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Policy discourses in Scotland

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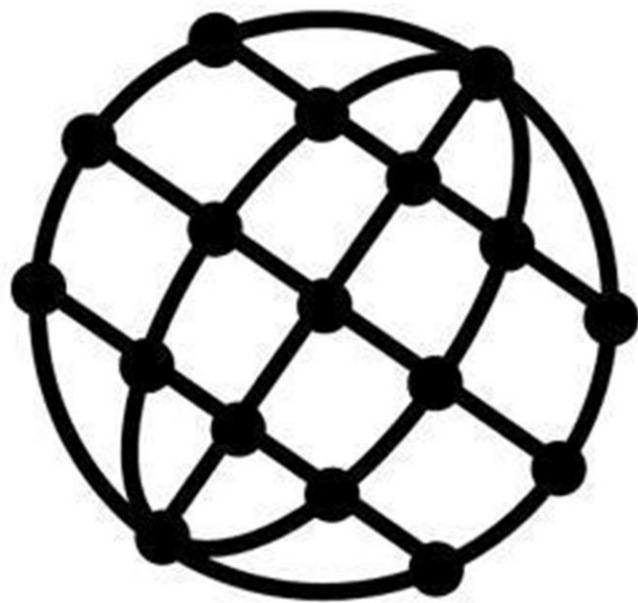
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Conference Proceedings



**MOBILITIES AND
TRANSITIONS: LEARNING,
INSTITUTIONS, GLOBAL AND
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Glasgow Caledonian University,
Scotland, UK 25-27 June 2013



Mobilities and Transitions: Learning, Institutions, Global and Social Movements

Conference Proceedings

Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland, UK
25-27 June 2013

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Introduction

We have great pleasure in presenting the 2013 CRL SCUTREA conference proceedings. The International conference was held at the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRL), Glasgow Caledonian University from the 25-27 June 2013.

The conference theme - Mobilities and Transitions: Learning, Institutions, Global and Social Movements provided a platform for researchers engaged in Lifelong Learning and the Education of Adults to address key areas of international concern. This theme expresses the clear need to explore the implications of change, turbulence and fluidity that characterises the field of post-compulsory education in different global contexts. A range of global countries are represented in these papers and in the conference participants, highlighting the strength of this interest. Participating countries include Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Thailand, South Africa, USA and the UK. The papers were clustered around the following central research strands: academic practices, labour markets and skills, students in transition, social movements, institutional mobilities, ethics and values.

We hope you enjoy the papers and that they continue to provoke stimulating debate and provide the basis for ongoing research.

David Smith and Anna Jones, CRL

Ann-Marie Houghton, SCUTREA

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Policy discourses in Scotland: adult literacy and social exclusion

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This paper has been informed by my Doctoral Thesis. The thesis explored understandings of social exclusion in policy and in literacy practitioners' discourses about their practice. As part of my study I undertook an analysis of Scottish policy texts relating to social exclusion and adult literacy. In exploring policy discourse my aim was to draw attention to the 'truths' that are embedded in policy narratives and contribute to critical debate about the nature of social exclusion and the role of adult literacy provision in addressing it.

Here I discuss how policy discourse about social exclusion has evolved between 1999 and 2011 from a combative to a more enabling style. I also illustrate how a more overt, individualistic economic discourse has become established as the underpinning rationale for policy intervention and seems at odds with a continuing attachment, in policy discourse and by practitioners, to a social practice pedagogy of adult literacy.

Social Exclusion has been described as the dominant inequality discourse in Europe (Mathieson et al 2008). The pervasiveness of the language of social exclusion in public discourse and government policy has been recognised (Levitas, 2005). In the UK, contemporary policy interest in social exclusion is driven by a concern to achieve social justice and reduce inequality in society (Scottish Government, 2007). UK and Scottish Government policy statements suggest economic development is perceived to be a fundamental component in strategic approaches intended to address social exclusion and they draw the critique that policy interventions place an 'emphasis on paid work as a vehicle of inclusion' (Levitas, 2005:29).

Social exclusion, however, is a contested term and there is a large and growing body of literature which addresses its nature, cause and purpose. Social exclusion has been conceptualised as alternatively a state and a process (Lister, 2004); it has been described as a multi-dimensional phenomenon arising from a range of factors which interact to disadvantage individuals and communities (Room 1995; Levitas et al 2007) and it has been variously said to be a term which distracts from fundamental issues of poverty in society and alternatively to illuminate the complex nature of social disadvantage (Estivill, 2003). Definitions of social exclusion, explanations about its causes, and the ways in which the term is used vary and, according to Levitas (2005), reflect differing analyses.

