How Can Literacy Count?

Researchers are now assessing the educational and community impacts of the monolingual, one-size-fits all approach to basic skills that characterises current US federal legislation (Evans & Hornberger, 2005; Abedi, 2004). In indigenous and multicultural education in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, there is ongoing policy debate over the contingent factors in the achievement of indigenous and multilingual students in socioeconomically marginal communities. Innovative and productive approaches begin from the building of supportive links between community language ideologies and the choice and implementation of medium of instruction and approach to literacy in the school; and, a reciprocal link between teachers’ understandings of the sociolinguistic patterns and language functions in the community (Au, 1998; McNaughton, 2002; Durgunoglu & Verhoeven, 2001). But the inclusion of these elements in a language education plan may be necessary but not sufficient for transforming material conditions and life pathways in equitable ways. Increased and improved literacy via school can only make a difference if it enables access and engagement in social fields where that capital can be gainfully and fairly exchanged.

Many literacy educators and researchers, however unintentionally, have bought into the “literacy myth” (Graff, 1979): that schools and, more precisely, literacy education have the power to redress social and economic problems that have their contextual locations in the structural inequalities and forces of broader and complex community, regional and national fields. Graff (1979) traces this legacy to the Reformation, where ‘reading for oneself’ was seen as pivotal in moral formation. He goes on to show how eighteenth and nineteenth century school reformers in Canada and the US translated the moral power of literacy into an agenda that was affiliated with the amelioration of poverty, criminality, poor mental hygiene and so forth. This in turn formed the assumption underlying twentieth century literacy campaigns in postcolonial sites and current models of human capital development in emergent economies, that improved literacy is an intrinsic driver of individual, social and economic development. Graff’s point is not that literacy doesn’t matter - but that literacy in and of itself doesn’t necessarily have such effects, even where it can empirically be demonstrated as a contributing and coexisting sociodemographic factor in social mobility, growth of GDP, the attraction of capital and so forth. While not always acknowledged as such, it was this and other revisionist social history and social anthropology (e.g., Street, 1984) - empirically based critique of the onto/phylogenetic assumptions about the effects of literacy on social and human development - that set the tenor for what now are
called the ‘new’ literacy studies.

That many educators subscribe to variations on the literacy myth is unsurprising. This is in part due to the motivation of those committed to educational equity and justice: to use whatever pedagogic power to shift educational outcomes and, thereby, to alter the material consequences for those students from marginalised communities. It is also supported by empirical studies showing how and in what ways literacy is shaped in the classroom can make a difference. This includes the large scale census and life pathway data on reading failure and ‘poor’ literacy achievement, variously measured, as a strong predictor of low educational achievement, lesser occupational and income outcomes, and, indeed, criminality and cultural alienation (e.g., Lucas, 1999). By backward mapping from the predictive power of early literacy failure on subsequent life outcomes, we can infer a potential hypodermic effect of early interventions. School reform data further suggests that pedagogy can make a statistically significant difference in the performance of students from marginalised groups (e.g., Newmann & Associates, 1996). Hence, there is both a normative political justification and empirical warrant for an ongoing policy pursuit of adjustments to school culture, textual practice, cultural resources and schemata, and interactional scripts that might better improve the performance of ‘non-mainstream’ students on ‘mainstream’ indicators.

The power of literacy education to make lived and material difference in the experiences, lives and pathways of students strikes every teacher as self-evident when they read students’ writing, talk to them about their lives and their own ‘readings’ of the world (e.g., Vasquez, 2004). Without a belief in it, we might as well pack our bags and quit. But there is a continual risk that we promise too much - that like the founders of state schooling in the West we have inherited a Protestant zeal for the unparalleled capacity of literacy to reshape lives. There is, further, a very real danger that stratified social systems and discriminatory institutional practices, whatever the intentions of politicians, senior bureaucrats and public intellectuals, actually rely upon teachers’ good faith in this promise as an ideological palliative to the hard social facts of inequality and structurally unequal life chances.

