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Literacy, Educational Disadvantage and Education Policy

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Improving literacy outcomes for all students, particularly those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, is a complex social, economic and political issue that challenges politicians and educators alike. The existence of unequal outcomes of schooling in Australia has become public knowledge as, for the past two years at least, the media has engaged in a series of extended attacks on schools, their work and student results. Given that literacy is now perceived as an essential skill for participation in modern society, it is important to establish what 'literacy' is (or 'literacies' are), why differences in literacy capabilities occur, and what roles schools play in shifting cultural and social values. My research explores the relationship between literacy research, literacy policy and classroom practice; in particular how policy is shaped and interpreted as its design and implementation move from the education bureaucracy to the classroom. My investigation draws on the discourses of production, distribution and consumption associated with literacy reform in Education Queensland. *Literate Futures* is the case study for my research.

What do we know about literacy?

The media perspective...

The demand for improved literacy standards has placed teachers under the spotlight as it is they who appear responsible for the problem of falling standards. For the teaching profession it is a serious matter that the public equates low scores with poor instruction and that the media continues to promote this view. Sustained and aggressive attacks on teachers have inadvertently supported the adhoc nature of government forays into curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In Australia, subject English, History, the teaching of reading, and grammar have systematically been targeted. The media, in particular *The Australian*, through articles by 'education experts' such as Kevin Donnelly and Luke Slattery, has marginalised the voices of teachers and cast doubt on state education authorities; thereby fuelling support for federal intervention.

The seriousness of these sustained attacks prompted Associate Professor Ilana Snyder of Monash University to write her text, *The Literacy Wars* (2008, p. 9) in an endeavour to give the public access to a source that provided a more balanced view. Snyder explains that effective teaching of reading includes both phonic and whole-word approaches, and that teachers make informed choices in the use of strategies to best meet the needs, capabilities and experiences of students. To date, there is no one 'best method' of teaching reading; but conclusive evidence that effective practice includes a range and balance of approaches. Snyder (p. 6) argues that the debates are rarely just about literacy and ways to teach reading; they are related to broader cultural and social issues, and to political forces. It is not surprising that Snyder's efforts to provide the public with an explanation of the controversy that continues to fuel the literacy debate resulted in another media attack in which she was described as 'barking mad'.

Government perspectives...

In the 21st century knowledge equates with wealth. Over the past two decades the fear of economic decline resulting from the rise of neo-liberalism and globalisation has led governments across the globe to adopt more interventionist approaches to education, particularly in the fields of literacy and numeracy. In many countries data, particularly that from international testing (PISA), has justified the implementation of national curricular and testing programs to improve literacy standards. This take-over of education by governments has marginalised academic discourses of learning that valued and took into account students' abilities, interests and needs by prioritising standards and accountabilities from schools, the teachers and the students. Associated accusations that schools and teachers are underperforming undermine school based curriculum, teacher confidence and public trust.

Governments in both Great Britain and The United States have adopted interventionist approaches to improve data. The British National Curriculum, incorporating an enforced literacy hour, and the USA's No Child Left Behind policy have been quick to attribute low levels of literacy to teacher capability. In these countries responses to this perceived 'deficit' in teacher expertise has included mandating phonic based reading programs, times for and methods of instruction, and

intensive testing. Underpinning this approach is the belief that success in early reading transform into success throughout the years of schooling. But PISA data consistently shows that high-stakes testing, league-tables and scripted curricula have failed to achieve top rankings internationally (OECD, 2005). The Year 4/5 slump remains evident; as does falling engagement in secondary education.

Interviews with teachers in both countries reveal that the take-over of the core business of schools by governments has seriously affected teacher morale. Government intervention has positioned teachers as technicians, denying them their professional responsibility to develop, teach and assess in ways targeted to meet the capabilities, interests and needs of their students (Lofty, 2006). In Britain there is less monitoring of and greater freedom for teachers in successful schools whereas teachers in disadvantaged communities, who continuously deal with more difficult student groups, also endure greater scrutiny. According to Ball (2003) the focus on 'performativity' has caused the demise of teacher professionalism and is producing a 'crisis' of a different order. Teacher employment data, particularly in the UK, confirms the destructive effects of policies that do not acknowledge and value the role of the teacher.

