Money Talks: The Power of Government, Business, National, and Philanthropic Groups in Literacy Education

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In many states, and indeed nationally, efforts to open classroom doors to particular business influences are gaining force. In this study, we offer a brief overview of neoliberalism and four specific examples of its effect on literacy education: (a) university entry into the marketing of ideas, (b) corporate philanthropy brokerage of consensus in the English language arts, (c) the economy of assessment for school district assessments, and (d) federal funding for research agendas.

Social Context: A Brief Overview of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, the dominant political ideology in the Western world during the last two decades, is based on the notion that people's freedom and prosperity are best served to the marketplace (Chomsky, 1999; Harvey, 2000; McChesney, 1999). Advocates of neoliberalism suggest that all facets of public and private life are better served by the pursuit of corporate and personal profits than they are by planning or substantial entitlements of social services (e.g., housing, income, food, health care) (Taylor & Webber, 1997). They point to the demise of the Soviet Union and the boom in the U.S. economy for a decade as supporting evidence for this proposition. Accordingly, governments seek to establish the best conditions for profit-making in market competition by peeling away the burden of taxation, environmental impact regulation, and antitrust legislation in order to keep more money in the hands of businesses (Friedman, 1999). This is the logic behind the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on

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funding. As such, we focused primarily on explaining and conveying the complexity of each case. Our central goal was to describe ways in which market forces were growing in influence. We began our investigations with the assumption that each case represented a social construction (Lemert, 1997; Mills, 1997), meaning each had a specific history, including social interactions that crossed many different groups, and each had direct connections to political and economic structures that were negotiated at particular times and places.

Data sources included interviews with key individuals, documents, secondary accounts, and artifacts. Data were triangulated to ensure trustworthiness of findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). No statement is based on single sources. Our initial coding was primarily descriptive, followed by interpretive coding that connected our initial findings to broader semantic fields, such as neoliberalism and capitalism (Barthès, 1967). Although case studies are limited because the results may not be generalizable to other situations, it is hoped that those who read this study can make naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) based on our use of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973).

Findings

Following is a brief summary of four cases, each of which demonstrate different aspects of the market's influence in literacy research and education.

Money Talks at Pennsylvania State University

The encroachment of market forces and pressure to become entrepreneurs come from three sources at this time: pressure to obtain grants, attention to sources of capital in hiring, and finding new markets for instructional products. Faculty in colleges of education are under increasing pressure to win grants and bring outside operating expenses to their respective campuses. New reward systems for faculty revolve around bringing funds from sources other than the state or tuition. At Pennsylvania State University, this pressure takes three forms. First, central administration officials have sold their football scoreboard and students to the Pepsi Company in exchange for $14 million in order to build a convocation/concert/sports center. Other contracts have been signed with Nike (sports uniforms and equipment), ATT (telecommunications), MBNA (student IDs which double as debit cards), Barnes and Noble (textbooks), and Microsoft (Internet server). Each of these contracts limits faculty, staff, and student options.

Second, pressure to increase revenues has complicated hiring practices. At Penn State, corporations have sponsored chairs and professorships. For example, DuPont endowed a chair in Chemistry, KPMG Peat Marwick funded a chair in the Accounting program, and Murata supported a professorship in the Materials Research department. Corporate representatives served on the hiring committees for each of these posts. A new complication in hiring has emerged in social sciences and professional schools in order to position universities to capture more

Money Talks at IRA/NCTE Standards

The agendas of professional organizations can likewise be influenced by money. This point is evident in the National Council of Teacher's of English
specific, complex groups—including business advocacy, liberal philanthropic, conservative philanthropic, and think tanks (see Table 1). These groups’ seemingly divergent agendas came together to “broker” a formal consensus on a national level about the need and structure of education reform.

Each group enacted a series of moves to position (Hall, 1997) the minds of American citizens. In its early stages, their victories were primarily discursive. They successfully established the commonplace discourse about what should count in schooling and what should be done to achieve the same. In the early 1980s, the discourse around “excellence” drowned out concerns over equity, and later, any opponent of the movement was said not to have “high standards” or want to improve education for students. The standards discourse created “patterns of communication that hid the social relations and power” implicit in them (Popkewitz, 1991, p. 129). This unavoidable juggernaut of standards discourse was created through the technologies of influence (Lagemann, 1987), or what Joel Spring (1992) calls “ideological management.”

Ultimately, this ideological management led to NCTE’s, the International Reading Association’s (IRA), and the Center for the Study of Reading’s (CSR) decision to participate in the standards movement (although CSR eventually withdrew when it had to ante up some of its own money). From 1990 to 1995, NCTE officials introduced a period of intense activism on behalf of the vision of NCTE-sponsored standards, which stood in bold relief from NCTE’s more traditional role as a service organization to the “teacher-scholars” of English (McCullom-Clark, 1995). In its activist role, NCTE officials intended to “take over” the momentum of the standards movement for their own progressive vision of the discipline.

