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Recommended Citation

Wang, Lurong (2007). "Immigration, Literacy, and Adult Education: The Policy Context," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/papers/104>

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Immigration, Literacy, and Adult Education: The Policy Context

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Abstract: This paper examines the institutional assumption of literacy that underpins Canadian immigration policy and adult literacy policy. My analysis focuses on how adult immigrants are positioned in policy contexts and what gaps or contradictions exist between the reality and policy discourses.

Canada is the country with almost 140 years of history of receiving immigrants with institutional purposes for maintaining economic development and sustaining demographic growth. Faced with increased needs for skilled human resources and demographic challenges in a new economy order, in the late 1990s, Canadian immigration policy experienced a series of modifications, increasing immigrant candidates' educational and occupational qualifications, and demanding increased official language abilities in English or French. The reform of the immigration policy results in a large pool of highly educated people coming to Canada. They had earned relatively higher language abilities in English or French and professional skills¹ in their home countries, prior to their arrival in Canada. However, in recent years, numerous studies have reported that many of skilled professionals experience barriers to having their resources recognized after they arrived in Canada. Indeed, in reality, with weak supports from governments, most adult immigrants find little space to link up their past experiences and current activities of their own in varied social contexts. On the contrary, government and media discourses have reported the "unsatisfied" outcomes of recent adult immigrants' economic performance and their "ineffective" experiences of adapting to Canadian society. The assumption made is that although recent immigrants are recruited as skilled professionals, this group is still in need of help to be up to "Canadian standards." The contradiction between the reality and policy discourses calls for a question: while their language and professional capacities seemed to be considered as advantageous qualifications to be recruited by Canada, why the existed resources of immigrant professionals can not be recognized and rewarded in reality?

This paper intends to unravel the mismatch between policy discourses and the reality from a socio-cultural perspective of literacy. In public policy discourses, literacy is utilized as an institutional tool representing standards, accountability, and measurement. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the root of barriers that immigrant professionals have faced, by using the concept of literacy as a lens to examine the relationship between policy and practice. In organizing the information based on the juxtaposing review of Canadian immigration policy and adult literacy policy, I have been guided by three main questions: (1) what concept of literacy underpins policy discourses? (2) how are adult immigrants positioned in policy documents? and (3) what are gaps or contradictions between the reality and policy discourses?

Literacy as Social Practice

The theory of literacy as social practice has been developed by New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The NLS theory establishes strong argument against the

¹ The population that I refer to are those adult immigrants who came to Canada under the point system that emphasizes an immigrant candidate's educational and professional qualifications and official language abilities in English or French.

institutional assumption of reading and writing which characterizes them merely as a set of technical skills and which lies behind the notion of a great divide between literacy and orality, and between the literate and the illiterate. In contrast to this institutional view of literacy, the NLS consider literacy as social practice embedded in historical, economic, and political contexts. They pay great attention to many different ways of literacy practices in everyday life, recognizing difference and diversity as well as challenging institutional power and domination. Their argument for situating literacy in a wider context of institutional purposes and power relationships lays a solid foundation that helps reveal the complexity of the phenomena of literacy. Viewing literacy as a discursive space concerning about access to symbolic and material resources, Heller (in press) asserts that literacy itself is utilized as a particular site to produce the legitimation of social categorization and the inequality of resource distribution through the institutional system of selection and elimination as well as through varied forms of symbolic domination. From this perspective, in policy and educational discourses, literacy serves to legitimize and reproduce institutional power in the form of de-valuing and marginalizing other cultures as efforts to solidify the relations of ruling. In the process of policy implementation, institutional authority creates varied forms of misrepresentations of reality that the negotiation of meaning becomes formalized as well as arbitrary in the way that “it may seem disconnected, frozen into a text that do not capture the richness of lived experience and that can be appropriated in misleading ways” (Wenger, 1998, p. 61). Thus, educational policies can be characterized as a powerful form of “reification,” reflecting a set of institutional assumptions of diversity of peoples’ cultural and linguistic resources. In sum, the theory of literacy as social practice provides us with useful approaches to uncovering the nature of ambiguity, arbitration, and contradiction of policy discourses. The theory also provides a lens and a methodology that enable adult educators and researchers to see behind the surface appearance of reading and writing to the underlying political, social, and cultural meanings of literacy.