Arguments about the intrinsic cognitive ‘bias’ or effects of literacy to the side, let’s begin from a simple set of linked premises: that literacy education can and does make a difference; that how it is taught, shaped and constructed has longitudinal intellectual, cognitive and social effects, whether for individuals, communities and civic society. This amounts to a social construction hypothesis: that literacy has variable linguistic and semiotic shapes, resources and practices and, not surprisingly, differential payoffs for communities of students. This is the focus of many of the essays in this volume, where there is ample demonstration of the variable institutional uptake and reformation of the literate habitus and its affiliated but patterned forms of practice, identity and agency. But a Bourdieuan view of literacy education would focus not just on which pedagogic
practices might make a difference in the formation of habitus, their systems of objectification, logics of practice and so forth, but, which differences make a difference in social fields of use.

The last decade of literacy research has done a great deal to resituate learned literacy, school-acquired cultural capital, in institutional contexts of use (e.g., Barton, Ivanic & Hamilton, 1999). The sociological argument is that the consequences and ‘effects’ of this capital is always mediated and remediated by other structural, material and social relational forces within the social fields outside of the school - those very social and intellectual fields where literacy is locally used, reshaped and deployed. Such a view enables us to avoid narrow “hypodermic models” (Luke & Luke, 2001) of cognitive and cultural, social and linguistic effects that, in instances, are embraced as the rationale for everything from phonics to reading comprehension to critical pedagogy. Graff’s work anticipated the belief that literacy per se, that an internalised set of psychological skills and/or socially coherent textual practices, has universal effects - whether intellectual or ‘emancipatory’, psychological or social - and that these effects apply regardless of the rules of recognition, use and exchange in complex and overlapping, equitable and inequitable social fields beyond the immediate control of teachers or curriculum developers or education ministers.

This isn’t to say that the historical emergence of print as human techne might not have been closely linked with the development of particular forms of economic exchange (e.g., mercantile capitalism) and state formation: hence, Benedict Anderson’s (1992) important argument that the European nation state, particular forms of civic society and nationalism were contingent upon the emergence of “print capitalism”. There is little doubt that digital communications and multimodalities today are providing the means for new modes of statism and governmentality, work and representation, their emergent forms still in transition (Kellner, 1995; Graham, 2005). But the relationship between state formation, economy and technology is a sociologically contingent one - not the simple result of technological determinism by medium or mode.

This chapter presents an alternative approach to literacy education policy formation. Using Bourdieu (1992), I define literacy broadly as a form of habitus/capital/disposition, arguing that the internal dynamics of curriculum, teaching and pedagogy are bids to enable the equitable conversion of embodied capital (e.g., skill, disposition) into material capital (e.g., cognitive artefacts) for translation into institutional capital (e.g., credentials, diplomas, degrees) (Luke, 1996). In this regard, teachers and schools have the capacity to both set up fair and equitable, transparent and accessible systems of exchange - even as they engage in the variable and somewhat idiosyncratic social constructions of textual and literacy practice that they inevitably do.

My first point is that these forms of cultural capital have no necessary or
intrinsic salience and purchase unless there are enabling conditions and other available combinatory forms of capital (e.g., social, economic, cultural, symbolic, libidinal, ecological) in those adjacent and overlapping social fields where student/literates live and practice. Improved or altered student capacity for literate practice per se in its variable shapes may be necessary but not sufficient for ‘success’, ‘empowerment’, ‘agency’ or the general educational amelioration of those conditions of economic and cultural marginalisation. It all depends.

