

The literacy myth continues: adapting Graff's thesis to contemporary policy discourses on adult 'foundation skills' in Australia

Stephen Black and Keiko Yasukawa, University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract

Harvey Graff (1979), in his study of literacy taught in common schools in mid-nineteenth century Canada, demonstrated that beliefs in the acquisition of literacy for upward mobility and economic success were a myth. Moreover, literacy instruction was promoted by educational reformers and manufacturers as a means of controlling the working class masses and instilling in them the traits, including thrift, order, and punctuality required for employment in factories. In this paper we consider how this thesis can be adapted to describe contemporary national adult literacy policy discourse in Australia. The main drivers of Australia's national policy are peak industry associations and skills agencies, and the human capital rationale for their promotion of literacy is derived largely from the powerful influence of the OECD. We critique this discourse on literacy through reference to studies which conceptualise literacy as social practices, including one recent Australian study of three manufacturing companies. We reinforce the claim that the literacy myth in relation to economic development continues in contemporary adult literacy policy, and we explain how the social control function of adult literacy education continues in the interests of industry elites and the capitalist relations of production.

Keywords: literacy myth, adult literacy policy, Harvey Graff, foundation skills, industry, social control

Introduction

Harvey Graff is an educational historian and author of 'The literacy myth' (Graff, 1979), a publication with significant implications for the way literacy is conceptualised in western industrialised societies. While Graff's original research focused primarily on the role of literacy in mid-nineteenth century urban life in Canada, and while his major study was published more than thirty years ago, his 'literacy myth' thesis and follow up publications hold continuing relevance for studies of literacy in contemporary societies (see also Graff, 1987a/b; 2011). In this paper our aim is to explore the relevance and applicability of his thesis for contemporary adult literacy (now officially framed as 'foundation skills') policy in Australia. While clearly there are contextual differences in the two historical eras, there would also appear to be some ideological continuities. Graff's argument has always been that the present world can only properly be understood

in relation to its past, and indeed that the past can only be viewed through the prism of the present. Our central argument is that Graff's analysis of the mid-nineteenth century linkage between the views of dominant groups on literacy education (seen within promotion of the 'common school') and the capitalist relations of production within a rapidly changing industrial landscape has some resonance with contemporary adult literacy policy in Australia. While in Australia and internationally there are researchers who lament the current state of the professional field of adult literacy education, with its regulatory regimes and audit compliance (e.g. Hamilton, 2009; Tusting, 2009; Black, 2010; Atkinson, 2012), an historical reminder of the almost symbiotic relationship between literacy and the needs of industry may well lead us to ask why we should expect the current situation to be otherwise.

Adult literacy education in Australia, which we detail later in this paper, has not always been industry dominated (note that the field of adult numeracy mirrors many of the arguments made in this paper, but we have chosen to focus exclusively on literacy mainly because of its resonance with Graff's work). In the early 1980s in Australia adult 'illiteracy' had only recently been 'discovered', and the field seemed to correspond, for those involved in it, with Darville's (2011, p. 163) description of teaching adult literacy in Canada in the same era, which he termed 'a project of inventing the field'. In both countries adult literacy education at the time appeared to be much about being responsive to learners' lives and 'empowering' them (e.g. Darville, 2011; Grant, 1987). A reflection of those times can be illustrated in the 1984 plenary address at the Australian national conference on adult literacy in Melbourne in which Joan Kirner, a state member of Parliament (and later Premier of Victoria) stated: 'Freire saw literacy as a weapon to be used in the transfer of power from the powerful well-resourced few to the disempowered under-resourced many – the working class. I share this view' (see Grant, 1987, p. 149). By way of contrast, today's Australian politicians make quite different comments about literacy, as demonstrated by Christopher Evans's comments later this paper.

Adult literacy education today in mainstream educational contexts is positioned by policy as a service role for industry. The normative aim would appear to be not to question people's place in society, rather, to accommodate them according to the human capital they are formally assessed to possess and need. And yet, despite many academic studies critiquing this human capital approach to adult literacy education (including those authors cited above who lament the current state of adult literacy education), policy in the field only appears to move in one direction – more and more in the service of industry. This paper hopefully may serve as a reminder for some, and an introduction for others new to the field, of why this is so by revisiting Harvey Graff's historical analysis of the role of literacy. After all, as Jim Crowther (2013, p. 1) commented recently in a journal editorial,

historical antecedents for some major social/educational struggles (in his case, for social justice) are 'easily forgotten'.

