

Literacy policy and English/literacy practice: Researching the interaction between different knowledge fields

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the role of research in disentangling an increasingly complex relationship between literacy policy and practice as it is emerging in different local and national contexts. What are the tools and methodologies that have been used to track this relationship over time? Where should they best focus attention now? In answering these questions this paper will consider three different kinds of research perspectives and starting points for enquiry: 1. Policy evaluation. The use of a range of quantitative research tools to feed policy decision-making by tracking the impact on pupil performance of different kinds of pedagogic or policy change (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010). 2. Co-construction and policy translation. This has for some time been a central preoccupation in policy sociology, which has used small-scale and context specific research to test the limits to the control over complex social fields that policy exercises from afar (Ball, 1994). Agentic re-framings of policy at the local level stand as evidence for the potential to challenge, mitigate or re-order such impositions. 3. Ethnographies of policy time and space. Ethnographic research tools have long been used to document community literacy practices, and in training their lens on the classroom have sought to focus on the potential dissonance between community and schooled practices. It is rarer to find such research tools deployed to explore the broader policy landscape. In the light of debate within the field, part of the purpose of this article is to examine how ethnographic research tools might be refined to study how policy from afar reshapes literacy practices in the here and now. (Brandt and Clinton, 2002).

KEYWORDS: Ethnographic research tools, literacy policy, literacy practices, policy analysis, quantitative indicators, school reform.

LITERACY POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: NEW RELATIONSHIPS FOR NEW TIMES

In recent times, and in many different jurisdictions, policy-makers have begun to exert much more direct influence over educational practice than once would have been the case. Literacy policy commonly stands centre stage in this process. Policy-makers' interests in literacy are most often voiced in terms of efficacy (How well are we doing compared to others?); equity of outcomes (Is our system producing equal levels of attainment for all?); levels of skill (Are the levels of skill high enough to compete in the new global market?) and include choice of teaching method (Which methods mobilised in which order secure the best results?). These concerns resonate in wider public discourse. Few education systems have been found to measure up to this kind of close scrutiny. When this produces demand for change, policy-makers by and large set the terms under which this will happen.

Such concerns are not restricted to a single country. Rather there has been a steady convergence internationally on a similar set of criteria for comparing system performance and on a common set of tools for engineering change. Rizvi and Lingard, (2010), following Appadurai (1990), describe the combination of discursive and material resources which now largely shape education policy as a new “social imaginary” that has crowded out other ways of thinking:

Over the past two decades the neoliberal social imaginary...has transformed thinking in almost all policy arenas including education....Neoliberalism has steered education policy priorities towards a particular curriculum architecture with an emphasis on the skills and dispositions needed for participation in the global knowledge economy, modes of governance that have highlighted principles of privatization and choice, and an audit culture that stresses performance contracts and various...regimes of testing and accountability which have thinned out the purposes, pedagogies and potential of education. (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 197)

These changed modes of thinking have begun to erode earlier commonsense understandings of the point and purpose of education. In particular they have weakened the assumption that teachers and students are primarily engaged in building common cultures and identities as they develop shared knowledge. Instead schools are now encouraged to trade in skills and qualifications that will act as passports for their pupils to a future somewhere else. Education becomes a means to another end, rather than an end in itself. From a sociological perspective, this creates new conditions in which the individual student orients to the pedagogic discourse of the school and the school itself blends the instructional and regulative aspects of its pedagogy (Bernstein, 1996; Moss, 2004).

LITERACY POLICY REMADE: COMPARING PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES USING QUANTITATIVE MEASURES.

One of the key ingredients in this new landscape has been the increasing use of quantitative indicators to capture different aspects of system performance and drive decision-making in the policy sphere. Perhaps this is best exemplified by the role the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has played in instigating school reform. PISA uses a range of test instruments, sampling and survey techniques to compare students’ competence in reading, maths and science in participating countries. The data are collected, analysed and published on a three yearly cycle. The analysis makes strong links between the measures of student performance, structural elements of national education systems, the potential for education system reform and the contribution such reforms might make to economic performance. This feeds policy-makers’ rationale for taking education seriously. It also keeps the focus tied to the desired outcomes at system level, overlooking the more localised and immediate contexts and micro patterns of social interactions in which teaching and learning actually take place.

In their list of FAQs, the OECD identify the value of the exercise in these terms:

Does PISA tell participants how to run their schools?