Social exclusion is not only embedded in views about poverty and disadvantage but also in views about social norms and attitudes about political and social organisation. Perhaps De Haan's view that social exclusion is best understood as 'a theoretical concept, a lens through which people look at reality and not reality itself' (2001:28) is a helpful metaphor to use when considering different discourses of social exclusion.

Adult literacy is one aspect of social policy which is thought to address social exclusion. Like social exclusion, literacy is a philosophically and ideologically loaded

concept and thus subject to debate and controversy. Hamilton (1996) identified three ideologies of literacy, apparent in public and policy discourse. Literacy for 'emancipation', 'social control' and 'cultural missionary activity' and she suggests the latter two give rise to 'the deficit model of literacy' which predominates in U.K. discourse about provision.

In Scotland literacy is currently defined as 'The ability to read, write and use numeracy, to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners' (Scottish Executive, 2001). This definition is intended to reflect the different ways in which people use literacy in their lives and move beyond a 'discourse of deficit' in which literacy equates to the acquisition of the pre-requisite skills necessary to participate effectively in a market orientated and driven society. The underlying proposition endorsed in Scottish policy therefore is that literacy is socially and contextually defined and it 'dispenses with the idea that there is a single literacy that can be unproblematically taken for granted' (Crowther et al., 2001:2). It draws attention to power dimensions in the privileging of some forms of literacy over others and argues in favour of a pedagogy in which literacy learning is posited as a liberating project which equips participants to choose to challenge dominant values and practices or to conform. However my analysis of policy texts suggests that this perspective is not sustained in key documents (Scottish Executive 2001; Scottish Government 2010) and that consequently literacy practitioners are operating in a conflicted and contested policy environment. This policy environment embraces both an emancipatory pedagogy of adult literacy and adult literacy learning defined by a neo-liberal economic agenda.

The policy texts which I analysed included *Social Justice: A Scotland where Everyone Matters* (Scottish Executive 1999), *Closing the Opportunity Gap* (Scottish Executive 2002) and *Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to Tackle Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland* (Scottish Government 2008a), *Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland* (Scottish Executive 2001) and *Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020: Strategic Guidance* (Scottish Government 2010). They were published under the auspices of successive Scottish administrations between 1999 and 2010.

Using an approach informed by the work of Wodak (2001) and Van Dijk (2001) and Fairclough (2003) in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) policy texts were subject to close reading and interrogation using Wordsmith 5.0 textual analysis software to identify key conceptual metaphors employed by the authors. Van Dijk (2001) suggests a useful starting point for analysis of discourse may be the identification of 'macro- propositions' of texts because these often encapsulate the taken for granted assumptions or 'big discourse' (Wetherell, 2004:12) or macro-propositions that delineate the possibilities for framing and thinking about issues. The conceptual metaphors that writers employ are often indicative of these propositions (Fairclough 2003).

My analysis of social exclusion policy texts highlighted that the tone of social exclusion discourse changed in the period between 1999 and 2010 from combative to enablement and collaboration. This latter discourse implied greater individual responsibility for dealing with the causes and consequences of poverty and social exclusion whilst in the former, the state could be seen to assume principal responsibility. *Social Justice: A Scotland Where Everyone Matters* (Scottish

Executive, 1999a) was published shortly after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and under the auspices of a New Labour administration which had recently returned to government after eighteen years of Conservative rule. Poverty and social exclusion are represented in this text as the consequence of previous exploitive and detrimental policies and practices. The New Labour Government distances itself from culpability but simultaneously assumes responsibility for addressing the problem of poverty and social exclusion in Scottish society. The text makes frequent use of combative vocabulary for example referring to 'the fight against poverty' and its goals of 'stamping out injustice and defeating child poverty'. The militaristic vocabulary represents poverty and social exclusion as an external threat and one which represents a significant 'danger' to society.

