

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION: *Impact of Policy on Practice* International Perspectives



Summer Institute 2004

June 28 - 30, 2004

The Institute was a three-day facilitated exchange that brought together adult basic education practitioners from the formal and community sectors, researchers, and policy makers to explore questions, enlarge understanding, and identify strategies to move adult literacy

policy and practice forward across local, national and international boundaries.

The articles in this issue are versions of “Think Papers” that we requested from the international presenters. We asked them to write from their personal vantage points of direct or research involvement in adult basic education or literacy policy. Just before the Institute, Australian researcher Joe Lo Bianco suffered a back injury that almost forced him to cancel his visit; because he could not write anything new at the time, he sent a formal academic paper as background reading. At the Institute, he presented a more personal informal version which is summarized below. His full-length academic paper is online on our web site. The Institute was run in partnership with the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL)

International perspectives

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QUESTIONS THAT STARTED THE CONVERSATION

Before participants arrived, we sent out some questions to start the discussion:

- How do the definitions of literacy and the positioning of literacy as an educational or social issue affect policy development? How does literacy policy connect to larger, long-term social transformation?
- Where does literacy fit in the lifelong learning agenda? Does the focus on “lifelong learning” increase or diminish emphasis on literacy? Is an adult literacy policy more effective than an adult education policy that embeds literacy?
- How do literacy or lifelong learning “campaigns” fit with policy? What happens when campaigns in different jurisdictions and organizations send contradictory messages?
- What happens when policies in different departments or jurisdictions clash? (e.g. social benefits and access to learning).
- What promising models of effective policy exist around other social issues at national, provincial/state and local levels? What lessons can we learn? Are any of the stakeholders in these issues potential allies for adult literacy? What are the challenges?
- How are international trends in policy-making set?
- What can we learn from places where new adult education and literacy policies have been implemented?
- What research questions need to be explored, who sets the research agenda, and how should priorities be set?
- How are the impacts of policy evaluated? What counts as evidence? Who decides?
- How can we get practitioners to care about policy and understand how they can influence its development?

Policy literacy: Understanding power, policy and professional knowledge in literacy agendas

by Joseph Lo Bianco
University of Melbourne

[Lo Bianco argued that we have to understand the history of policy-making and advising to be policy-literate. He explained some dilemmas and issues of government and academic literacy research. He outlined the difference between human capital theory that underlies much education policy today, and social capital theory that may be more appropriate. He distinguished between United Nations and OECD approaches to literacy policy, and suggested that evidence has not yet led to action on this issue. Using a framework that highlights the interconnections between power and knowledge, he analysed the role played by advice and advising in policy-making, and traced it from Classical Greece to present-day western culture – and rational, or scientific, policy-making. While he suggested a growing scepticism about policy as science, he conceded the model still dominates western policy. He concluded that literacy practitioners and researchers must become policy literate and reclaim their voices in policy debates. Selected edited excerpts are below. The full paper is on The Centre web site.]

In this paper I argue that policy is itself a kind of literacy that literacy educators and researchers need to participate in, critique and understand the 'policy moment'. The policy process is the main vehicle in democratic societies for determining resource allocation. When the trajectory of government policy is towards overall reductions and a shift towards the private sector, informed kinds of policy activism are needed to minimize negative impacts on disadvantaged communities. An enhanced and critical under-standing of the process, history and dilemmas of the overall practice of public policy-making can help us participate more reflectively and fully in its processes.

Dilemmas and issues

Policy is a distinctive category of activity, located just short of overt and formal politics, and just beyond professional practice. We all know about policy in various ways. We encounter the notorious policy promise in the run-up to elections. We protest against policies we dislike and applaud those we prefer. In our professional lives, and as citizens, we engage in processes and debates that aim to shape and influence policy. However, and especially for language and literacy educators in recent years, we often consider "policy" an almost endless sequence of intrusions into the field of educational practice. This view is tied to recent trends that make learning into a commodity, and to the intrusion of market and human capital theories into most educational practice.

Recent education policy literature from different countries, especially adult education and community based, non-formal settings, highlights more dilemmas and issues than confident engagement with the processes for change that democratic societies make available. Even when policy makers have been positively disposed towards adult literacy education, it is consistently traceable to either International Literacy Year in 1990, or, more powerfully, to the adoption by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the 1990s of the idea that developed national economies had lost competitiveness in international markets, partly due to literacy deficiencies.

