Inclusive Education does not Include Literacy ='s Reading + Writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider: 1) How North American definitions and myths related to literacy have been constructed; 2) How these definitions and myths might be deconstructed; and 3) How a culturally specific and sensitive "brand" of literacy might lead to a more inclusive education for students.

Background: Literacy and Inclusive Education

"Truth like light, must be in motion" (Rainer, 1997, p. 173).

When I took my first class in Literacy at Concordia University (Montreal, Quebec Canada) as an MA student (2006), I was surprised to discover that I held a large number of myths about literacy. I assumed that being literate meant one could read and write and that there was always a direct correlation between being literate and reducing poverty in the developing world. As I became exposed to alternative ideas about literacy I found that I felt a greater freedom to challenge some of the myths that I had unknowingly adopted throughout my life. This period of questioning, wondering and thinking was disruptive because while I was abandoning some of my previous misconceptions, I did not have any fully formed new theories or ideas about literacy to attach to. In this way, I felt as though I was learning about literacy from a liminal or borderland space. Embracing this in-between-space of unknowing was both exciting and frightening. It also led me to re-examine some of my other beliefs about inclusivity that I reenacted as a high school teacher at a downtown multi-ethnic and multi-cultural school in Montreal, QC (for students with learning disabilities). In this position, I conceived of inclusivity in relation to students' abilities and disabilities (to read, to behave appropriately or to participate in classroom practices). This view was coupled with my attempts to understand my students' specific backgrounds (rather than treating them as a homogenous group) in order to maximize classroom contributions and student success.

What I discovered for my teaching practice during this time was that when I was conceptually allowing myself to unlearn some of my own ideas about literacy, I created a space that helped me to see literacy in education in a more inclusive and culturally specific way. This discovery led me to embrace theories such as the Borderland Theory because dwelling intellectually in a marginal space allowed me to expand my ideas and awareness so that I was able to also improve my teaching.

Introduction

"Those who live in the borderlands are re-thinking, re-living, and re-making the terms of their identities as they confront difference and similarity in apparently contradictory worlds" (Rogoff, 2000, p. 29).

The intent of this paper is three fold. To begin with, I will set out to examine the ways in which Literacy, Development and the Literacy Myths that pervade North American culture have been constructed. This introduction provides a stage for understanding the complex problems existing in many parts of the world today because of global efforts such as Education for All and similar campaigns which link functional literacy for poor people with economic prosperity, better health, and higher levels of production. Once some of these myths and the roots of their

construction are considered, I will proceed to deconstruct selected Literacy Myths in order to eventually present the idea that literacy can be reconstructed using some of the main elements of the Borderland theory. This will be done in order to propose that an emancipatory brand of literacy can lead to more inclusive classroom practices for teachers who teach in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual classrooms.

Part 1: Literacy = Reading + Writing

"*The world is not made up of certainties. Even if it were, we would never know if something was really certain*" (Macedo, 2003, p. 361).

Amidst an educational reality of increasing curricular standardization, high stakes testing, and corporatization of education, it would seem that adopting a singular definition for literacy would be desirable. However, such thinking does not account for the current realities of international migration or global informational technological sharing. This reality implies that it is problematic to maintain that there is one best way to do anything in all instances.

For this reason, in relation to literacy, one must bear in mind that "the idea of a 'universal' type of literacy skill…that can be applied in all…life situations" (Maddox, 2001, p. 148) cannot exist because it does not account for the differences and variety of needs that each individual person, country, and culture has.

This definition for literacy is in contrast to what can be referred to as The Literacy Myths (some of the ideas that depict literacy as a solution to a variety of real-world problems). In Olson's (1988) *Mythologizing Literacy*, examples of these myths are provided:

1. Literacy is at the root of the world's social problems (like poverty, malnutrition, poor health) and consequently, illiterates are "inferior beings" perpetuating these problems.
2. Literacy leads to a better (more economically superior) life or lifestyle.
3. A single test (for example those used for establishing the findings in the Southam Report, which presents findings in order to identify 'functional literacy for all') can be administered and used in all contexts and countries.
4. Unsubstantiated claims about literacy levels can be made and programs and policies put in place to combat literacy.
5. Literacy is likely to cause development. (there is a causal relationship between the two). (Olson, 1988, pp. 115–119)

In my personal experience, reading these myths was one of the first steps to disrupting my own ideas about what literacy is/is not. In creating such a list of myths, it is not the intention to replace a prior framework of belief with the new completely. Rather, I feel, this list provides an opportunity for dialogue about the implications and roots of these ideas, leading one to consider questions such as what or who is literacy for? For Uta Papen (2001) literacy is about reading and writing as a social practice that is "dependent on the people using it and the social and political context within which reading and writing take place" (p. 41). This definition hints at an understanding of literacy that allows particular people in particular places at particular times (with different needs for the ability to read and write) to be included in its definition. It also resists definition in a sense because the social and political context in which writing and reading takes place can never exist in two places (or within the constructs of the minds of two people) in the same way. As this definition does not account for mathematical literacy or market literacy it is problematic and necessitates asking: *What is literacy for?*

In a sense when literacy is no longer problematized and myths are no longer given meaning (and thrust upon particular places and peoples), the adherence to the defined or Western idea of literacy can be left open for those who need to define it for their own purposes.

Perhaps allowing for an open interpretation of literacy (despite the definitions of literacy that exist) means that a "Freirian approach [which] relies on the experiences [and needs] of the students and implies respect and use of the student's culture, language and dialect" will allow definitions of literacy to co-exist and be re-created to serve a range of people (Peterson, 2003, p. 366).

