Literate or Illiterate?: Seeking the Literate Student in Government Policy

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Abstract: In this paper I intend to critically examine the discursive accounts of literacy, and of the successful literate student, within the Australian Federal language and literacy policy documents of the last three decades. The purpose of the critical examination is to clarify the policy outcome intentions in terms of how literacy and the successful literate student were conceptualised, and the shifts within and between the policy documents. A critical discourse analysis lens is used in order to discover how the constructions of literacy and the successful literate student within the policy had potential for rich inclusive literacy pedagogy or for a narrow pedagogy that advantaged certain forms of literacy as successful and valued.

Keywords: Literacy, Policy, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

EDUCATION POLICY DOCUMENTS are statements of values, as well as vehicles for the delivery and funding of specific aspects of education. As such they establish the ‘discursive contours’ for the constructs of education that are implemented (Liasidou, 2008), and directly influence classroom practice through funding. Literacy and language policy documents tend to shape a pedagogy that privileges certain literacy and language practices, while marginalising other practices (Ball, 2003; Lund 2008). Thus such policy documents demand a discursive critical analysis (Codd, 1988) that has not often occurred in Australia.

Australian Context

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories with School education, including literacy education, primarily the responsibility of the State and Territory Governments. The Australian Commonwealth (Federal) Government has no specific constitutional responsibility for the provision or direction of school education. This is complicated by a dual tiered funding system, with the Australian Commonwealth Government providing funding to government schools for specific programs, and providing the majority of funding for non-government schools. Prior to 1975, Australian Commonwealth Ministers for Education had influenced and shaped educational debates, and policies, through provision of Commonwealth funding for specific programs (Harman & Smart, 1982). During the early 1970s in particular these funding initiatives had enabled a period of expansion and reform in education directed by the Australian Commonwealth Government. In 1975 these initiatives ceased due to budget constraints. The Commonwealth Education Ministers then directed their energy into influencing curriculum issues, specifically literacy, through policy initiatives (Harman & Smart, 1982). Consequently, the first Australian Commonwealth policy for either language or literacy...
was presented in 1987, with two subsequent policy changes to date, one in 1991 and another in 1998.

The three Commonwealth Literacy Policies examined in this paper: the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987); Australia’s Language, The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (DEET, 1991); Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools (DEETYA 1998) are situated within broader contexts of public debate about literacy achievements and literacy levels of Australian children, adolescents, and adults. They appear to be vehicles for the Australian Commonwealth Government to prescribe a national uniformed direction for literacy education in Australia. This was a significant change for Australian school education in terms of the Commonwealth government input into, and prescription of, compulsory literacy education.

Purpose of the Study

This paper is part of a wider study with the purpose of critically examining the discursive accounts of literacy and the successful literate student in Australian Commonwealth Government policy documents over time. The competing Discourses evident in the constructions of literacy and the successful literate student in the policy documents were also critically examined. This paper focuses on the critical analysis of the discursive constructions of the literate student within the policy documents to discover whether these constructions have potential for rich inclusive literacy pedagogy, or prescribe a narrow pedagogy that privileges specific aspects of literacy. The entire analysis is outside the scope of this paper, however, examples will be provided to support the findings discussed.

Methodology

A critical discourse analysis framework, following Fairclough (1995, 2003) and Gee (1999, 2005), was used to identify and examine the Discourses of the literate student within the policy document. This framework provided an interpretive and deconstructive way of examining the policy documents, as well as providing a means to examine the ideologies, underpinning the policies. It also provided a method for critical semiotic analysis of text, crucial for analysis of written texts such as policy documents where the predominant information is the language itself, alongside the contextual analysis. The tools of inquiry provided by Gee and Fairclough guided both the research and the reading of that research in a systematic and transparent manner.

Each policy document was analysed at three different levels. At the macro level of text, where the policy documents exist within wider social and political contexts, the overarching metaphors used within the text were examined to uncover the Discourse models they communicated (Gee, 1999, 2005). Intertextuality and genre were also examined at the macro level of text. The meso level organising features of text structure and interdiscursivity were then critically examined, followed by analysis of the micro or sentence and word level of each policy document. At this level linguistic features such as modality, vocabulary, and nominalisation were examined. Selected aspects of the textual analysis of the policy documents are used in this paper to illustrate the conceptualisation of the literate student within each policy.
Findings

Change over Time

Analysing the three policy documents provided an indication of how policy constructions of the successful literate student, have changed over time in Australia. Changes in the policy due to the evolving understandings of multiliteracies and growth of digital technologies would be expected. However, the changes over time in the three Australian Commonwealth language and literacy polices do not reflect a growth in the breadth or depth of the conceptualisation of the literate student. Instead, there is a narrowing of focus and a reduction of literacy success to what is easily measurable.