The Changing Face of Immigration in Canada

The Point System

Pressured by an increasing need for skilled, technical, and professional work force, the point system was launched and incorporated into the 1967 immigration policy. It involved varied factors including education, professional skills, and official language abilities. The point system was first revised under the 1976 Immigration Act, placing greater emphasis on the benefits of immigration in enriching the cultural and social fabric of Canada as well as in developing economic growth. In 1992, the Conservatives introduced a new Immigration Act—the Bill C-86, intensifying the link between immigration and labor market needs. Professional and skilled immigrants have become a more welcomed group of populations to Canada, compared with family class and refugees. In the updated points system, more weight has been given to official language abilities, education, and professional skills². In 2002, the Liberal government enacted a new Immigration Act—Bill C-11, to bolster the restructuring of a new economic order in Canada. The new Immigration Act stresses the significance of official language abilities in assisting immigrant candidates in making quick adaptation to the Canadian labour market. Responding to this mandate, the new legislation of immigration mainly increased requirements

² In the 1992 points system, the percentage of units of education and official language abilities has been increased; 16 points were assigned to education, 18 points to education and training, and 15 points to language ability. A required pass mark was established at 70 points out of 112 points.

on education and language proficiency levels on official languages³. Up till now, the point system in Canadian immigration policy has played a determinant role in selecting and recruiting skilled workers with substantial human capital. Over the last decade, revisions of the point system have largely influenced immigration flows and generated changes in composition of immigrant populations.

Recent Immigrants' Profiles

The point system has generated changes in composition of immigrant populations, in terms of language, education, ethnics, and age. Among recently arrived immigrants (1996-2005), the major source countries of immigration are the People's Republic of China, India, Philippines, and Pakistan. For example, in the year of 2005, out of the total number economic class immigrants (156,310), 45.1 percent of immigrant professionals came from these countries. Accordingly, the language profile of immigrants has changed dramatically. With the decline of the number of native-English speakers, four most common languages are Mandarin, Arabic, Spanish, and Punjabi. Reflecting Canadian immigration policy selection criteria, 49.6 percent of recent immigrants (1996-2005) held a Bachelor's degree, 18.9 percent held a Master's degree, and 4.1 percent had a Doctoral degree. Over 50 percent of recent immigrants reported that they have linguistic and professional capabilities of working in an English environment. However, the rate of unemployment among recent immigrants aged 25-44 has remained high, for example, 11 percent for men and 15.8 percent for women in 2001. Immigrants' earning levels are also much lower than the Canadian-born. According to the 2001 Census, there is a 14.6 percent income gap between the university-educated immigrants and the Canadian-born who are at the same educational level. It is reported that recent immigrants with a university degree found it increasingly difficult to convert their education and professional skills into earnings comparable to those of the Canadian-born population. Clearly, the value of immigrant professionals' resources is downgraded. Immigrants' language and literacy abilities in English or French are particularly cited as insufficiency influencing their employment rates and earning levels.

Development of Adult Literacy in Canada

An Overview

The emergence of adult literacy as a national policy issue in Canada started in the 1960s, with concerns about negative impacts of illiteracy on social stability and economic growth in the country. Since the enactment of the 1969 Official Language Act, literacy has been dominated under the regime of the nation's linguistic ideology. Within the framework of bilingualism and multiculturalism, from the 1970s to the 1980s, the Department of Heritage Canada implemented policies offering mother tongue literacy programs for immigrants and their children through community-based organizations in urban areas. During this period, issues of the economics of illiteracy were intensified in several documents and surveys⁴. These policy documents drew attention to relationships between problems of illiteracy and social categories such as linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, gender, years of schooling, and economic status. These categories served as index to label and stereotype a certain group of peoples whose language and culture are different from those of the privileged group in mainstream society. At this time, concerns related

³ In the point system of 2001, a maximum of 25 points were given to formal education and 24 points to knowledge of official languages. A pass mark was dramatically increased to 75 points out of 100 points.