However by 2002 the language of policy had become less combative. Social exclusion was no longer represented as the consequence of external and malevolent forces but increasingly as something more complex and embedded in society. The language of *Closing the Opportunity Gap* (Scottish Executive, 2002) suggests a recognition that social exclusion is a more complex phenomenon than previously portrayed. Words such as **providing, enhancing, supporting, improving, and optimising** appear more frequently and begin to replace the militaristic lexicon of *Social Justice: A Scotland Where Everyone Matters* (Scottish Executive, 1999a). Consequently, the later text conveys a sense that the need for a more pragmatic and cooperative approach to social exclusion is required. Policy narratives refer to '**dismantling the obstacles** that people face in their lives' in order to '**unlock the prosperity** that is at the heart of our vision for Scotland' (Scottish Executive, 2002:5) suggesting that perceptions about social exclusion and poverty have shifted. Social exclusion is no longer seen as the consequence of an external threat but generated by malignant, internal social and economic practices that act to disadvantage. The recognition of social exclusion as something undesirable but inherent in social institutions requires a different sort of approach to achieve change because of the vested interest this analysis implies.

Expressions such as '**we will give** our young people the best possible start in life', '**we will make** our nation healthier', '**we want** our young people to realise their full potential' and '**we will tackle** poverty and disadvantage' (Scottish Executive, 2002:5) suggest that the Labour administration recognised a communal responsibility to address social exclusion. The publication of *Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to Tackle Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2008a) however signalled a shift to a more individualistic perspective. Social exclusion continued to be recognised by the Scottish Nationalist Government as a phenomenon or process embedded in social institutions and structures however the individual was more prominent as a key agent of change in the achievement of personal and national prosperity. This can be seen in the way that disease and waste replace combat as a metaphor of social exclusion. Poverty is described as having '**blighted** Scotland for generations' (Scottish Government, 2008a:6). There is recognition of a '**huge waste of potential** in our people and society' (Scottish Government, 2008a:6). It seems that government had shifted responsibility for social change, an assertion supported in the policy statement that

We are committed to an approach which supports **empowering people to make a difference to their own lives**. We must adopt an approach that

improves the capacity of individuals and their families **to lift themselves out of poverty by developing their resilience** (Scottish Government, 2008a:9).

A discourse, to which paid employment is pivotal, has been in evidence in UK and Scottish social policy since the latter part of the 1990s but has more recently become more prominent and eclipsed other policy discourses. Since 1997 economic development has been increasingly recognised as the main mechanism for addressing poverty, disadvantage and inequality and thus social exclusion. As early as 1999 the Scottish Executive (Scottish Executive, 1999a:6) stated 'the main driver for poverty has been worklessness' and this discourse is evident in all areas of policy. In 2002, in *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, the Scottish Executive's budget plan for achieving social justice it was stated that

None of us wants to live in a Scotland where poverty and prejudice are allowed to prevail...our plans will tackle poverty, build strong, safe communities and create a fair, equal Scotland where rights for all is our byword...We will help those without work find jobs... Unemployment may be falling, but people living in Scotland's most deprived areas are still four times more likely to be out of work. That is why we will devote our energies to increasing training and employment opportunities in these communities (Scottish Executive, 2002:6).

By 2008 the SNP Government in Scotland had established a social inclusion framework encapsulated in three linked policy documents, *Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to Tackle Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2008a), *Equally Well* (Scottish Government, 2008b) and *The Early Years Framework* (Scottish Government, 2008c). All of these foreground economic prosperity through increased access to paid work as fundamental to achieving the government's goal of 'a Scotland which is wealthier and fairer' (Scottish Government, 2008a). This evolution of discourse is mirrored in Scottish Adult Literacy policy texts but a continuing commitment to a social practice perspective on literacy has given rise to a contradictory and conflicted policy discourse.

The growing dominance of an employment orientated discourse is evident in policy documents pertaining to adult literacy and learning, published between 2001 and 2010. In the late 1990s and early part of the 21st century a discourse of lifelong learning in which the intrinsic worth of learning was more evident in key policy documents relating to adult learning generally, and literacy specifically but employment as an antidote to social exclusion was a discourse already present. In 2001 the tentative view was expressed that

In an increasingly globalised economy, Scotland's future prosperity and competitiveness depends on building up the skills of her existing workforce and improving the employability of those seeking work. But improving literacy skills can also provide the first steps to learning other languages, promoting understanding in a multi-cultural society and accessing a whole range of life opportunities. An inclusive society is also a literate society (Scottish Executive, 2001:7).

By 2010 in the Scottish Government's strategic guidance for literacy the evidence that employment is accepted as the solution to social exclusion is much stronger.

The Scottish Government is committed to creating a smarter, wealthier, healthier, greener and fairer Scotland, with opportunities for all to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth. Central to this purpose is the refreshed skills strategy 'Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth'. This strategy reaffirms that "improving levels of adult literacy and numeracy is crucial to securing a competitive economy, promoting education and lifelong learning, and tackling ill- health and improving well-being (Scottish Government, 2010).