Discourses Common Across the Policies

Three Discourses of the literate student are evident at the broad macro level of the policy documents, and supported at the meso and micro levels of each text. The first Discourse is a humanist Discourse of literacy as personal growth. In this Discourse the successful literate student is considered to be temperate, socially responsible, insightful and culturally knowledgeable. Literacy is reified as a neutral, unitary skill, independent of social context and used by the literate individual predominantly as a tool for achieving individual growth and reward ((Dixon, 1969; Goldstone, 1979; Hunter, 1988a, 1988b).

The second Discourse evident at each level of the policy documents is a social justice Discourse of literacy as socially constructed practices (Gee, 2008, Lankshear, 1997, 1998; Street, 2005). Within this Discourse the successful literate student is considered to be flexible in their use of different types of literacy, able to adapt to different modes of language use and new technologies, and be able to move between and within different types of literacy practices. Literacy is considered to be neither single nor a unitary skill, rather it is conceptualised as multiple literacies that are mode and context specific, and encompass all forms of symbolic meaning making (Cope & Kalantzis, 1995; The New London Group, 1996). Since there is a multiplicity of equally valued literacy practices, the literate student may take many forms.

The third Discourse evident across each level of the policy documents is a neoliberal Discourse of literacy as human capital. The neo liberal ideology underpinning this Discourse constructs the literate person as an economic resource, contributing to the nation’s economic viability, hence the term human capital, (Lo Bianco, 2004; Turner, 2008). The literate student is thus perceived to be measurable, employable and an economic resource for the nation (Leathwood and Hayton, 2002; Lo Bianco 1999a; 2001; Lankshear, 1991). Literacy is again reified as a unitary, measurable skill, independent of context, universally acquirable and used by both the individual and the nation as a tradeable commodity. Within this Discourse literacy and the successful literate student become defined by assessment and what may easily be measured.
Discussion of these Discourses within the Policy Documents

**Linguistically and Culturally Diverse**

The literate student is initially constructed in the 1987 *National Policy on Languages* document as both linguistically and culturally diverse. They are ideally proficient in more than one spoken or written language and able to contribute to the intellectual and cultural life of the nation, as well as being an economic asset. Within this construction of the successful literate student there are limited, and often implied, understandings of the knowledge required to be literate. However, since productive contribution to the life of the nation is not specifically defined in the policy document, multiple realisations of the literate student are possible. The opportunity within the policy document for multiple versions of the literate student is, from a critical discourse perspective, very desirable. Interdiscursivity, specifically the inclusion of photographs, is used in the policy to maintain this emphasis on the desirability of linguistic plurality and the possibility of multiple literate outcomes. The photographs also suggest a construction of literacy as developing over time. Multiple representations of the literate student are evident through the photographs, with different ages and stages of literacy development.

An example of the different Discourses of literacy informing the 1987 policy document is evident in the metaphors of literacy used in the preamble to the policy document. The organising devices of intertextuality and problem-solution text structure are then used as textual cohesive ties at a macro and meso text level. An ontological assumption of critical discourse analysis is that language shapes reality as well as reflecting it, thus policy documents are ultimately about shaping the literate world as well as reflecting what is already there. One of the textual strategies that does this is metaphor. There is a consistency of literacy metaphor throughout the three policies that provides an indication of how literacy is reified as initially as opportunity and resource, and later as assessment, achievement and inoculation against social disadvantage. Each of these metaphors conceptualises literacy as something to possess, while in the 1998 policy, *Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools*, the inoculation metaphor also presents literacy as an object that may be given to another. Use of this metaphor serves to move the responsibility for literacy acquisition from the individual to the person providing the inoculation: in this case the early years teachers, with a resulting realignment within pedagogy as well.

Literacy as individual cultural and intellectual enrichment opportunity underpinned by a liberal humanist ideology is first evident in the second paragraph of the preamble to the 1987 policy, where language use or literacy is stated to be “a means of personal growth, individual cultural enrichment and recreation” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 1). Further in the policy document the literate student is stated to be one who has “sophisticated levels and types of language skills” and is “linguistically … adaptable” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 81). In this discursive account of literacy as opportunity, intellectual and cultural achievement is reified as an object with inherent value. The neoliberal Discourse of “economic … opportunities” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 1) provided by “skilled and proficient use” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 1) of language, and the social justice Discourse of literacy also occur together from page one. Identified in the initial section of the policy by the use of the phrase “promote the rights “ as well as “enhance opportunities” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 1), this social justice Discourse of literacy is restated later in the policy document as the goal of “overcoming of injustices, disadvantages and discrim-
ination related to language” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 189). Inherent within this Discourse is an ideology of social justice and a view of the literate student as having “skilled use of language [that] will increasingly become an instrument of empowerment and social participation” (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 79).