The literacy myth

Graff represents one of the North American 'radical revisionist' educational historians writing in the 1970s who exposed the politics of early mass schooling, indicating that rather than being traditionally a 'great and wondrous story' (Cremin, 1965, p.16), it served to reinforce an inegalitarian capitalist society. Other radical revisionists at the time included Graff's mentor, Michael Katz (1968), Lazerson (1973), Bowles and Gintis (1976), and Kaestle (1976). Australian educational historians were also represented in this revisionist trend as the story of early Australian schooling was revised to incorporate the dominant role of capitalism, including work by the 'Adelaide school of social history' led by Davey, a contemporary of Graff and also a student of Katz (e.g. Cook, Davey & Vick, 1979; Miller, 1982).

Graff exposes the myth that the acquisition of literacy, of itself (as an 'independent variable'), brings special benefits to individuals and societies. In a more recent publication Graff (2011, p. 35) introduces the literacy myth as follows:

The Literacy Myth refers to the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility ...

To a large extent this view of literacy as an unqualified good and essential to technological progress is a given, rarely questioned in either contemporary or past societies. Of central importance for this current paper is the pervasiveness of the assumed link between literacy and economic success, 'one of the cornerstones of western modernisation theories' (Graff, 2011, p. 59). It is beliefs regarding the power of literacy to foster economic development that fuels fears that a decline in literacy standards will correspondingly have detrimental economic effects on society.

It is perhaps necessary at this point to stress that in arguing literacy be accorded the status of a myth, Graff does not claim that the acquisition of literacy in contemporary and past societies has no role to play or that it cannot be or is not for some people an advantage in their lives. But what Graff's historical analysis does is to indicate the complexity and contradictions of literacy. His 1979 publication for example, based on close textual analysis of census manuscripts, tax assessment rolls and a range of local occupational/company records from mid-nineteenth century urban life in Ontario, indicated that many uneducated and 'illiterate' people often occupied relatively skilled

jobs. And conversely, a great many people who did have literacy skills occupied relatively low status positions. The relationship between education generally and literacy in particular to work and earnings was found to be complex, and ‘complicated by other determinants, usually ascriptive social-structural ones: ethnicity, social class, race, age and sex’ (p. 198). Graff concluded that ‘Illiteracy could be depressing occupationally and economically, but literacy proved of remarkably limited value in the pursuit of higher status or greater rewards’ (ibid.).

This viewpoint however was at odds with the way literacy, as the medium of the ‘common school’, was elevated and promoted at the time by educational reformers and leading industrialists. From the documented words of individual educational chiefs, bureaucrats, and importantly from local manufacturers, it was apparent that literacy education was valued not so much for its cognitive effects but for its moral and social control effects. Manufacturers needed and demanded a disciplined, deferential workforce and their belief was that the best educated workers were not only the most profitable and well paid, but also ‘more moral, loyal, cheerful, and contented as well as more punctual and reliable ...’ (1979, p. 203).

As Graff and his then mentor Katz (1968) and others have demonstrated, the transformative societal shifts from agrarian to factory work in mid-nineteenth century North America necessitated an educational response as a means of controlling the new social order in the interests of the dominant capitalist class:

Schooling and literacy education were the first steps in re-ordering the values and customs of rural populations entering the Industrial Age, instilling in them the industry, thrift, order, and punctuality required for the successful operation of the factory and a new social order. Literacy was not primarily or by itself a vehicle for economic advancement, but rather a means of inculcating values and behaviours in the general population that made large scale economic development possible. (Graff, 2011, p. 43).

In a well-worn phrase applied to early industrialisation in mid-nineteenth century England and North America, training in literacy was primarily a matter of ‘training in being trained’ (ibid.). In the common schools Christian morality was propagated through reciting and reading the Lord’s Prayer, the Bible and the Ten Commandments. School texts (readers) reinforced order, harmony and progress, and teachers were the moral agents, demanding respect and conformity to rules. As Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued, as contemporaries of Graff in the mid-late 1970s, in this new mid-nineteenth century industrial era there was an apparent correspondence between the social relations of school, emphasising submission to authority, temperament and internalised control, and the requirements of factory work. Thus it can be argued that literacy did not change

society, rather 'literacy itself was changed – its forms, uses and meanings – in response to its environment' (Graff, 2011, p. 43).

Graff, like Katz (1968) before him, draws on the Gramscian concept of hegemony to explain how the common school as an institution of civil society, and through its medium, literacy, functioned as a social control mechanism 'in which the predominance of one class is established over others, by consent rather than by force' (1979, p. 34).

