Negotiating gaps: adult educators between policy and practices

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Over the past few decades international surveys conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—including the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the current Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)—have been primary mechanisms in constructing a new international consensus which ‘more strongly integrate[s] education into the core of labour market and economic agendas’ (Rubenson, 2008b, p. 257). Adult literacy policies based on the logic of the OECD surveys reinstate distinctions between vernacular and dominant literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) and occlude processes through which ‘certain literacy practices are supported, controlled and legitimated…[and] others are de-valued’ (Hamilton, 2001, p. 179). In doing so these policies fail to address firmly ‘entrenched and intractable problems of inequality, social exclusion and social injustice’ (Hillier, 2009, p. 548) correlated to lack of fluency in dominant literacies. Rubenson (2006, 2008a) argues that the OECD has made an ideological choice in continuing to promote a market-logic story about ‘literacy’; he documents how the OECD has ignored research findings which indicate that countries in which adult education policies are informed by equity concerns have much more equitable outcomes than countries where policies are based on a market model. Growing evidence suggests that market-oriented policies may be ‘further deepening the gap between social groups whose unequal access to the knowledge economy has nothing to do with an ability to decode the alphabet’ (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010, p. 185). In this paper I reflect on what these changes mean for adult literacy educators.

Naming the gaps

The notion of a gap between policy and practice was introduced by Kell (2001b) in her description of how adult literacy work was reorganized in post-apartheid South Africa. Kell notes that informal programs that fostered competences were replaced by formal programs focused on asking learners to perform specific tasks. The educational middle class sponsors of literacy were supplanted by participants from the economic sector who relied heavily on ‘stale ‘bringing light to the darkness’ metaphors’ (p. 105). The newly-established ‘hyperpedagogised literacy’ drifted further and further from supporting learning related to ‘what goes on in [adult literacy learners’] everyday lives’ (p. 103), creating a widening gap between learners’ actual
literacy practices and those provided for in policy. Practitioners are caught in this gap.

Similar changes occurred in Canada during the 1990s; educators argue that current policies overlook the range of barriers faced by students attending adult literacy programs (Carpenter & Readman, 2004; Hodgkinson, 1998; Horsman, 1999) and express dismay that current policies seem to place higher priority on accounting and financial tracking than on ‘delivering literacy services’ (Crooks et al., 2008; Woodrow, 2006). In England and Northern Ireland, Hamilton (2008) asserts that practitioners are frustrated because dominant, institutional definitions of literacy are turning them into technicians and robbing them of agency. She notes a difference between less experienced tutors, who feel the lack of agency as ‘paperwork overload and contradictory demands,’ and more experienced ones who ‘interpret it as a real ethical undermining of their role which traditionally has been characterized by large amounts of ‘gift-time’ a pride in making the most of resources in a marginalized field and a bedrock commitment to social justice and the human rights of learners’ (p. 5).

Jackson (2005) notes that OECD surveys influenced policy changes in England, Australia the United States and Canada, and focuses on how the gap between policy and practice is being produced. She uses institutional ethnography to map how ‘literacy work is defined, organized and coordinated’ (p. 770) through reporting processes that give funding bodies ‘a particular ‘slice’ of the lived reality of literacy teaching and learning’ (p. 773). Jackson argues that the gap between policy and practice is ‘a systematic feature of a textually mediated mode of governance’ that translates ‘the messy details of peoples’ lives and learning…into standardised and objectified categories through which they can be counted and made administrable’ (p. 774). By ignoring ‘messy reality’, policies and reporting procedures create dilemmas and frustrations for workers who are caught between the ‘competing and sometimes conflicting interests [of]…funders and users of literacy services’ (p. 775). Perhaps historicising the immense power differentials between vernacular and official literacies can shed light on how systemic inequities, a strong feature of current ‘messy realities’, are reproduced.

**Historicizing the power differential between official and vernacular literacies**

I understand literacy as a key technology of processes of ‘modernisation’ and I take the perspective that colonial relations—and the epistemological hierarchies used to justify them—did not end with the formal end of colonialism. From this theoretical position I understand that literacy education has routinely been implicated in processes whereby dominant practices are imposed upon vernacular ones. This is not to say that all literacy campaigns operate in this manner: there have been successful campaigns aimed at strengthening and renewing vernacular literacies and language communities. What I am arguing is that there are suggestive parallels between the OECD literacy surveys and past projects of ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’. In particular I note that the OECD literacy surveys assume that
subjects require qualities similar to those that the civilizing mission aimed to develop in modern subjects, namely ‘hard work, discipline, curiosity, punctuality, honest dealing and taking control’ that can be used for the ‘accumulation and reinvestment of wealth…to anticipate and forecast future trends …[in] the drive for unbounded productivity and the provision of material abundance’ (Adas, 2004, p. 81).