In Australia the Howard government responded to our threatening 'crises' at both national and state levels by initiating the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading. The research, conducted by Ken Rowe, recommended that teachers should be equipped with teaching strategies based on findings from rigorous, evidence-based research; that teachers should provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction; and an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies (Australian Government, 2005). These findings endorse and validate the ever-expanding national literacy and numeracy testing program and the development of national curricula. The Rudd government's adoption of similar approaches continues to perpetuate the 'failing schools' and 'failing teacher' solution.

It is concerning that Australian federal governments appear keen to adopt practices similar to those taken up by Great Britain and the United States. There is a remarkable resemblance between the Howard Government's approach and the No Child Left

Behind Act which focused on making schools accountable for results, giving States and communities more freedom in distributing federal funds, using educational methods with demonstrated efficacy, and giving parents more options regarding school choice (Poyner & Wolfe, 2005). Likewise, America's National Reading Panel and Australia's National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy both reduced effective reading instruction to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (Australian Government, 2005; Poyner & Wolfe, 2005; Rowe, 2006, p. 100).

The research findings...

Rapid changes in technology have historically brought about a focus on literacy. According to Graff (1995) governments across the globe have been challenged to improve the literate capabilities of citizens since the fifteenth century and the current global focus on literacy can be considered as yet another of the on-going waves of literacy reform that have taken place over the centuries.

What may be said of literacy campaigns is that, both historically and comparatively, they have formed part of larger transformations in society. These transformations have attempted to integrate individuals into more comprehensive political and/or religious communities. They have involved the mobilisation of large numbers of learners and teachers by centralising authorities, who have used elements of both compulsion and social pressure to propagate a particular doctrine. (Graff, 1995, p. 270)

Whilst at the cause level contemporary reform efforts can be explained from this perspective, the effects of practices influenced by the significant ideological shift associated with the global trend towards neoliberalism remain concerning.

The focus on achievement data under neoliberal approaches has silenced social justice and equity issues in education, yet there exists a strong correlation between test data and socio-economic status that confirms the relationship between school success and poverty (Pegg & Panizzon, 2007; Singh & Taylor, 2007; Timperley & Parr, Fall 2007). Many governments continue to ignore this. A growing body of research is challenging the approaches adopted by the United States and Great Britain as reports show that the reforms adopted have consistently failed to make a difference in disadvantaged communities and that decisions made with regard to resources for

NCLB were driven by factors other than quality (Poyner & Wolfe, 2005). Even though the Coleman Report, released in America in 1966, linked non-school factors such as poverty, community attitudes and low educational level of parents to the verbal and nonverbal skills that disadvantaged minority children the United States still does not adequately compensate for nonschool achievement factors (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006). This is a finding that United States researchers have been trying to address in spite of the overwhelming belief that the source of persistent achievement gaps is entirely within the schools (Micklos, 2008, p. 5).

In Queensland, the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study found that students in secondary schools in low socio-economic areas and with higher percentages of Indigenous students are exposed to lower levels of productive pedagogy than other students (Queensland Government, 2001, p. 8). Because teaching and leading in these schools is difficult they are more liable to have high staff turnover, high numbers of beginning teachers and first-time leaders, high student mobility and increasing numbers of students with special needs (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006, p. 194). Recently, following release of national testing data the Queensland Minister for Education, Training and the Arts, Mr Welford, attributed the poor performance of Queensland's students to the number of students from remote and Indigenous communities (22 Sept 2008).

In Great Britain and the United States approaches to literacy reform have been based on the assumption that low levels of literacy are a reflection of teacher capability. Responses to this perceived 'deficit' in teacher expertise include mandating phonics, times for and methods of instruction, and intensive testing. By comparison research has shown that where coherence within and between the multiple levels of the schooling and educational administration systems is combined with a focus on evidence-informed inquiry into effectiveness at each level of the system improved outcomes can be achieved (Timperley & Parr, Fall 2007). At the classroom level improvement for all students begins with teachers exercising their professional wisdom to make links between home and school discourses and establish high expectations for all students. The sustainability of improvement requires teachers to engage in professional learning that is directly linked to the context in which they work.

