



6-1-2016

Tracing '21st Century Literacies' in College and Career Ready State Standards: A Multi-State Scalar Analysis

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Stornaiuolo, Amy; Nichols, T. Philip; and Plummer, Emily, "Tracing '21st Century Literacies' in College and Career Ready State Standards: A Multi-State Scalar Analysis" (2016). *C-SAIL Publications*. 22.

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The Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL), funded from July 2015 through 2020 by the Institute of Education Sciences, examined how college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards were implemented, if they improved student learning, and what instructional tools measured and supported their implementation.

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Abstract

This paper brings together resources of sociocultural literacy studies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 1999) and policy attribute analysis (Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988) to examine how the meaning of "21st century skills/literacies" - as emphasized in recent college and career-readiness (CCR) standards - is framed and negotiated across state and district scales.

Keywords

college and career-ready standards, implementation, curriculum, professional development, assessment, students with disabilities, english learners

Disciplines

Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

Comments

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Introduction

This paper brings together resources of sociocultural literacy studies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 1999) and policy attribute analysis (Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988) to examine how the meaning of “21st century skills/literacies” - as emphasized in recent college- and career-readiness (CCR) standards - is framed and negotiated across state and district scales.

While the theory underlying CCR standards parallels that of many past reforms, the new standards respond to the Obama administration’s call for increased rigor to prepare students for college and the workplace (U.S. Department of Education, 2010; National Research Council, 2012). By far, the most prominent of these are the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which were developed under the auspices of governors and chief state school officers working with advocacy and research groups. Among the new additions to the CCSS is attention to “21st century skills” which are explicitly linked to literacy in the English Language Arts (ELA) standards. These provide CCR anchor standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language - all of which are intended to take a broad, cross-disciplinary perspective on literacy, not only tied to traditional modes of reading and composition, but to a variety of media technologies (CCSSO, 2010). This language associated with technology and learning is reflected elsewhere in the Obama administration’s education policies. *The Strategy for American Innovation* (2011), for example, identifies K-12 education as a “building block of innovation,” tasked with providing Americans with “21st century skills.”

Significantly, in each of these instances, “21st century skills” are presented as a taken-for-granted category. While the *Strategy for American Innovation* positions them alongside associated terms - “standards,” “technologies” - there is no elaboration as to exactly what these “skills” are, why they are important, or who they are for. This uncertainty raises further questions: as states and districts work to implement CCR standards, what does it mean to implement something as nebulous as “21st century literacies?” And what, if any, is their relation to the established literature on “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) and “multiliteracies” (New London Group, 1996)? Drawing on data from a longitudinal, multi-state study examining processes by which states and districts work to implement CCR standards, this paper traces distributed conceptions of “21st century literacies” across scales and examines its networked meanings through the lens of sociocultural literacy studies.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how the meaning of “21st century literacies” is negotiated across state and district levels, this study draws on New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1990; Street, 2003) and policy attribute analysis (Porter, 1994), two theoretical models that - while not often paired together - can work in tandem to illuminate how discourses are formed and sustained at different scales of activity. NLS frames “literacy” not as a discrete set of skills, but rather as a sociocultural practice - one that is situated, contingent, and inseparable from ideology. When brought to bear on the concept of “21st century literacies,” this framework allows us to parse the language of hardened, homogenous “standards” as something more

emergent: jostling ideas, beliefs, and assumptions about students, teachers, and technologies - all working to constitute not only a term but also its attendant practices.

Where NLS offers a framework for untangling competing ideologies that shape the discourse of “21st century literacies,” policy attributes theory (Porter, 1994; Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988), provides a heuristic for understanding the diverse valences that characterize its implementation as policy. In particular, it attends to five dimensions that shape how policies are mobilized across state, district, school, and classroom scales: *specificity*, which refers to how extensive and detailed a policy is; *consistency*, which captures the extent to which policies are aligned; *authority*, which indexes the mechanisms by which policies gain support across scales; *power*, which is tied to rewards and sanctions associated with policies; and *stability*, which represents the extent to which people, circumstances, and policies remain (or are perceived to be) constant over time.

