Speaking Truth to Policy

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Being able to talk to policy-makers is something we have been discussing together for a long time. Larson is a qualitative researcher of language and literacy practices and Rios Aguilar is a quantitative researcher of educational policies targeted to minority students, using both secondary data analysis techniques and survey methods to collect data on Latino/a students and families’ literacy practices using Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez’ (1992) funds of knowledge work as a basis for informing the design of her survey instrument. We have wondered why policy makers typically do not use the wealth of existent research on the multiple language and literacy practices of children and families from non-dominant groups have and use to make policy. Instead, they continue to rely on “numbers” that do not challenge deficit model views of non-dominant groups. Large-scale policy reforms such as NCLB are examples of the use of “folk” knowledge about literacy and how to understand it that ignores what research has told us for more than 25 years. We try here to articulate some challenges to the research base upon which NCLB rests and to offer ideas about resistance and action for literacy researchers and teachers facing these unrelenting policies.

There is plenty of evidence that policy-makers have used to present the “literacy crisis” that they claim exists in the U.S. What type of evidence is offered? Many indicators such as the literacy rate (i.e., the percentage of adults who read out of the total adult population), functional literacy rate, reading achievement, ELA test scores, Stanford test scores are used to build evidence. Policy-makers use these numbers to make
decisions regarding budgets, curriculum, intervention programs, and educational reform because these numbers have shown relatively high correlations with many economic and social outcomes, such as wages and unemployment. Crime rates, health indicators, and welfare are frequently cited in the economics literature and correlated to literacy using erroneous measures. Its main purpose is to build models that attempt to explain economic growth. Mostly, these indicators are used to compare “literacy” levels among different countries. One example of this kind of measure is the International Adult Literacy Survey [IALS] (Hamilton & Barton, 2000). Moreover, these numbers have been used by many policy-makers at different levels (i.e., federal, state and local) to blame and condemn all those children and families who lack these skills.

NCLB relies on numerous studies (e.g., Snow et al. 1991; NRC, 1998) that offer explanations for why children, particularly poor children, fall behind in literacy performance focusing on: (1) their home environment, and (2) their school experiences (Lee & Croninger, 1994). Some of these studies have adopted a perspective of students and their families that is questionable. For example, in these studies students, particularly Latino/a students and their families are viewed as “abnormal” simply because they are not read to in English every single day or because they use mostly Spanish to communicate. Consequently, these studies suggest that some children must exclusively rely on school-related opportunities to develop literacy skills, particularly when home supports are seen to be weak or ineffectual (Lee & Croninger, 1994). What these studies fail to show is the fact that Latina/o students and their families, as well as many other children and families from non-dominant groups, do engage in multiple literacy practices that can have a positive influence on their learning.
This limited research base fails to recognize the complexity in studying reading achievement and literacy outcomes among non-dominant students. First, embedded in these traditional figures are notions of “literacy” and “reading” that capture only one aspect of what “literacy” actually entails (i.e., a limited set of skills). Second, the lack of “literacy” and “reading” skills has often been associated with academic, economic, and life failure (Snow et al. 1991; Fedderke, de Kadt, & Luiz, 1999). According to this particular “literacy” model, what it means to be literate is linked to the individual’s capacity to master a set of skills to “function” in the economic, social, and political life. Furthermore, it is implied in this definition that possessing these skills will automatically translate into higher academic achievement and better life opportunities. If this is true, then why have many “literacy” and “reading” interventions and reading programs, such as the Reading First initiative supported by NCLB legislation, targeted to non-dominant children and families failed? Perhaps, as suggested by Street (1997) “literacy not only varies with social context and with cultural norms and discourses regarding, for instance, identity, gender and belief, but that its uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power” (p. 48). Or perhaps there exist other necessary conditions that combined with the set of skills will contribute to students’ academic success? Furthermore, is academic success the only measure of literacy?

We are not arguing that academic literacy skills (or school-based forms of literacy) are not important for all students to learn, but are questioning whether these “skills” are sufficient. We are arguing that a narrow focus on this limited set of skills unnecessarily excludes authentic language and literacy practices students bring from out of school contexts. For example, Latino/a students comprehend texts in both languages
(English and Spanish) and engage in multiple language-related activities in both languages (English and Spanish). Finding solutions to address the literacy learning needs of these students then, requires researchers to examine the situation from a variety of angles. This is certainly not an easy task, but perhaps, as argued by many researchers (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Freebody & Luke, 1999; Moll & González, 1999), failure in reading English is not about individual familial skill deficits; rather it is about not valuing and making use of the multiple resources, skills, and knowledge already available to all children in their homes and communities.

So what can we do to change this policy environment? We believe we must make a systematic effort to be heard in a language policy-makers understand by collaborating with like-minded colleagues who have this expertise in order to “speak truth to policy.” What if we were able to: (1) build measures that better capture the multiple ways in which all children and families practice literacy, (2) use these measures to show policy-makers the relationship between multiple forms of literacy practiced by children and families from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and languages and children’s cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, and (3) report findings carefully, since methodologically there are enormous challenges to taking this new approach? Would legislation change? Would policy-makers start asking school and school districts to report these measures to provide evidence of their success? At this point there is little to no evidence of the multiple skills that children and families do have in the databases commonly used by policy-makers. In fact, some researchers have questioned the narrow view of literacy used by many policy-makers. A clear example of this is the article by Hamilton & Barton (2000) that claims that the well-known and widely used International Adult Literacy Survey has serious
methodological concerns, treats culture as an error, and uses a very narrow view of what literacy really means to adults. In spite of these efforts, we have not found research that uses the same approach to question federal and local educational policies, such as those embraced by NCLB.

There is some research that documents how a variety of literacy practices are used by children and families from non-dominant groups. And, as we mentioned earlier, there are studies that use large-scale datasets to provide evidence of the “lack” of literacy skills needed to succeed in a global economy. However, what we lack is, perhaps: (1) willingness among policy-makers to find alternative measures of literacy and its relationship with other social, economic, emotional, and educational outcomes, (2) willingness among researchers to collaborate and to design studies that attempt to remedy existent weaknesses, (3) research methods that address these issues, (4) willingness to help local educators (e.g., administrators and teachers) to address these issues in their particular contexts. What if we just start collaborating to develop and use authentic measures? We may be able to articulate and fight for an alternative “evidence-base” for use in resistance and change strategies. To not do this is to sit by and watch our children suffer needlessly.
References


