Contradictory discourses: the politicization of the ‘local’ and access to literacy education

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In 2009-2010, sixty-three adult literacy educators in British Columbia participated in a web-survey designed to gauge interest in a certificate in literacy education proposed by Simon Fraser University. Responses suggested that professional development for adult literacy educators must be studied in the context of broader policies of access and equity in literacy learning. This paper thus reports on a slice of the survey findings, suggesting that ‘contradictory discourses’ (DeVault, 2008) and policies that ostensibly permit greater local control and agency to ‘meet community needs’, are narrowing access to literacy education for low-income British Columbian adults with little formal education. These competing processes are not accidental, nor inconsequential: Attending to how local literacy work is coordinated extra-locally (Smith, 2005), can make visible patterns of inequality, as well as opportunities to interrupt these patterns.

Local contexts and universalizing texts
Processes of inequality, like literacies, are best illuminated through attention to the local. Negotiating the discursive terrain of IALS and OECD, survey respondents observe that the status of ‘low literacy’ or a ‘Level One or Two’ learner (OECD and Statistics Canada 2005) has become a marker for decisions about access to learning resources among colleges, employment agencies, school districts and welfare offices. This plays out differently across geographical, cultural, social and economic contexts. For example, an adult who experiences reading and writing difficulties as a newcomer to Vancouver and to Canada, who is not literate in her first language, or who perhaps speaks a language for which there is no writing system, faces learning challenges and instructional needs that are distinct in many ways from a middle-aged adult native speaker of English, living in rural BC, who completed Grade 10 twenty years before, and is returning to school to qualify for career and job training programs. The learning conditions for each of these adults, the rules governing access to education while receiving social assistance or employment insurance benefits (Butterwick & White, 2006), even the extent to which each can travel to their classes using public transit, access the Internet, or find a qualified educator, varies widely, and shapes fundamentally access to ‘powerful literacies’ (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett, 2001).
In contrast, institutions that govern adult literacy work in BC use universalizing metaphors to describe adult literacy work, and adult learners, in ways that mask these local problems of access. Here, an entire province can be ‘the most literate jurisdiction on the continent’ (Government of BC, 2006), 40% of adults are said to be unable to participate in their community effectively (OECD and Statistics Canada, 2005), in spite of their actual competencies or learning needs, and whether they struggle with literacy, or with learning English as an additional language (Jackson, 2008). Workers are said to require ‘essential skills’ with apparent consequences for the productivity of the entire province or country, regardless of the nature of work available or the social and economic policies that make workplace participation possible (Jackson, 2005). Indeed, as a respondent in the present study suggested, universalized discourses can be more powerful in shaping literacy education than the actualities of literacy teaching and learning: ‘There’s a disconnect between what adult students want/need and what the Ministry ‘knows’ about these students and us, the instructors.’

Expanding views of literacy and narrowing opportunities for learning
This disconnection provides a backdrop for three policy processes that produce inequalities in access to literacy resources in local settings. These processes are seemingly uncoordinated, but have in common a principle of ‘local control’; the delegation of educational decision-making power to individual actors and institutions. For example, several respondents drew attention to the effects of the Literacy Now community planning approach to literacy (Literacy Now, 2007). Here, community groups and school districts develop priorities for literacy programming tied to local needs and interests such as food security, computer literacy, school readiness, and so on. While the goal was to respond to local issues and to ‘reach the hard to reach’, decisions for literacy programming were made by local stakeholders who did not always attend to low income adults’ access to literacy resources, including high quality instruction. As one respondent concluded, ‘I believe when we began funding these (community literacy) programs, we all thought the target to be adults who are not able to read (...) but this is not always so.’

Secondly, respondents suggest that the needs of adult literacy learners with learning difficulties, or little formal education background are not adequately met because few literacy educators feel they have the skills to support these learners, and accessible and relevant training is not normally available. The consequence is a ‘two-tier’ system, as this educator observed:

There are two streams of literacy in adult learning: the ABE model wherein native speakers or higher level ESL learners are honing reading and writing skills, then there are new immigrants and low wage workers who come with little or no education history and they need settlement, classroom readiness and support packaged into one program. For the latter, there is very little out there in terms of training or resources.
Thirdly, budget constraints in colleges and universities limit access to literacy education, just as they eliminate employment opportunities for adult literacy educators. For example, the higher the formal qualifications of adult literacy educators, the less likely they are to be employed by colleges because they are ‘too expensive.’ Similarly, educators working in colleges that have converted to universities under a new provincial initiative, find themselves over-qualified to work with ‘literacy level’ students, but under-qualified to work as university instructors, who now require doctorate degrees. As one respondent explained, ‘With the movement away from colleges to universities in BC, plus the push toward higher degrees in order to be hired into universities, instructors in Level One and Level Two are becoming marginalized, and those positions, when available, are not always being filled with the right ‘type’ of instructor.’

Missing among efforts to provide local control over access to literacy is an equity lens, embedded in a stable and integrated provincial policy framework. Currently, seemingly uncoordinated processes produce a unified effect; indeed, what researchers and practitioners (Walker, 2008; Butterwick & White, 2006, Jackson, 2008) had predicted: British Columbians with low levels of formal education and income have the least access to instruction in the most powerful literacies, from the most experienced literacy educators.

References

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