Recontextualisation as a framework for understanding relationships among literacy research, policy and practice

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Abstract
This paper examines the nexus between literacy research, policy and practice from a Bernsteinian perspective. There has been increasing concern about incongruent relationships among literacy research, policy and practice as evidenced in recent debates about what counts as a legitimate model of literacy pedagogy. Whilst documents such as the Teaching Reading Report have aimed at establishing priorities for literacy teaching and research, the recommendations address only limited aspects of literacy education and do not provide a sufficiently comprehensive basis for policy development and classroom practice. There appears to be little alignment between most research being conducted by the researchers, the policies being proposed by commonwealth and state governments, and what happens in classrooms.

Bernstein’s theory of the pedagogic device, and more specifically, his concept of recontextualisation, provides a means of conceptualising the complex relationships among the fields of research, policy and practice. This theoretical framework describes a system of rules that regulate the production and reproduction of knowledge. For Bernstein, the movement of knowledge from one field to another, for example from literacy research, to policy, to practice, occurs through a process of recontextualisation. This process brings about changes in power relations and control over pedagogic discourse. Analysis of underlying recontextualising principles can thus reveal relationships both within and among the fields of literacy research, policy and practice. The usefulness of this framework is then illustrated by analyses of recent debates regarding the use of evidence-based approaches to literacy teaching in Australia. This paper highlights issues concerning building a literacy curriculum that can improve and sustain the literacy attainment of all Australian children.

Introduction
This paper is part of an ARC Discovery project, the Literacy Nexus Project, which examines the nexus between literacy research, practice and policy (Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, Turbill, Cruickshank, McKenzie & Konza, 2006). There has been increasing concern that the fields of literacy research, policy and practice do not interact with one another in ways that are congruent or productive (Harris, 2006a). This incongruence is evidenced in recent debates about literacy teaching. Attempts, both national (e.g. Teaching Reading, 2005; Benchmarking Australian Primary School Curricula, 2005; Human Capital, Council of Australian Government April 2007; Delivering Australia’s First National Curriculum, 2008) and international (National Literacy Strategy, UK, 1998; No Child Left Behind, United States Congress, 2002), have aimed at establishing priorities for literacy teaching and research. The recommendations address only limited aspects of literacy education and do not provide a sufficiently comprehensive basis for policy development and classroom practice. There appears to be little agreement among literacy educators as to research priorities in the field. Yet, as governments and bureaucracies continue to focus on ‘quality teaching’ and the professional knowledge teachers need in order to operationalise
this, there is a need to explore the implications of literacy research and policy upon classroom practice. In this context, it is not surprising that there appears to be little alignment between most research being conducted by the researchers, the policies being proposed by governments, and what happens in classrooms.

It is therefore both timely and critical for researchers to analyse the nature of the complex relationships between literacy research, policy and practice. This paper does so through a sociological approach represented by that of Bernstein. Below, the policy context of this paper and its related ARC Project is described. This context is followed by the theoretical framework for this paper, illustrated by applications of the concepts to analysis of recent discourses of literacy education in Australia.

Setting the policy context

In 2004, the Australian Federal Government launched its National Inquiry into Literacy. Invitation to input on this inquiry was published in national newspapers and made open to all. By inquiry’s end, 453 submissions were received. These submissions came from teachers across prior-to-school, primary school, secondary school TAFE and University settings; consultants, commercial interest groups, private researchers and research companies; University researchers; providers of pre-service teacher education; professional associations; literacy tutors; and private citizens. These groups and individuals represented a range of different perspectives and concerns, documented in the submission data on the Inquiry’s website. In addition, twelve schools were visited as part of the Inquiry; and a literature review undertaken, sub-titled ‘a review of evidence-based research literature on approaches to the teaching of literacy, particularly those that are effective in assisting students with reading difficulties’ (DEST, 2005b).

Findings of the Inquiry were synthesised and published in The Teaching Reading Report (DEST, 2005a). ‘All children’ is a recurring motif throughout the Report, with a concern for teaching methods work for all children.