Through their action, these professional organizations legitimated the standards movement with their participation. Even after the federal government withdrew funding in 1994, NCTE and IRA were dogged in their insistence on standards as the best vehicle for their reform efforts. This case demonstrates that consensus about schooling, brokered in part by business and philanthropic groups, led these professional organizations to compete to be players in the standards arena on business’ terms, and to likewise compete for funding. In the end they were played by the market.

Money Talks for School Districts

In 1995, Pennsylvania’s newly elected Republican Governor Tom Ridge began to phase out outcome-based education. Although the state’s K–12 assessment (the Pennsylvania System of State Assessment, or PSSA) continued to cite the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ (NAEP) definition of reading as an interactive process, the language in the assessment handbooks for teachers began to reflect levels of achievement standards. By 1998, in compliance with the 1994 Title I Reauthorization Act, the PSSA was aligned with the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Language Arts, and school districts began to compete for state money awarded for high test scores. This competition for funding means that schools must now operate on the state’s terms. Further, because Pennsylva-
nia emphasizes test scores, money is involved in two ways: (a) tests come from private influences and (b) schools must look for programs to raise test scores.

Private organizations have had much influence on the development and implementation of assessments, including the NAEP (Vinovskis, 1998). Private companies are contracted for assistance in test development and administration services. For example, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) develops assessments, scores students’ responses, and analyzes and reports subsequent data. ETS further contracts with NCS (National Computer Systems) to print, distribute, scan, and score student assessments, and AIR (American Institute of Research) to develop background questionnaires. WESTAT, an independent commercial testing company, secures school samples, collects data, trains assessment personnel, and manages field operations.

As schools work to improve their test scores, private corporations market programs, curriculum, and textbooks that are aligned with tests. As one example, Harcourt General, a mega-corporation resulting from mergers and acquisitions that have included but are not limited to the General Cinema Company and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, generated $2.14 billion in revenues from education products, services, and testing in 1999. Its mission follows:

Harcourt General, through its wholly owned subsidiary, Harcourt, Inc., is a broadband learning company that is a major participant in the growing global markets for education, assessment, training and professional information. Broadband describes our strategy focusing resources on four key points along the lifelong learner spectrum, and creating, marketing and distributing our high-quality, value-added content to those markets. Harcourt, Inc. has organized its businesses into four strategic groups targeting specific customer sets: K-12 Education, Higher Education, Corporate and Professional Services and the Worldwide Scientific, Technical and Medical Group. (home page for Harcourt, www.harcourtsite.com)

Harcourt publishes the Standford 9, the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, the News Standards Reference Exams, and the Metropolitan Early Childhood Assessment Program, among others. Meanwhile, Harcourt owns publishing companies including Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Academic Press, and Steck Vaughan, and it operates several assessment corporations, including Assessment Systems, Incorporated. Keeping in step with the globalization of learning, it also owns Netg, a global e-learning company.

Whereas educational policy-making often seems to be located publicly within state legislatures, private corporations set and maintain the parameters. The link between state and national educational policy-making becomes even more complicated as financial contributions from businesses and foundations wield an underlying power and control over educational policy-making.

Money Talks Through the Sandia Report

On September 24, 1991, an exclusive audience, including then Deputy Secretary of Education David T. Kearns and then Assistant Secretary for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement Diane Ravitch, listened as representatives from the Sandia Laboratories, a federally funded research center in New Mexico, presented a report at a meeting in Washington D.C. The report, prepared as part of the Energy Department’s Education Initiative, suggested that the perception of a system wide education crisis gaining momentum through A Nation At Risk and other corresponding reports both overstated and misstated the problem (Miller, 1991a). Rather than supporting the Bush administration’s reform agenda, the Sandia report indicated the crisis mentality which shaped those reforms was misguided and did not focus on actual circumstances facing educators (Stedman, 1994). Researchers pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, test scores in the country had been relatively stable for more than two decades and some areas had actually improved as the United States remained a worldwide leader in high school and college graduation rates (Stedman, 1994). Further, the Sandia report noted that since the 1960s, public education served children who in previous generations would have been excluded from schools (Rothman, 1991) and, due to this trend, it called for more assistance for racial and ethnic groups who continued to lag behind (Stedman, 1994, p. 144).

Reaction to the report was swift and volatile. According to congressional sources, Mr. Kearns and other administration officials “reacted angrily” during the meeting, and Diane Ravitch proceeded to give interviews and make public appearances “in which she angrily attacked the report” (Miller, 1991b). Meanwhile, Robert Huelkamp, one of the authors, announced that his continued involvement in the “educational arena” was, in his management’s opinion, not in the best interest of Sandia (Miller, 1992).

