Practising equity in a policy-for-profit world: international perspectives on adult literacy

Introduction

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This symposium brings together theoretical and empirical perspectives on shifts in adult literacy education in Scotland, England, Portugal and Canada over the past two decades, noting the intersections and conflicts between theory, policy and practice in these contexts and paying particular attention to how recent policies have affected teaching and research for equity and access to learning. The symposium includes presentations describing four different adult literacy campaigns: three national policy frameworks informed by the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey, and one based on a theoretical understanding of literacy as situational and context-bound. The symposium will illustrate both differences and striking similarities in the four contexts. Presenters will highlight the various ways in which theory, practice and policy are interrelated; they will also discuss what opportunities exist for issues of equity, access and social justice in each context.

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’—(Scribner and Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995; Barton et al., 1994; Breier and Prinsloo, 1996; Barton and Hamilton, 1998) yet this shift in thinking has rarely penetrated policy development. At the same time as theoretical understandings of literacies have become more expansive, policies that inform literacy education have become increasingly narrow (Sandlin and Clarke, 2009; Weiner, 2005; Kell, 2001; Shore, 2009, Hamilton, 2001). During the past three decades, for example, the OECD has carved out and steadfastly maintained its pivotal position in adult literacy policy development using large-scale international literacy surveys. The implementation of the surveys was a response to ‘a revival of human capital asset thinking’ (Lo Bianco and Wickert, 2001) and international comparisons of adult literacy scores have become a litmus test of national adult literacy policies and ‘evidence’ of a nation’s capacity to compete (Darville, 1999; Hamilton, 2001; Jackson and Slade 2008). This symposium will consider the range of responses from policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to this environment, highlighting the complexities and tensions. This symposium will
also offer alternative perspectives and strategies—including international collaboration—that could reinvigorate the field.

References


Shore, S (2009) 'Literacy surveys as racial projects: contemporary debates about literacy and skill development', in M Weil, L Koski and L Mjelde (eds.) *Knowing work: the social relations of working and knowing*, Bern and New York, Peter Lang.


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