Serious attempts to address the issues associated with culturally diverse communities in New Zealand have led researchers to believe that policy implementation requires policy formulation to be informed by a more detailed understanding of the local conditions which policy is designed to influence (Timperley & Robinson, 1997). Complex reform requires processes that allow on-going dialogue about the beliefs and practices informing the reform and the localised practices that must be taken up in order to make a difference. At the school level improving student outcomes requires alignment of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy; achieved through teachers working collaboratively to improve student outcomes. Literacy is central to this and successful literacy reform is influenced by the ways in which teachers think and talk about their work and their students. Global data and research consistently confirm that it is the quality of the teaching that makes the greatest difference. Finland's success as measured by PISA has been attributed to funding teacher quality rather than national testing programs. If teachers are to confidently manage the learning needs of all students for life in an increasingly complex world, then reform must be built on data and evidence drawn from the field.

Sustainable improvement for all students requires teachers to make links between home and school discourses; align curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; teach explicitly and establish high expectations for all students (Department of Education, 2001; Mc Naughton, 2002). It is this capacity that constitutes the professional wisdom of the competent teacher. *Literate Futures* stressed the importance of whole school planning and the importance of teachers working and learning together through a focus on the students within their school, thereby building teacher competence. The required whole school literacy planning and implementation strategy was termed a 'living' document; as it was to change and grow as the school refined and expanded its capacity to provide for the community it served. The processes involved in *Literate Futures* supported the professional autonomy of schools.

The field of research into policy is rich in stories of frustration and failure. Principally this is because major reform is politically driven and as a result the timelines are too short for sufficient attention to matters of quality (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992, p. 2). As a result it is easy for researchers and commentators i.e. newspapers and politicians to

blame the participants for failure to take up the challenge. There is no doubting that schools do struggle with change and reforms and do make mistakes. Bowe et al. (p. 3) suggest that there are political expectations and ideological projects that are destructive of values and relationships, and which undermine and divert schools from their ability and capacity to cope. Over the past two decades an avalanche of initiatives and policies has descended on schools in Queensland and in schools across the globe. The complexity of school reform through the process of policy implementation has become a focus of extensive educational research as the process of achieving success remains a disputed field.

What was Literate Futures?

Literate Futures, implemented during the period 2001-2004, was one of the first and most significant reforms of the new millennium in Queensland. The phenomenon of the 'millennium moment' provided an impetus for societies to become more forward looking, searching for fresh ideas. Consideration of how business and lifestyles could change in the coming decades exposed the gap between school literacy practices and the rapidly increasing use of information communication technologies in the world outside of the classroom. In order to embed new technologies and new workforce competencies in education in Queensland, the state government released *QSE-2010: A Future Strategy*. This document projected a view of the contribution of government schools to the Smart State over the first decade of the third millennium (Queensland Government, 1999). *Literate Futures* was one of a number of strategic initiatives designed to reform our schools, to fast-track Queensland's entry into the technological world of the 21st century (Department of Education, 2000).

In order to incorporate the potential of the rapidly expanding field of communication technologies into school practice, *Literate Futures* (Department of Education, 2000, p. 9) provided a new definition of literacy:

Literacy is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia.

This definition moved beyond the traditional and simplistic understanding of literacy as a set of print-based skills for reading and writing learned in the early years to an understanding of literacy as a social practice. To successfully accomplish this shift in

understanding a broader definition of literacy, teachers, administrators and researchers into education were challenged to ‘begin a rigorous and ongoing debate over which repertoires of literacy practices students will need in the economies and cultures, communities and institutions of the new Queensland’ (Department of Education, 2000, p. 9). This definition acknowledged that literacy is not neutral but shapes and is shaped by the culture, politics and economics of the community in which we live. According to Luke and Freebody (1999) literacy education is not about skill development nor deep competence. It is about the institutional shaping of social practices and cultural resources; about inducting successive generations into particular cultural, normative ways of handling texts; and about access to technologies and artefacts, and to the social institutions where these tools and artefacts are used.