Graff explains that the mid-nineteenth century populations of cities in Ontario were far from homogenous, featuring large influxes of working class immigrants, many from Ireland, England and Scotland representing various Christian denominations (Catholic, Protestant, Presbyterian), and also black labourers from the United States. Fears by the ruling elites, and manufacturing owners in particular, over the potential for rebellion, of the dislocation of the existing social order, prompted the need to control these populations, to assimilate the 'Other'. Mass public schooling and the medium of literacy provided a suitable hegemonic response because it was promoted as an equaliser, providing opportunities for all, and thus received wide consensus from all sections of society. But it also effectively reinforced the stratification of society, the status quo. For Graff, this strong element of social order linked to the promotion of literacy 'has never been lost' (1987b, p. 61).

According to Graff, historically and contemporarily, the literacy myth serves 'to obscure the causes of social and economic inequities in Western society at least by attributing them to the literacy or illiteracy of different peoples' (2011, p. 44). He states that what is needed is a critical examination of the meanings of literacy and its different values past and present. The literacy myth continues largely because it exists 'apart from and beyond empirical evidence that might clarify the actual functions, meanings, and effects of reading and writing' (2011, p. 36). He concludes however, that changing the dominant (i.e. mythical) conceptualisation of literacy is difficult because there are powerful interests vested in its current form:

Like all myths, the literacy myth is not so much a falsehood but an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes. For this reason, the literacy myth is powerful and resistant to revision. (Graff, 2011, p. 36).

The 'myth' in the context of the New Literacy Studies

In linking Graff's literacy myth thesis to contemporary literacy studies, the point needs to be made that many researchers have similarly reconceptualised literacy and come to similar conclusions. For the past thirty years many studies, often using ethnographic methods and referred to collectively as the New Literacy Studies, have examined the uses, meanings and values of literacy to a wide range of people (e.g. Heath (1983), Street

(1984), Gee (1990), Barton and Hamilton (1998) and many others). These researchers examine literacy as 'social practices', that is, their concern is with the close ethnographic exploration of how individuals and groups use, understand and value literacy in their everyday lives (practices), in contrast to how a singular schooled literacy is assumed to affect their lives. Drawing in particular on Street's early work (1984), a distinction is made between an 'autonomous' conceptualisation of literacy, which sees literacy as a single set of skills having a generic (and beneficial) role in people's lives (akin to Graff's 'myth'), and an 'ideological' or socio-cultural conceptualisation often viewed as a wide range of everyday literacies or literacy practices that are inherently linked with the exercise of power. Thus the former (autonomous view) sees literacy as a technology largely independent of context, and the latter (ideological), completely contextualised within local cultural norms. These two different conceptualisations of literacy underpin much of the key arguments made in this paper.

Predominantly in mainstream literacy discourses in all western nations, dominant groups representing governments, industry and the media promote a direct and causal link between literacy and economic development (for individuals, enterprises and nations). These discourses essentially fit within Street's 'autonomous' understanding of literacy (and Graff's 'myth'). However, researchers from the 'literacy as social practice' perspective have consistently demonstrated in local ethnographic studies of workplaces, that the link, if there is a link, is both complex and bound up with many local factors/variables, many of them political. Moreover, one consistent message from these workplace studies is that claims about literacy can be used by employers in a variety of ways to exert control over their workers (see North American studies by Gowen, 1992, 1994, 1996; Hull, 1997; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; Belfiore et al., 2004; Hull, Jury & Zacher, 2007; Australian studies by Castleton, 2002; Black, 2004; Black & Yasukawa, 2011; and a New Zealand study by Hunter, 2012). Gowen (1996, p. 26) succinctly encapsulates this political point in her study of a manufacturing company in the United States in which she writes of the need to better understand 'the deeply embedded power relations that drive productivity and commitment much more than literacy skills ever will'.

It should be noted however, that it is not only 'social practice' researchers who have provided research that counters the literacy myth in relation to economic development. For example, in a range of workplace literacy studies in the UK within the past decade, including longitudinal studies, researchers found generally that there was little evidence workplace literacy programs led to productivity gains, at least not in the long term (e.g. Meadows & Metcalf, 2008; Wolf et al., 2010; Wolf & Evans, 2011). Furthermore, in a recent Australian study (Ryan & Sinning, 2013) it was found that among a category workers identified as having low levels of literacy (non-native English-speaking migrants), contrary to industry rhetoric, their work itself placed few literacy demands on

them, and thus there would be little benefit for the employers from these workers undertaking literacy training.