No. The data collected by PISA shows the successes of some participants' schools and the challenges being faced in other countries/economies. It allows countries and economies to compare best practices and to further develop their own improvements, ones appropriate for their school systems.

http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,3746,en_32252351_32235731_38262901_1_1_1_1,00.html

From the point of view of the OECD, the data do their own work in the public domain, as countries review the findings and react accordingly. The assumption is that characteristics of the school systems in those countries that do best could usefully be borrowed by those countries doing less well and in this way all systems will converge on the same levels of performance (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Repeating the exercise at regular intervals – data collection, analysis, publication – produces new points of comparison, in relation to what has changed between time points. The analysis itself thereby becomes more nuanced. The work the datasets do rests with how these points of comparison are mobilised and understood.

At its crudest, the analysis produces a rank ordering of countries, showing those with the strongest to weakest outcomes from their education system in terms of student performance. The results are often reported like this in national newspapers. But they also set policy-makers and politicians the task of explaining why their particular system is where it is and whether it needs to change. The need to explain and to change intensifies not so much according to the ranking per se, but according to where individual countries are in relation to their own education policy cycle, and how the data fit with, contrast with or even undermine current policy thinking and the investments in education it has led to.

The politics to all this matters. In England, for instance, the PISA data have not strongly shaped the discussion on system reform. They have been used more simply to reinforce or counterpoint directions of travel politicians have already committed to, whether the data have shown the system doing well or pointed to weaknesses. In large part this is because England already collects and publishes its own system performance data. Its National Pupil Database (NPD) holds extensive information on individual pupils and continuously tracks their progress through an education system that tests frequently and throughout their school careers. In this context the NPD data already play a similar function to PISA data elsewhere, by fostering fine-grained comparative analysis of system performance, in this case conducted and then published at the level of the school. By contrast, Denmark has historically relied far less on examination and test data within its school system. The PISA data led it to consider whether it should use such data more (OECD, 2004).

As the analysis of this kind of quantitative data has become more nuanced, so have the responses. For example, the table below breaks down the percentage of the sample performing at different Levels on the PISA test instruments for reading. This makes it possible to compare the distribution in student performance scores across Levels as well as the mean score for any one country. This can be used to identify longer tails of underachievement produced in one system as against another. (The data below are extracted from a larger table reported in PISA 2006 (OECD, 2006)).

	L1	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5
OECD	%	%	%	%	%	%
Australia	3.8	9.6	21.0	30.1	24.9	10.6
Austria	8.4	13.1	22.0	26.2	21.3	9.0
Canada	3.4	7.6	18.0	29.4	27.2	14.5
Finland	0.8	4.0	15.5	31.2	31.8	16.7
Ireland	3.2	9.0	20.9	30.2	25.1	11.7
Korea	1.4	4.3	12.5	27.2	32.7	21.7
N. Z.	4.7	9.9	18.7	26.4	24.5	15.9
Spain	8.7	17.0	30.2	29.7	12.6	1.8
U. K.	6.8	12.2	22.7	28.7	20.5	9.0
OECD total	8.9	14.2	23.1	26.6	19.2	8.1
OECD av	7.4	12.7	22.7	27.8	20.7	8.6

Table 1. Percentage of sample performing at different Levels of reading (PISA)

This level of analysis became a key element in the public discourse on literacy attainment in New Zealand, a country which came out very well on a “one number”, single mean score. On the latter indicator, the Ministry of Education in New Zealand commented: “Of the 572 countries participating in PISA 2006, the mean reading literacy performance of only three countries was significantly higher than New Zealand, two countries were similar, and the other 50 countries were significantly lower” (Telford & Caygill, 2007).

Analysis of the distribution of student performance across Levels, however, led to a different set of questions which mapped onto prior concerns about the relative attainment of different sections of the population.

In the international study of literacy achievement conducted in 1991 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), New Zealand had the largest spread of scores of any of the participating countries (Elley, 1992). In the most recent study by the IEA (Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez & Kennedy, 2003), the standard deviations of achievement in reading ranged from a low of 57 for the Netherlands to a high of 106 for Belize. The standard deviation of New Zealand’s reading scores was 93. Similarly, results from the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study (OECD, 2004) indicated that the distribution of New Zealand’s reading scores was larger than all but a few of the 41 participating countries. In each of these studies the majority of poor readers were from low-income backgrounds with an over representation of Maori students. (Tunmer, Chapman & Prochnow, 2006, pp. 183-4)

This became the starting point for public debate over whether New Zealand should move away from its commitment to “real books” pedagogies in the early years towards phonics as the primary means of teaching reading. Tunmer and colleagues used their analysis of the PISA data to advocate phonics as a more effective method of teaching reading to the target populations who were doing less well. In the end this suggestion was not adopted (Soler & Openshaw, 2007).