By the time the Report was published, the Literacy Inquiry had narrowed its focus to reading. In defining reading, the Report stated that ‘reading involves two basic processes: one is learning how to decipher print and the other is understanding what print means (Center, 2005, p. 7)’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 89). A careful analysis of the Report reveals that reading is highlighted, while other areas and aspects of literacy (eg. writing, critical literacy, multiliteracies, visual literacy) are not included or elaborated upon; that beginning reading is emphasised over later school years; that decoding skills are given priority over other reading skills and strategies; and students with decoding difficulties appear as a major concern in the Report (Turbill, 2006).

As a consequence of these explicit priorities, the Report recommends ‘systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 38). The Report also states, ‘Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 38). However, the Report clearly carries a code-emphasis.

The Report bases its recommendations on evidence-based research, defined in the Report as ‘the application of rigorous, objective methods to obtain valid answers to clearly specified..."
This definition is elaborated on in terms of ‘(1) systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation and/or experiment designed to minimise threats to validity; (2) relies on sound measurement; (3) involves rigorous data analyses and statistical modelling of data that are commensurate with the stated research questions; and (4) is subject to expert scientific review.’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85).

The Teaching Reading Report resonates with previous federal reports in Australia (e.g., de Lemos, 2002; Ellis, 2005), as well as later reports (e.g., Coltheart & Prior, 2007) that embody similar views of reading, research and pedagogy. Furthermore, the Teaching Reading Report clearly pursues similar directions taken overseas in literacy policy reform – such as the U.S. National Reading Panel Report (National Reading Panel, 2000), the U.S. No Child Left Behind (U.S. Congress, 2002) and the U.K National Literacy Strategy (1998).

On the other hand, tensions and differences exist between the Teaching Reading Report and reading and literacy research reported elsewhere in the literature, beyond the brief that the National Literacy Inquiry set itself (Allington, 2002; Freebody, 2007; Harris, 2006a. Reports have been released since the Teaching Reading Report that synthesise current research-based evidence on literacy pedagogies and recommend that teachers draw on elements of these various approaches to most effectively cater to the needs of their particular students. These reports include Literacy education in school: Research perspectives from the past, for the future (Freebody, 2007) and Evidence-based research for expert literacy teaching (Wyatt-Smith & Gunn, 2007).

The Teaching Reading Report and its surrounding context and circumstances, bring into question how the particular vision of reading instruction came to be so prominent in Australia’s policy reforms; and how particular documents were used in the policy making process or why these documents and not others came to be influential. These questions became the driving force behind the authors’ ARC Discovery ‘Literacy Nexus’ Project, called ‘Investigating Relationships Among Literacy Research, Policy and Practice’ (Harris, Derewianka, Chen, Fitzsimmons, Kervin, Turbill, Cruickshank, McKenzie & Konza, 2006).

As indicated earlier in this symposium, this project is framed by a range of theoretical perspectives. In this paper, Bernstein’s (1990) pedagogic device is used to explore recontextualisation in the policy context described above.

**The pedagogic device**

The pedagogic device is a key notion of Bernstein’s (1990; 1996; 2000) sociology of education. It brings together concepts of fields, rules, social relations and power control in a complex and relational framework. Bernstein describes the pedagogic device as a system of rules that regulate the processes by which specialised knowledge is transformed or pedagogised to constitute pedagogic discourse (in the forms of curricula, selected texts, and teacher talk). The pedagogic device operates through three internal rules: distributive rules, recontextualising rules, and evaluative rules. These rules are interrelated with each rule derived from and dependent on the preceding one. In the following sections, key constructs of the pedagogic device are reviewed in relation to their pertinence to interpretation of the literacy nexus.

- **Fields of the pedagogic device**

Bernstein (1996) describes the processes of pedagogising knowledge as occurring in three hierarchically related fields, namely, fields of production, recontextualisation, and reproduction. These fields coincide with the three fields identified in the Literacy
Nexus Project: the field of literacy research where theories of literacy and language learning are generated, the field of policy making where the knowledge is transformed into specific forms of pedagogic discourse, and the field of practice where privileged and privileging pedagogic discourses are translated into classroom practice.

“Field” is a key notion of Bourdieu’s (1993) sociology of education. Parallels have been drawn between Bourdieu’s and Bernstein’s notions of field (Grenfell & James, 2004; Naido, 2004; Singh, 2002). Bourdieu describes field as a configuration of relations among actors who struggle for status and resources. Each field is governed by its internal rules while at the same time being influenced by external forces coming from other fields. In a similar vein, Bernstein (1990; 1996) views fields of the pedagogic device as constituted by agencies and organisations. Agents of each field struggle for resources and control over the rules for constructing pedagogic practice. In so doing, agents take up different positions, some dominating, others dominated; and what and whose agendas prevail represent ongoing concerns.