Coherence of text is maintained within the 1987 policy document by use of a persuasive genre whereby the three different Discourses of literacy are used together to provide a common justification for the policy conceptualisations of the literate student. Yet at the macro text level the social justice Discourse of literacy becomes increasingly colonised by the language of economic opportunity as primary justification for the policy construction of the literate student. In contrast at the meso text level the humanist and social justice Discourses take precedence over the neoliberal Discourse of literacy, indicating the potential for a pluralist perspective of literacy and the successful literate student.

The inclusion of photographs within the 1987 policy document provides a cross-textual element that both supports and extends the written text. The photographs strengthen the social justice Discourse of literacy as opportunity for multiple versions of being literate, by the way people are visually categorised within the photos. Gee (2003) proposed that the combining of text and image provides an added dimension to the meaning communicated by the text or the image alone. This is realised by the photographs as they also provide an echo of an academic Discourse of literacy as practices, not clearly evident in the written text. Each photograph has a similar theme of illustrating multiple languages in use, in a diverse, multicultural and multilingual Australia. Thus providing a visual narrative of the harmonious, productive pluralist society evident in Australia. This discursive message of the photograph does not always match the message provided by the surrounding written text, even though in each instance there is something within the written text that connects to the photo.

An example of this is the third photograph on page 74 of the 1987 policy document, where an image that has not traditionally been privileged in Australia as literacy is moved into the known. This is achieved by locating the learning about Australian Indigenous culture in both the left and right spaces of the photograph, and on the left side of the double page spread (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1990, for detailed information about the placing of visual information as known or unknown information).
This is a carefully composed image (as are other photographs used in the 1987 policy document) with both indigenous and non-indigenous participants on both sides of the image. They are grouped together, in close physical proximity and smiling, with their attention focussed on a common point on the rock that is being explained by one member of the group.
This image continues both the social justice and humanist Discourses of literacy as multiple literacy practices by collocating a photograph where students are learning about their own Aboriginal cultural background with a print justification for dual language learning contributing to cultural enrichment.

The analysis at the micro level of the 1987 policy document supported the findings at both the macro and meso levels of text that these three Discourses, with different ideological perspectives of literacy, inform the policy and are held together through the use of textual devices. Textual cohesion is maintained by the choice of vocabulary, and the use of phrase and sentence structures that reduce multiple Discourses, and possibilities for the literate student, into one uncontested perspective. In the attempt to construct an authoritative and persuasive policy document the multiple Discourses within the policy document are often harnessed and reduced to a single voice. This indicates the difficulty confronting policy writers in envisaging a pluralist view of the successful literate student, where there are multiple social constructions of what it means to be literate, informed by different Discourses of literacy. Aspects of this construct of the literate student are also evident in the 1991 and 1998 policy documents.

**Human Capital**

The second Discourse of the literate student evident in the Australian Commonwealth literacy policy documents is the Discourse of literacy as a human capital resource. In this neoliberal Discourse the literate student is perceived to be an economic unit of human capital, whose literacy skills and achievements may be measured and accounted for at key points in their school life. The content of this skill set varies across the policies but reading and writing remain the privileged items, especially in the 1991 and 1998 policies.

An example of this may be seen in the 1991 policy, *Australia’s Language: the Australian Language and Literacy Policy*, where one of the macro organising devices used to present this Discourse of literacy as undisputed, established knowledge is the presentation of policy as solution to a problem or problems. In this policy seven problems to be solved by improving student literacy are outlined on page 2 of the policy document. These are presented in the third paragraph of the introduction as problems of human resources due to “global economic forces … demanding changes in the structure of Australian industry, in our ability to compete in world markets, and in our readiness to adapt to new jobs, new career structures, and new technologies [that require] English language proficiency” (DEET, 1991a, p. 1). The impact of “global economic forces” requiring alterations in the Australian workforce and workplace, which the Australian population is not equipped to manage, is presented as established knowledge without reference to any other authority. Increased proficiency in English language as the solution to these required changes is similarly presented as established knowledge.