Street's research resonates with many of Graff's main arguments. In a more recent paper Street (2011) elaborates on the power of dominant institutional agencies to name and define literacy and thus determine policy and funding priorities and prescribe how and what is taught. Naming and defining literacy determines who has it, and thus enjoys its advantages, and who lacks it, and thus experiences inequality. Importantly, in an argument similar to Graff's references to hegemony, Street (2011, p. 581) states: 'one of the most powerful mechanisms available to ideology is to disguise itself', which literacy education does very effectively, presenting predominantly as natural and objective. Street's argument is that ethnographic studies, which indicate an understanding of literacy practices as multiple and culturally varied, help avoid simplistic claims regarding the consequences of literacy based on one-dimensional and culturally narrow categories and definitions.

Australia's National Foundations Skills Strategy (NFSS) for Adults and the 'crisis' discourse

Having briefly outlined recent adult literacy research relating to the literacy myth, in this section we consider the contemporary mainstream policy on adult literacy and its role in Australian society, drawing on the recent National Foundation Skills Strategy (NFSS) for Adults (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills & Employment [SCOTESE], 2012). We demonstrate how the focus on workplaces and productivity in the strategy document provides a good example of educational policy that has been 'economised' (Lingard, 2010, p. 136). In later sections we relate key elements of this policy discourse to Graff's arguments in relation to the 'myth', and the social control functions of adult literacy programs.

The NFSS was released in late 2012 and was several years in the making. The first point to be made, however, is that it is not a 'literacy' strategy as such. Hitherto viewed within a 'language and literacy' policy (e.g. Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991), literacy is now subsumed within 'foundation skills'. Thus, in policy terms the federal government has re-named and re-defined the field. Foundation skills are defined on page 2 of the strategy as the combination of:

- English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) – listening, speaking, reading, writing, digital literacy and the use of mathematical ideas; and
- Employability skills, such as collaboration, problem solving, self management, learning and information and communication technology (ICT) skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life. (SCOTESE 2012, p. 2)

The Foreword to the NFSS by then Federal Minister, Senator Christopher Evans provides a one-page synopsis of the strategy, which still focuses largely on literacy (and numeracy). It begins with the sentence: ‘More than 7.5 million Australian adults do not have the literacy and numeracy skills needed to participate fully in today’s workforce’ (SCOTese 2012, p. i). Adding to this ‘crisis’ the Minister states ‘we know’ that jobs will become increasingly high skilled and that ‘it is imperative’ more Australians improve their language, literacy, numeracy and employability skills. The Foreword and the strategy itself are geared primarily to the workforce and the economy. In making its case, the strategy provides headings that include: ‘the benefits to individuals’, with statistical data indicating how improved literacy and numeracy skills will lead to improved labour force participation rates and hourly wage rates; ‘the benefits to employers’ expressed in terms of how improved literacy and numeracy leads to improved efficiency and workplace productivity, improved flexibility in adapting to technological change, improved staff retention, increased compliance with occupational health and safety standards, and improved confidence and team work; and ‘the benefits to the economy’ which indicate that improved literacy and numeracy provides a better skilled and qualified workforce.

Several other features of the strategy need to be mentioned: firstly, the statistics that give rise to this current literacy (and numeracy) crisis (i.e. the 7.5 million found lacking) are based on the Australian results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALLS) survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada. Secondly, as the frequent references in the strategy demonstrate, primarily the push for the NFSS comes from reports by industry associations and skills agencies (e.g. Skills Australia, 2010; Industry Skills Councils [ISC], 2011; Australian Industry Group [AIG], 2012). Report titles such as *No more excuses* (ISC, 2011) provide some idea of the urgency with which such groups argue the national case for improving adult literacy and numeracy. Thirdly, while the strategy itself provides little direct funding, recent government budgets have nevertheless allocated considerable funding to workplace and jobseeker literacy programs (Australian Government, 2010). These are the only types of adult literacy programs to receive substantial federal government funding in recent years.

In summary, this dominant policy discourse sees adult literacy as a key element of ‘foundation skills’ that are deemed essential for individual, enterprise and national prosperity. This ‘human capital’ approach is sponsored by government with strong promotion and support from industry associations and skills agencies.

How would we know if it is a ‘myth’?

