

Afterword: Theories, policies, practices

JoAnne Kleifgen
Teachers College, Columbia University

The social situations and ideas represented by the papers in this volume raise a number of questions for extended discussion around literacy theories, policies and practices. In this contribution, I focus on the relationship among these three, with particular attention to the knotty issues around policies and practices. We can ask a number of questions: about the directionality of policy-making regarding orthographic and pedagogical choices for literacy (top-down, bottom-up, bi-directional); about the social consequences of these choices; and about the role of education in enacting literacy practices on the ground and the preparation of educators so that they have the tools to influence and implement language and literacy policies. Finally, we must ask whether addressing theories, policies and practices for language in education is sufficient for a difference to be made in students' lives.

Whose Language Policies?

In terms of who makes the language-policy decisions (including orthographic choices) and their accompanying social consequences, we have in the Ingulsrud and Allen paper an example of a top-down language policy, with the Chinese government's stated goal of 'unifying' the people through standard Mandarin (Putonghua) by the year 2010. The orthographic choices come from the top; that is, teachers follow the government mandate to begin teaching reading by using romanized Hanyu Pinyin and moving quickly from there to Mandarin Chinese Characters. These top-down decisions are made not only to bring Chinese children to literacy, but to teach them to speak the national language, Putonghua, all part of a broader campaign toward political education (cf., Arnone & Graff, 1987). In short, the local vernacular in some areas of China is bypassed in favor of the standard vernacular as the bridge to literacy. Ingulsrud and Allen show how this policy is enacted by putting the burden on teachers who are responsible for children in their first years of schooling, and the authors discuss the consequences of such a policy especially in regions where minority languages are spoken.

Luykx presents the Bolivian case, in which earlier, more repressive, top-down language policies have given way to recognizing the value of incorporating indigenous languages (and the development of written codes for them) into education. These new policies are carried out by soliciting the expertise of university scholars to codify these vernaculars so that they can be used to teach literacy in schools. Yet, Luykx shows that this approach to literacy by selecting outside experts to design a writing system (known as corpus planning) is having unintended consequences. She clearly points out the need to pay more attention to the social aspects of orthography rather than to focus exclusively on technical and historical criteria for corpus planning. Decentralizing language policy can be a good thing if done judiciously. But bad choices made without careful planning and interdisciplinary collaboration can be a recipe for failure. Luykx's research is a case in point. In Bolivia, historical linguists were charged with making orthographic decisions, and they seemed to favor ancient forms taken from proto-languages over a community's contemporary practices in Quechua or Aymara. So, for example, Spanish borrowings

that are prevalent in today's speech community are banned from the written code, and suffixes are inserted that reflect historical sound-shifts rather than current speech. So, if top-down and delegated policies such as these have adverse consequences, where should we go next?

To the speech community of course, we might say. Let us assume that the ideal practice would be to place some of the decision-making power in the hands, not of government officials or university language experts alone, but also of the speakers of the vernacular in local communities. But, which of the multiple groups within a community will share in language-policy decisions? Which of the numerous language varieties existing in a community will predominate? (Recall Luykx's description of the controversy around varieties of Guarani.) And, which constituencies will be given voice in the decision-making? For instance, there are the indigenous linguists, who through a university education understand the workings of orthographic-phonetic relations and are able to lend expertise in such an endeavor; there are the educators, who see the value of using learners' linguistic knowledge as a bridge to literacy via a phonemically-based written version; and there are the parents, who may want their children educated in the majority language because they fear that native-language literacy is just another way to suppress economic access and political power.

Research on sociolinguistic situations in other parts of the world illustrates the complexities around who should be making such choices, and they reflect the fact that policy and planning may occur at every level from national to local groups (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Corson, 1999) and even throughout the various levels within educational systems (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). I offer an example here as a case in which the views of parents, community members, politicians and the intelligentsia are often at odds with one another. Orthographic debates around Haitian Creole (Kreyol) are caught up in what it means to be Haitian and what a language is for. Monolingual Kreyol-speaking parents worry that the use of the vernacular in the schools with its phonemically-based orthography to replace written French limits their children's chances for upward mobility (Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994). In my own research in one sector of the Haitian diaspora here in New York, a number of parents (though parents' views are mixed even in this community) are convinced that Kreyol is not meant for writing but for talking. These parents do not think that a written version of their everyday vernacular makes sense in their children's education (Kleifgen, 1991). Many Haitians still regard Kreyol as a language that is "caught" rather than taught, and they prefer that English or French be the languages of reading, writing, and learning for their children. In short, the question asked directly by Luykx and indirectly by Allen and Ingulsrud, "Whose language is it anyway?" continues to be an open one.

Whose Practices?

So how does all this complexity in terms of language policy and multilingual populations affect educational practice? In his contribution to this series, Street discusses the growing tendency to favor top-down governmental policies towards practice, which impose positivist models for teaching literacy. These long-ago discredited models run counter to all of the research in New Literacy Studies spearheaded by Street, whose work in the field spans 20 years (e.g., Street, 1984, 1993, 1995, 2001). This line of research is being marginalized, as the current climate in both the U.S. and the U.K. is to dictate

which research approaches 'count', to decree that we already know 'what works', and to prescribe 'scientifically proven' methods for schools. These top-down policies assume that a one-size-fits-all set of skills will be all that is needed in order to make a difference in a child's quality of life. Yet, even some of the more nuanced approaches, which take into account people's uses of languages and literacies both inside and outside schools, are themselves struggling to show success. For example, the Multiliteracies Manifesto published by the New London Group (1996) proposed a set of four features for promoting equity and achievement for students of all ethnolinguistic backgrounds: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. Yet, research has found that these features have not been appropriated fully, even in classrooms with innovative curricula (Michaels & Sohmer, 2001).

Whose Answers?

Street suggests that there be more active engagement among the various constituencies—researchers, policy makers and literacy practitioners—if we wish to have any effect on the educational achievement of all ethnolinguistic groups. Dialogue, indeed deeper collaboration between those engaged in research, policy-making and practice at all levels is fundamental. Luke (2003) takes the call for collaboration further by arguing that the development of language and literacy policies must take place alongside other social policies associated with health, employment and immigration, among others. He illustrates the point this way:

It is all too easy for systems ... in the case of Australian indigenous communities, to deliver education and, indeed, 'alphabets' on one hand while running other policies that actually accelerate the deterioration of the communities' kinship structure, traditional values and forms of work, private sector investment, and community social infrastructure on the other. In such scenarios, indigenous communities, linguistic minorities, diasporic communities and others are often blamed for having 'squandered' or abused 'government handouts' and other resources made available.

Perhaps we need a kind of "participatory design" akin to that originally developed by Scandinavian researchers and workers with the aim of creating better artifacts for the workplace (Ehn, 1988). This conjoint-action approach was an attempt to bridge the gap between designers and end users. To apply the approach to the making of language policies, we might argue that the design of artifacts (read policies) is of higher quality when users (read practitioners and students) are included in the process. In such a scenario, policy makers immerse themselves in the daily activities of the people for whom their policies are designed. Whatever approach is taken, teachers, researchers, community members, and educational policy makers need to develop sustained and deep collaborative actions. And eventually, they must find ways to coordinate these efforts with other social policy makers so that all students, no matter what their ethnolinguistic background, can hope for good health, satisfying work, and, yes, rich literate lives.

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