Analysing adult literacy policy and equity in England using a literacy as social practice perspective

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The UK national governments operate within layers of international policy. Currently the most influential of these are the OECD and its regional partners in the European Union (Henry et al, 2001; Rivzi and Lingard, 2009). A challenge for literacy policy analysis, therefore, is to identify the ways in which the effects of global policy regimes play out across different countries, teasing out specific, local characteristics from the broader layers of international interventions. A number of specific features in the UK literacy policy environment have mediated the effects of global and European discourses and in this paper I will describe this interplay, showing the ‘two-way’ flow between national and international influences that Urry (2003) describes in his discussions of glocalisation.

The paper focuses specifically on issues of access and equity in recent English adult literacy policy. It goes on to look at how the theoretical perspective of literacy as part of social practice might support an equity agenda in the context of powerful neoliberal discourses.

The OECD and the European Union broadly share a view of countries, and their citizens, competing within a global marketplace and they concur on the importance of developing policy indicators that can measure performance across nations. The EU promotes the harmonization of educational and training qualifications to facilitate the movement of labour across member countries. This entails developing common measures of achievement (Grek, 2009) and this has been reflected in continuing efforts since the late 1980s in the UK to produce a standardised national framework for adult literacy and numeracy qualifications that can be calibrated against the national vocational qualifications framework (NVQF), school measures of achievement and the levels of the International Adult Literacy Survey (Hamilton and Hillier, 2007). Another important concern in the European Union which can be traced in local policy is that of citizenship (Dwyer, 2004). This both promotes the idea of people belonging to national states within a broader European formation within which communalities of interest can be built on, but also involves protecting the boundaries of those states from unwanted migrant populations.

I will offer some observations about the effects of neoliberal globalisation policy on equity and access for adult literacy learners in England drawing attention especially
to four aspects of provision: (1) the measurement and commodification of literacy skills (Hamilton, 2001); (2) the increasing vocationalisation of provision (see DIUS; 2009) (3) the ways in which funding favors those nearest to the threshold of success (the 'low hanging fruit') (see Bathmaker 2007) and (4) divisive approaches to language education and migration which has resulted in restricting access to ESOL even though it has been classified as part of basic skills provision (Cooke and Simpson, 2009).

Literacy Studies sees literacy as part of social practice. The meanings and values of literacy are contingent and situated, shifting according to context, purpose and social relations (Barton et al 2000; Street and Lefstein, 2008). Scholars of literacy studies have concentrated on describing the vernacular, everyday practices of reading and writing. They view institutions as selecting and privileging certain practices and policy regimes are one example of this. I will argue that a social practice approach to literacy research can support equity and access through the insistence on diversity which is built into this perspective; by deconstructing the power relations within which literacy is learned and used and by contesting, through its chosen methodologies, the dominant technical/rationalist approach to literacy and policy.

References


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