For both Bourdieu and Bernstein, the relative autonomy of a field is crucial to its structure and change (Bernstein, 1996; Bourdieu, 1993; Maton, 2005). The extent to which external pressures are transformed and take on forms in a field depends on the field’s internal structure and its relative autonomy (Maton, 2005). In a similar vein, Bernstein sees power relations as the major force mediating the level of autonomy of a field. Power relations “create boundaries, legitimise boundaries, reproduce boundaries, between different categories of groups” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 19). The strengths of the insulation between “boundaries” of the fields affect the extent to which external pressures are realised within a field. Therefore, to understand a field and its relationship with other fields, it is important to understand the way in which boundaries are socially constructed and maintained. This can be revealed, according to Bernstein, through analysis of the field’s underlying structuring principles.

- Rules of the pedagogic device

Bernstein (1996) identifies three internal rules as underlying structuring principles of the fields. These rules comprise distributive, recontextualising and evaluative rules and act to regulate the processes of pedagogising knowledge. Specifically, the distributive rules “create a specialised field of production of discourse, with specialised rules of access and specialised power controls” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31). They govern the production of different forms of knowledge and distribution of these to different social groups. In literacy education, these rules determine whose or what knowledge counts as a legitimate knowledge base for policy and practice.

Bernstein (1996; 2000) draws a distinction between everyday ‘mundane’ (thinkable) knowledge and ‘specialist’ (unthinkable) knowledge that is encoded in special ways. Control of these types of knowledge is differentially distributed among different social groups with the specialised knowledge being controlled by the higher agencies of education and the thinkable or common sense knowledge being managed by primary and secondary school systems. Bernstein’s (1996; 2000) sees strength of classification as the internal principle regulating the relationship between these two types of knowledge. The strong classification principle produces discrete categories whereas the weak classification generates integrated categories whose boundaries are blurred. He argues that the classification of distribution of knowledge in the school has a significant impact on students’ access to pedagogic knowledge and therefore their success at school as the “keeping things apart” principle (strong classification) means that only a small number of students would have access to specialist pedagogic knowledge (Bernstein, 2000, p.11).
For Bernstein, the movement of knowledge from one site to another occurs through a process of recontextualisation. Through recontextualisation, “other discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relationship with each other, for the purpose of their selective transmission and acquisition.” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 32). In literacy education, recontextualising principles constitute literacy curriculum by selectively dislocating discourses produced in the field of literacy research, then relocating and refocusing it to form curriculum or pedagogy, which is then recontextualised by teachers to constitute classroom practice. From this perspective, the process of recontextualisation connects the fields of the literacy nexus and brings them into complex relationships with each other. Analysis of recontextualising rules may, thus, provide us with insights into the principles that generate policy statements as well as the possible realisations they may lead to in the classroom context.

Recontextualisation draws on and reproduces power relations in the processes of selective dislocation and relocation. Understanding the recontextualising principles drawn on by the government and states and the underlying ideological messages that are relayed is important for interpreting the literacy nexus. Bernstein gives primacy to the recontextualising field, seeing it as a mediating context governing “the fundamental autonomy of education” (2000, p. 33). He develops this argument by identifying the existence of two sub-fields of the recontextualising field: namely the official recontextualising field (ORF) and the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF). These two sub-fields of recontextualisation and their relationships will be elaborated in the ensuing sections to illustrate the value of the construct of recontextualisation in understanding and interpreting the literacy nexus.

Finally, evaluative rules construct pedagogic practice (Bernstein, 1996; 2000). They do so by providing agents with evaluation criteria for measuring what counts as legitimate realisations of pedagogic discourses. In literacy education, the pedagogic device operates to define what counts as a valid display of learning and acquisition in the forms of teacher standards and assessment standards. These two sets of standards classify, rank, and order teachers and students in such a way that they work to construct teacher and learner identities (Bourne, 2008).