Points of comparison in the quantitative data are not fixed, therefore, any more than the actions they engender. Rather such data lend themselves to multiple interpretations and responses in different national settings (Grek 2009; McGaw, 2008). Despite what policy-makers might wish, part of the work they do is precisely to pose questions rather than give definitive answers:

Analyses like these cannot offer definitive evidence about the causes of the variations or about specific actions to improve national performances. They can, however, suggest issues worth further exploration by other means. (McGaw, 2008, p. 226)

Yet because of the way the statistical range in the data is interpreted, they also produce a general sense that most countries could do better in terms of equipping their citizens with the appropriate literacy skills. In and of themselves they offer little guidance on precisely how this could be done. The dilemma that policy-makers face is therefore two-fold. On the one hand keeping control over the political agenda so that any dissatisfaction with system outcomes can be safely managed; and on the other putting in place suitable remedies that can address the current state of affairs.

WHEN POLICY SETS THE TERMS: FIXING THE FOCUS FOR LITERACY RESEARCH

Using quantitative data to monitor literacy performance in this way has become commonplace, whether at national, district or school level. It fits modern modes of governance in education, facilitating “steering at a distance” (Kickert, 2005) by those who take political responsibility for educational outcomes, even though they operate at some distance from the schools and classrooms they seek to reform (Grek, 2009; Moss, 2009). In the policy domain itself expectations have been high that the problems can be fixed. If some systems produce better results than others, then this acts as a guarantee that any system could function at the same level, with the right mix of policy features. The notion that school systems express complex trade-offs in terms of the relationships between school structures, school curricula, social geographies and the potential distribution of roles and functionings in the wider economy gets pushed to one side.

Instead the research community is positioned as the source of the possible answers to a policy problem that others have defined in their own terms. This often amounts to being asked to fix the system’s results rather than look more broadly at a range of wider social factors that might need to change. Indeed it is often not within the scope of the literacy research community to pursue the latter course even if they wished to do so. On the contrary the very specialisation within research communities that leads to the development of expertise in particular areas that might be relevant to raising literacy standards – phonic instruction, for instance – may precisely preclude those same communities from knowing much about key elements in carrying out system reform – strategies for getting buy-in to a particular programme in different settings, for example. Yet such an alternative range of skills may be crucial to working at the scale policy-makers require. All of this is to draw attention to the fact that the answer to the question “how can we substantially increase literacy levels?” is unlikely to rest with substituting one method of teaching reading with another, though choice of methods and their sequencing may well play a part alongside other elements: the

general quality of instruction, models of professional development, or different ways of acknowledging and responding to social segregation within the student body, to name but a few. School effectiveness and improvement researchers have been amongst the first to draw attention to this complex mix of features and begin to find ways to orchestrate them in the process of trying out reform (Fullan, 1993; Barber, 1996; Levin, 2010).

Reform programmes do not exist as simple recipes that can achieve their ends by moving an intact knowledge base from here to there. More than ten years of attempts at large-scale reform have demonstrated this fairly conclusively (Linn, 2000; Earl, Watson & Katz, 2003). However, the logic of the policy field often drives policy-makers to act as if this were precisely the case. From their point of view, discussion of the data in the public domain continues to lead to broad-brush assessments of comparative failure or success which need channelling in different directions in the restless search for improvement. The desire to achieve better outcomes, more than the state of play in the available knowledge base or the conditions required to enable research to develop, drives the timelines and speed at which reform is implemented (Moss, 2009).

Look across different jurisdictions and one can see this play out in various ways in relation to literacy policy, through the sequential championing of different methods of literacy instruction (for example, mandatory phonics programmes in California or *Success for All* in New York (Coburn & Stein, 2010)); more rarely through the co-option of lead academics into the policy domain (Luke, 2002); or through the introduction of intensive, centrally-driven programmes of professional development, that have largely bypassed existing research communities to reach deep into the social organisation of schooling (Levin, 2010). Often the “lease” such programmes have on the policy space is provisional. A change of government or disappointing results can all lead to one programme being dropped and another being adopted (Earl et al., 2003).

