Searching for Alberta’s literacy policy, if found what difference would it make?

Audrey Gardner, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

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After years of adult literacy practitioners calling for a literacy policy the Alberta provincial government in Canada produced ‘Living Literacy: A literacy framework for Alberta’s next generation economy’ (2009). This ‘framework for action’ (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 1) has become an influential text in the dominant discourse on adult literacy in Alberta. It is frequently referenced in literacy presentations, reports and conversations in government, adult education institutions and literacy organizations. Ackland (2006) describes discourse as ‘a shifting representation of social reality, both a cause and an effect of ideological change’ (p. 37). As a discursive text Living Literacy presents an explanation of what literacy is, a rationale for why it matters and a vision for ‘Albertans (to) have the literacy competencies to participate fully and successfully in living, learning, and work’ (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 6). It outlines priority actions including goals, indicators and outcomes. I contend that Living Literacy has come to be perceived as a policy text even though a specific policy is not explicit in it or in relation to it. In this paper I will investigate how the Living Literacy text is interpreted in the current dominant discourse in Alberta.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) grounded in social theories is concerned with connections between social relations of power and use of language. Fairclough has written extensively on CDA and states ‘Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations they construct or ‘constitute’ them’ (1992, p. 3). He provides a three-dimensional theoretical and methodological framework and notes ‘Any discursive event (i.e. any instance of discourse) is seen as being simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 4). A thorough analysis of the Living Literacy document is beyond the scope of this paper however I will endeavor to analyze one discursive event, one piece of text in the Living Literacy and its meaning in all three dimensions of CDA. A discursive event is an instance of language use and its connection with social relations of power (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 2003).

The discursive event is the specific use of ‘level 3’ from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) measurement scale. In Living Literacy the term ‘level 3’ is
used seven times in the 15-page document. One usage of ‘level 3’ reflects a threshold to measure literacy by: ‘Individuals at level 3 are viewed as having skills adequate to cope with demands of today’s society’ (p. 2). ‘Level 3’ is also presented as a goal for increasing literacy: ‘More Albertans have a minimum of level 3 on international adult literacy measures’ (p. 6). A third example of how the language of ‘level 3’ is used in this document is as a targeted outcome: ‘By 2020, 70% of Albertans will have a minimum of level 3 on international adult literacy measures’ (p. 3).

The phrase ‘on international adult literacy measures’ refers to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (Murray et al, 2005). The overall purpose of IALS is to inform government policy that will build human capital and strengthen national economic competitiveness. Living Literacy can be viewed as an IALS text as it reinforces the notion that literacy is an economic object. IALS was initiated in the mid-1990’s by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in partnership with Statistics Canada and the Educational Testing Services in the United States of America. Two surveys have been completed to date and a third the Programme for Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC) is being launched in 2011. In Alberta the government has coordinated provincial participation in all three surveys.

IALS (meaning all three surveys) is much more than a measurement instrument, it is a distinct conceptual framework that has created new knowledge about adult literacy in Canada. How IALS is taken up in Living Literacy and how Living Literacy is taken up in the adult literacy field in Alberta represent discursive practices ‘where relations of power are enacted’ (Wickert, 1991, p. 50). CDA describes discursive practices as processes in which written and spoken texts are produced, distributed, circulated and consumed that influence and are influenced by contextual power dynamics (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000).

In regards to CDA’s third dimension discourse as social practice refers to what Darville (1999) calls a ‘literacy regime’ (p. 274) and Fairclough describes as ‘order of discourse within hegemonic processes’ (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449). Discursive social practice represents IALS as the only story of literacy (Hamilton, 2001), and Living Literacy is most likely positioned as discursive practice within this dynamic hegemonic process. It could be argued that questioning the purpose of Living Literacy, including the discursive practice of it as a policy text, is resisting the hegemony of IALS. Blommaert and Bulcaen (2001) note ‘discourse is an opaque power in modern societies and CD aims to make it more visible and transparent.’ (p. 448). The simultaneity of the CDA three-dimensional framework challenges us to address the textually mediated social inequality, which can be as simple as questioning if a government document is a policy.
References


Murray S T, Clermont Y and Binkley M (2005), Measuring adult literacy and life skills: new frameworks for assessment, Ottawa, Statistics Canada.


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