⁴ The most notable report is Audrey Thomas' *Adult Illiteracy in Canada—A Challenge* (Thomas, 1983). The report provides a comprehensive assessment of illiteracy in Canada.

to second-language learning became an issue in urban areas with large immigrant populations. The intersection of literacy and economy was formalized when the National Literacy Secretariat was founded as the jurisdiction of federal government in 1987. Its establishment symbolizes the federal government's commitment to moving adult literacy onto the national agenda. The major mission of the National Literacy Secretariat is to develop resources to ensure that Canadians have access to literacy skills that are the pre-requisite for participation in the international and national advanced market economy, in accordance with the international and national agenda that locates literacy as a workforce training and economic issue. In partnership with provincial and local organizations, the National Literacy Secretariat has launched literacy programs in the way that they give funding priorities to family literacy, workplace literacy, new technology, and a network of resource centers. However, adult immigrant populations have been identified as a mass population in many literacy policy initiatives that fail to sustain difference and diversity of immigrant populations. In fact, government policy intervention in support of adult immigrants has limited to adult basic education (ABE) in general and second-language education in particular, with a primary focus on removing immigrants' linguistic deficits and improving their capacities of official language learning, in most cases, in English.

Immigrants' Literacy in Surveys

The 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)⁵ releases the result that most Canadians have serious literacy problems. According to the report, the negative distribution of Canadians' literacy levels may be impacted by immigrant population's unsatisfied literacy performance in the Survey because of their different educational experiences, relatively low official language abilities, and unfamiliarity with the literate culture of the country (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995). However, an official document, *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada* (Government of Canada, 1996), indicates that according to the IALS database of 1994, the numbers of immigrants with high levels of skills in English or French are more than the numbers of non-immigrant Canadians. The report further maintains that the high level of immigrants' literacy proficiency is attributed to the efficacy of the current Canada's immigration policies which welcome immigrants who are "likely to have excellent education and literacy skills in English or French" (Government of Canada, 1996, p. 7).

Given a large flow of adult immigrants over the decade and given the increasing attention to recent immigrants' "ineffective" economic performance, adult immigrants have become a target group of populations in recent official documents on literacy. Drawing from the data set of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)⁶, a report on literacy skills among Canadian immigrant populations points out that recent immigrants have higher educational attainment than established immigrants and the Canadian-born. However, in all four literacy domains: prose, document, numeracy, and problem solving, immigrants tended to perform at lower proficiency of literacy skills than the Canadian-born population. For example,

⁵ In 1994, Canada, in partnership with other six countries in the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), conducted the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The IALS provided an updated profile of Canada's adult literacy skills. The IALS of 1994 measured three literacy domains: prose, document, and numeracy.

⁶ Conducted in 2003, the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) collected comprehensive data from large samples of recent (those who have been in Canada for 10 years or less) and established (those who have been in Canada for more than 10 years) immigrants, and the Canadian-born. Over 23, 000 individuals aged 16 and over from across the ten provinces and three territories responded to the Canadian IALSS. The 2003 Survey measured four literacy domains: prose, document, numeracy, and problem solving.

60 percent of recent and established immigrants, compared to 37 percent of the Canadian-born population, were at Levels 1 and 2 in prose literacy. At the other end of the proficiency scale, 10 percent of established and recent immigrants performed at Level 4/5. This compares to 22 percent of the Canadian-born population. The report asserts that higher proficiency of literacy skills is associated with higher rates of employment and earnings, suggesting that if immigrants had the same average literacy scores as the native born, the earnings differential between immigrants and the native born would narrow. In policy document discourses, identities of immigrant professionals are negatively constructed through the deficit view of literacy.

Discussion

The juxtaposing review of Canadian immigration policy and the development of adult literacy in Canada helps draw out some main themes that uncover some aspects of issues.