An ideological shift occurred between 1990 and 1996. During International Literacy Year (ILY), adult literacy thinking was still characterized by reformist social

ambition. Agendas were influenced by lingering Freirean ideologies, or by second-chance rights thinking, or by ideals about overcoming disparities between developing and rich countries' education. ILY had fleeting and marginal impact. By the time the International Adult Literacy Survey was conducted by the OECD and its Canadian partners, participating countries engaged with substantially more commitment, and mainstream policy attention. Ideas of social transformation were replaced by prevailing ideas about labour market reforms, efficiency, and enhanced global competitiveness.

In recent years many western post-industrial democracies have implemented competitive free-market oriented regimes to deploy resources. This has often involved reductions in direct finance to public education. For many literacy teachers and researchers this has led to 'policy' being identified as code for 'cutback'. 'Policy' is also associated with intrusion into educational practice, via assessment regimes considered overly rigid. National governments increasingly impose more stringent kinds of external accountability for the outcomes of literacy programs. Governments have instituted a kind of contract, in which the elevated importance of literacy within public policy is conditioned by restrictions on the professional judgment and autonomy of teachers.

The increased attention to literacy by developed-country governments is directly associated with a revival of human capital asset thinking within the context of the emergence of the 'knowledge economy' or post-industrialism. This thinking is reinforced by a strong move towards international comparative studies on the relative literacy performance of national economies, especially deriving from the OECD (1992; 1995; 1996; 1997).

Policy patterns

[He traces patterns in literacy policy among OECD countries to show how different emphases of government and researchers lead to different types of policy advocacy. Current government policies include a focus on human capital effects on the labour market adult literacy ‘campaigns’ to ‘solve’ literacy difficulties at the interface of education and the labour market; and a ‘vaccination’ approach of intense language skills in early years and primary schooling rather than cross-curricular and more socially complex approaches.]

A typical policy addresses attainment levels of learners, defined as “key skills”, and seeks

indicators of overall and group-specific performance standards in an international comparative framework. It seeks to develop ‘techniques’ to efficiently monitor skills-based literacy and ways to report test results in publicly accessible ways. The policy advocacy that emerges from such research topics tends to be evaluative commentary on literacy performance as statistically represented, and on measures to ‘improve’ the results of school-to-school, or country-to-country comparisons. Public ranking of schools or national economies is one manifestation of this. Another key outcome has been partisan promotion of preferred literacy teaching methods.

By contrast, academic literacy research addresses a much wider array of social and educational contexts and is sensitive to variation, context, and social meaning. The policy advocacy that emerges argues for greater attention to the located and culturally variable dimensions of literacy in social practice, and understands literacy as having personal and social meanings over economic ones.

However, there are also many dilemmas involved in scholarly knowledge production regardless of whether or not it has been specifically recruited for a policy purpose. The endurance of the skills-based focus in most government literacy policy discourse, and the construction

BOX 1

Human capital and social capital

Human capital is the theoretical framework that dominates thinking about education in many societies. The OECD defines human capital as: *"The knowledge that individuals acquire during their life and use to produce goods and services or ideas in market and non-market circumstances"*

Austrian economist Fritz Machlup, a key proponent of the idea, offered a more specified definition:

" The connection between knowledge and human capital is easily understood if one realizes that capital is formed by investment, that investment in human resources is designed to increase their capacity (to produce, to earn, to enjoy life etc), and that improvements of capacity, as a rule, result from the acquisition of 'knowing what' and 'knowing how.'" (1984)

Adding the overall value of these knowledge stocks yields a measure of the human capital resources available to a national economy, but to handle the inevitable differences in conceptualization of these

measures across national systems requires the use of some proxy measures. Assessed literacy levels serve this function.

The focus on the economic role of knowledge seeks to make 'invisible' capital visible to the gaze of accountants and economists. The emergence of the post-industrial economy (services, high technology products, value-added processes, tourism etc) reinvigorated the notion of human capital which had lain dormant since the 1950s. Alongside moves for unfettered markets for the ‘exchange of competence’, individuals are seen to operate like mini-economies, investing in their skills and knowledge and ‘trading themselves.’

This is a classical economics vision; an interconnected network of rational individuals making cost-benefit calculations of the returns they expect for investment in all areas of their lives; including the languages they speak, the cultures they can competently function in, and the literacies they have available to them.