In drawing some parallels with Graff’s notions of a myth, the first issue we discuss is the perceived role of literacy in society. In other words, is the contemporary Australian

policy discourse in accord with Graff's myth that sees literacy as the precursor to, and its acquisition resulting in: 'economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward mobility'? In relation to economic development, which is the primary focus of this paper, the answer would have to be resounding yes, and the strategy document provides ample examples. In fact, so obvious is the perceived value of literacy (seen as part of foundation skills) that it is almost a given, making it unnecessary to explain. As the Minister's comments in the strategy document (above) suggest, 'we know' that jobs are becoming increasingly high skilled and that it is imperative Australians improve their literacy (and language, numeracy and employability skills). And the opening paragraphs of the strategy state that 'The importance of strong foundation skills in a modern, knowledge-based society *is well established*' (SCOTESE, 2012, p. 2, emphasis added). Some claimed 'benefits' of improving literacy have been briefly mentioned in the previous section in relation to employment and the economy. This brief explanation of the key elements of the contemporary policy discourse on adult literacy, bound within a 'crisis' framework, would appear to be very much in accord with Graff's myth, in so far as literacy is elevated as an economic panacea. The problem is, due to its hegemonic nature, this discourse on literacy is so obvious and commonsensical to most people, including policy makers and practitioners, that there are few who would challenge it. And importantly, as Graff notes, there are powerful interests vested in literacy's current form (including government and leading industry associations and skills agencies), that make it even more difficult to challenge, as the following section on adult literacy research demonstrates.

Australian adult literacy research and its influence on policy

As Graff argues, the literacy myth continues largely because it exists 'apart from and beyond empirical evidence' that might indicate exactly how literacy is used and the meanings people attach to it (2011, p. 36). But while Street and others strongly promote ethnographic studies that show how individuals and groups use and value literacy practices in their everyday lives, this type of research framework is rare in Australian adult literacy studies. Moreover, the adult literacy research of most influence on policy in recent years has largely comprised quantitative methodologies, in particular drawing on the ALLS survey data to illustrate the nature of the crisis, and to claim statistically a link between improved literacy and numeracy and economic outcomes such as workforce participation and earnings (e.g. Shomos, 2010). Some researchers refer to the terms 'policy as numbers' (Lingard, 2010) and 'literacy as numbers' (see <http://www.uea.ac.uk/literacyasnumbers>) to describe the influence of statistics on educational policy.

Other influential (in policy terms) adult literacy research has been undertaken by peak industry associations and private consultants, all with a vested interest in the prevailing dominant discourse. One study by Australia's peak industry organisation, the AIG (2012)

for example, the most expensive government funded research project on adult literacy conducted in Australia (\$500,000), surveyed the views of employers (finding that 75% reported their business was affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy), and trialled a range of workplace literacy and numeracy programs. Their first recommendation makes the claim that the current literacy policy agenda should relate primarily to the needs of industry: 'Position employers at the centre of the National Foundation Skills Strategy' (AIG, 2012, p. 78). Some of the significant private consultancy reports include work on: reframing the national reporting system (Perkins, 2005), future strategies for adult literacy and numeracy (Perkins, 2009), a background paper on foundation skills (Wignall & Roberts, 2010), evaluating the effectiveness of workplace programs (Third Horizon Consulting, 2012), and exploring an employability skills framework (Ithaca Group, 2012). In these and other reports the dominant 'crisis' discourse as expressed in the NFSS is accepted uncritically, and these reports work within and help to constitute various elements of this discourse.

The above research accurately reflects Lingard's (2013) recent work on the impact of research on education policy. That is, policy is informed by this type of research due to its congruence with the values of policy makers, which in turn is linked to a 'globalising of the policy-as-numbers approach' (Lingard, 2010, p. 136), which we explain in more detail in the next section. The research that counts is largely quantitative and is often undertaken by 'policy entrepreneurs' specifically *for* policy (2013, p. 119). It is a problem-solving orientation that stands in contrast to research *of* policy, critical academic research, usually adopting qualitative methods, that seeks new knowledge and which problematises the problem (in this paper, the 'problem' of low literacy).

There are relatively few examples of research *of* policy in recent Australian adult literacy studies. One such study, undertaken by a research team that included the authors of this paper (Black, Yasukawa & Brown, 2013a/b), examined the literacy and numeracy practices of manufacturing workers, and the findings ran counter to the dominant crisis discourse and the above *for* policy research. The research approach was ethnographic and involved multiple visits to three Australian manufacturing companies, observations of workplace practices, and semi-structured interviews with production workers, managers and trainers. In all three companies, which were at different stages of implementing 'lean' production processes, literacy was found to be deeply embedded in workplace practices and largely indistinguishable as a separate and generic set of 'skills'. The production workers, the great majority of whom were born overseas and did not speak English as their first language, together with managers and trainers, were concerned primarily with workplace performance and were relatively unconcerned with literacy skills or levels. It was not so much that literacy was unimportant, rather that it was so embedded in work practices that there was little evidence it restricted the work performance of the workers. Most workers learnt their jobs relatively unproblematically