More than a year later, the report remained unpublished, leaving some openly questioning whether the Bush administration suppressed it because of obvious conflicts with the administration’s views (Miller, 1992). During that same year, it was also written that Sandia researchers “reported being berated and even threatened with loss of funding by Administration officials.” Peggy Dufour, the chief education advisor to then Secretary of Energy James T. Watkins, responded to these accusations by acknowledging that researchers were “chastised” by officials for “circulating their findings before the report had been reviewed by experts and revised.” She concluded, “They have chosen to play this out in a political arena, and when you do that, the gloves come off” (Miller, 1991a). For Sandia, this meant retreating from research in the educational arena or facing a loss of grant monies. Three years later, Project Censored ranked the Sandia report third on its list of top 25 most censored stories (Appie, 1995).

Today, the gloves still seem to be off for researchers who do not support the government’s position. As one recent example, Dr. Joanne Yatvin, the one member who voiced dissent from the National Reading Panel, has publicly discussed her criticism of the report. Because of her concerns about both the process and product of the Panel’s work, Yatvin has sacrificed her job as an elementary school principal in Oregon, and currently she is the only panel member who receives no financial support for travel to professional conferences to discuss her role in the report.
Discussion

Robert McChesney (1999) writes of neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time—it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit. (p. 1)

That private interests influence literacy education agendas is evident across these four cases. In particular, we can see how universities are vulnerable to particular research agendas and money-making endeavors as demands for external funding increase. In addition, we see how professional organizations for English and language arts educators can be seduced by the market. Through the allocation of funds based on test scores, we see how school districts compete with one another with new bottom lines. And finally, we see how literacy education, research, and assessment are influenced by the support (or not) of funds that forward specific ideological positions. Given the influence of capital in literacy education and research, we are left to wonder how our conversations might be otherwise if research funding in literacy education truly supported and generated a free market of ideas where researchers were encouraged to open their doors to contribute to a rich and diverse conversation about literacy.

Based on our research, we suggest three ways to monitor the influence of money talks in the literacy field: (a) ask who is involved, (b) question consensus, and (c) examine research requests for proposals.

Attend to Who Is Involved a Small Group of Like-Minded People

Close attention to the players in education literacy and policy reveals that few are involved in tangled webs of participation as they cross groups and positions. For example, Marc Tucker, a former Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) grantee, has worked at various times as the executive director of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, as the director of the National Center on Education and the Economy, and as a founding partner of the New Standards Project. Meanwhile, he testifies regularly to Congress and the National Governor’s Association, has participated in National Governor’s Association Education Summits, and has worked with the National Council of Education Standards and Testing. President Bill Clinton also appointed Tucker to the National Skills Standards board. This crossing in and among groups is not unique to Tucker. Indeed, a few others have wielded similar influence. Keeping an eye on individual participants and their past and present connections can help us to see why certain ideas circulate so regularly in policy decisions of literacy education.

Attend to Consensus-Building

Careful attention to the ways in which consensus is brokered—but whom and for whom—demonstrates aspects of how money talks in literacy education. Recent consensus-building in literacy research and education has included the National Reading Panel’s Report Teaching Children to Read, the National Research Council’s Preventing Reading Difficulties, the Brooking Institute’s Forum on Reading and Math, and the 1999 Education Summit in Palmadise, New York. Consensus-building is a social construction, complete with social interactions and direct connections to political and economic structures (Lemert, 1997). These constructions, negotiated at particular times and places through various individuals and groups, make some issues and solutions appear to be more or less viable. The process of consensus-building can be better understood by asking questions such as: Why are particular individuals or groups involved? How are issues framed? What values are implicit in the brokering of consensus? How are diversity of ideas, values, and interactions accommodated? Although these are not the only questions to consider, their answers should begin to unravel the influence of money on consensus-building events.

Carefully Read Requests for Proposals

A careful reading of requests for proposals (RFPs) from the U.S. Department of Education, which provides 75% of the funding for educational research (Olsen, 1999), and other funding agencies provides important insight into the ways in which money will be attached to research agendas. The criteria outlined in these RFPs foreshadow the conference agendas and journal publications that are sure to follow. For example, perusal of recent literacy conference programs evidences the ambitious work of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). This group has worked seemingly tirelessly on early literacy issues—a primary emphasis of the U.S. Department of Education throughout Bill Clinton’s second term as president. The group begins with Clinton’s premise that all children should read well and independently by the end of the third grade, and focuses their research accordingly. Much research money has been directed toward these early literacy endeavors.

Money talks in and around many aspects and at all levels of literacy research and education. More often than not, it invaginates compliance with particular economic and political agendas. Our hope is that studying money’s influence will assist educators in becoming more savvy political players who can understand not only how markets influence and narrow literacy education and research, but also how we might think and work differently.

References


