

Book Review

Adult Literacy Policy and Practice: from Intrinsic values to Instrumentalism. Gordon Ade-Ojo and Vicky Duckworth, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 138 pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-53510-8.

Increasing technological advancement makes possible a ‘knowledge’ society where textual information abounds. This has resulted in numerous changes in the way people participate in their communities, which in turn has necessitated the call for appropriate literacies that are needed for survival in a twenty-first century world. Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear and Leu (2008, p.14) contend: “(n)ew literacies are multiple, multimodal and multifaceted. It becomes increasingly difficult to think of literacy as a singular construct that applies across all contexts.” They also point out the need to focus on interpretive, critical meaning construction if the demands for new literacies are to be met. Herein lies the timeliness and relevance of this book, albeit from a strong theoretical perspective. The theme ‘change’ is a common denominator. Starting with the 70s decade, the book focuses on how policy priorities have changed with respect to adult literacy. To do this, it employs philosophical, sociological and economic situations from a variety of perspectives.

The authors’ choice of subtitle and related content headings, immediately suggests a respectable level of engagement with deep philosophical assumptions. The first chapter examines four concepts – instrumentalism, philosophy of education, ideology and value position. For readers who seek an ‘aha’ moment for getting the sense of understandings that relate to given theoretical perspectives, this book provides a good start. But, for educators, policymakers and researchers, it does go beyond a mere stimulating level by supplying an apt framework within which these practitioners can find a starting point to unravel, and indeed understand the very philosophies that underpin their practices; especially in relation to adult literacy policy, which is both subject and object of the book’s main content. The main concept under consideration is instrumentalisation, and by extension, instrumentalism. The authors have left readers in no doubt about how very complex these concepts are at definitional level. To aid understanding, readers are given a simple dictionary definition as a starting point, before they are taken on an “excursion into the semantic field enveloping the relevant term” (2).

The first chapter draws on Phillips’ (2013) *What is the Philosophy of Education?* in an effort to decipher a broader understanding of the philosophy of education via three dimensions: (1) the constructivist theory of learning; (2) Skinner’s behavioural perceptions; and (3) Rousseau’s theory about a learner’s natural disposition and societal expectation (5 – 13). The focus in the second chapter is not only timely, but also instructive since value positions are in some way linked to changing policies as respect adult literacy. Given that the individualised framework of value position is built on man’s intuition of right and wrong, as well as his innate being, it seems practical to assume an association, albeit not a corresponding match (30). Therefore, in the absence of explicit policy position, relevant events and activities are considered instead. Based on the specific nature of policy direction, the authors’ argument is played out over three main time periods – 1970s, 1980s to mid-1990s and the mid-1990s. The

framework of values presented on page 33 is the basis for the analysis. The data analysed were drawn from the findings of a previous study on adult literacy policy. The interviewees are former and current practitioners and members of a policy development team. The third chapter directs the readers' attention to recommendations made by the Moser Committee and the policies that are linked to them. The analyses made here are based on findings from interviews with members of the Moser Committee. A discussion of the findings allowed the authors "to corroborate the argument that the dominant value positions that informed policy development at the time of the Moser Committee had evolved in the same manner that the policy itself had evolved" (99). From the 1970s to more recent times, the development of adult literacy policy moved from a focus on learners' needs to attending to funders' interests. The main underlying factors that are responsible for this shift are identified as the economy, labour market and international competitiveness.

The final chapter offers a transformative model of adult literacy as an alternative to dominant philosophy, policy and practice (102). It contends that the difference this model makes will result in a different curriculum and a different approach to practice. The suggested changes are operationalised within various authors' works on Basic Skills presented by the recently closed National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NDRAC). One such source is Parson and Bynner's work (2005, p.21), which was used to underscore the argument that a dominant value position has not benefitted many people. Duckworth (2013, p.14) is another, which demonstrates that many people were let down by compulsory and post-compulsory systems. Transformative learning, emancipatory learning and critical pedagogy were shown to be useful theoretical positions when applied to adult literacy. In arguing their case for new literacy approaches, the authors clearly points out the inextricable relationship between literacy, self-worth and identity, given that literacy also lies in the development of "social, cultural and emotional life, happiness and well-being" (109).

Adult literacy programmes can be successful if teachers make full use of Practitioner Action Research (PAR), which is a vital tool to engender change. Teachers can begin this process by engaging learners, listening to them and paying close attention to their overall dispositions, including their knowledge, skills and attitudes. In this way, learners can become active participants in their learning. More importantly, taking such a position should create the space that adult education needs to produce and maintain success stories.

References

Coiro, J., Knobel, M., Lankshear, C. and Leu, D. (2008) Central Issues in New Literacies and New Literacies Research. In J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear and D. Leu (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*, New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 1-22.

Duckworth, V. (2013) *Learning Trajectories, Violence and Empowerment amongst Adult Basic Skills Learners*. Monograph. Educational Research. London: Routledge.

Parsons, S. and Bynner, J. (2005) *Measuring Basic Skills for Longitudinal Study: The Design and Development of Instruments for Use with Cohort Members in the Age 34 Follow-up in the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCs70)*. London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.

Phillips, D. (2013) What is Philosophy of Education? In R. Bailey, R. Barrow, D. Carr and C. McCarthy (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Philosophy of Education*. London: Sage, pp.3-20.

Dr Gertrude Shotte , Middlesex University, UK, Email: g.shotte@mdx.ac.uk