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Historicising Reading Pedagogy: Rethinking 'Evidence' and Education Policy

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Background

Since WW2, the issue of literacy teaching has been a frequent and fraught site of debate in educational and public forums in Australia, the USA and the UK (Green, Hodgens, & Luke, 1994; 1997). The last ten years have seen ongoing 'literacy wars' (Snyder, 2008)being played out in newspapers and literacy teaching being increasingly politicised. These debates have tended to focus on the best approaches to teaching reading – the 'methods debate' – and on the quality of the literacy skills of the nation's teachers. Australian government policy initiatives have echoed these foci. What all of these reports and policies have in common is an insistence on the importance of the teacher, and the positioning of reading in the early years as central to the health and well-being of the education system as a whole.

In the midst of these often heated debates and claims, however, there is a clear danger that the focus of reform efforts will champion so-called single best methods without a proper understanding of the complex and interconnected ways that literacy, literature and school-subject English contribute to students' learning and broader social processes such as citizen formation.

Research Questions

This paper focusses on the teacher of beginning reading as arguably the most important figure in the literacy education landscape, and describes the historical formation of this figure, from the mid-19th century, when state-sponsored teacher education was initiated, right up to the present. An historical perspective will be used to shed new light on present-day literacy policy and practice.

Methods

Soler and Openshaw (2006), in their study of debates about reading teaching in the UK and NZ, and Freebody (2007)in Australia have illustrated that schools have maintained literacy standards over time. In spite of such evidence, across the English-speaking world, there has been an overt politicisation of the field and a ready willingness of governments to legislate for particular approaches to teaching reading. These approaches have limited teacher autonomy and, in particular, more clearly prescribed particular approaches to teaching reading (Openshaw & Soler, 2007).

An historical perspective reveals remarkable parallels between some current debates about literacy education and those of the mid 19th century and after. At that time, the monitorial system, dominant in the early 19th century, which emphasised the 'syllabic method' that systematically focussed on teaching reading from the parts towards the whole, was under challenge. This method was simply not proving adequate to the task of teaching the larger number of pupils being brought into universal education. According to Vincent (1999), the advent of the 'Look and Say' method, which characteristically proceeded from whole to part, allowed the teaching of reading to be more flexible and amenable to connecting reading to the world beyond the school. However, this new approach required much more of the teacher than the monitorial system's rigid attention to working through words from two letters up to more complex forms. Put simply, the new approach being introduced into schools from the mid-19th century required much more knowledge and expertise from the teacher. It was around such problems that modern forms of teacher education were built. These approaches, pioneered in Scotland by Stow, were imported and used in a variety of contexts – such as in England by Kay-Shuttleworth and also in the Australian colonies, and combined with other innovations such as the development of the Irish National Books in the mid-19th century – to develop ways of training

teachers to work differently with children through new kinds of more 'sympathetic' relations with children.

Frame

This paper engages in curriculum-historical inquiry by addressing a gap in the current historical record regarding the formation of early reading pedagogy and teacher education in Australia and thereby seeking to supplement that record (Cormack & Green, 2008; Reeves, 1996; Reid & Green, 2004; Vick, 2006). This includes attention to some of the neglected aspects of curriculum history, directing attention to specific locations to avoid what Baker (1996, p.112)calls a somewhat 'generalized, universalistic, ahistorical and unidimensional' approach which has not been sufficiently sensitive to variation between places and times, or to the struggles between different interests and groups over the curriculum.

As a genealogy, it involves a process of starting with a problem (in this case, the problem of the best way to teach reading in the early years) as it is currently constituted and tracing its history. Genealogies attend to discontinuity, to accidents and the mundane (Cormack, 1998), and to the practices and techniques by which human subjects have been shaped (Rose, 1996)and not just the ideas and knowledges that have been brought into play in this process. Foucault (1986)coined the term 'history of the present' for the approach being taken here.

Research findings

Historically in Australia and the UK, Reading has been situated as central to the English curriculum, and more broadly to schooling. Links can be observed accordingly between the 'literature lesson' and the 'reading lesson', and also between the figure of the English teacher and that of the teaching of (early) reading – and hence between primary and secondary schooling. Especially in the early years, the 'reading lesson' has been a focal point for teacher training, as has the use of literature as a suitable resource for the teaching of reading and the shaping of the student-subject. Thus, subject English and, especially though by no means exclusively its focus on literature, are important aspects of the history of the reading teacher – at least as important as issues of 'method'.

Our analysis of the reading lesson demonstrates that there are three significant elements at work which can be represented as points of a triangle – the reading teacher, the student reader, and the text being read. Method, or technique, can be thought of as a way of disposing the relationships between these elements and is clearly an important aspect of the process that unfolds in the reading lesson. Some methods are only possible if these elements are disposed in particular ways – for example, the phonics lesson requires a certain kind of structured text to work. Equally, this lesson requires certain dispositions and knowledges of the teacher and the student. Without consideration of these interrelated elements, 'method' is stripped of its meaning. In many ways, 'method' can be thought about as an 'empty signifier' onto which can be written a variety of aspirations, programs and ideals – each with their implications for the figure of the teacher, the student and the text, and the relations between them. To emphasise method alone is to elide these important relations and therefore to disguise the kind of teacher-student-text triad that is being required. Critical analysis is required to understand the political and practical program implied in various methods being promoted in policy. Our analysis shows that 19th-century teacher educators understood this relation and successfully generated new and successful 'reading lessons' – we're not sure that current policy demonstrates a similar awareness.

We argue that there is much to be learned about the problems facing literacy education in the present, by understanding the ways in which earlier, similar problems were faced. The figure of the English/reading teacher has always been complexly interrelated with, and mutually constituted by, constructions of literacy and English as a school subject, including views of nationhood underpinning schooling policy. There is value, then, in tracing the ways in which the problem of 'method' was handled in the past, and how questions about the teaching of reading were resolved, especially in relation to the 'training' of the teacher. We argue that having access to these historical (dis)continuities will equip teacher educators and teachers themselves, and perhaps also policy-

makers, with a rich understanding of the complex policy and discursive environment surrounding the teaching of reading, and literacy pedagogy more generally.

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