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FIELDS: LITERACY AND ETHNOGRAPHIES OF PRACTICE

In the account I have given above, I have brought out the differences between how policy-makers and researchers orientate to the business of system reform. Policy-makers’ priorities stem directly from the very different position they occupy, at some distance from the everyday interactions and social processes that make up teaching and learning within particular settings. Instead their eyes are firmly fixed on responsibilities and powers that belong in the political domain. Those researchers who have worked most closely with policy-makers and then written about the experience have often reflected on the difficulties this creates as political priorities change and in turn re-shape the research agenda (Luke, 2005; Stannard & Huxford, 2007; Levin, 2003). Assent in all quarters to the general call to improve teaching and learning often blurs the very different interests and motivations that lead such different fields to converge on what seems to be the same territory. One important role for the research community is to separate out the different logics at work.

Ethnographic research tools are well suited to explore this complex terrain. They have been variously mobilised to interrogate the different logics that underpin the domains of policy, research and practice and how they interact. Using participant observation and/or open-ended interviews such studies often focus on close analysis of specific social interactions at the level of the classroom. This makes it possible to explore how specific policy directives translate into practice, whether and how teachers' and learners' interactions change in this light, and the intended and unintended consequences that may flow from the interaction between the "new" of the policy and the "given" of the classroom. Often this kind of enquiry sets out to challenge the reach of policy by demonstrating how it is changed as it is enacted through the actions and agency of participants on the ground.

Methodologically ethnographic perspectives assume that people's actions and beliefs are tied to and generated by the specific social contexts in which they act and their membership of the networks or communities to which those spaces belong. The context makes the culture and the culture shapes the context, in an on-going process of negotiation between the two in which regularities emerge, and may become relatively fixed. This produces the logic to a given field and the means to act successfully within it. Retrieving such regularities in "the rules or norms that individuals within a society, community or group have to know, produce, predict, interpret and evaluate in a given setting...in order to participate in socially and culturally appropriate ways" (Green & Bloome, 1997, p. 186) in respect of marginalised or less powerful groups becomes the central point of the analysis. Yet such local cultures will also be subject to challenge and renegotiation as one community's norms inevitably come into contact with another's. The rights to define whose norms will prevail in any given setting may well be distributed unequally (Michaels, 1986). The use of ethnography in education has often highlighted such inequalities by investigating contrasts between pupils' home literacies and the school literacy practices they encounter in the classroom (Freebody et al., 1995; Bloome, 1992; Heath, 1983).

Where policy-making is concerned, such inequalities are often structural features of policy itself. Policy defines the boundaries to the problem that practice should address and the methods and means to be adopted to achieve change. Policy also defines how the outcomes of any intervention will be judged, often using repeated and systematic collection of performance data to track the progress being made in achieving policy goals. There are deliberate asymmetries in agenda-setting and in forms of accountability. Linear-rational models of policy-making regard such inequalities as a virtue (Nutley, Davies & Walter, 2007). Provided the choice of policy is steered by the best research evidence, then it could and should over-rule the specific characteristics of local contexts. This is how improvement will happen. The quality of the evidence entitles the policy-makers to be confident that the policy will "work" in achieving the desired outcomes. As the policy is implemented, success in changing practice rests therefore with policy "fidelity" – the understanding that the terms and conditions that make the policy effective will not be diluted or altered by those who implement it. Yet adhering to this approach is not without its difficulties, particularly when policies seek to intervene and alter complex patterns of social interaction of the kind that characterise teaching and learning (Cuban, 1993; Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan, 2003).

By contrast, constructivist models of policy-making recognise that the relations between fields are not straightforward, and that effective policy implementation may precisely require adaptation of policy content and conduct to circumstances that the policy has not foreseen (Datnow et al., 2003; Fullan, 1993; Earl et al., 2003). Those championing this approach argue that good use of research evidence in policy

involves two way rather than linear flows of knowledge in which researchers and research users each bring their own experience, values and understanding to bear in interpreting research and its meaning for local contexts. Using research emerges as a social and collective...process that takes place through intricate interaction. (Nutley et al., 2007, pp. 116, 305.)

From this perspective policy implementation is part of an on-going dialogue between interested parties, which has the capacity to modify policy itself as well as local actions. These two different approaches create very different vantage points from which to consider the interaction between policy and practice. Perhaps surprisingly, policy-makers have themselves drawn on the second as well as the first approach (Levin, 2010; Bransford, Stipek, Vye, Gomez & Lam, 2009). In stepping into such contested terrain, characterised by competing frames of reference that shape literacy policy implementation in different ways, ethnographic methods can usefully explore how each set of actors regard the specific case, disentangling the logic that constructs each point of view. This also means suspending judgement on whose approach is to be preferred, and instead setting out to understand what the consequences are of deploying different logics in competing fields (Schwartz & Kardos, 2009).