Establishing policy as a solution to a problem is a rhetorical device characteristic of policy documents (Saarinen, 2008). However, this device also establishes boundaries that limit the literate student within the policy document to achievement of English language proficiency. The remainder of the policy paper uses the terms “needs, priorities, goals, objectives, targets and strategies” (DEET, 1991b, p. 1) rather than problem and solution. Yet the organising device of a need or problem to be solved through increased English literacy achievement remains constant throughout the policy document.
The neo-liberal Discourse of the literate student is also maintained at the sentence level in each policy document. For example in the 1998 policy document, *Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools*, the collocation of employment or related terms such as work, jobs, with literacy frequently occurs. The first reference to work is in the principles underpinning the policy in the introduction section (DEETYA, 1998, p. 6), followed by regular collocation of this term with literacy through the policy and the collocation of literacy and employment in the final sentence of the policy document. Combined with this focus on employment is an emphasis on the measuring of student literacy achievement as a determinant of policy success, especially within the first three years of school.

**Diverse Literacy Practices**

The social justice Discourse of literacy, evident to some degree in each of the policy documents, provides a third possible construct of the literate student. In this construct the literate student is one who has a diverse and flexible repertoire of literacy practices across different language modes, contexts, and purposes. From a critical discourse analysis perspective this is a construct of literacy to be valued for its potential for flexible and diverse outcomes. While this flexible and varied repertoire of literacy practices, or literacies, is implied as a possible indicator of success in each policy document, it is not explicitly realised as a measure of the literate student in any of them, rather textual spaces are provided for alternative constructs of literacy as policy outcomes.

An example of spaces within the text, where alternative diverse constructs of the literate student may be found, is evident in section 5 of the 1998 policy document *Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools*. In this section literacy is initially connected with variety, diversity, and practices all terms associated with a social justice Discourse of literacy. Similarly, section 5.7 starts with the collocation of literacy with process, practices, and contexts, even though by the third paragraph this has changed to the linking of literacy with terms associated with a neoliberal Discourse such as benchmarks, assessment, and skills. Both a social justice and a neoliberal Discourse of literacy inform this section of the 1998 policy document. While the lack of textual coherence that results is indicative of the disparate ideological bases of these two Discourses of literacy, this lack of coherence also provides a textual space for an alternative construct of the literate student.

Another example of textual space for alternate Discourses is evident in the use of intertextuality in the 1987 policy, *The National Policy on Languages*. In this policy document reference to other texts is used initially to create citational authority, however, the references also provide parallel narratives alluding to a more complex heteroglossic construction of literacy. Reference to Parker and Pollock (1981) for example interrupts the rhetorical cohesion of the policy text by introducing into the policy dialogue a text containing alternative potential conceptualisations of the literate student, and feminist Discourses of language and literacy, that are otherwise absent from the policy document.

**Conclusion**

My critical discourse analysis of the Australian Commonwealth literacy policy documents, 1987 to 1998, provided textual evidence of consecutive Australian Commonwealth governments prescribing an increasingly bounded conceptualisation of the literate student. In this
process many of the broader and more nuanced aspects of literacy are ignored as policy outcomes, while the conceptualisation of the literate student becomes increasingly narrow in each policy document. In the 1987 policy document, the *National Policy on Languages*, the literate student is proficient in English language and a second language, and able to contribute to the intellectual, cultural, and economic life of the community. In the 1991 policy, *Australia’s Language, The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* these aspects are still valued to some degree. However, there is an increased emphasis on employability as a determinant of the successful literate student, and the measuring of literacy achievement against expected national norms. By the 1998 policy document, *Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools*, the literate student is perceived to be one who has successfully acquired foundational literacy skills in the early years of school, as determined by standardised testing.

Use of critical discourse analysis enabled the uncovering of the textual strategies employed within the policy documents that resulted in a narrow construct of the literate student. More importantly it enabled the exposing of potential points of leverage within the policy documents for alternative readings and alternative policy outcomes. While the policies prescribe increasingly narrow pedagogy, there are textual spaces within the policies where there is potential for richer more nuanced literacy pedagogical practices.

From a critical discourse analysis perspective future Australian Commonwealth language and literacy policy documents need to reflect the contested and messy plurality of literacies and the various ways of being literate, even though such policy documents may appear less textually coherent. The enduring metaphors of literacy across the current and previous policy documents are of literacy as opportunity and resource. These metaphors are utilised in each of the three key Discourses of literacy that inform the documents, and are primarily functional metaphors of literacy. Future Australian language and literacy policy requires solution metaphors of literacy that may be systemically packaged, while reflecting complex understanding of literacy and the diversity of the Australian population. These need to be metaphors of dynamism and creativity, providing information about the nature and values of literacy as multimodal semiotic systems.

The complexity of literacy requires a complex multidimensional metaphor such as connectivity. The metaphor of connectivity reflects the nuances of the social construction of the successful literate student, with multiple possible literacy practices and simultaneously evolving connections across multiple modes of communication, information and texts. It also indicates that the literate student is connected to both local and global communities, to multiple histories, and to economic prosperity, without being limited by those connections.

**References**


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