My second point, focal here, is that literacy education policy can be made differently. The power of literacy - in all of its variable forms - is contingent. It is contingent upon the availability and mobilisation of other forms of capital for and by students, and their passage into equitable, transparent rules of exchange in civic society, workplaces, government, corporation and other forms of life. By this view, current neoliberal attempts to ‘fix’ literacy policy are by definition futile in shifting the patterns of achievement and failure, work and unemployment, advantage and disadvantage that they might genuinely target - unless they are lodged within a broader set of social, economic and civic policies and reforms that mobilise and enable other forms of capital and, potentially, alter existing patterns and rules of exchange in communities and institutions, social and intellectual fields.

This isn’t an easy task for any ministry or department of education. But my case here is to situate literacy and education policy (cf. Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003) as a subset of a broader social and economic strategy that optimises mobility and exchange for marginalised students and communities. Such policies can be made - and they can make a difference. I here offer brief descriptions of current strategies for Aboriginal community education in Cape York, Queensland as cases in point.

The Neoliberal Fix

The social facts of the new economic order of cultural and economic globalisation are at hand. Cultural and linguistic diversity as a norm not just in urban school districts but wherever the pull of capital, culture, ‘home’ and identity is mobilising families; knowledge and epistemological standpoint are in rapid transition in the face of new technologies, new texts and new ways of thinking; and there is compelling data that the gaps between rich and poor, between social classes is increasing - even in those contexts where GDP is trending upward, economic growth and employment levels high. One might ask whether the general deterioration of the resources and political commitment to universal, free public schooling is a further ideological feature of the transnational, corporate state.

As the local differentials in material conditions, in access to capital of all types, and in lived experiences between dominant and non-dominant, powerful and marginal classes have been exacerbated by economic globalisation (Cohen, 2005) - schools become ‘social shock absorbers’ par
excellence. In many settings, curricula and teachers trained to deal with monocultural, monolingual populaces must contend with new norms of diversity, differing behavioural and epistemic responses of children, transient populations, and, indeed, new curriculum demands. In many countries East/West, North/South, teachers are being asked not just to keep up with, but to ameliorate, compensate for and, indeed, ‘fix’ structural socioeconomic and cultural disparities that are contingent upon and have their genesis in other, more complex overlapping social fields - from those of the state and multinational corporation, to community cultures and local institutions and businesses. The responses are by now built into pre and inservice programs, ministry bureaucratic structures and, indeed policy: marketise schools as competitive business entities, put more and more curriculum outcomes on the table, commodify curriculum and increase the density of testing and ubiquity of surveillance. This constitutes a managerial fix to what is an immediate pedagogical problem - at the level of the classroom construction of literacy - and, moreover, a complex social and economic policy issue: how to remotivate a workforce and populace around a technology in transition, where the social fields of use also are shifting.

With the global spread of neoliberal and corporate models of government that Bourdieu (1998) so adamantly critiques in Acts of Resistance - there is a broad consensus amongst critical sociologists and educationists around the ideological bases of current educational policy. Its characteristics as political discourse have been the subject of wide ranging critiques, and there are now broad empirical as well as social theoretic analyses of the effects of a decade plus of neoliberal reform in the US, UK, New Zealand and Australia (e.g., Apple, 2001; Weis, McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2006).

In terms of literacy education, the new wave of policy is epitomised in the US No Child Left Behind initiatives, with similar moves towards increased standardised testing and performance monitoring, the tying of state funding to performance on these measures, with bids by the state to standardise both teacher/student interaction, instructional approach and, with this, to centrally circumscribe and control as best as possible the particular constructions of literacy negotiated by teachers and students in face-to-face instruction. In some states, this has moved well beyond archetypal neoliberal “steering from a distance” into a panoptic surveillance of classroom implementation of mandated approaches to literacy. There are extensive critical commentaries on effects on pedagogy, on methodological approaches to literacy, and on the measurable performance of students, (e.g., Allington, 2002; Cooper, 2005).