- Official recontextualising field (ORF)

As discussed earlier, recontextualisation plays a crucial role in the formation of official pedagogic discourses of federal and state policy at the macro level in the official recontextualising field (ORF) and of local pedagogic practice (e.g. classroom interactions) at the micro level in the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF). In the ORF, official pedagogic discourse is produced in the forms of national and state policy documents and statements, and state-endorsed curricula (Bourne, 2008). Thus through macro recontextualising, certain forms of knowledge are legitimated over others, and certain types of pedagogy are privileged over another. To do so, agents in this field (e.g. the government and its selected agents and ministries) selectively choose one form of knowledge, making one more legitimate than another. In terms of the literacy nexus, social relations between government agencies in the fields of policy, those agents involved in the field of research (e.g. educational researchers and teacher trainers), and those in the field of practice operate to define various connections and communication between the fields of the literacy nexus.

Bernstein (1996; 2000) identifies two models of education as a result of official pedagogic recontextualisation: performance and competence models. He distinguishes these two modes of pedagogic practice and context on the basis of what counts as valid knowledge (curriculum), how learning takes place (pedagogy); and what counts as a legitimate display of
learning (evaluation). In a performance model of pedagogic practice, official pedagogic discourse explicitly defines the ‘what to teach’, ‘how to teach’ and assessment criteria. Teachers and learners have little control over the selection, sequencing and pacing of the transmission and acquisition (Bernstein, 1996). In contrast, in a competence model, the ‘what to teach’ and ‘how to teach’ are implicit and diffuse and integrated in the forms of “projects and themes, ranges of experience” (1996, p. 58). Learning is facilitated by teachers, and learners have more control over what they want to learn and how they want to learn. At a time when evidence-based approaches to literacy teaching is privileged by recent official discourses of literacy education as evidenced in the Teaching Reading Report, it is timely to analyse the principles and ideological bias underlying the approaches and consequences that the recontextualising of this pedagogic model may bring about to the field of literacy education.

- Pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF)

Recontextualisation in the pedagogic recontextualising fields concerns both the taking up and realisation of official pedagogic discourse. Uptake of official pedagogic discourse sees the transformation of policy into accessible pedagogic forms by classroom teachers. Bernstein (2000) argues that knowledge is tied to specific contexts. Thus knowledge in one context may not be easily transformed in another context (Wheelahan, 2007). Indeed, research studies have shown that teachers’ uptake of literacy research and policy are mediated by myriad factors, including: students’ needs, backgrounds, interests; resources and personnel support; experience; teaching philosophies; organisational norms, routines and priorities; situational enablers and constraints (Coburn, 2001, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Harris, 2006a, 2006b).

In the PRF, agents *inter alia* include teachers and executive staff, authors and publishers of textbooks and classroom resources, professional associations and providers of teachers’ professional development. Some of these agents are part of the institutional school system (e.g., teachers and executive staff), while others are non-system actors (e.g., authors and publishers, professional associations and PD providers) who also exert significant influence on how teachers implement policy (Coburn, 2005). What approach/es finds a place in classrooms will largely rely on the power relations between the ORF and the PRF. The degree of autonomy of the PRF will have an effect on its control over pedagogic discourse and its practice (Bernstein, 2000, p. 33). In the classroom context, for example, this means teachers have freedom to recontextualise knowledge from a specialist discourse to common sense discourse with which learners are familiar to raise the attainment of all students (Bourne, 2003).

The existence of the ORF and PRF suggests possibilities for conflict, resistance and inertia both within and between these fields. Whilst official pedagogic discourse may work to establish ideological coherence within the recontextualising field, the local pedagogic discourse may align to show compliance, or oppose or resist to maintain its local integrity (Bernstein, 2000).

In short, the value of the construct of recontextualisation lies in its role in bringing the three fields of the pedagogic device in a dynamic and complex relationship, which allows us to critically analyse how the fields of literacy research, policy and practice connect and communicate with each other.

*Interpreting discourses of pedagogising literacy education*
In this section, the analytic framework discussed above continues to be applied to develop a critical analysis of official pedagogic discourses about literacy education in Australia with a view to understanding relationships among literacy research, policy and practice. The analysis will focus on pedagogising consequences of recent official discourses on literacy education such as *Teaching Reading* (2005); *Human Capital, Council of Australian Governments* (April 2007); *Delivering Australia’s First National Curriculum* (2008). We use recontextualisation as a heuristic device for framing the structure of this section by starting with analysis of recent official pedagogic discourses of literacy education. This is then followed by a discussion of the recontextualising consequences they have brought about to the fields of research and practice.