through informal peer learning. If they did encounter difficulties with work performance, rarely did this appear to be linked with literacy skill deficits, and problems with workplace practices could usually be resolved with the informal assistance of team leaders or fellow team members. A manager at one of the companies stated that literacy was not a major issue: 'I guess we find a way around it. So it didn't stop anyone getting training or learning something ... No, it's not blocking us' (2013b, p. 18). A workplace trainer in one of the companies ensured that every worker in the company completed at least a certificate level course in lean manufacturing. She accomplished this partly through using training materials in a visual/diagrammatic form that made them more user-friendly and efficient for all personnel, and in other situations team leaders and other workers provided support to workers if it was required. There were the occasional managerial comments in one company that indicated a perception of worker 'deficits', in particular regarding spoken English, but in general the conclusion was that language, literacy and numeracy were not considered problems or issues, either in terms of recruiting workers or in workplace performance.

These research findings indicating manufacturing workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were not necessarily restricted in their workplace performance by their English literacy skills were not altogether surprising. Hull, Jury and Zacher (2007, p. 304) for example, commented in their ethnographic study of Silicon Valley production workers:

In four years of documenting work at two large companies, we simply did not find the literacy problems of the sort that were once popularized by the press as accounting for US failure to compete economically.

Some Australian studies from an ethnographic perspective have produced similar findings (e.g. Black, 2004; Black & Yasukawa, 2011), and others have demonstrated that when the in-depth perspectives of workers are analysed, the role of literacy in the workplace is more complex and multi-dimensional and far from a crisis discourse focused on worker deficits (e.g. Waterhouse & Virgona, 2004; Farrell, 2006; Scheeres, 2007). Overall, the qualitative and largely ethnographic research studies mentioned in the above paragraphs support the view that the acquisition (or not) of a singular literacy, in contrast to the way it is portrayed within the current literacy policy discourse of the NFSS, is *not* a major determining factor in workplace success or failure for individuals or enterprises. Thus we claim the literacy myth continues, at least in terms of economic development which is the primary focus of contemporary adult literacy policy. However, in making this claim we are cognisant that this is a conclusion resulting from the perspective of (in Lingard's 2013 terms) research *of* policy, in contrast to research *for* policy outlined earlier which has greater impact on policy largely because it corresponds to the values of the policy makers themselves and those who promote literacy as a crisis.

This section has outlined the type of research that currently influences national policy on adult literacy, and also the type of research that is ignored by policy makers, research that may be seen to run counter to the values of policy makers, in part by demonstrating the literacy myth. We now consider these values, and the second part to Graff's thesis, that literacy education has primarily a social control function.

Literacy, economic development and social control

As we have seen, Graff demonstrated that manufacturers promoted literacy in the context of the common school in mid nineteenth century urban Canada primarily as a means of moulding the attitudes and values of the future workforce to fit the new capitalist relations of production in manufacturing companies, and in the process, maintaining the existing social order. It remains in this paper to consider how adult literacy education in the contemporary Australian policy context fits within a paradigm of social control in the interests of modern day capitalism. Our starting point is the global role of the OECD in adult literacy.

The OECD exerts considerable international influence and control in setting literacy agendas, directly influencing national adult literacy policies in its member states (e.g. Hamilton, 2001; 2012), including Australia. This has been accomplished through the OECD's role in developing and publishing international adult literacy surveys (OECD/Statistics Canada, 1995; 2000; 2005; 2013) for the past two decades, comparing the adult literacy (and numeracy) levels of a wide range of western nations. The large scale of these surveys and their significance emanating from the world's leading economic 'think-tank', has enabled the OECD to exercise its power to name and define literacy and its relationship to economic development. To a large extent the OECD's surveys have encouraged an international 'vocational turn' in adult literacy education (Druine & Wildermeersch, 2000). The survey data feature correlations between literacy levels and a range of socio-economic variables from which statistical links have been determined between higher levels of literacy and improved economic performance (e.g. Coulombe, Tremblay & Marchland, 2004; Shomos, 2010). Within this paradigm, literacy is valued primarily for its economic benefits, and literacy levels in effect have become proxies for human capital.

Necessarily, with a remit for economic cooperation and development, the OECD's role is to reproduce and promote capitalism in its current form, and thus it follows that their international literacy surveys have been seen by some researchers as 'technologies of neo-liberal governance' (Atkinson (2012, p. 81). Through these surveys literacy levels are viewed as a measure of a country's human capital, and the surveys have the power, through their use of benchmark levels (i.e. level 3), to assess whether people are deemed to have sufficient human capital to participate in society. In other words, whether people are 'fit' or 'unfit' to participate (Atkinson, 2012, p. 82). Seen in these terms, Atkinson

(2009, p. 2) argues that the OECD's literacy surveys are an attempt 'to use literacy to reorder society in the interests of economic elites'.