Many legislators and planners, educational psychologists and assessment experts promote such reforms as in the interests of disenfranchised communities and providing better educational provision and outcomes. Yet the logic underlying ‘high’ neoliberal policy of this order is indicative of a two decade long push to turn education into a measurable, training model through market competition. The syllogism goes roughly like this:

• devolved school management and a business model of education at the local level, monitored through new standards for institutional performativity; gauged through,

• universal standardised norm-referenced achievement testing; accompanied by,

• rapid and often untrained usage of other standardised measures in schools and classrooms; and,

• a rapid and ad hoc proliferation of compensatory ‘pull out’ programs for dealing with the aforementioned cultural, linguistic and epistemological diversity; relatedly,

• a universal and growing expenditure on behaviour management programs; in the context of,

• the slow-cycle implementation of outcomes-based curricula, with voluminous print-based documentation and infrastructure in place in all states; one affiliated total effect of which is,

• increased usage of packaged and commodified instruction, reinforcing ‘worksheet’ pedagogic practices, which in turn supported

• a political economy of text production which combines the efforts of multinational publishers, university and freelance ‘outsourced’ consultants, with universities subjected to declining state funding developing into

• research and development operations bidding to develop, market-test and scientifically validate curriculum commodities, ‘methods’ and reading textbook series.

Policy responses to the new configurations of student diversity and exacerbated differential patterns of achievement have been marketisation and an agglomerative approach to compensatory programs. These range from classical remediation to mainstreaming, often part of legislatively ‘tied’ funding with powerful constituency lobby support (e.g., special education, behaviour management, speech pathology, ESL programs, Reading Recovery, counselling and educational psychology). These ‘add on’ approaches are accompanied by moves to further standardise and ‘tighten’ curriculum to deal with variation. This is done in part through the focus on measureable performance - which has the effect of atomising literacy into smaller and smaller constituent skill components. It is achieved through the development of scripted approaches to pedagogy that attempt to write out less controllable variables of teacher professional knowledge and competence, local curriculum variation, face-to-face interactional and curricular response to community diversity and variation and so forth. In this way, while the rhetoric of school reform and marketisation is to increase
'choice' - the defacto effect is less choice and more standardisation, particularly amongst those communities and student bodies at the bottom end of the socioeconomic scale. It is ironic that the model of this approach, No Child Left Behind, was based upon an application of scientific studies of English speaking students that excluded the growing migrant, second-language population (NICHD, 2000).

This combination of ‘science’, policy and corporatism is the new political economy of literacy. That economic field is based on rules of exchange with structural incentives for expanded multinational corporate production of textbooks and multimedia learning aids, for academics to engage in product development, testing and trialling; and for teachers to act as commodity consumers, supported by a multi-million dollar market of outsourced and free-lance educational consultants and a growing industry of private, augmenting out-of-school tutors and support centres (Larson, 2002). But whether and how this approach will redefine the performance and learning of those communities most at risk remains an empirical and theoretical sociological question.

Remaking Educational Policy

To understand how we might approach the task different requires some preliminary definitions and reframings of educational policy. Educational policy is intrinsically normative, entailing three moves:

1. *Narrative function*: The establishment of a state ideological narrative with problems, protagonists, attempts and outcomes - an overt objectification of the purposes and outcomes of schoolings;

2. *Resource flow*: The purposive regulation of flows of human resources (e.g., teachers, students), discourse resources (e.g., policies, syllabi, curricular materials, classroom talk) and fiscal resources (e.g., infrastructure, materials, artefacts and convertible capital) in an expository logic of practice aimed at the realisation of narrative goals and aims;

3. *Pedagogical alignment*: local bids to focus the resources via alignment (and/or disalignment) of systems of practice (curriculum, instruction and assessment) in the social fields of schools and classrooms.

While at the ideological and teleological level (1) educational policy is about socially and culturally consequential narratives, in bureaucratic practice (2) it entails the selective regulation of flows of material and human resources, knowledge and discourse. These flows, in turn, are translated by schools and teachers (3) into an enacted curriculum, versions of skill and practice, knowledge and competence with material consequences for students and communities. This translation of policy into practice, therefore, cannot be explained or driven by principles of scientific causation (Cohen, Raudenbush

& Ball, 2003), precisely because of the sociological contingency of the institutional fields of schools and classrooms.