- Changing in power and changing official pedagogic discourses

A central argument of Bernstein’s sociology of education is that pedagogic discourse is “a carrier, a relay for ideological messages and for external power relations” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 39). Changes in agents (e.g. government) usually lead to differential valuing of what may be regarded as a legitimate form of knowledge, and thereby differential control and power relations (Bourne, 2000).

In Australia, each change of government in power has brought about new shifts in educational structuring and new official pedagogic discourses that reorder the control over the fields of research and practice. This is demonstrated in the aims of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy instigated by the previous Liberal government 2004/5: “… a broad, independent examination of national and international reading research, teacher preparation and practices for the teaching of literacy, particularly reading” (*National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy*, 2005). The inquiry resolved around the issues of solving the problem of underachievement of Australian children in basic skills tests and international testing.

What counts as a legitimate model of literacy pedagogy was a point of focus of the Inquiry, which was also an issue of much contestation in recent literacy inquiries and many years previously (Pearson, 2004). The recommended focus of the *Teaching Reading Report* was on early intervention and evidence-based approaches to literacy teaching as solutions to the problem of underachievement. This approach resembles Bernstein’s conception of performance-based model discussed earlier. As argued by Bernstein (1996; 2000), each form of official pedagogic discourse sets up different definitions of learner needs, leading to a different set of prescriptions for practice. The *Report* aligns evidence-based approaches with the needs of students with learning difficulties, advocating the teaching of technical discourse such as phonemes and discrete skills at word, sentence and text level. This apparent focus on form contrasts with previous emphases on critical reading and creative expression advocated by whole language and constructivist approaches, which the *Teaching Reading Report’s Literature Review* explicitly criticises with the assertion that ‘constructivist whole language approaches are not in the best interests of children with learning difficulties and especially those experiencing reading difficulties’ (DEST, 2005b, p. 12). Clearly, “underachievement is defined as a problem brought about as a legacy of progressivism; a significant part of the problem of underachievement” (Bourne, 2000, p. 35).

This move has been shared by both the previous liberal party and the new Labour government. In a recent media release Honorary MP Julia Gillard asserted that “evidence seemed clear on the best way to teach reading, with phonics and learning to sound out words giving students the foundation skills” and that “children need intensive phonics instruction before they can become effective comprehenders of what they read” (The Australian 19th
May). As suggested by Bernstein, each model of pedagogy is based on a selective appropriation of discourses and constructs from other fields. In the present context, the official pedagogic discourses drew on a narrow definition of what literacy is and does (Harris, 2006a), and examples of international “phonics first” programs (e.g. the British mandated programs “Phonics First and Fast”) as the basis for forming policies about literacy education. While this assertion has attracted continuing debate, of interest here is the Report’s focus on research about children with reading difficulties, on which basis the report advocates pedagogic practices of direct instruction that work for ‘all children’ with and without such difficulties.

Recently, a new official pedagogic discourse is being formed with the call for the development of a national standard curriculum by Education Minister Julia Gillard of the Labour government (Delivering Australia’s First National Curriculum, 2008). The aim of this national curriculum is to “develop a core set of nationally agreed skills, knowledge and attributes for school” to “improve outcomes for all children and raise literacy and numeracy standards” (Delivering Australia’s First National Curriculum, 2008). Although what may be legitimated by this official discourse is yet to be determined, it appears a highly centralised and interventionist literacy program for all Australian children is likely.

The centralisation of the control over the contents of education was also evident in government attempts to set up the minister appointed authorities such as the literacy inquiry Committee headed by Dr Ken Rowe appointed by the previous Liberal government which produced the Teaching Reading Report, and the new National Curriculum Board by the new Labor government. In so doing, new agents were introduced to make the selection and organization of the literacy curriculum. These attempts, as noted by Bernstein (2000), are likely to reduce the power and autonomy of the PRF, including state governments and other system providers.

