What counts as literacy work?

by **Nancy Jackson**

In June 2003, the Canadian government released a Parliamentary Committee report calling for a first ever "pan-Canadian accord on adult literacy and numeracy skills development." Such an accord would commit the federal, provincial and territorial governments to work together to "significantly increase the proportion of adults with higher-level literacy skills" (Longfield 2003, p.1). In taking this initiative, Canadian policy would fall in step with the proclamation of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) and its goal of increasing literacy levels by 50 per cent (UNESCO 2003). It would also draw the Canadian policy discourse into alignment, rather belatedly, with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries where frameworks for comprehensive national provision have emerged throughout the decade of the 1990s.

The proposal for a national system across Canada has been pursued by literacy advocates with a blend of hope and caution. This is based in the knowledge that literacy campaigns and large scale policy initiatives elsewhere have come and gone in the past, but the hoped for targets remain elusive nearly everywhere around the globe. Comprehensive frameworks of provision have promised not only to raise levels of literacy functioning, but also to create a system for doing so that is comprehensive, efficient, effective and accountable. But mounting evidence suggests that these systems are fraught with contradictions, and even advocates are having doubts about their reliability.

Informed literacy watchers seem to write increasingly about distortions, ruptures, contradictions, tugs-of-war, tensions, distractions, reversals, and competing values relating to literacy work. Policy and reporting frameworks (including assessment, performance monitoring, and quality assurance) are said to mislead, exclude, narrow, reduce and reorient the needs and intentions of teachers and learners. In the face of such dilemmas, many resilient and bureaucratically savvy literacy practitioners are said to be "gaming the numbers" and "circumventing the rules" to "survive." Growing numbers of others are reported to be over-burdened, stressed, disillusioned, burned out, and leaving the field. This chorus of voices is remarkably similar across national, international and intercontinental boundaries, fuelling a growing sense that literacy workers are becoming "enrolled as agents to a project" that is increasingly not their own (Hamilton 2001, p. 191).

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There is a growing and varied literature, in print and online, about these troubles. From my perspective, the most helpful and hopeful of these accounts connect such thorny reporting problems to underlying theoretical debates between functional versus social or practice-based conceptions of "what counts" as literacy itself. In all cases, literacy practitioners ineluctably determine what counts—or what is made to count—through the routine daily work of record keeping and reporting to funders. As others have commented, such reporting work is itself a highly complex form of literacy practice that remains remarkably under-examined (Darville 2002; Hamilton 2001; Derrick 2002a; 2002b). I hope the issues raised will be familiar to a wide range of readers and the analysis suggestive of useful ways to investigate the policy challenges currently being faced across national and international boundaries.

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This focus on policy frameworks reflects a growing interest in the adult literacy field in improving our own "policy literacy." Experienced literacy advocates describe themselves as "well-practiced in the art of working in the cracks" but less effective at "engag[ing] with the central processes of policy formation and decision-making (Hamilton 1997, p. 147). Even language theorists point out that the theories of language that have largely guided the literacy field in past are "not by themselves adequate to the task of guiding action in the 'messy' policy arena of our times" (Wickert 2001, p. 86-7; Barton 2001). Policy processes are coming to be recognized as a specialized form of textual practice and subject to examination as such. According to Barton, (2001, p. 100) "writing is not just speech written down...[but]...a distinct form of meaning-making" that is increasingly the object of theorizing in language studies and elsewhere.

We need new strategies for engaging with policy formation.

Sociologist Dorothy Smith describes this phenomenon as "textually mediated social organization" (1990a; 1990b; 1999) that has become increasingly central to understanding institutional arrangements over the past century. In her view, texts have a unique capacity not only to "make meaning" but to actively organize social action based on those meanings across a variety of settings by "transposing the actualities of people's lives and experience into the conceptual currency by which they can be governed" (Smith 1990, p. 14). Darville has taken up this analysis in the field of literacy (1998; 2000; 2001), pointing out that literacy reporting frameworks accomplish precisely this work of "organizing and coordinating" literacy teaching across settings. They do so in part by "holding the meaning of words constant" and thus creating "a stable object for discourse, for policy, and institutional action" (Darville 2000, p. 1). He calls this system of coordinating the "literacy regime" (2001), emphasizing the "complex institutional arrangements by which literacy is worked up...as an issue for public attention...and regulated as an arena of action" (2000, p. 1).

But there are tensions between this "stable object of discourse" and the "messy" world of literacy practice.

International literature associates these dilemmas with the rise of comprehensive policy regimes using abstracted and standardized categories for reporting and accountability. I believe that these concerns might be understood and investigated empirically as textually mediated troubles, and that this perspective on policy analysis might contribute toward new strategies for engaging with policy formation. ∎

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