

Submission to the National Strategy for Early Literacy

February 2009

As educational researchers of languages, literacies, and literatures, we have read with interest background papers for the National Strategy for Early Literacy initiative posted on the Canadian Language & Literacy Research Network/Réseau Canadien de Recherche sur le Langage et L'alphabétisation website (<http://nseel.cllrnet.ca/>). We are troubled by the assumptions underlying some of the papers and about the potential effects of a national policy that rests on the perspectives outlined there. We believe, along with Victoria Purcell-Gates and Robert Tierney of UBC (<http://www.lled.educ.ubc.ca/>), that we must interrogate the framing of literacy “problems” in Canada as displayed in some of the CLLRNET papers, and we must be cautious about the potential effects of that analysis and its assumptions about educational research and practices.

An example of such problematic framing is a claim made in Pelletier’s paper (posted on the CLLRNet site) on family literacy: “One of the largest gaps of Canadian research in parent and ELCC involvement in early literacy is the lack of scientific evidence. By this, it is meant undisputed findings to show *how* parent and ELCC involvement results in improved literacy outcomes for children” (p. 59). Across the papers commissioned by CLLRNet we see repeated reference to a lack of Canadian literacy studies that produce “scientific evidence” to inform “best practices” in literacy education. This so-called lack is one of the central reasons for the creation of a national initiative for literacy.

Before proceeding with a national policy on literacy, it is crucial to engage in a conversation about what ‘scientifically based’ literacy research is, what ‘scientific evidence’ is, and what real sense a ‘best practices’ approach makes in a culturally and linguistically diverse, geographically immense, and historically complex country like Canada. We suggest, in place of ‘best practices’ a ‘repertoire’ of practices, responsive to diverse conditions, informed by granular accounts that take the measure of difference. Our reading of the CLLRNet site is that it conflates ‘scientifically based’ research with randomized controlled trials and large-scale designs, on the understanding that such trials will inform educators of what instructional approaches will work ‘best’, universally.

“The idea of scientifically based research in education is contested”, as prominent educational researchers Eisenhart and Towne (2003, p. 37) point out. It is important to define and debate the taken for granted terms that CLLRNet uses to define the NSEL initiative before such terms (like ‘scientific’) are codified into official national policy.

Much has been learned from the use, in language and literacy studies, of a range of research designs: experimental, case studies, surveys as well as mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative), designs which are selected in relationship to the type of questions asked in particular settings. It would be a serious oversight to limit the study of educational problems to an overly narrow or undefined notion of “science”, at the expense of funding a range of theoretical, historical and/or practice-based approaches to knowledge building. Science itself also grows and develops, and we have moved beyond the assumptions on which the CLLRNet project appears to be based.

A narrow definition of what counts as good literacy research will eclipse other approaches and orient funding, as it did in the US, to models of educational research that have been recognized as problematic in a complex and contextually-sensitive field like education. What 'science', and what 'good research' are, should not be determined by popular opinion, based on that which "we all know" is right and good. The US educational research literature is replete with discussions about how destructive narrow perspectives on educational research and accountability have been to educational research and practice over the past few years (e.g., Allington, 2007; Lather, 2004; Meier and Wood, 2004; McGill-Franzen et al., 2006; Miskel and Song, 2004). We see in the CLLRNet papers insufficient recognition of the international research literature that has been critical of narrow approaches to what counts as good educational research (e.g., Cummins, 2007). Nor do we see any reference to the position statement of the large number of language and literacy researchers of Canada (LRCC). We agree with LLRC that consultation about literacy policy and research must be inclusive, flexible and dialogic (see their position paper at <http://www.csse.ca/CACS/LLRC/docs/LLRCPositionStatement.pdf>). These are not matters over which federally funded networks thereby have authority.

We are worried that the National Strategy for Early Literacy will embrace CLLRNet's particular epistemological and political perspective about literacy and about credible educational research, a perspective that takes little note of the wide debates elsewhere about the problems of defining good educational research too narrowly or of a best practices approach to education and literacy. We also note with concern that any claims to diversity in these papers are limited to different cognitive perspectives.

We believe strongly that attention to context-sensitive and critical studies of literacies are crucial to developing successful literacy practices in a bilingual and increasingly multilingual and multicultural society. As researchers, we are committed to studies that inform, guide and develop instructional practices, and we hope that any policy statement will also make this commitment.

Signed by members of the Faculty of Education of Simon Fraser University,

Dr. S. deCastell, Dean and Professor

Dr. D. Dagenais, Associate Dean and Professor

Dr. K. Toohey, Professor

D. D. Moore, Professor

Dr. W. Cassidy, Associate Professor

Dr. E. Marshall, Assistant Professor

Dr. M. MacDonald, Assistant Professor

Dr. R. Ilieva, Assistant Professor

Dr. H. Han, Assistant Professor

Dr. C. Sabatier, Assistant Professor

Dr. D. van der Wey, Assistant Professor

Dr. O. Sensoy, Assistant Professor

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