In this regard, literacy policy lands us right back where we need be: at a foundational argument about which developmental meta-narratives, which material practices, which official discourses actually should count in the reshaping of literacy for new cultures and economies. Second, it asks the practical administrative and systemic questions about which centrally and locally governed flows of resources (including tests, curriculum commodities, and teachers) might realise these and other goals. And third, it asks which local (and often idiosyncratic) alignments of educational discourse make a difference, which actually have material effects and outcomes in the construction of the literate habitus. While there is no clear causal effect from narrative to practice, the model does follow a general theoretical frame. Social discourses and larger scale state ideologies in narrative form are reconstituted into an expository logic of practice - ostensibly based upon some kind of scientific or quasi-scientific objectification of the field. These in turn moderate and set the conditions of available capital in intersubjective exchanges in classrooms by teachers and students.

Certainly the Neoliberal model outlined above operates under principles of corporate performativity and output. That is, in itself it remains silent about the philosophic and ideological questions about what should count as knowledge and practice, for whom and with what effects, a constituent reason for its functionality in secular, plural, multi-party state systems. Policy grand narratives can remain just that, overall sets of chained events that operate at a level of discursive generality as to be both heteroglossic (appearing to voice and represent ‘everybody’s’ interests) and, ultimately, meaningless (sufficiently polysemic to justify each and any ‘flow’ in question). In the case of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy, for example, particular policy goals (e.g., the improvement of the lot of Aboriginal and Islander communities) are to be achieved through government agency and action. The government is positioned as a “heroic agent” (Luke, 1997), who will use funding and policy to raise living standards, achieve reconciliation and, thereby, act realise Australia’s national interests. However intentional, the policy situates indigenous peoples as passive recipients of ameliorative action initiated by dominant cultural groups and the state.

While this species of policy might purport to or appear to have a technocratic objectification underlying it, that is, to be driven by fine grained quantitative indicators of resource utilisation and institutional performance, assuming that state governments and districts. But in actual operation it is as likely to be the product of complex and competing discourses and institutional forces: institutional precedent, political pressure, or, simply, folk wisdom and arbitrary experience of a small group of senior bureaucrats (Luke, 2005). In this way, the potentially arbitrary and idiosyncratic mediations of grand narratives into regimes of practice occur...
not just at the level of teacher/student classroom fields that systems seem so concerned about controlling - they as well are entailed in the discussions and decision-making cultures of bureaucrats, legislators and other key stakeholders in the social fields of policy.

At its best in many systems, policy is made on the basis of partial, incomplete evidence or evidence taken without careful critical scrutiny of the epistemic or methodological limits. At its worst, evidence is agglomerated and used for post-hoc justification. Returning to literacy education, current policy approaches are constrained both by the limits of the available evidence, and by their very narrowness as literacy and language education curriculum or testing policy. But how might we do policy differently?

Policy and Capital: An Aboriginal Community School

One of the central features of government educational policy in the West is that it often operates independently of related social, economic and cultural policy and legislation. This is in part because different arms of government tend to operate semi-autonomously, competitively bidding against each other for precious annual funding. In state and provincial centralised systems, such as those of Canada and Australia, for example, the two largest expenditures for state government are education and health, with each taking around a quarter of overall government budgets. Yet annual planning, strategic directions for each area - while coordinated at a premier’s office (i.e., a state governor’s office) - usually proceeds in camera with government branches often holding their budget strategies as confidential until annual cabinet meetings. Whatever the actual cultural processes, the resultant coordination of the provision of health care and education tends to be limited. In practice, this means that the planning and provision of schooling and, say, hospital/nursing/medical infrastructure even for a relatively small and homogeneous Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community may be developed independently.