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF LITERACY POLICY: REFRAMING POLICY TIME AND SPACE

Ethnographic approaches to studying literacy in context have been most fully developed in what is sometimes known as the literacy as social practice perspective, or the New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Moss, 2007). In this research tradition, the predominant unit of analysis is the literacy event, most commonly defined as any occasion where a piece of written text plays an integral part in what is going on (Heath, 1983; Barton, 1994). Documenting and analysing a given event situates the text involved in relation to its social context of use. What participants say and do offers a window onto their shared assumptions about what this particular text stands for. Analytically, this gives precedence to those ways of doing reading and writing that may be culturally specific to the participants in the immediate setting. Steering by the event is intended to precisely bring these aspects of literacy practice to light.

However, in their article, “Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice”, Brandt and Clinton argue that focusing too closely on the “ethnographically visible” risks according too much agency to those observed interacting in the present moment – what they call the here and now of the event – and assigning too little power to elements outside the immediate context which nevertheless exert a structuring effect (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 343).

Literate practices are not typically invented by their practitioners. Nor are they independently chosen or sustained by them. Literacy in use more often than not

serves multiple interests, incorporating individual agents and their locales into larger enterprises that play out away from the immediate scene. Further, literate practices depend on powerful and consolidating technologies – technologies that are themselves susceptible to sometimes abrupt transformations that can destabilise the functions, uses, values and meanings of literacy anywhere. (Brandt and Clinton, 2002, p. 338)

By consolidating technologies they partly mean artefacts present in the event, which they describe as “active mediators – imbuing, resisting, recrafting” the event and its meaning through their presence (p. 346).

In literacy events shaped by literacy policy such artefacts might include the policy texts that set the new course of action in motion by their immediate presence. But such events might also respond to or be partially shaped by those policy documents that never reach the classroom directly but do their work elsewhere within the policy sphere, establishing political buy-in for the policy-makers’ direction of travel amongst other policy-makers. The publication of *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003) would be an example in the context of the policy development of the National Literacy Strategy in England. (See Alexander, 2004). Such documents may nevertheless set the tone, the backdrop to the particular literacy event, in important ways without being directly invoked there. They may equally be influenced by pedagogic resources, whose travel into the classroom is directly sanctioned or expedited by policy, even though they have not been fashioned within the policy domain. Or literacy events may become saturated by new modes of accountability that effectively make what happens in the here and now take its meaning from what will happen later, when the pupils’ performance is ultimately judged against a standardised test score, or the teacher’s performance is reviewed. In myriad different ways, this literacy event, in which teachers and pupils interact to get something done in the here and now is therefore profoundly shaped by other times and other places. It cannot be considered as a self-sufficient moment, created by the particular participants as a direct and unmediated reflection of their own values and beliefs.

Policy sociology has been particularly interested in exploring the fractured and multi-layered effect achieved by the simultaneous invocation of times and spaces that are elsewhere in the here and now. Most commonly this has been done by tracking the evolution of the particular policy over time and in the many different contexts it travels through. Shifts in policy-time and policy-space are important (Taylor et al., 1997). They open up points at which the policy will be recontextualised – re-appropriated in ways that simultaneously re-order the particular field the policy moves into and the relations between the various actors involved at whatever level (Bernstein, 1996).

The successive realignments between policy and the other spheres of action it touches have been variously described. Some focus on establishing timelines to the different stages the policy goes through. Levin (2001) suggests: origins, adoption, implementation and outcomes. Others prioritise the successive contexts in which policies impact: national; district; school, classroom (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard & Henry, 1997). In these ways it becomes possible to identify how policy work changes at different points in the policy lifecycle. Earl et al. (2003), drawing on Wylie (2002), suggest development, evolution and transformation as the successive stages through which policies mature. They see the latter two as inevitable consequences of policy

interacting with unanticipated features of the local settings in which it is implemented. In some cases they argue that policy transformation will lead to the policy's demise.