Part 2: A Discourse of the Marginal Spaces

We must dare to learn how to dare in order to say no to the bureaucratization of the mind in which we are exposed to every day. We must dare so that we can continue to do so even when it is so much more materially advantageous to stop daring. (Freire, 1998, p. xviii)

Many authors have approached the deconstruction of literacy and its myths using ethnographical studies and individualistic approaches towards the exploration of this topic. For example, in *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives,* a compilation of studies from around the world edited by Brian Street (2001), gives a variety of new approaches and informative observations about literacy practices in different environments. In a sense, these examples highlight the idea that there is a euro-centric one-size-fits-all way of approaching literacy (and development) that marginalizes local initiatives and indigenous knowledge. This leads to a growing discrepancy between literacy for the people (and their needs) and literacy for global, political, and economic production. In order to address this problem, I am in favor of promoting a discourse of the *Marginal Spaces.* A place where hybrid identities once configured can stay safe from the marginalization that they would and do experience when attached to specific cultures, attitudes, and institutions, etc. Conscientization or "the process by which students (or any people), as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and discover their own capacities to re-create them" (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p.15) is an approach which can allow for this reconfiguring to occur.

How Does this Reconfiguring and Deconstruction Happen?

In order for such a change to take place, emancipatory literacy (i.e., students becoming literate about their histories, experiences, and the culture of their immediate environments and the appropriation of a culture within the dominant sphere (that aims to transcend a particular environment)) allows for reconfiguration and deconstruction of current ideas and beliefs to take place (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 354).

Of course this opens up a new set of questions and challenges when one thinks about how to help an individual (or oneself for that matter) become literate about their histories and experiences while also understanding the way the rest of the world and its constructions function. This can be difficult when historical discourses have focused on the stories of the dominant and powerful. Thus, in order to move beyond the known and begin the process of confronting the unknown everyone must begin by examining not only their own history but, the dominant and marginalized histories/herstories.

Part 3: Emancipatory Literacy & Inclusive Education

"The borderlands refer to the study of people who live between different worlds. It speaks against dualism. It is a discourse and a language that explains social conditions and peoples that have hybrid identities" (Elenes, 1997, p. 191).

As I have already begun to illustrate, we are all composed of hybrid identities. We are all changing constantly and cannot (even if we choose to stop the process) in fact stay still. Our body's age. Our minds can expand or stagnate. We can choose to be proactive or reactive. Races of people intermarry and recreate children who belong to more than one culture or country. Governments move political borders so often that you could be geographically born a citizen of one country and die in the same place a citizen of a new country. Change is not new; it is simply how we view it that matters and in this sense we all dwell in the borderlands.

The particular example of Chicana(o) border studies is a way of looking at both the borderlands theory and aporia-dualism of identity as an example that could be related to literacy and broaden what one understands about inclusive education. The Chicana(o) peoples are a community of people in the (primarily) Southwestern United States who are living in America but of Mexican or Latin American descent. As such, they hold a variety of 'mixed' traditions, languages, foods, and beliefs that intertwine the two cultures. In the 1960's and 1970's the Chicana(o) movement focused on a reform of educational institutions. This movement led to a higher number of Chicana(o) students in various levels of education classes and for a curriculum that was to be centrally focused on Chicana(o) history,

culture, politics &, and identity. The ultimate vision for this movement was to incorporate the needs of both the students and the community as one in order to promote the group's idea of identity. This movement essentially reached its goals and in fact moved beyond them to affect other theories and theorists such as feminists and critical pedagogues. This movement occurred at a time when the National Myths (of freedom, democracy and individualism) through the assimilation of school and society (culture and language) were reaching extremely dangerous levels in the US. Giroux's (1992) conceptualization of border pedagogy as discussed in Elenes (1997) *(which decenters as it remaps)* and McLaren's (1994) critical narratives (that call for a resisting and transforming of the grand narratives that define our concepts of the world and work to maintain the power structures that exist) are just two other examples of some of the ways academia has been affected by this theory.

Because creating a border identity is not a static construction and because it acknowledges a fluidity of culture, the link to an emancipatory literacy that exists in a marginal space corresponds to the recommendations made by Street (2001) in *Literacy and Development*:

1. We need to take a more sensitive approach to local meanings and understandings of the development process
2. We need to address what literacy and development mean to those for whom the programs have been designed
3. In order to understand and facilitate literacy and development we need to analyze political and economic contexts that might not at first appear to prioritize these initiatives
4. Researchers must be able and willing to change the focus of their research when the needs of a participant or a program require it. (pp. 95–201)

These recommendations correlate with the ways that inclusive education could be approached in Canadian schools. What I mean specifically is that if the ways that one approaches literacy in a developmental context were applied to individual students in culturally and ethnically diverse classrooms (where a more sensitive approach to individual student needs, understanding what literacy means to each student and how the mandated programs do or do not address them as individuals, etc.) were considered, improvements in literacy and constant adaptations for all individuals could lead to student success.

Conclusions

The work done in the area of literacy and development that focuses on individual and culturally specific contexts can teach us a lot about how to approach inclusive education in schools. Specifically, as a teacher this might mean questioning ones own prejudices and assumptions about literacy, curriculum and students of various educational and cultural backgrounds. This task may be an unsettling undertaking at times and lead to new ways of seeing oneself and the world, but, in doing so, one is positioning oneself to facilitate this work with and for their students.

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