The history of government involvement and intervention in Aboriginal and Islander communities across Australia is a case in point (Luke, Land et al. 2002). The common complaint of successive Labor and Liberal federal governments is that twenty years of substantial state and federal government funding have failed to substantial improve health and life expectancy, economic capacity, community cohesiveness and sustainability (DEETYA, 2000). On all indices of relative social advantage and disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders stand well below other Australians (Altman, 2000). This is the single most significant social and cultural failure of Australian government and society.

As noted at the onset, there is a tenable but potentially misleading case that early literacy achievement and school underperformance more generally are at the core of sustained poverty, economic and social disenfranchisement. As for indigenous education in the US and Canada, for
Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education he policy question is what to do about it. Certainly, the patterns of poor Indigenous achievement in school language arts, English, and literacy persist. Over a ten-year period, from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, the gap between the reading comprehension levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait adolescents and ‘mainstream’ Australian adolescents with English as a First Language nominally closed (Marks & Ainley, 1997). Federal government data shows that the Years 3 and 5 test score achievement in literacy among Queensland Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander children has improved marginally. Further, despite having a lower level of exclusions than other States and Territories, this same data provides very rough comparative evidence that the overall performance of Queensland Aboriginal and Islander children in Year 3 reading is marginally better than in other States with large Indigenous populations (DEST, 2001) But none of this even approaches a satisfactory situation.

On the year two state developmental assessment, urban Indigenous students are roughly 2 times more likely to be identified as requiring developmental assistance in basic reading and writing; this ratio increases to 3 or 4 times for rural and remote Indigenous students. For the Years 3, 5 and 7 tests, rural and remote Indigenous students are roughly twice as likely to be below State averages on all four aspects of literacy measured (reading, viewing, writing and spelling) than their urban Indigenous peers (Luke, Freebody & Land, 2000). Nor does the data show noticeable upward trends across time. While the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous performance in Queensland is less than the national average gap at Year 3, it has worsened to fall below that average by Year 5 (Luke, Woods et al. 2002). While there have been some improvements to these patterns for urban Indigenous students in recent years, perhaps reflecting the emergence of a larger cohort of middle class Indigenous students, there is little apparent improvement for Indigenous students in most rural and remote community contexts.

A sociological explanation of pathways to and through school in these communities raises a number of larger questions about schools and communities as intersecting fields of exchange. For example: an Aboriginal girl might enter Hopevale Primary School (in a remote community on Australia’s northernmost peninsula, Cape York, approximately 3 hours from Cairns overland) with trilingual/dialectal linguistic competence (an indigenous language, plus Aboriginal English and English) but limited early print knowledge (embodied capital), access to family networks and community infrastructure (social capital), and limited family material wealth (economic capital). The state school, as a ‘mainstream’ social field, has the capacity to exchange and transform her capital into other forms of cultural capital. This can be done by:

- setting up optimal interactional zones and linguistic environments for the conversion of her existing linguistic competence, cultural scripts and knowledges into English literacy and oracy;
• enabling the transformation of that cultural capital into a visible portfolio of artefacts of writing, speech, performance and multimodality (objectified capital); and

• degrees/diplomas/grades (institutional capital) with exchange value in community life and mainstream institutions and social fields.

Forms of educationally acquired cultural capital are in turn represented, remediad and exchanged in other institutional settings (other educational organisations, communities local and ‘global’, face-to-face and virtual, workplaces) with differential field-specific cache. The missing key to effective language-in-education policy and practice is the degree to which it can be dovetailed into a larger community strategy for enhancing the availability and exchange of capital. It is not just the remediation of the classroom as social field that is at issue, but the reconstitution of relations of exchange within communities and regions.