Contradictions between the Reality and Policy Discourses

Canadian immigration policy has carried an obligatory responsibility for recruiting skilled professionals, an institutional agenda of human resources development in the globalized economy era. In the policy document on a portrait of adult literacy in Canada (Government of Canada, 1996), recruiting skilled immigrant professionals was considered as the result of the efficacy of immigration policies, which helps develop skilled workforce for a knowledge and economic society. In this situation, adult immigrants' linguistic abilities and skill competencies are utilized as a token for the purpose of legitimizing and reproducing the market driven public policies. Confined in immigration policy texts, immigrants' skills are considered as merits simply because they are evaluated as human capital serving the economic need of the country. In this way, literacy acts as an institutional tool, which is bound up with power relations and linguistic domination through the establishment of relationships between literacy, language abilities, and economic outcomes.

To a great extent, the market driven ideology for public policies induces the issue of contradictions between the reality and the rhetoric. Although recent immigrant populations were recruited as human capital to achieve social and economic goals of Canada through the implementation of immigration policies, their professional qualifications and language abilities are not rewarded as valuable resources in varied social and political discourses indeed. Immigrant professionals' competencies and language abilities are reified as deficits in need of economy. It should be noted that the accentuation of economic valuation in public policies results in the continuation of social inequalities in ways that adult immigrants' existed resources have been blamed as unfamiliar or undesirable deficits that would threaten the unity and development of mainstream society. Impacted by the deficit and monolithic institutional assumption of literacy, policy documents on literacy in reference to those widely cited surveys such as the IALS misrepresent the reality. These documentations fail to appreciate the difference and diversity among cultural and linguistic groups, ignoring multi-dimensions of literacies that are constructed in a particular social-cultural context. Furthermore, the institutional assumption of literacy creates a danger to mislead researchers and educators to believe that lower rates of earnings and employment among recent adult immigrants are largely attributed to insufficiency of their literacy and language abilities. Consequentially, educators and researchers hold the idea that these deficits can be removed through professional and language trainings in formal educational settings.

Standardizing Frameworks of Literacy: Deskillling and Stereotyping

The discourse of human resources development has dominated the literacy agenda with the narrowly economic definition. The surveys that focus on literacy such as the IALS and IALSS concern standardization, accountability, and quality and consistency of provision that shapes future development of the nation's globalized economy. Within the standardization framework, these surveys serve to oversee the creation of a skilled workforce. Situated in an economic logic, the deficit discourse of literacy characterizes adult immigrants' resources as commodities valued only for the economic needs. When policy discourses downgrade recent skilled immigrants' professional competencies and official language abilities, blaming that immigrants' credentials and language proficiency fail to meet "Canadian standards," they generate types of stereotyping on immigrant populations across varied social contexts. As a result, the stereotyping under the deficit view of literacy and language hinders a better understanding of difference and diversity of immigrant populations as well as limits their learning opportunities to pursue their self-actualization in a new society. In Canada, most educational (learning, language, and literacy) programs and their surrounding policy discourses fail to take into account recent adult immigrants' linguistic, cultural, and educational resources in the process of policy making and program implementations. Adult immigrants are discriminated with a disadvantageous position in language and literacy programs that they are labelled as second language learners and stereotyped as people with language problems. Clearly, changes in the composition of adult immigrant populations require that Canada's adult education programs and policies respond to this particular group of people's needs and provide a range of services that are appropriate to meet their needs.

Concluding Remarks

This paper reveals gaps and contradictions that exist in policy discourses. The juxtaposing review of Canadian immigration and adult literacy policies suggests the significance of collaboration, initiative, and communication between public policies in the joint pursuit of advancing the understanding of the growing diversity in the country, solving problems, and developing new ideas. Drawing on my analysis, I suggest that adult educational and literacy policies must be made on the basis of the benefits and rights of the population in the way that people's resources and skills can be genuinely recognized and valued across a set of social settings. This paper provides an opportunity for policy makers, adult education researchers and practitioners to rethink of where their underpinning values and assumptions about literacy lie and how to articulate these within the policy context.

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