However, critiquing the OECD's literacy policies as hard-edged human capital/economic approaches is problematic because these policies, as with the OECD's lifelong learning policies generally, are usually framed in socially inclusive ways. Walker (2009, p. 339) for example, uses the term 'inclusive liberalism' to describe such policies, which she explains is a political doctrine that 'attempts to strike a balance between the welfare state and the market state'. Nevertheless, using critical discourse analysis to examine OECD documents on lifelong learning, Walker (2009, p. 348) claims that 'scratching beneath the surface of declarations of balance and equal concern for both the economy as well as society reveals a continued bias in favour of education for employment, productivity and wealth'. Walker maintains these OECD policy documents attempt to construct a particular idealised version of a citizen, a 'good and worthy' citizen (p. 342) who is autonomous, entrepreneurial and actively committed to learning goals that are congruent with those of the state (and thus, capitalism).

There can be little doubt that the OECD literacy surveys strongly influence Australian adult literacy policy (i.e. the NFSS), providing the primary data source to support claims of low levels of literacy amongst Australian adults, and how these may have a negative influence on economic development. The OECD's role is demonstrated powerfully by Australia's peak intergovernmental forum, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), comprising the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and State and Territory leaders, adopting an OECD literacy benchmark as a national proficiency skill standard. The NFSS states with reference to COAG:

Skill level 3 is considered by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to be the minimum level required by individuals to meet the complex demands of work and life in modern economies. (SCOTese, 2012, p. 4)

Thus ALLS level 3 literacy, promoted by the OECD as the benchmark level for functioning in society, and adopted uncritically by the ABS (2008) in its reporting of the ALLS, has been further adopted by the COAG (COAG Reform Council, 2009) as a national standard representing a skilled, competent workforce (see Black & Yasukawa, 2014 for a critique of level 3). And in order that Australian governments, federal and state, can measure progress in meeting this standard, a study has recently been completed which maps the ALLS levels with the existing national adult literacy (and numeracy) assessment tool, the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF, see Circelli et al., 2013). This mapping exercise justifies and enables an expanded adult literacy testing regime in Australia using the ACSF to measure progress in meeting national skill standards, particularly in the vocational education and training (VET) sector (see Australian

Workforce and Productivity Agency [AWPA], 2013). Thus we see that an OECD understanding of both what literacy is and a benchmark determining a level of literacy that relates to economic and social development, have been translated via the promotion of industry associations, skills agencies and government policy (and also the media), to frontline assessment, and from there to program delivery services in VET. From this global perspective, therefore we see literacy used for social control purposes in the interests of capitalism – an OECD version of literacy for economic development determining why and how adult literacy is taught in Australia.

Overseas studies of adult literacy policies within the broader concept of lifelong learning shed further light on contemporary forms of literacy for social control. Appleby and Bathmaker (2006, p. 703) for example, examined the UK's *Skills for Life* strategy which could be interpreted initially as 'a commitment to providing wider access to foundation skills for adults who had previously missed out, as part of a lifelong learning agenda'. But this soon shifted to a focus on providing skills for employability, especially targeting young people at the relative exclusion of other categories of learners in need of wider access to education. Brine (2006) expands these discussions in a related textual analysis of European lifelong learning documents in which she distinguishes between the construction of two categories of learners – the high knowledge-skilled learner for the knowledge *economy* and the low knowledge-skilled learner located in the knowledge *society*. The latter may typically be found in adult literacy classes, and includes for example, the unemployed, ethnic minorities/immigrants and people with a disability. According to Brine (2006, p. 649), these low knowledge-skilled learners 'are not only those *at risk*, they are increasingly constructed as *the risk*'. As the high knowledge-skilled learners are trained to respond to technological innovations in the workplace, the needs of low knowledge-skilled workers are described as 'basic skills, skills to increase inclusion, vocational education, basic social skills and skills to increase entrepreneurship and increase employability' (p. 661). These learners, characterised primarily according to social class, are seen as a potential threat to political, social and economic stability, and they tend to become participants in 'cyclical vocational training' (p. 654). Similar arguments are made by Gibb and Walker (2011) in a study of Canadian training and employment policies – a high skills and low skills training divide in which there is rhetoric of building a high skill knowledge workforce but nevertheless many programs 'tend to focus on the development of low-skilled labour' (p. 389). In relation to adult literacy skills, the focus is on raising levels 'to a level that might partially combat low income and health and crime levels, not raising literacy levels to a rate that might help create more Canadian 'knowledge workers'' (p. 390).