Literate Futures priority areas were student diversity, whole-school programs and community partnerships, the teaching of reading and future literacies. These priorities were identified after significant consultation with schools and communities across the State. The value of this preliminary research can not be underestimated as it gave those leading the reform a clear picture of contemporary practices and immediate needs. Central to this reform was acknowledgement of the diversity of communities in which state schools were situated. Because of this the first requirement of each school was to draw up a whole school literacy strategy that required school leaders and teachers to identify and detail the cultural, social, economic and geographic factors influencing learning. Schools were then expected to analyse practice, identify what they wanted to achieve, and develop a plan for implementation. Whilst this may seem a logical approach, it presented major challenges to schools. In the early years where there was a concentration of teachers with extensive knowledge of reading pedagogy and who engaged in moderation processes through the Year 2 net, there was considerable uptake. This was significantly diminished in the upper primary years and almost non-existent in secondary schools. The isolationist culture of traditional schooling was no doubt a contributing factor in the failure of middle years’ and secondary teachers to take up the opportunity afforded by this reform.

Literate Futures was not meant to be a standard compliance process nor was it KLA specific. It was a reform that required an analysis of school practices and beliefs about

standards and targets, assessment and monitoring of students, classroom organisation and pedagogy, intervention and special needs support, leadership, coordination and professional learning and strategic community partnerships. In order to address these effectively, all teachers and administrators needed to engage in the process of building an understanding of the community they served and in developing a shared vision of the repertoire of literacy practices that would best serve the students needs, both in school and for their future. It was a big ask of schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities, to identify and address the institutional inequalities that were embedded in the culture of schooling and to come up with ways of addressing these.

Literate Futures did not blame teachers for falling literacy results nor did it provide a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to literacy reform but promoted practices that catered for the diversity of communities served by state schools. It was argued that ‘best practice’ was to be found in our schools and that the way forward required implementing processes that would allow competent teachers to share their practice with others. To facilitate this, 21 Learning and Development Centres (LDCs) were established across the state. Their first duty was to assist schools with the development and implementation of their Whole School Literacy Plans. These facilities were co-ordinated by experienced teachers who had credibility in the field from which each was drawn. The operations of the LDCs were managed, usually by an administrator of the school in which they were situated. In many areas the LDC co-ordinator was a primary/early years’ teacher. Some regions made the role a shared one and included both primary and secondary co-ordinators. As major providers of professional learning, the LDCs were expected to become self-funding within the three year period.

What has been learned from the Literate Futures experience?

Although *Literate Futures* drew on the most up-to-date research and was led by world class academics, it did not succeed in bringing about consistent improvement in the literacy outcomes of Queensland’s state primary school students. Data shows improvement in Year 3 reading results in 2004, but there is insufficient evidence to attribute this to one factor. Those in Queensland who were involved closely with this reform will affirm that *Literate Futures* was a major leap forward; both in terms of

understanding reform and in process. However, there were many in schools who had little engagement; some none. In schools where there was strong curriculum leadership *Literate Futures* was taken up with some degree of enthusiasm. Such schools, predominantly primary schools, had access to an LDC; or had a staff member skilled in the teaching of reading or with prior experience in leading professional development. Those working in the field found that there was little understanding of what the teaching of reading involved, no common understanding of practices such as shared reading or guided reading, and no shared metalanguage for the teaching of reading. This has been identified as an issue for teacher training institutions.

It was assumed that the effective principal, supported by a literacy teacher or team, could assess the current capabilities of students and teachers, and together plan a professional development program that assisted teachers achieve the goals the school established. However, Queensland's principals were not prepared for such a role. The Leading Schools Project, introduced in 1997, had situated principals of larger schools as managers – not Head Teachers (Department of Education, 1998). This placed the focus of their work on budgets and Annual Operational Plans rather than the curriculum and classroom practice. As most secondary schools were part of the Leading Schools initiative where the work of the principal was not about pedagogy, the hierarchical structure of secondary school leadership was not able to match with the demands of this reform. Furthermore, LDCs provided limited guidance and resources to secondary schools. Many of the LDC coordinators came from primary backgrounds where Reading Recovery had dominated approaches to improving reading outcomes.