However, different and sometimes contradictory discourses can also be seen in adult literacy policy texts. The Education Scotland website for example (Education Scotland 2012:2nd para.), described the 'Scottish Approach' to adult literacy provision as being 'a social practice model, which sees literacies as part of the wider lifelong-learning agenda'. The 'model' is described as recognising 'literacy and numeracy are complex capabilities rather than a simple set of basic skills', and as an approach which recognises the benefits of contextualising learning methods and which embraces negotiated person centred planning and teaching. These are the themes which have been used to characterise adult literacy policy since 2001 (Scottish Executive, 2001; Scottish Government, 2011) and have been widely disseminated across Scotland through practitioner training initiatives. However alongside these is a narrative which reflects a functional and deficit perspective on literacy and which is present in most policy texts (Scottish Executive, 2001; Scottish Government, 2007a; Scottish Government, 2010). A review of adult literacy practice and provision in Scotland *Improving Adult Literacy in Scotland* (HMIE, 2010) by Her Majesty's Inspector of Education, made reference in the foreword, to 'those who lack literacy skills' and to the 'impact of limited literacy skills' on people's lives. Reference was made to learner accounts, 'of their embarrassment about their literacy skills...and attempts to hide their weaknesses'. It was asserted that, 'Supporting their literacy development is a vital area of work in developing an inclusive society in which everyone can contribute effectively'. These introductory comments illustrate a skills orientated and deficit perspective on adult literacy which despite policy statements to the contrary, the evidence (Scottish Executive, 2001) indicates has been sustained for the last ten years.

Barton (2007) suggests that the metaphors we use for literacy shape our discourse. He identifies 'skill set' as a common metaphor for literacy and argues that this metaphor contributes to a discourse of deficit in policy and practice. Barton (2007) argues that by treating literacy as a set of skills, which individuals either acquire or fail to acquire, results in the representation of adult literacy learners as inadequate, vulnerable and socially inept. He also observes that the widespread use of metaphors of disease and warfare are symptomatic of understandings, associated with a skills based or functional view of literacy. These metaphors are seen as contributing to the persisting use of terms such as 'illiteracy' and the resultant deficit models of the adult learner. He suggests that the metaphor of 'literacy as skills' in discourse, makes it difficult for governments to adopt new approaches not least because the skill metaphor corresponds with prevailing economic ideology.

According to Barton (2007), the skills metaphor ultimately gives rise to a discourse about literacy learners as socially isolated or more vulnerable than other groups in the population, a characterisation which he refutes as unfounded suggesting that

those with 'poor' literacy are as equally well 'networked' as other adults in the population it is just that the networks are different and more localised and the social networks in which these individuals engage and the literacy practices of these communities may not be recognised or valued outside of those settings. Bynner and Parsons (2006) findings from UK based research is consistent with this view as are the findings reported in the *Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies 2009* which say 'People have spiky [literacies] profiles, with areas of strength and weakness, and a greater ability to use texts more effectively in some circumstances than others' (St Clair et al., 2010). However this discourse of deficit is powerful and, as Tett and MacLachan (2008) comment, learners are often viewed as 'people whose deficiencies have a direct and adverse impact on the national good and who therefore pose a problem for the literate *others*' (2008:664).

Tett (2006:44) asks the question 'Is it possible to move from the dominant, deficit approach to literacy and numeracy as a way of more effectively promoting social inclusion and justice for all?' Her view is that a social practice view of literacy set within a social justice policy framework will allow provision to make an important contribution to social inclusion. She suggests some ways that this can be done whilst also acknowledging that a start has already been made on this in Scotland. What she proposes is a critical and reflective environment for literacy and numeracy provision that takes account of individual socio-emotional contexts that promotes learning as purposeful and challenging and which takes account of all forms of prior learning and knowledge (2006:49). She argues that learning is crucial to social inclusion but identifies a particular kind of learning that is 'a resource for people to help them identify inequalities, probe their origins and begin to challenge them using skills, information and knowledge in order to achieve and stimulate change' (Tett 2006: 50).

Whilst this is a desirable goal my analysis suggests that in the current policy climate, literacy practitioners may have a difficult task ahead navigating a way through a conflicted policy landscape where a discourse of deficit, fuelled by a growing emphasis on employment, threatens to dictate the nature and purpose of literacy provision.

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