

How does the language which shapes educational reform influence classroom practice?

What this research was about and why it is important

In the US, documented social inequalities based on race, class, gender and linguistic differences stem from both *micro discourses* (taking place within classrooms) and *macro discourses* (shaping educational policies at the level of government). For example, putting non-native speakers into low level classes where they are only exposed to simplistic, poorly produced academic materials, can limit their ability to develop strong academic literacies, potentially stunting their academic and professional development. To address these inequalities, social justice advocates now argue for wide ranging reform of curricula and instructional practice. One approach builds upon similar developments in how business and wider society are organized, emphasizing less hierarchical power structures and more inclusive, collaborative ways of working which value and promote diversity. This study investigated how a primary school in California implemented such a program of reform, looking at how the macro discourse which shaped the reform impacted on both the micro discourses which took place within a classroom, and the effect this interaction had on the students.

What the researchers did

- They selected a primary school in rural Northern California which was undergoing reform in order to adapt to a large in-take of non-English speaking *Hmong* students, who had emigrated from refugee camps in Thailand. This required the school to support both native-English speaking students and students who were learning English as a new language.
- The reform comprised four elements: *(i)* multi-age classrooms (e.g. grades 3-6 together); *(ii)* integrating language learning into all classes; *(iii)* using collaborative, project-based instruction; *(iv)* respecting cultural differences and supporting use of the *Hmong* language in class.
- The 2-year study consisted of three overlapping phases:
 - **P1** – conducted a broad analysis of the school’s institutional practices, such as their curriculum design, approach to teaching, and opportunities for professional development.
 - **P2** – investigated the experience of a sub-set of Hmong students. This involved analyzing audio/video recordings of classroom interactions to see what kind of activities these students engaged in, with a focus on how literacy-based activities were structured, and the roles students and teachers performed in class.
 - **P3** – analyzed the discourses which shaped the reform at the institutional level and how these shaped the classroom experience of the students, in order to see whether the reform reinforced the negative experiences for English language learners it sought to replace, or whether it brought opportunities for genuine transformation.

What the researchers found

- The new classroom arrangements required both teachers and students to assume multiple roles. Teachers operated as educational instructors, cultural mediators, classroom managers and social workers. Students assumed the roles of both learners, and, where necessary, mentors, guides and teachers to younger or less proficient students.
- The multiple roles brought both advantages and drawbacks. For example, by extending their role to one of relationship social worker, teachers were able to defuse tensions as their students adapted to a multicultural/linguistic environment. However, the demands these new roles imposed reduced the time available for more traditional teaching activities.
- For students, the opportunity to work with older, more academically prepared peers allowed younger class members to access help even when teachers were busy. However, for the older students, these interactions served as a distraction from their own study, and working in mixed-age groups may even have hindered their language development, as it meant they were exposed to a less academic way of using language than would have been the case if the grades had been segregated by age.

Things to consider

- When implementing educational reform, it is important to consider how the discourses which shape the reform agenda impact upon classroom practices, as they may develop in unexpected ways, depending on how the ideologies of policy makers, school leaders and classroom teachers interact on each other. The best way to explore these issues is to conduct long, multi-year studies to see how school practices, second language learning and issues surrounding social change interact.

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