New adventures in the politics of literacy: An introduction

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In what ways are childhood and literacy political? The identification and categorization of the ‘child’ as a distinctive kind of human subject coincided with the formation of the European nation state, the proliferation of mercantile economies and calls for mass literacy and secular schooling (Luke, 1989). There is a longstanding and powerful connection between ‘childhood’ as an ontological and cultural category and what Benedict Anderson (1991) called ‘print capitalism’.

Over several centuries, then, schools, churches, families and industries have been charged with the promotion of particular literate traditions and the construction of distinctive kinds of text practising children. It is precisely these very educational institutions and linguistic monocultures built around practices with the written word that appear to be teetering on some kind of an historical brink. For according to discussions of Canadian and Australian, UK and US schooling in this edition of JECL, the teaching of initial print literacy is struggling to adapt to heteroglossic, multilingual student bodies, new communications technologies and modalities of representation, and the tenacious forms of social inequality that run with globalized economies.

The political formation of early childhood literacy follows discernable and durable patterns, detailed in these articles. We can speak of early childhood literacy education as ‘political’ across three connected strata:

• AS IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION – Literacy education is a mode of ideological representation. That is, it is an introduction to particular social and political ideologies, cultural values and beliefs which are selections from possible sociocultural positions and class interests. The first two articles here by Larson and Gatto and Comber and Nichols question how policy foci on basic skills narrow and constrain ideational and curricular diversity of early literacy instruction. Apart from these overt ideological implications, several recent discussions of No Child Left Behind have suggested this narrowing of literacy as curriculum sets the grounds for cross-curricular achievement slumps in mid and upper primary years (e.g. Calfee, 2002).
• AS SEMIOTIC CAPACITY AND POTENTIAL – Literacy education creates selective access to and differential capacity with textual and semiotic systems. Pedagogy involves the framing of selected text practices, genres and literacy events. Gregory, Williams, Baker and Street, following their remarkable studies of home/school transitions (Gregory and Williams, 2000), document how many current practices developed in the aftermath of the UK National Literacy Policy select in favour of those children who possess particular kinds of cultural capital. The result is a systematic stratification of educational outcomes qua semiotic capacity and resources by class and culture. Kendrick and McKay’s piece on Canadian schooling argues that what is at work is the exclusion of opportunities to demonstrate ‘other’ community-based semiotic modes and displays (cf. Dyson, 2003).

• AS BODILY TRAINING – Literacy education entails the interactional construction of bodily habitus, identity and cultural capital. That is, the training described above as well constitutes a particular kind of body and sensibility, where one learns to look, act and feel like a particular kind of reader and writer. Master narratives about learners and learning inform the training regimes for specific literate bodies (Luke, 1992). This is one of Bialostok’s key concerns, shared by Comber and Nichols in this and previous work (Comber and Simpson, 2001): how metaphors of ‘risk’ and ‘work’ affiliated with the ‘new work order’ get played out in staffroom categorization and response to classroom behaviour, renewing and reinventing ‘lack’, ‘absence’ and ‘deficit’. These in turn, Manyak’s work shows, are often remediated into monocultural training for linguistic minority students and others deemed ‘at risk’. Our point here is that training has durable effects on dispositions that cannot be wholly described by reference to ‘countable’ lists of knowledges and skills. The evidence in these articles suggest that it is indeed tough to ‘learn’ non-indigenous (or, provisionally using Gee’s [1999] term, ‘secondary’) dispositions. Though outside of the scope of the studies here, we could also query the sustainability and durability of these dispositions, asking how readily they can be ‘unlearned’ once acquired.