In some respects these categories articulate with policy-makers' own attempts to make sense of policy development. These separate out the kinds of information necessary to steer decisions about what kinds of policies are required, through the point of policy design, to the attempts to effectively implement the policy and the points of review and evaluation afterwards in which decisions can be taken about what to do next. In the New Labour period of office in the UK, this was sometimes referred to as the ROAMEF framework, in which policy-makers would be expected to adopt different courses of action as they established a Rationale for the policy, its Objectives, spelt out in specific and measurable terms, Appraisal of the various means by which these objectives could be met, Monitoring of the policy in action, Evaluation of what it had achieved, and feedback on its success to inform subsequent decision making (*Evaluation and Appraisal Guidance*, DfES, 2004). These are attempts both to rationalise the decision-making process and exercise control over likely outcomes. In many respects they also represent the recontextualisation of research tools, associated with action research, into the policy domain (Moss, 2009).

By contrast, over time, policy sociology has built up a different picture of how these sequenced interactions work. This turns out to be a much less tidy process than the original models predicted, in part because a single policy rarely has unlimited time or space in which to run its course. Rather, individual policies provide a single thread linking one context to another when the relation between whole fields may be shifting in other ways. Stephen Ball's work captures some of these multi-dimensional processes precisely by setting out to track other kinds of policy actors and networks that are also reaching into the policy sphere. His most recent work has moved away from identifying the trajectory that individual policies may follow as they cycle through contexts of influence, text production and practice to instead describing more complex re-orderings of the policy scape, in which the flow of knowledge, finance, and networks that now generate policy change produce disparate effects and temporary conjunctures in a disordered world. Thus, Ball comments in a review of Academy schools in England, a new form of school provision akin to charter schools in the USA:

New policy communities bring new kinds of actors into the policy process, validate new policy discourses – discourses flow through them – and enable new forms of policy influence and enactment....These new forces are able to colonise the spaces opened up by the critique of existing state organisations, actions and actors....All in all it replaces hierarchy with *heterarchy*,...bureaucracy and administrative structures and relationships with a system of organisation replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy and/or divergent-but-coexistent patterns of relation. (Ball, 2009, p.100)

All of this hectic activity argues against keeping a narrow lens on whether and how far a particular policy content or strategy delivers new forms of pedagogic practice to particular settings and changes pupil outcomes in its wake. Important as it may be to understand how policy impacts on practice, this is not the only or even necessarily the key question. Rather, reframing how ethnography looks at the interaction of time and space in the here and now linking this moment to other times, other settings, other

actors and other interests can help explain what sustains or undermines change in the classroom

In their paper, Brandt and Clinton highlight the need to account for what they call the “transcontextual aspects of literacy”, those facets of literacy practice that “regularly [arrive] from other places – infiltrating, disjuncting, and displacing local life” (2002, p. 343). In relation to literacy policy this raises a number of questions about how policy itself gets into the room. What are the means it uses to re-shape the local sphere? And in that case where should we look to see its effects? One route is to continue to take the particular event, a moment in teaching and learning that instantiates the interaction between literacy policy and pedagogic practice at the local level, and track back to those other contexts and spaces that determine this encounter. Micro-analysis of such moments can facilitate more nuanced accounts of policy effects, its tension points and contradictions, and the intended and unintended consequences that flow through policy implementation. This might still entail describing how the new of policy is re-appropriated into older grammars of place or time and the individual values and beliefs that sustain them. A case study conducted in England by Adam Lefstein (2008a) provides a good example.

Lefstein set out to explore the use of exemplar teaching materials produced as part of the National Literacy Strategy in 2002 with the final year of primary school (Year 6) in mind. The moment he captured stemmed from the lesson of an experienced teacher working in a low performing school with the age group whose test scores mattered most in determining the school’s ranking. Lefstein’s interest was in how these materials got taken up. The model materials were designed to encourage and develop “higher order reading skills” that “probe beyond the literal” through developing teachers’ skills in using open questions to structure pupil talk (Lefstein, 2008a, p. 713). They set out a sequence which shifted control over the teaching and learning activities that accompanied a short story from the teacher to the pupils, working independently or in pairs, back to the teacher again. The materials were therefore intended to reapportion time and space in the classroom so that pupils could apply their “higher order reading skills” to a particular set of issues the story raised. The materials saw some value in pupils talking about the text in a relatively open way, using the text to sustain their enquiries and shape the discussion. The interaction that Lefstein documented showed many of the open-ended questions suggested in the materials being used. But by running the activity from within the whole class space, the teacher compressed the time pupils had to investigate and speculate on their own. Lefstein comments:

Rather than releasing the pupils to work independently for 20 consecutive minutes, Mr Thompson punctuated their independent work with frequent interventions, collecting answers to one task and assigning a new one. The longest period of uninterrupted pupil work is 5.5 minutes. On the second day Mr Thompson skipped the independent task altogether, instead continuing whole class teaching until the end of the lesson. (2008a, p. 717)

Through micro-analysis of particular exchanges, Lefstein argues that “The suppression of potentially open questions was the joint accomplishment of both Mr Thompson and his pupils” (p. 720) as they converged on another model of spoken interaction with the respective roles it allots to both pupils and teachers. Each were playing their own part in this realignment of interactional genres. The result was that

“potentially rich and challenging inquiry is broken down into a series of closed questions leading to a rather banal conclusion” (p. 723) and “the prescribed tasks and questions were assimilated into the class’s habitual ways of interacting....Macro level goals regarding the use of open questions were often subverted by micro-level patterns” (p. 724).

Lefstein sees this episode as a problem for policy and a problem for pedagogy. He sets his analysis of policy in the context of the prescriptive approach NLS took to school reform. In its earliest stages, teachers were left little room to negotiate with the policy’s principles. Rather they were expected to follow exactly its prescriptions and would be explicitly judged on whether they had done so through a planning regime run as high-stakes auditing. One might add that the release of these materials designed to support more exploratory and open-ended readings of a given text also happened at a moment in the policy cycle when early performance gains had slowed, and there was particular anxiety about the number of pupils reaching higher-level standards. However, the materials themselves arrived without such a sub-text being made explicit, to supply a missing gap in the programme identified elsewhere (Moss, 2009). By contrast, the engagement with policy that Lefstein records within the school was acute awareness of its poor record in raising results, despite high levels of compliance with what the Strategy asked of them. This disjuncture unsettled staff.

In terms of this teacher’s engagement with the materials, Lefstein treats this as neither a case of misunderstanding nor resistance. On the contrary, he is at some pains to show that this teacher did not regard the text as closed but valued different interpretations of the text and looked for ways to elicit and sustain them. He suggests that the real difficulty in the classroom was the enduring stability that the interactional genres associated with whole-class settings afford and the lack of appropriate professional support for re-working these. Lefstein comments:

The professional development opportunities provided by the NLS were based largely on a demonstration and imitation model, in which the teachers observed live or video demonstrations, which they were then expected to emulate. None of the complexities or problematic aspects of such teaching were explored. (2008a, p. 727)

There are other ways of deploying ethnographic research tools to map policy space and time. Colin Mills (2011), also writing about English primary schools, has studied the interactions between external consultants, brought into schools via different routes to improve school performance, and the staff they set out to help. The study does not so much focus on individual literacy events as use participant observation and open-ended interviews to tease apart the very different contexts consultants and teachers gear towards in their respective roles. Often in his study, the starting point for the discussion is the performance data generated at the level of the school. This is at once impersonal and overly precise in the common object it constructs “between two worlds”. Impersonal in so far as it deals in generalities, not the specific individuals, their purposes and micro-patterns of social interactions that generate the data; but also quite precise in terms of the focus for future action. He quotes a consultant’s input to a staff meeting in a school in “special measures” – a designation that leads to a programme of intensive external support designed to raise standards.

The main problem you can see from the online data, is in boys’ achievement...and we can further analyse the figures to see that it is boys’ writing that is bringing you down

in the local authority rankings, and in the national figures. You are getting 57% to Level 4 at Year 6 – that’s way below the authority benchmark...75% and way below the actual figure for the authority which is 80%. That’s also the national figure we are reaching. When you have a close look you can see it is the boys who are holding you back. (Mills, 2011, p. 106)

Mills comments that the consultants are primarily positioned by their accountability to government and local authority policy not the school. They home in on rankings and figures that place this school in relation to others – the tangible signs that will also demonstrate when they have done their job. Their gaze is thus firmly fixed on the outcome sought, on what this school should be if it would only measure up. By contrast the teachers he interviewed articulate their response to the performance data differently, by recontextualising objective data into personal relationships with pupils and other staff, and by recalling longer histories to the school and the ways of working that have evolved there over time. They put back in the contexts the data strips out. He treats this orientation as deeply tied to their sense of professional worth and their conceptions of teaching and learning. The struggle here is not so much over different perspectives on teaching and learning or the value of different approaches per se; rather it is how each side is invested in solving the “problem” that lies at the heart of the interaction between these two different groups.

