Adult Literacy as Technique and Technology of Governmentality

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Abstract

This thesis examines the policy for adult literacy in New Zealand, in particular developments since the International Adult Literacy Survey of 1996. It was the findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) that led to the problematising of adult literacy in terms of the needs of New Zealand society and economy and the greater engagement of government, businesses and tertiary education providers.

Foucault’s (1991a) notion of governmentality provides a lens through which to view adult literacy policy and to analyse a number of policy documents, in particular More than Words, the adult literacy strategy, Te Kāwai Ora, and the subsequent Tertiary Education Strategies 2002-2007, 2007-2012, and 2010-2015.

The thesis argues that, in the policy formulation, adult literacy is concerned with the techniques and technologies through which the literacy needs of the population are constructed and controlled. The concerns of policy are how to bring people to a state of literacy so that they can be usefully involved in society, as employable workers. The mainstream discourse of adult literacy defines it as a set of skills without reference to context or culture, that can be applied in a range of contexts. The policy approaches tend to marginalise or silence other discourses, for example literacies for Māori, literacies as social practices, critical literacies and literacies used in a range of settings.

The thesis traces adult literacy in New Zealand from pre-European contact and the subsequent developments as part of the colonisation processes. The 1970s to the present saw the development of community responses to adult literacy.

The thesis discusses the subsequent tertiary education reforms and the subsuming of adult literacy into the tertiary education sector with increased emphasis on audit and monitoring practices developed by the Tertiary Education Commission and NZQA with implications for the identities and self-government of learners and providers.

Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion of ways for considering the development of a wider policy focus for adult literacy that addresses such issues as culture, context and the needs as identified by learners. This is followed by some recommendations and questions for future research.
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