In the case of Hopevale School, the Cape York Partnership strategy aims to situate school and curriculum reform within such a larger approach. The strategy was established in 1999 by an independent community organisation with government and private sector support. Its target is whole scale community development across a range of North Queensland remote Aboriginal communities (see www.capeyorkpartnerships.com), including Coen, Aurukun, and Hopevale. Led by Aboriginal lawyer and community activist Noel Pearson, The Cape York Institute of Policy and Research promotes a comprehensive approach to community development that coordinates and mobilises partnerships between government agencies and ministries, business and philanthropic organisations, and community Elders and families. A key element of the strategy is the search for sustainable development, through what have been termed “hybrid economies” (Altman, 2001).

The aim of the Cape York Partnership is to work simultaneously to move families off of what Pearson (2005, 11) terms “the gammon economy” of welfare into local employment, an ethics of “reciprocity and care”, and economic participation. According to Pearson, both traditional indigenous economies and contemporary market economies operate on principles of exchange and “social reciprocity”. The building of new relations of exchange involves the establishment of government and private sector employment projects, the community redirection of funds previously set aside for welfare payments, and the provision of planning and infrastructure resources to manage local projects and funds. Targeted strategies include working with families in income management, community-wide approaches to substance abuse and health improvement. Its aim is to develop and open pathways to and through school into productive employment and community engagement.

Various curriculum reforms are underway in several Cape York schools. These include the implementation of one-to-one basic literacy instruction to
enhance early print knowledge, including but not restricted to a strong grapho-phonemics awareness component. There is an across the board effort to develop local projects which engage youth with digital technologies around projects of oral and cultural history, ecological sustainability and intercultural communication. A strong emphasis of these programs is using the technology to communicate with indigenous and non-indigenous youth nationally and internationally.

Hopevale School formally trialled the Queensland ‘New Basics’ approach (Luke et al. 1999), an integrated approach to curriculum and pedagogy that engages students in the completion of “rich tasks” focused on community-based projects. New Basics sets out to reduce overall curriculum “outcomes” and move teaching and learning towards purposive, integrated projects that are formally assessed by state-wide panels and groups. These projects focus both curriculum organisation, timetabling, attempting to construct cultural and social zones for the interactive production of artefacts. Thematically, “multiliteracies”, “active citizenship”, “environments and technologies” and “life pathways” are used as curriculum organisers, rather than traditional quasi-disciplinary subjects or “key learning areas”. The “Computer Culture Project”, part of Hopevale’s participation in the New Basics Trial, focus primary students’ rich tasks on the collection and digital archiving of Elders’ stories, community histories and narratives. Hopevale students recorded and distributed their own music to local and commercial radio stations. This has been linked to the production of design artwork, a marketing website and a business plan to support local musicians and organise tours. School projects and student work in multiliteracies are profiled and distributed online.

Approaches such as this are not news. We find the grounds for such moves not just in contemporary debates over the mobilisation of social capital (Fine, 2001), but as well in the educational philosophies of Dewey and Freire. While it has generated heated political debate among Aboriginal leaders over its critique of social welfare, one feature of the Cape York Strategy is that it attempts resituate the improvement of language and literacy, the reform of curriculum and pedagogy within an overall strategy of community mobilisation. During the New Basics trial, several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, including Hopevale, that have adopted the New Basics and a community partnership model reported improved attendance, higher levels of student engagement and community support, and no deterioration of basic skills levels as measured by standardised tests (for summaries, see Matters et al. 2005).

A Bourdieuan approach to communities as social fields with available sources and practices for the exchange of capital offers a sociological analysis for the use of governments, communities and, indeed, business interests. It provides different grounds for ‘evidence’ and ‘accountability’ as the basis for social policy. That evidence would require comprehensive community profiles and audits of available capital, and their combinatorial potentials, rather than just relying upon a single ‘thermometer’ approach of test scores. Educational accountability could be redefined to gauge the

institutional capacity and effectiveness of schools for the setting out equitable and productive systems for the exchange and enhancement of capital.