A number of significant factors contributed to the lack of response by secondary schools to *Literate Futures*. Secondary principals did not see themselves as literacy experts but saw literacy as someone else's work. In regions where there was not strong leadership from the District Office, principals were not alerted to the significance of the reform; it was one of many and schools took up those with which they felt most competent. Lack of accountability allowed this to happen. Although schools were required to produce a Whole School Literacy Plan, it was seen as nothing more than a compliance document. The traditional practice of schools sharing programs meant that Whole School Literacy Plans were recycled among schools even

though it was inappropriate as each school was required to develop its own site specific profile and vision. In all schools the pace of engagement with *Literate Futures* was hampered by delays in the production and distribution of resources and by the simultaneous roll out of numerous other initiatives, including outcomes based syllabi for all Key Learning Areas.

In my research interviewees consistently comment on the inability of schools to undertake such reform single-handedly. All identify the need for site-based expertise, whether it was an LDC coordinator or a consultant who was involved over a period of time. Because only half the recommended number of LDCs was ever established, many school had no engagement with LDCs at all. Of those who did many regretted their closure at the end of 2004 as it was becoming increasingly evident that this structure had the potential to support teachers across the diversity of communities in Queensland. Many of the coordinators used the FLIP model involving coaching and feedback to support teacher learning. This approach is repeatedly identified as a preferred model for refining teacher practice as it involves teachers demonstrating their learning within the context of their classroom. There remains reluctance for engagement with the CD ROM as it is difficult to navigate and on-line learning is not considered as effective as face-to-face methods of professional development.

Literate Futures showed that large scale school and education reform requires leadership and time. From his work with government, Levin (2008) found that politicians are influenced more by what people believe to be true than by evidence and experience, and that evidence and experience are not enough to drive decisions and may be among the least important factors. This corroborates with the political experiences of Luke (2005). Levin further believes that, while governments do attempt to shape, as well as respond to public opinion, they are particularly sensitive to issues that are taken up in the media. Governments are primarily concerned with remaining in power and keeping voters on side. Given that many who work in education bureaucracies were more conscious of the media's sustained attacks on literacy standards and teachers than on the research influencing literacy reform, it is understandable that a reform of this magnitude in a field of considerable public interest met with opposition within the government bureaucracy.

In Allan Luke's auto-ethnography on life as Deputy Director-General of Education, he describes the grounds for bureaucratic decision making at senior policy meetings as precedent, political, fiscal, evidence and philosophy. Luke noted that the latter two were invoked the least and, during his time in the bureaucracy, this was a common pattern in such meetings (2005). *Literate Futures* again exposed the failure of the Education bureaucracy to develop and sustain processes that lead to measurable improvement in literacy results. Although led by respected academics and researchers, and funded commensurably, the processes followed and time lines demanded resulted in little gain for our most disadvantaged students.

Although there were many issues with the implementation process, *Literate Futures* has contributed significantly to literacy research. The practice of starting with an analysis of the current context, as done by Luke and Freebody, has been taken up by other researchers as it supports the focus on evidence. *Literate Futures* highlighted the need for school reform to be linked to sound research and showed that strong leadership requires knowledge of both content and process. This leadership is essential at all levels from central office, through district offices, in schools and in classrooms. Most significantly *Literate Futures* exposed the conflict that occurs when government bureaucracies focus on time and money rather than the complexity of the reform. This reform showed that, although traditional structures and approaches were inadequate for the task at hand, significant gains in understanding were achieved.

It is essential to learn more about policy implementation in order to address complex issues in education. The collective wisdom of those who tackled literacy through this approach provides a rich source of data at a number of levels and it is from the personal stories of those involved that I draw my data.

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