Finally, it is also possible to pursue literacy policy into other arenas that are further away from the site of schools and the immediate contexts in which teaching and learning take place. Two further examples follow. In *The politics of literacy in the context of large-scale reform* (Moss, 2009), I drew on interview data I had collected from a range of policy-makers involved in developing the National Literacy Strategy in England between 1996 and 2004. They included politicians, civil servants, Heads of Agencies with responsibilities that brought them closer to or put them further from direct management of the Strategy, as well as those directly involved in both its policy design and implementation. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to elicit interviewees’ views of how the policy had evolved, key events, documents and turning points they considered had shaped its evolution and what they had learnt about policy or research from observing or participating in the process. This revealed how far the trajectory of the policy was shaped by structural features of the policy environment itself – the annual decision-making cycle in policy-making; the courses of action determined by the patterns of government finance; and the uncertain trajectory to any such initiative that plays out in the political sphere. Indeed major shifts in the direction the policy took were directly linked to political weaknesses expressed in public debate at the centre rather than the strength of the research evidence about the policy’s relative success or sustainability (See also Moss & Huxford, 2007). Public events in the policy sphere often took precedence over what was really happening in schools. One conclusion I drew from the analysis was that the difficulty policy-makers found in fixing the results from schooling to their satisfaction over the longer term ultimately led them to decide to give the problem away. In the English context this is leading to system fragmentation and an increasing desire to invite private operators in to pick up the mess of broken promises the state has left behind.

By contrast, the interplay between political intent, public debate and research knowledge that lies at the heart of so many of these issues finds an alternative means of exploration in Lefstein (2008b). In this final example, Lefstein analysed three

episodes of *Newsnight*, broadcast in 2005. One of the most influential news and current affairs programmes on the BBC, *Newsnight* had decided to try to explain why there was then so much interest in introducing systematic phonics instruction into the early years as a potential answer to the perceived failings of the NLS. They did so by documenting the introduction of a commercial synthetic phonics programme to a school with previously poor literacy standards. In practice this led to a sequence of reports which packaged pre-recorded material collected in the school with a live studio debate. Unusually, Lefstein presented his analysis to the participants in the studio debate as well as the report's producer at *Newsnight* ahead of publication. The article explores how the structuring of the news report cast speakers as protagonists for and against phonics and phonics itself as an easy answer to often complex literacy problems – views which did not fully fit with any of the experts they asked to discuss their experiment. Yet “expert knowledge” itself became problematic in this context, given the limited space in which it was possible to speak, and the terms in which contributions were allowed. Lefstein wonders if part of the difficulty here is the extent to which the *Newsnight* report was relying on the genre of the makeover to do the work of telling a complex story in simple terms. He concludes “proponents of evidence-based policy...might take comfort in the fact that educational research received considerable attention on *Newsnight*. However, although “research” was elevated, the researcher who assumed the role of scientific gatekeeper was marginalised. Paradoxically the case study suggests that “what works” in the public sphere may be a less “scientific” approach” (p. 1141).

ENGAGING WITH POLICY: THE ROLE OF EVIDENCE AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS

Often in the academic literature on literacy policy, what seems to matter most is who controls the policy content. This can be treated as a re-run of long-standing disputes within the research field: about pedagogic method – whole books versus phonics; or about research methodologies – quantitative versus qualitative approaches. On the contrary, what I am arguing here is that policy does not provide a neutral space in which any of these methodologies can impose its own terms on an already congested social space. Policy logics are not the same as research. They have developed in very different social contexts. Policy recontextualises into its own image knowledges and approaches whose logic arises elsewhere, embedded in very different kinds of social relations. In setting such knowledge to work policy sutures space and time together in new ways.

Research does indeed have responsibilities to practice and to making literacy learning and teaching function as successfully as they can. It has far less responsibility to the policy field, in terms of either guaranteeing or underwriting the promises that politicians make on their own terms and determining whether they can really be honoured to the letter. Part of the difficulty at the moment may simply be that politicians promise too much, provide too little time or security in policy delivery and probably expect to pay too little.

Where research does have a clear and pressing role in policy is in assessing as objectively as it can the diverse impacts that policy has. I would argue this is a democratic duty. This can be done using a wide variety of approaches. Quantitative

analysis of large-scale datasets may be at least as important as qualitative and small-scale studies of particular cases at the level of the individual school, classroom or community. Both kinds of methodologies have a place. But tensions between them should not expect to get resolved according to which ones get taken up by policy-makers and co-opted into their sphere.

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