industries, and so may encourage funding. But it *institutionally* defines literacy—as the ability to "sight-read" a range of perhaps unfamiliar texts; the concern is the flexible reader, counterpart of the flexible worker in management discourses (Darville, 1999). It doggedly denies that people might decide for themselves what literacy is important, and how much is enough. Several such assessment technologies instruct people to judge their abilities (only) against skills defined by others. Finally, fetishizing "level 3", this technology menacingly hints that if learners cannot be, at modest cost, brought up to that level, forget them.

The second governing technology is that through which programs must display "accountability" for producing what can be seen as the policy object. While sometimes giving a welcome structure, this in-

evitably produces "gaps" between the work done and its required display (Jackson, 2005b). It requires burdensome time and effort, and reorganizes teachers' attention, away from responsiveness to learners, towards reporting requirements (Crooks et al., 2008; Tusting, 2009). It supplants learners' and teachers' own language. Its individualizing of literacy undercuts work for literacy development as community development. At a different level, managerialism uproots that mode in which civil servants engaged with literacy workers' effort to create a field, supplanting it by relentless keeping tabs (Hayes, 2009).

Of course a regime generates resistance. There are calls for practitioners and learners to have some say in "what counts." But this demands changing the terms of accountability, and perhaps the global discourse they hook into, requires "'policy-oriented' documents ... for senior officials and politicians" (Page, 2009, p. 6). In this vein there are interesting models: US work on "practice outcomes" (not skill gains but changes in learners' uses of literacy) (Reder, 2008), and Australian schemes for social connectedness as programming aim (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2009). Such developments might allow some tweaking of accountability, to capture more of what literacy work accomplishes.

But undoing the local dispossession of literacy workers would ironically require changing the global discourse, grounding a utopian project of adult education not in individual change but in class and social movement organization (Rubenson 2005; McBride, 2005).

Governmentality: A Promising Theoretical Frame

Tannis Atkinson

Since the early 1990s adult basic education in Canada has been framed as a labour market issue, consistent with the OECD-sponsored International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and administered under increasingly rigid accountability regimes. Current policy emphases are leading to intense frustration among practitioners who experience daily pressures to make financial tracking a priority over the work of educating the adults who enter their programs. Many practitioners chafe at what they perceive as a deficit mentality in the current literacy policies and, concluding that current policies are irrational, assume that open dialogue with policy-makers might lead to policies that conceptualize literacy in the interests of the adults who attend literacy programs.

I think we should consider whether the profound disconnect between actual policies and what adult

literacy advocates propose the field needs are not, in fact, accidental.

Looking at this disconnect through a lens of governmentality offers an explanation of why policies are routinely framed in ways that overlook both the needs and interests of adult students, *and* the research from practice that could inform policies that would take account of those needs and interests. I understand governmentality as the administrative power of the state, used to direct the activities of the population as a whole. Governmentality could help make sense of why adult literacy policy in Canada has, for several decades now, placed emphasis on “sustaining meritocracy rather than on producing social equity” (Vee-man, Ward & Walker, 2006, p. 105), an emphasis that has intensified during the neoliberal era.

Despite common-sense beliefs about ‘democracy’, governments are not interested in meeting the needs and aspirations of their citizens or subjects; rather modern power uses “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 140). Power in the modern era aims to “optimiz[e] forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern” (Foucault, 1978, p. 141). It works to “qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize” in order to “distribute[e] the living in the domain of value and utility” (Foucault, 1978, p. 144). Modern power operates by calculating people’s worth according to established norms and by drawing attention to those who do not meet the norms.

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In the current context, the cognitive definitions of literacy which form the basis of the International Adult Literacy Survey clearly articulate norms of literacy that subjects within OECD member nations are expected to possess. It operates as a technology of neoliberalism, reinforcing the idea that the subject is not so much

a social citizen with powers and obligations deriving from membership of a collective body than an individual whose... citizenship is to be manifested not in the receipt of public largesse, but in the energetic pursuit of personal fulfilment and the incessant calculations that are to enable this to be achieved. (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 201)

‘Literacy’, in neoliberal logic, is an attribute of human capital that individuals must develop throughout their lives; those whose human capital does not ‘appreciate in value’ over time have failed to meet the requirements of the marketplace and are responsible if they cannot ‘compete’ in the labour market. According to this logic the marginalization and impoverishment of adults who are not fluent in dominant literacies is justified, and governments are absolved of responsibility for their abjection. The lens of governmentality reveals why the self-defined needs of adult literacy students and programs are routinely ignored. Such an analysis might also offer some hope of devising strategies that could respond more effectively to the changes wrought by IALS and other OECD surveys of education.

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