At first glance, sociocultural literacy studies and policy attribute analysis may seem to be a strange theoretical pairing. The former tends to emphasize ethnographic description (e.g. Heath, 1983) of local literacy practices (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 1998); whereas, the latter, is more attendant to analysis of systemic reform efforts (Clune, 1998) and comprehensive school reforms (Desimone, 2004; Desimone, Smith, Hayes, & Frisvold, 2005). However, in light of recent calls for literacy research to trace links between local and global practices (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Prinsloo & Rowsell, 2012) and to examine how ideologies emerge through interactions of people, texts, and language across contexts (Lam & Warriner, 2012), we bring these frameworks together using theories of “scale.” This dimension - informed by Latour (2005) and DeLanda (2006) - helps us see “21st century literacies” not as simply “local practice” or “top-down policy,” but rather, as a contested constellation produced, maintained, and disseminated through networked interaction and negotiation (Author 1, 2016; Collins, Slembrouck, & Bayham, 2009).

Methods and Data Sources

Data for this paper are drawn from a longitudinal, multi-state study that traces the implementation of “college- and career-readiness standards” across contexts. The larger study examines how educators across five states are understanding and interpreting the standards; assesses the nature and quality of support and guidance at the district, state, and school levels; and observes whether and how teachers report they are changing their practices in relation to CCR policies. Data collection procedures include annual interviews with state and district administrators about supports for CCR implementation; a review of state documents, including standards, assessments, websites, and curricular materials; and a statewide representative survey of district administrators, teachers, and principals. States were selected for participation based on diversity both in geography and in approach to the CCR standards and collectively represent a range of policies and characteristics: both CCSS and non-CCSS; states with PARCC, Smarter-Balanced, and other assessments; geographic variation; and some with a high concentration of English-language learners.

Relevant data sources for this paper include interviews with state and district officials as well as document analysis related to the formation and implementation of “21st century skills.” The interviews were conducted with state representatives responsible for overseeing implementation of CCR standards

(state curriculum directors or directors of assessment) and with officials in three purposively selected districts in each state (e.g. math/reading content specialists, and, in smaller districts, the superintendent or assistant superintendent). Interview data was supplemented with a review of key CCR standards documents in each state and in the sampled districts. This document review included examination of state and district as well as other documents provided by state or district administrators to inform teacher practice (e.g. curricular guides, materials and lessons, guidance around instructional practices that support alignment). This data was then analyzed using deductive and inductive codes (Saldana, 2009; Erickson, 1986) to trace and organize emergent patterns in the discourse of “21st century literacies” across state and district scales.

Findings

While analysis for this project is on-going, preliminary findings suggest complex and, at times, conflicting ideas and assumptions about the meaning and purpose of “21st century literacies” in CCR standards. Where some state and district officials spoke openly about the literacy practices mobilized across changing academic, work, and interpersonal contexts, others expressed skepticism about the role of standards in supporting ‘new’ forms of knowledge production and social mobility, particularly for those students already disenfranchised. This reveals two interrelated themes. First, tracing continuities and variations in how “21st century literacies” are positioned within and across states complicates the conventional notion of “standards” as inflexible, top-down typologies. Instead, it suggests a valence of contingency in their development and implementation - one tied to contested ideologies related to students, schooling, and technology. Second, parsing these ideologies brings recent research in “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) to bear on “21st century literacy” policy. In doing so, this paper suggests not only how the meanings of such policies are situated and negotiated at different scales of activity, but also points to potential contributions that sociocultural perspectives on literacy might make to the formation and implementation of educational policy.

Relevance to Audience

This paper, which traces how discourses around “21st century literacies” get mobilized and instantiated in CCR policies, represents an area of great interest to the LRA audience by linking issues of literacy “practice” with broader policy conversations. While discussion of “new literacies” have long emphasized the importance of social practice and identity - many of these contributions have been more descriptive and less eager to engage in the dimensions of policy. In tracing these discourses across multiple classrooms, districts, and states, this paper opens up space for “new literacies” research to speak back to and more directly engage in conversation at different scales. A scalar analysis helpfully illuminates how people’s conceptions of ‘21st century literacies’ get taken up to varied effect and for often contrary purposes, a focus well-aligned with the conference theme, “Mobilizing Literacy Research for Social Transformation.”

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