In Canada, education was a key tool of colonization. Until the 1960s, indigenous children were removed from their families and communities and sent to residential schools where they were forbidden from speaking their languages and trained to become low-status workers in the emerging industrial economy (Battiste and Barman, 1995; George, 2001; Kempf, 2009). Dominant society has, very recently, begun to acknowledge the pivotal role of residential schools in colonization but public discussion of this history has not resulted in any structural changes. While adult educators stress the need to de-colonize understandings of indigenous literacies (Antone, Gamlin, & Provost-Turchetti, 2003; Balanoff & Chambers, 2005; George, 2001) the government continues to assert that too many indigenous people score below Level 3 in IALS terms and that indigenous people lack the ‘essential skills’ to thrive in the emerging knowledge economy. Analysis of income disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous people continue to focus on whether or not indigenous people are fluent in dominant literacy practices, even as reports acknowledge that close to ‘half of the wage gap’ is due to factors such as discrimination which ‘require further research’ (Kapsalis, 2006, p. 25).

In Canada, adult literacy policy is a relatively recent phenomenon: no jurisdiction had a strong history of supporting adult literacy work before the 1960s. Walter’s (2003) study of Frontier College, the longest-standing adult literacy program in Canada, revealed that Social Darwinism was central to its pedagogical approach in the nineteenth century. Decisions about which men were allowed to attend programs was based on racialized hierarchies of educable and uneducable ‘races’, and Frontier College instructors believed that their role was to ‘Christianize’ and ‘Canadianize’ students. Canada’s immigration policies historically encouraged immigration of low-status workers, and when immigration from non-European countries was expanded in the mid-twentieth century highly-educated racialized immigrants continued to be relegated to low-status, low-paying jobs. Current literacy policies based on the OECD survey findings may be operating as ‘racial projects’ (Shore, 2009) by carrying forward epistemological hierarchies from the colonial era and suppressing ‘recognition of the long arm of racialised phenotypes that anchor assumptions of competent citizenship’ (p. 93).

Between the 1960s and 1980s the federal government supported basic education up to secondary school equivalency as part of labour force training, prodded in part by findings that the Canadian labour force had a ‘low average education level…relative to other Western countries’ (Alden, 1982, p. 2). Support for the program ended in the mid-1970s when it became apparent that ‘training at the literacy level did not
reliably lead to people getting jobs or taking further training, and therefore did not serve the federal mandate for job training’ (Darville, 1992, p. 16). In this period charitable and community organizations scattered around the country became increasingly active in advocating for literacy ‘as a right, and as a means of participation in society (p. 18). By the late 1980s most provinces had begun to fund adult literacy programs; policies were premised on liberal assumptions that saw ‘illiteracy as a primary cause of poverty and unemployment, and correspondingly, [saw] adult basic education as a particularly effective anti-poverty strategy’ (Alden, 1982, p. 1). But statistics continue to show that acquisition of dominant literacies does not translate into higher incomes for women (Shalla & Schellenberg, 1998), for indigenous people (Kapsalis, 2006) or for racialized subjects (Arat-Koç, 2010; Colour of Justice, 2007). Within the OECD discourse of literacy as skills, these systemic inequities are made to disappear.

**The ‘doing good’ trap**

Alden (1982) notes that adult educators played key roles in advocating for literacy programs as solutions for poverty and social exclusion; he is critical of the fact that they did not examine the structural causes of marginalization. I would like to carry forward his findings by asking how a commitment to ‘doing good’ gets constructed, and how that desire to ‘do good’ gets used. In asking these questions I draw on scholarship about how subjects are formed within networks of power and knowledge, using Spivak’s (1993) suggestion that we consider ourselves as ‘being able to do something—only as you are able to make sense of it’ (p. 34).