As suggested by Bernstein (2000), the move to institutionalize a pedagogic model is made possible by strengthening classification of knowledge and regulating pedagogic practice. The following resolutions made by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG, April 2007) provide evidence of the government and states control over pedagogic practices and its social context. At COAG (April, 2007), the following goals were identified as agreed priorities: to “develop a core set of nationally consistent teacher standards for literacy and numeracy”; to “accredit university teacher education courses and register or accredit teachers to meet these national standards”; to “implement on entry to school diagnostic assessment systems for children in their first year of school” (Human Capital, Council of Australian Governments April 2007). By providing explicit evaluative rules for assessing teachers, teacher trainees and learners, the official pedagogic discourse works to produce new categories of learners, researchers, educators and teachers.

Whilst one function of official pedagogic recontextualisation is selection and legitimation, Grenfell (2003) argues that agents often legitimate and justify the selections by appealing to their ideological values, namely social justice and economism. In Australia, Singh (1997) points out that social justice has been acting as a strong recontextualising principle on the Australia’s national policy education agenda. Indeed, the previous liberal government referred to “a central equity issue in education today” (National Literacy and Numeracy Plan, DEEWR 2005/6). In a similar vein, the new Labor government argues the National Curriculum is capable of ensuring “every child has access to the highest quality learning programs” (Delivering Australia’s First National Curriculum, 2008). While this may appear
to be an attempt to provide children of all classes with equal access to literacy education, the present paper argues this access may be enhanced by their increasing access to local pedagogic discourse through effective classroom practice – as discussed in the ensuing section.

- Valid research practice in literacy
As discussed above, official pedagogic discourse plays a significant role in defining what constitutes valid research practice. A notable example of the role of official pedagogic discourse in defining what constitutes valid research practice is evidenced in Australia’s recent *Teaching Reading Report* (Rowe, 2005) and its US 2002 counterpart, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) (United States Congress, 2002). Funding has been set aside for research projects which inform and support the government’s recommended pedagogic model: evidence-based approaches to literacy teaching. Both the Australian and U.S. documents use the terms ‘evidence-based research’ and ‘scientific research’ respectively to define research in a particular and highly selective way. “Evidence” thus becomes a recontextualising principle for selecting knowledge from the field of research and relocating it in the curriculum. The rhetoric of evidence-based research has been reiterated by the new Labour government when Education Minister Julia Gillard announced a $10 million budget to gather research and data “to inform an evidence-based approach to literacy and numeracy programs and teacher professional development” (The Australian, 19 May 2008). This attempt shows an apparent shift in the discourse towards greater specialization of the theoretical discourses, privilege evidence-based research over projects of other paradigms.

The *Teaching Reading Report* defines evidence-based research in its Glossary as involving ‘the application of rigorous, objective methods to obtain valid answers to clearly specified questions’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85). This definition is elaborated on in terms of ‘(1) systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation and/or experiment designed to minimise threats to validity; (2) relies on sound measurement; (3) involves rigorous data analyses and statistical modelling of data that are commensurate with the stated research questions; and (4) is subject to expert scientific review.’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 85).

This may be seen as an attempt by government to intervene by creating a new knowledge base in literacy, one that is premised on positivist views of production of knowledge in terms of correlation and prediction. This definition of research is not representative of the full range of approaches in the field of literacy research (Pearson, 2003). Indeed, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write, the research field may be characterised as networks of convictions about the nature of knowledge and reality, producing multiple interpretive communities that each has its own criteria for evaluating interpretations that are made.