“Social capital” is a contesting notion that locates individuals within social, cultural and other collectives. Social capital deals with the trust, goodwill and networks of human collectivities, rather than with isolated individuals. Social capital approaches are less well developed than human capital theorizing which is a longstanding branch of economics. The term is increasingly used to express literacy as a phenomenon of human relationships rather than individual’s skills. Policies inspired by principles and understandings of social capital would emphasize community-based settings, and networks of relationships and social cohesion in which learning takes place and what is learned is practiced. With its stress on effective and valuable relationships, social capital is an appropriate notion for inclusion in literacy since recent academic work has stressed the culturally variable and located character of literacy. It represents literacy as embedded in contexts of relationships and social values; literacy acts and literacy events that take place within networks of social life.

of recurrent “literacy crises” as a device to sustain wider political agendas create an unavoidable policy-tinged environment for literacy scholarship. Any literacy research or teaching practice undertaken in contexts where there is so much prior framing of the issue makes ‘politicization’ highly likely. French philosopher Michel Foucault understood that ‘policy’ (power) and ‘information’

(knowledge) are mutually shaped and shaping. There is no place to begin that is without history and effects.

Joseph LoBianco grew up as a non-English speaker in a farming community in rural Australia, and has lived in Italy, Sri Lanka, Scotland, the US, SE Asia and the Pacific Islands, and other places. He has training in applied linguistics, economics, sociology and political

science, and teaching. He was founder and Chief Executive Officer of Language Australia, and is a professor of language and literacy education at the University of Melbourne. He is the author of Australia’s first language policy The National Policy on Languages (1987), served on the Australian National Commission for UNESCO for 10 years, and has consulted worldwide on language and literacy planning.

BOX 2

International contexts of literacy advocacy

The United Nations, through its specialized agencies of UNICEF and UNESCO, has used a human rights orientation in their elaboration of literacy policies. For decades they have issued declarations, aims, goals, objectives, calls to action and other instruments of persuasion and mobilization in relation to literacy problems in poor and developing countries. These ‘calls to action’ usually aim to ‘eradicate illiteracy’ and achieve the ‘universalization of primary education’ and suggest action at all levels of formal, non-formal and adult education. The discourse usually refers to indigenous or local languages, to local scripts or writing systems, to the special needs and problems of females, of remote or marginalized populations, to nomadic peoples. This approach takes a ‘development and human rights’ perspective and identifies literacy with enhancement of communities, their quality of life, improvements in health and opportunity.

In recent years, the global literacy agenda however has been set by international organizations concerned with relative international competitiveness of rich countries with post-industrial knowledge-based economies. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) whose members are the world’s most economically

advanced democracies has been especially prominent; in their calculations ‘relative literacy levels’ have been established as part of a discourse of human capital and economic competitiveness.

OECD studies are policy-oriented research in that they are commissioned by the OECD member states to guide their national decision-making. This research requires substantial decontextualization of literacy practices and literacy-tasks within an ideology that considers adult literacy problems as a kind of social threat. The sophisticated data sets produced by the OECD have stimulated calls for ever increasing comparisons, greater statistical refinement, and further evidence of comparative literacy problems in industrialized countries. Having more data, especially comparable international data reinforces the likelihood that discussions of what constitutes literacy, and ‘acceptable literacy performance’, will be debated within an established model of description of tasks accomplished in measurable, discrete and recurring ways and a vocabulary for comparing such results across cultural-national settings. One influential instance of this work is the 1995 IALS.

Does evidence lead to action?

Despite this commitment to statistical constructions of information about literacy there is little direct correspondence

between empirical demonstrations of literacy need and any kind of public policy response. Any such correspondence would presuppose a direct or rational connection between the generation of knowledge and resulting policy action. The history of evidence about literacy problems (adult or child, male or female, developed-country to developing) and the connection of demonstrations of need with policies of provision do not support such confidence. The clearest indications of this have been the regular (largely unheeded) calls by UNESCO for global mobilization to ‘eradicate’ identified disparities in national literacy levels within particular timeframes. With sad frequency since the 1940s, UNESCO has ‘called’ on national governments (its constituents) to deploy resources to school all girls, to make primary education universally available, to teach adults etc by various nominated dates. All calls have passed without producing the hoped-for ‘mobilizations’.

The relationship between evidence and action is mediated by many intervening factors, social values. Policy does not emerge unproblematically from the demonstration of need. All new information is absorbed within power configurations that combine prevailing ideologies, existing knowledge and the various interests of those involved. One person’s problem is often another person’s non-issue.