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Literacy for Work: Exploring Dominant Discourses about Work and Literacy in the Everyday Practice of Adult Literacy Education

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Abstract: *This paper first discusses the move in adult literacy policy to link literacy education to workforce development. It then argues that literacy researchers need to examine how dominant discourses about education and work are enacted in the everyday practices of adult literacy classrooms.*

The New Literacy Myth: Linking Education and Work

Researchers have argued that adult literacy education in the United States operates as a form of social control to maintain social and economic inequalities. This occurs despite popular rhetoric that states that literacy education offers adults a “second chance” at educational, social, and economic success. A number of adult literacy educators who believe that literacy education is inherently political (Gowen, 1992; Lankshear, 1993; Quigley, 1997) decry the move in literacy policy over the last few decades to link literacy education with workforce development because it perpetuates a new literacy myth. In the context of the economy, this myth argues that the inadequate literacy skills of America’s workforce will cause the demise of the national economy. This myth focuses on the idea that there is a skills gap between the current workforce and the demands of the workplace. The causes of this skills gap typically include: 1) workers’ lack of basic skills, 2) technological changes, 3) workforce demographic changes, and 4) workforce organizational changes. The consequences anticipated for this literacy skills gap are that 1) business is losing its competitive edge in the global marketplace, 2) the American standard of living is decreasing, and 3) Americans cannot get jobs because they lack skills. Finally, part of public rhetoric surrounding this new literacy myth concerns the perceived solution or response to this skills gap. In order to solve these economic problems, it is claimed, workers and future workers need to be educated in the “new basics,” which include basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, as well as communication and problem-solving skills (Grubb, 1997).

Some critical educators have argued that focusing on literacy as the panacea to economic problems

obscures “other social and economic problems that literacy alone cannot solve” and provides a “smoke-screen, covering up certain key societal problems by drawing our attention to other issues that, while important, are only symptomatic of larger ills” (Hull, 1997, p. 11). It is this alarmist discourse that has pushed literacy policy makers to create programs to remedy this “skills gap” problem. Little research has explored how adult literacy learners – who are ultimately supposed to benefit from the literacy education in which they engage – are being affected by this discourse as it plays out in literacy classrooms.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine how “the new literacy myth” plays out in the everyday practices that occur in adult literacy education. Given the 1998 *Workforce Investment Act* that consolidates all literacy and basic skills training under the umbrella of workforce development, it is imperative that literacy educators investigate how these dominant discourses about work and literacy are enacted in classroom practices. Research from the sociology of education has shown us that education is always a political enterprise. This research also reveals that classrooms are sites of ideological struggle and that classroom practices embody unequal power relationships (Apple, 1995; Gore, 1993). While adult literacy educators have critically examined policy surrounding the connection between literacy and work in the United States, focusing on how it has been used for social control, how it has functioned to reproduce social inequalities, and how it has contributed to the perpetuation of the “literacy myth” (Gowen, 1992; Hull, 1997; Schultz, 1997; Quigley, 1997), much less critical debate has focused on how classroom practices are implicated in social control and in perpetuating or challenging

dominant discourses about literacy (Schultz, 1997). If this new literacy myth – which promotes simplistic educational solutions to complex economic problems and takes a deficit perspective with regard to adult literacy students – is fostered in adult literacy classrooms, literacy becomes not an instrument for emancipation, but rather a tool for domestication (Lankshear, 1987).

The idea for this roundtable is grounded in ethnographic research that I am currently conducting exploring the ways in which the curriculum-in-use, or the day-to-day classroom practices, in adult literacy classrooms contribute to or challenge dominant discourses about work and literacy in the United States. The research questions guiding this study are: 1) How does the curriculum-in-use in adult literacy classrooms depict the world of work? (2) How does the curriculum-in-use position learners as workers or future workers? and (3) How does the curriculum-in-use portray the connection between literacy and work?

Discussion

At the time of this writing, I am still engaged in data collection in two classrooms. Although I have not begun analyzing my data, it is clear that the dominant discourses about work and literacy are promoted in both of these classrooms. In both classrooms, great import is placed on students following rules and exhibiting other “good worker” behaviors. In addition, the teachers in these classrooms embrace and promote the GED as the students’ “ticket to success.” While many students also embrace this dominant discourse, there have been incidents of student resistance. More detailed findings will be presented at the roundtable.

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