The *Teaching Reading Report*’s definition of research resonates with other recent Australian reports on literacy and is aligned with particular definitions of literacy. Consider, for example, the report, ‘Closing the Gap Between Research and Practice: Foundations for the Acquisition of Literacy’ (de Lemos, 2002). This report acknowledges two ways of defining literacy and aligns research approaches with these two definitions. The Report then states its selection of the ‘narrower definition’ of literacy, leading the report by its own definition and logic to focus only on scientific kinds of research to the exclusion of other research approaches. It can be argued that this selection or recontextualisation has consequences for the distribution of resources in the field of the production of knowledge. This example illustrates how literacy and research may be defined in ways that impact what research is and is not officially admitted into the nexus of research, policy and practice – and who therefore is admitted entry as participants in this nexus.
The Literacy Nexus Project acknowledges the importance of rigour, clarity, specificity and validity in literacy research and recognizes that an experimental approach has an important contribution to make. However, it has been argued that this evidence-based ideology presumes that “researchers can make generalisations from one site or context to another with near infallibility, not only to inform policy and allocate resources, but also to determine the way the teacher should practice.” (Nicholson-Goodman & Garman, 2007, p. 284). Further, the rhetoric of evidence-based research officially forges a regulative relationship that gives more control to the field of policy over the field of research. This has implications for the academic autonomy over the field of research. It is likely that agents in this field may determine their research priorities according to an external agenda (Middleton, 2008). In addition, divisions drawn among research approaches pit researchers against one another in competition for voice and resource support while polarising the teaching profession and alienating teachers from research (Mills, 2005; Nicholson-Goodman & Garman, 2007). Engagement with binary oppositions between literacy approaches is not a concern for teachers who generally favour more eclectic approaches based on what they find works for their students in their classrooms (Broadley et al, 2000). Meanwhile, other research approaches that literacy researchers use to identify best literacy practices and which are also needed for the enactment of policy recommendations are excluded (Harris, 2006a)

Why such an apparently self-defeating approach by policy makers is taken may be partly understood in the argument put by Allington and Woodside Jiron (1999) that the use of research in policy making is utilitarian. That is, the use of research as a policy making tool does not seem to rely on the reliability of research synthesis, but rather on the extent to which research supports the particular agendas of policy makers. What is recontextualised, then, is ideology – and, as Pearson (2007) argues, ideology can and does prevail over evidence in literacy policy even as policy ostensibly and overtly argues for evidence-based approaches.

- Legitimate pedagogic practice

Instructional efficacy, the effects of evidence-based approaches, should not be judged by its role as a short-term intervention strategy. Rather it should be judged by its capacity to bring about long-term sustainable outcomes for all children. We argue that the day-to-day recontextualisations by class teachers are crucial to the transmission and acquisition of official pedagogic discourses.

As discussed above, the field of practice selects and regulates the forms of knowledge responding to the influences of various stakeholders such as government, states, school, students, and parents, to name a few. As knowledge is differentially distributed among different social groups, the field of practice is marked by unequal distribution of participation, inclusion and access to the pedagogic experience” (Bourne, 2003, p. 504). In the Teaching Reading Report, some practices such as building stronger home school partnership have been recommended as a strategy to weaken the boundaries between home and school. There is no reference in the Report as to how the unequal access to knowledge may be addressed through classroom practice. In Bernsteinian work, teachers’ efforts in making connections between vertical discourses of specialised knowledge and common sense discourses of everyday communication are considered as an important recontextualising means for addressing unequal distribution of participation, inclusion and access to the pedagogic experience for all (Christie, 1999; Bourne, 2003).

The extent to which teachers recontextualise specialised knowledge into more accessible forms of knowledge through the resources of everyday language is dependent on the
autonomy of the pedagogic recontextualising field. The current policy’s emphasis on direct and explicit instruction and related external standardised testing, constructs teacher/student relations in particular and more authoritarian ways that are different from previous policies based on constructivist approaches that saw the generation of more dialogic interactions during literacy instruction. For example, in a study by the second author of this paper, a Kindergarten teacher working in a predominantly Chinese community in a metropolitan area had several agents as sources of influence upon her pedagogic choices about the class literacy program (Harris, 2007). She drew implicitly from the field of research, on ideas shaped by constructivist, sociocultural and direct instruction perspectives of literacy instruction in the field of research. She recontextualised (selected) these theories in light of state and school policy, and filtered messages from research and policy most predominantly in terms of her teaching philosophy; the children and the social resources she perceived they required to effectively negotiate their transition as new arrivals to school in a linguistic and cultural setting different to that which they had previously been accustomed; the children’s parents’ expectations of their children’s progression in literacy at school and later life chances.

Bernstein (2000) argues that all forms of pedagogy involve social formation and regulation of individual identities. He is most concerned with the categories of teachers, learners that a specific form of pedagogy to likely to produce (Bourne, 2008). Recontextualisation as a framework provides a powerful means of understanding the challenges and tensions that curriculum changes can present to teachers as the official discourse is transformed into practice. For example, policy change can and does have impact on teachers’ operational space, defined in terms of the space teachers perceive they have to make decisions not made by other people (Smith & Lovatt, 2003). While curriculum policy of the 1970s and 1980s considerably expanded teachers’ operational space with the introduction of school-based curriculum development in Australia, recent years and the Teaching Reading Report in Australia and its counterparts in the US and the UK, have seen a distinct narrowing of this space, with more directed, outcomes-based curricula and a greater emphasis on high stakes standardised testing.