Employability, as we have seen above, invariably plays a role in these low skill training initiatives. Simmons (2009, p. 137) in a study of English programs aimed at improving employability claims that such programs 'reinforce the class-based divisions of labour'

(see also Atkins 2013). He states that despite some progressive aspects of these programs at the local level, they are unlikely to enable people to access high skills employment in a knowledge economy, and in fact ‘may help to perpetuate the low-waged, unrewarding and insecure employment that characterises a significant amount of work in the contemporary English economy’ (p. 138). These programs, according to Simmons, effectively shift responsibility for unemployment and low-waged work towards the individual and away from the state.

We would argue that the above research based on European and North American studies resonates with the contemporary Australian adult literacy policy context. The NFSS, for example, features social inclusivity expressed in terms of principles for equitable access to and increased participation in learning, though economy and the human capital rationale nevertheless predominate. The NFSS can also be seen to target specific groups of low skilled people (those below level 3 on the ALLS) and the focus of the strategy is on developing literacy and basic vocational skills that can be seen to fit the latter of the two-tiered high skills/low skills divide discussed above. And clearly employability plays an important part in view of its role in the newly defined ‘foundation skills’ in the NFSS. Significantly, a new employability skills framework known as the ‘Core skills for work developmental framework’ (Ithaca, 2013) has just recently been published, and, like other similar frameworks before it, such as the ACSF, may well play a key role in assessing students in the VET system. Thus, as with Brine’s (2006) study above, we argue that Australian literacy policy in the form of the NFSS is directed at regulating the learning, and thus controlling, working class people who are not only *at risk*, but *the risk*.

Conclusions

As we stated at the beginning of this paper, our aim is to explore the relevance and applicability of Graff’s thesis for contemporary policy on adult literacy (now ‘foundations skills’) education in Australia. We have argued the case that Graff’s ‘literacy myth’ can be applied to the Australian policy context, at least in relation to the role of literacy for economic/workplace development, and we have explored the link between promotion of adult literacy and the capitalist interests of industry groups, finding that they are inseparable. We have indicated that contemporary adult literacy policy privileges the role of a dominant form of literacy which has an empirical value resting largely on statistical correlations derived from international literacy survey data, and the work of ‘policy entrepreneurs’ researching *for* policy. The perceived determinism of this form of literacy, particularly in relation to its economic effects, predominates largely because it is named, defined and promoted by powerful international institutions such as the OECD, and at a national level in Australia, by the federal government, in turn influenced strongly by peak industry and skills organisations and agencies (and the media which we have not specifically focused on in this paper). In ethnographic studies on the other hand, those *of* policy, which problematise taken-for-granted assumptions about the

role of literacy and seek new knowledge, this powerful role of literacy is shown to be a myth.

In Graff's historical study, it was leading educational reformers and elites from manufacturing who promoted literacy so strongly. In contemporary Australia leading government figures with responsibility for market reform in education and industry elites in the form of peak industry associations and skills agencies are the driving forces behind adult literacy education policies, framed by the globalising economic discourses of the OECD. The NFSS represents the translation of their human capital values (ideologies) into a policy document which seeks to closely regulate and control the literacy education of a large percentage of working class people - those identified in the NFSS as falling within the lowest (i.e. below level 3) literacy levels in the ALLS (and most recently the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies [PIAAC], see OECD, 2013).

Literacy education has shown itself to be a perfect medium in the promotion of economic interests, discursively presented as a great equaliser. However, as we argue in this paper, adult literacy policies are hegemonic, reinforcing social divisions and inequalities, while at the same time presenting as the rules of the game and the arbiters of who achieves a successful life. The role of the OECD's level 3 literacy and its translation to an Australian government national performance target is a good example, assessing in Atkinson's words, 'whether subjects are 'fit' or 'unfit' to participate in society' (2012, p. 82). Thus literacy policies help to provide a buffer, protecting the capitalist system by shifting the focus away from the structural inequalities of social class, ethnicity and race, and towards individual people with literacy 'problems' or 'deficits'.

As Graff's research has indicated, in past eras as in the contemporary world, literacy policies and practices change in response to the needs of industry and the capitalist relations of production. They are primarily in the interests of, and about the exercise of power by, dominant capitalist groups. And it is precisely this power that makes dominant conceptualisations of literacy resistant to revision.

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