A more sophisticated sociological and economic analysis would shape educational policy as a subset of larger policies of social justice and economic independence. The effect is to place a caveat under the ‘myth’ that the improvement of pedagogy, curriculum and student performance on a range of measure in and of themselves can have sustainable and meaningful consequences in peoples’ trajectories across highly unstable and volatile, structurally unequal and asymmetrical social fields of exchange.

**Literacy Education and the Realignment of Capital**

The scenario of disalignment of educational, social and community services is a common one. Government may put a strong push on for local nursing, health care, and hospital access - while at the same time failing to provide experienced teachers, relevant and quality learning materials, and innovative instructional approaches. Alternatively, health care might improve but without an economic strategy for jobs and improved capital flows into the community, that care would largely go to mopping up the effects of difficult cultural and material conditions. Where and when effective coordination within the social fields of the community occurs, it tends to happen at the local level, through exchanges and negotiations between community elders, local service providers, families and so forth. In this way, community empowerment and development suffers from a series of disalignments of capital that can be abetted by the discoordinated and unprincipled investment of government and non-government money. At best this has the effect of balkanising and compartmentalising community development. Worse, it can lead to successive government ‘interventions’, including the efforts of schools and teachers, with little visible synergistic impacts on material conditions and cultural sustainability. At worst, it can lead to a cycle of victim-blaming where communities and families are blamed for their inability to capitalise upon projects and funding.

To assume that the problems of English language and literacy can be solved between the four walls of the classroom or school is another iteration of the literacy myth. If there was a theoretical and empirical flaw to current educational policy approaches, it was a strong belief that the finding of the right curriculum or pedagogical approach had the potential to ‘solve’ the dilemmas of indigenous achievement. The logic of this argument both misrecognises the problem as one of “achievement”, rather than improved material, bodily and cultural conditions, and it misplaces the solution in “pedagogy” per se, rather than in the overlapping fields of capital exchange where pedagogy, schooling and language use occur. With all good intentions, this approach has been consistently reproduced over the last decade in the introduction of ‘stand alone’ educational interventions for Aboriginal children ranging from Reading Recovery, to THRASS phonics programs to, most recently, functional communicative approaches to English
as a Second Language/Dialect.

Basil Bernstein’s (1972) controversial claim thirty years ago - that “education cannot compensate for society” - is a reminder that other kinds of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital need to be put in play before the full value of educationally acquired capital can be realised. Schools have the power to open access to dominant cultural capital through the curriculum and languages that they offer. It is established that particular forms of pedagogy that recognise difference and systematically bridge students’ existing cultural capital with the mainstream forms of English language and literacy can indeed improve the acquisition of institutional capital, narrowly or broadly defined (McNaughton, 2002). In the case of Aboriginal education, the longstanding ‘two-way schooling’ model recognised that these complex relationships between school and community, English and vernacular, Anglo/European and indigenous cultures were absolutely essential (Malcolm et al. 1999). Yet in many cases, there was little capacity for schools or teachers to effect an overall community coordination of the availability and exchange of different kinds of school-acquired capital.

Acquired literacy is one form of capital: contingent upon the availability of other forms of capital. The lesson for current policy is that early intervention in phonemic awareness and ‘alphabetics’ in itself won’t suffice. Direct and explicit instruction in the code in itself won’t suffice. Literacy-in-education, language-in-education, and curriculum policies designed to ameliorate or modify the socioeconomic, cultural and social disadvantage experienced by those students, need to extend beyond the school to ensure that the viable conditions for the use and exchange of that capital is possible and probable. This was a prototypical lesson in late twentieth century “third world” literacy campaigns, that educationally acquired habitus will, indeed, atrophy without gainful exchanges, powerful and meaningful contexts of use (Arnove & Graff, 1987). Social, economic, and literacy education policies must work synergistically. They must go beyond ‘fixing classrooms’ and focus co-equally on mobilising and changing the social fields of community and institutional use.

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