To consider these questions I turn a recent study of white women development workers in Canada. Heron (2007) builds on critiques of development that foreground global and historical contexts, particularly ‘modernity’s enduring idea of progress as universally valued and the purview of the West/North’ (p. 36). Heron notes that feeling ‘entitle[d] and oblig[ed] to intervene so as to ameliorate the Earth and the lives of its human inhabitants’ are ‘important, racialized and self-affirming relational aspects of white middle-classness in the late twentieth century’ (p. 37). She asserts that when white women describe their passion for development work as motivated by social justice, they ‘construct [them]selves as moral subjects’ (p. 134) and turn away from their own position in relations of global domination.

**Between policy and vernacular literacies**

Adult literacy workers in Canada tend to be white, middle-class, middle-aged heterosexual women; they are, in most parts of the country, demographically different from students who attend the programs. What does it mean that they are outsiders to the students’ vernacular practices? The frustration that practitioners feel in inhabiting the gap between policy and practice is quite different from that of colonized subjects whose literacies and languages are erased or occluded by the imposition of dominant literacies and forms of education (Franchetto, 2008; Ho'omanawanui, 2004; Thiong’o, 1986; Thomas, 2007). As foreigners to the
students’ practices, do adult literacy teachers believe their role is to support learners in acquiring the dominant literacy as an additional set of practices? In ESOL training in Canada teachers are expected to consider how language teaching is connected to acquisition of cultural norms; they are asked to think about whether their aim is to assimilate students or to offer language tools the students can use to function within the dominant cultural and linguistic context. In adult literacy training, on the other hand, these discussions do not occur. Materials for paid and volunteer practitioners routinely define literacy in terms set by the OECD surveys and reiterate the claims that a quarter of adults ‘do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the demands of modern life’ (Community Literacy of Ontario, 2009). By asserting that learners’ vernacular literacies are not acceptable, perhaps policies deprive practitioners of language to describe the work they do supporting learners to negotiate diverse literacy practices. Perhaps if adult literacy workers paid more attention to how the OECD discourse has colonized other ways of knowing and other literacies the field could imagine how to avoid being trapped between vernacular and policy literacies.

**Between policy and structural inequalities**

I am curious about what role assumptions about the benefits of ‘progress’ play in the OECD literacy discourse and in ideas that maintain racialised hierarchies. In the current market model of education, literacy ‘takes on the commodity form, gaining exchange value through equivalences’ (Kell, 2001a, p. 206). Do policies that treat literacy as a form of currency make it impossible for practitioners, and other social justice advocates, to talk about the fact that this currency does not have equal exchange value for all users? Heron argues that in white settler colonies such as Canada discourses of development occur within a ‘national story…of colonial and imperial innocence’ (Heron, 2007, p. 37). Her work allows me to ask how Canada’s national story of innocence might make it difficult for white subjects to see how we are implicated in practices of domination, including practices that entrench particular literacy practices as ‘normal’ and more valuable than other practices. A national story of innocence makes it difficult to examine how social exclusions are produced, and how each of us participates in or benefits from these exclusions. The national story of innocence may also explain why so many white literacy workers believe that the government would, and should, enact policies that support literacy work as a social justice endeavour.

**Naming the traps**

To understand how policies reproduce systemic inequalities and reduce the spaces in which adult literacy educators can act, I draw on Foucault’s insights about modern power. He uses the term bio-power to name processes that ‘brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 143). He argues that capitalism would not have emerged ‘without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to
economic processes’ (pp. 140-141). New forms of power emerged that could make optimal productive use of the population; these forms of power relied on norms and hierarchies to ‘distribut[e] the living in the domain of value and utility’ (pp. 144).

Perhaps measures of literacy, such as the OECD surveys, are being used to articulate norms and to reassert hierarchies among subjects in the interests of maximizing the productive potential of the population as a whole. Taking this perspective makes it possible to see how market logics have been used over and against effective pedagogy. It also reveals how policies framed on the level of aggregations cannot but ignore ‘the particular interests and aspirations’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 100) of the individual subjects who struggle with dominant print culture.

Around the world, adult educators need to find creative new ways to highlight global inequities in ‘economies of literacy’ (Blommaert, 2008) and to unsettle long-standing patterns of dominance and exclusion. We can start by asking about the origin of our belief that literacy will lead to social inclusion, and that government policies will address inequities. We can also ask how we ourselves benefit from social relations that privilege specific culture- and class-specific literacy practices. But perhaps we also need to ask how we can work towards a world in which it is much more common to ask whose literacies are de-valued, and why.

References


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