In these ways, early education introduces children into particular ideational contents, particular skills and competences, and particular dispositions. But a simple accounting of these still does not yield political analysis. There are indeed systematic linkages between the everyday construction of literate practices in homes and schools with larger social and institutional forces (Barton et al., 1999). This occurs via complex political economies – that is, institutional networks of interest and relations of power that align and run across the state, economies and educational sites where the face-to-face work of literacy teaching and learning takes place. We can describe political economies of education in terms of three informing orders:

• OFFICIAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY-IN-EDUCATION POLICIES: official bids by government to regulate and monitor flows of discourse, human and material resources to schools and classrooms, teachers and
students in particular normative directions;

• ECONOMIES OF TEXT PRODUCTION: bids by publishers, multinationals and media to construct and manage markets for children’s texts, media, instructional materials, tests, pedagogic approaches and affiliated and co-marketed commodities;

• SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM POWER RELATIONS: bids by principals and teachers and, indeed, children to locally remediate the resources above into everyday pedagogic relations, often in idiosyncratic ways.

The articles in this edition move across these different levels of analysis. Several begin from identification of a specific official policy context: the recent No Child Left Behind policies in the USA (Larson and Gatto), the national benchmarking policies in Australia (Comber and Nichols), the UK National Literacy Strategy (Gregory, Williams, Baker and Street) and California’s Proposition 22 move against bilingual education (Manyak). In Larson and Gatto’s article, we visit classrooms that tactically work ‘under’ the radar of a policy that attempts to lock schools into participation in an economy of text production, commodity consumption, and production of performance indicators – the byproducts of mandated phonics instruction and its affiliated ‘science’ (Luke, 2003).

It is in this shunting from micropolitical analyses to larger policy and socio-economic implications that gives each piece here a political ‘bite’. What ultimately is at stake, all remind us, are very real consequences for communities and children. That is, each of these particular policy contexts and their affiliated mediations into everyday classroom decisions and relations ‘counts’, however intentionally or accidentally, towards the production of cultural capital, of differential semiotic capacity and embodied competence. These in turn are translated as students move into different social fields of further schooling, community, work and civic participation into particular life pathways, access to employment, realized capital, institutional credentials and position, sociocultural membership and, perhaps, power – or the absence of same. While not the sole or determinate source, children’s introductions to literacy are defining moments in the shaping of capital.

One reading of these analyses might be a call to depoliticize early childhood literacy – to return to a descriptive model that presumes it is ideologically and culturally neutral, a less contaminated matter of development, or play, or cognition. Such a move is both intellectually and empirically naïve, as well as ethically indefensible. The cases here show how early childhood literacy is political by definition. It always entails a normative selection of particular kinds of representation, semiotic potential and training. These cannot be natural, neutral or ‘unbiased’, nor can they be detached from judgements about what might count as just and equitable social contexts and forms of life.

A further response, that of many current government policies, is an attempt to restore approaches to early childhood literacy that might have
served the state and communities, teachers and parents well before.
Whatever their intentions, such policies can act as nostalgic proxies for the
days of principally monocultural, monolingual populations in stable, printbased
economies and cultures (where these might have actually existed).
As ascendant as such policies may appear, they ultimately are up for grabs.
As so much of the recent published work in the JECL shows, the alchemy
of state, print literacy and childhood is being pressed by several powerful
forces. These include the emergence of new technological modes of
information and their affiliated commodities and economies, with visible
influences on everyday practices of child-rearing and play, socialization and
cognitive development, and of course, text practices and pathways to
literacy. At the same time, the social facts of mobile and heterogeneous,
multilingual and multicultural populations are calling into question
conventional models of child development and their normative models of
childcare, schooling and early education.

But, after all, what might make these new adventures in the politics of
literacy? After several decades of compensatory and ameliorative education,
following post-1968 attempts to establish minority ‘voice’ and culture in
schools and literacy education, in the midst of yet another ‘back to the
basics’ movement, the question of what is to be done remains. The
challenge facing politically committed literacy educators has always been
to translate critique of the state and corporation, curriculum and classroom into
practicable approaches that remodel and refashion the distribution of
capital. Given the depth and range of recently published work in JECL, and
its editorial commitment to literacy education as a means of social justice,
we hope that these pieces provide us with yet another starting point for
rethinking and remobilizing our own ethical and social responsibilities as
literacy educators and researchers.

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