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Reading Pedagogy, Reading Politics: The Shifting Landscapes of Educational Reform.

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Background

This symposium considers some of the continuities and discontinuities in how research, policy and practice in the literacy curriculum have been articulated in different countries, both historically and in the present. This paper contributes to this discussion by considering some of the inherent tensions within the literacy curriculum as they have played out in England during an unprecedented decade of centrally-driven educational reform (Moss, 2009).

Research Questions

Much of the research on literacy as a social practice draws on Brian Street's key distinction between ideological and autonomous approaches to literacy (Street, 1984). This remains an important means of distinguishing between research literatures and traditions. For Street, autonomous perspectives view literacy as a set of internal mental competencies which can be defined in the abstract without reference to the specific social contexts in which they will be used. Hence the term "autonomous". This kind of research is grounded in positivist perspectives, searches for universal laws about how literacy works, and is often associated with pedagogies which outline the precise sequence in which particular skills and sub-skills should be taught. Using normative criteria, those who struggle to acquire the appropriate skills in the appropriate order will be judged as deficient, and their deficiencies will then become the subject of remedial action. By contrast, ideological perspectives acknowledge that literacy is an intrinsically social competence which cannot be divorced from the intentions and purposes of its users, and will vary from one setting to another. The term "ideological" reflects the assumption that there is not a single best way of acquiring literacy, or even defining fully what being literate means. Precisely because literacy is defined as an intrinsically cultural act, literacy pedagogies are alert to and respectful of learners' existing competencies and will seek ways of valuing them. Pedagogies are more likely to be built bottom up rather than top down.

Those committed to an ideological view of literacy have been highly critical of many of the government-driven education reform programmes which have concentrated the power to choose and impose pedagogies more and more in politicians' hands. From this perspective, arguments over methods will always have a political hue and indeed the heavy reliance on drill and skill approaches in many reform programmes are often regarded as politically suspect, rather than empowering of poor communities (Teale et al, 2007; Larson, 2007).

Methods

In this paper I want to unpack some of the politics involved in making literacy central to education reform programmes. To do so I will draw on Bernsteinian perspectives and the link Bernstein makes between different forms of pedagogy and different social relations between participants in the business of teaching and learning – teachers as well as pupils - and the different knowledge communities they belong to (Bernstein, 1996; Moss, 2007). In this discussion I will use the concept of autonomy in a different way from Street, not as a marker of the form of knowledge content invoked in descriptions of literacy, but rather as a potential feature of the learner and their use of the skills they acquire.

Frame

I will argue that the literacy curriculum always holds within it two versions of the learner: as one who must submit to the symbolic system of literate language in its written form as it already exists; and as

one who will re-fashion that system for their own purposes through use. These two different elements can be contrasted as autonomy and control. In Bernsteinian terms, pedagogies that embrace weak classification and framing emphasise autonomy, whereas pedagogies grounded in strong classification and framing emphasise control.

Research findings

If part of the key business involved in literacy learning is navigating round both facets of reading and writing – autonomy and control – then different methods set out different terms and conditions under which this will happen. Drawing on a sequence of empirical research projects which used qualitative methods to examine literacy policy and practice in English primary schools over the last decade, this paper will explore how the possibilities for navigating the literacy curriculum have changed during a period of centrally-driven curriculum reform, and what should happen next in the interests of children, parents and teachers and those who see literacy as fundamental to getting on in schooling.

References

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