Changes in the boundaries of teachers’ operational space not only impact classroom practice – they also impact teacher identity by broadening or narrowing scope for teachers to exercise professional prerogative (Pearson, 2003). Research studies have shown the critical importance of teachers’ professional judgment based on a well informed and articulated knowledge base that teachers draw on to implement practices that meet student needs, that are appropriate to their classroom realities, and that advance student learning (Broadley et al, 2000; Dudley-Marling, 2005; Ewing, Smith, Anderson, Gibson & Manuel, 2004; Hoban & Ewing, 2005; Johnson, 2002; Pearson, 2003). However, recent policy reforms in Australia and overseas have brought this aspect of teacher identity into question. Australia’s Teaching Reading Report has explicitly problematised teachers’ professional judgment, arguing the need for teachers to base their practices on evidence-based research because ‘many teaching approaches used in schools are not informed by findings from evidence-based research, and … too many teachers do not have a clear understanding of why, how, what and when to use particular strategies’ (DEST, 2005a, p. 14).

While a direct approach of teaching phonics and grammar may help make what may appear to be implicit and hidden explicit to all learners (Christie, 1999), it is not clear from the Teaching Reading Report how they may be taught effectively to bring out sustainable outcomes for all Australian children. Bourne (2008, p. 49) argues that “simply following a strategy without really understanding its logic can mean that teachers are unable to make the strategy work to raise the achievement of disadvantaged children”. Again, the importance of
teachers’ professional judgment is highlighted. Concern has also been raised about the risk of the use of students’ achievement scores as measures for quality teaching and teachers’ compliance with the policy (Moss, 2002; Olson, 2007). The consequences of regulative educational policies is evidenced in Olson’s (2007) study, who suggests that students may lose opportunities to learn as a result of teachers’ attempts to organise their instruction to skill and drill teaching to show compliance with policy. This concern is borne out by other research that has indicated a negative impact of such policies, specifically high stakes testing, on teacher-student relations (Valli & Buese, 2007).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have reviewed key constructs of Bernstein’s pedagogic device, and particularly the construct of recontextualisation and its contribution to illuminating curriculum changes and underlying principles that have brought about the changes. Analysis of the underlying recontextualising principles can reveal practices brought about by the recontextualisation, including school curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, assessment criteria, and learners’ and teachers’ identities. Understanding the literacy nexus thus entails identifying both the underlying recontextualising principles that characterise the change in pedagogic discourses as well as the potential realisations that they give rise to in the classroom.

Recontextualisation as a framework provides a dynamic view of the literacy nexus as evolving, constructed in the processes of recontextualisation and formation of pedagogic discourse. Recontextualisation brings about new relationships that are forged through distribution of new power relation and control, as well as new categories of learners, researchers, educators and teachers. From this perspective, the interactions between research, policy and teaching are not linear and stable. They are complex and dynamic and are connected through processes of recontextualisation.

Recontextualisation as a framework provides a powerful means of understanding the challenges and tensions that curriculum changes can present to teachers as the official discourse is transformed into practice. Conflict and contestation are inevitable within and between fields of research, policy and practice as agents for recontextualisation struggle for control over the pedagogic discourses. We argue with Bourne (2000) and Moss (2002) that conflict and contestation may be settled when solutions are found at the level of the classroom through negotiation of the extent to which the new pedagogy can be recontextualised to deliver better sustainable outcomes for all children. That is, we should engage with the changes as suggested by Bourne (2000) and work to recontextualise the new pedagogic discourse in a way that can improve and sustain the literacy attainment of all Australian children.

The changing of the locus of power in symbolic control may cause discomfort to those of us involved in the academic study of literacy or in teacher education, but if we recognise what is happening, and engage with the changes rather than retreating, there is still time to reassess our potential contribution to the raising of attainment of all children, and to re-position (Bourne, 2000, p.44).

References


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