NEW IDEAS

CHANGING PRACTICE

by **Diane Dagenais**

Il faut faire des activités de littératie puis on ne savait pas trop c'était quoi et puis on le demandait aux gens puis ils ne savaient pas trop non plus c'était quoi, donc il y avait beaucoup de flottement dans les concepts.

We had to do literacy activities and we didn't know exactly what they were and we asked people and they didn't know what it was either, so the concepts were fuzzy.

(French teacher B, Interview 17: 478-681)

Introduction

Traditionally, francophones used the term *alphabétisation* to discuss literacy, but it most commonly referred to developing individual decoding skills in reading and conforming to the grammatical code in writing. Painchaud, d'Anglejan, Armand and Jezak (1993) suggested that *alphabétisation* did not adequately capture the semantic construct of literacy as social practice. They proposed that the francophone community adopt the new French term, *littératie*[1]. Their suggestion drew considerable attention in francophone academic and professional circles where the introduction of new French terms is carefully scrutinized to avoid adopting anglicisms.

Their argument formed the basis of a literacy project which aimed to change perceptions of literacy and introduce novel literacy activities in *classes d'accueil*, Quebec's welcoming classes for new immigrant students. As indicated in the above quotation, the term *littératie* generated considerable confusion and endless debates among the francophone educators involved in this project.

Within the context of this literacy project, my own research was to study the process of educational change[2]. In this article, I draw on discussions presented elsewhere[3] to examine how talk about *littératie* changed among these educators as they participated in this project. My study of educational change was informed by political and cultural theories of organizational change (Candlin 1996, Fullan 1991

and 1997, Gilly 1989) that examine change phenomena from the perspective of participants in innovative projects. According to this framework, as people in an organization participate in a change project, they construct new meanings about the content and process of the innovation (the "what" and "how" of change according to Fullan 1991). Thus, I was interested in exploring how a group of education professionals collectively and individually interpreted what was meant by *littératie* in the context of a literacy project.

My research on educational change also drew on the work of French social psychologists who proposed *la représentation sociale* (social representation) as a construct to articulate how people attribute meaning to their shared experiences through discourse (Doise 1988, Jodelet 1989). These meanings, or social representations, may be relatively homogenous, shared by all, or they may be heterogeneous when they include divergent or contradictory notions that are more or less shared by group members. For example, the group may have a very similar social representation about reading instruction or they may have diverging ideas about it. In the latter case, individuals strategically align themselves with particular notions about reading instruction to signal allegiance or opposition to these ideas. Social representations are thus dynamic and can lead to either group conflict or the negotiation of new shared meanings.

Definitions of social representation advanced in French scholarship share some commonalities with Gee's (1999) discussion of discourse and Discourse (with a capital "D"). Drawing on French scholars Bourdieu and Foucault, contemporaries of the social psychologists working on *la représentation sociale*, Gee proposed that discourse, defined as "language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories)" be distinguished from Discourse, which he viewed as "ways of using language...to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group" (p. 17). His concept of Discourse and the French construct *la représentation sociale* both articulate how language is used to signal group membership. However, Gee focuses specifically on ways of using language, whereas francophone scholars who refer to *la représentation sociale* primarily emphasize how groups construct meaning and secondarily consider how meaning is expressed through language and discursive positioning.

I applied the concept of social representation to my study of educational change and analysis of educators' talk about *littératie*. The concept helped uncover how a group's representation of literacy can be constituted by diverging ideas. It also helped interpret how individuals may align with a particular discourse on literacy as a means of positioning themselves strategically in relation to others. Drawing on Gee (1996), discourse is conceptualized here as a socio-cultural expression of beliefs, values, behaviours and ways of talking. It serves to situate the social identity of individuals and their membership in particular discourse communities.

My analysis revealed that over the course of the literacy project, two divergent discourses emerged in the group's representation of *littératie*. At times, participants in this project adopted a technical discourse that equated literacy with individual abilities and school practice and, at other times, they aligned themselves with a social discourse that linked literacy to larger social phenomena beyond the school context. In what follows, I describe the context of the literacy project, the research methodology and the two discourses that constituted the group's representation of *littératie*. I conclude by examining how contextual factors led these educators to refer to one discourse over another at different stages of the project.

Context

The objective of the literacy project was to change perceptions about literacy and literacy practices among educators involved in secondary school *classes d'accueil* serving adolescent immigrants who had been designated low literate. The project grouped together a range of educators including secondary school teachers, resource personnel, consultants and administrators from a large urban school district, representatives from the Ministry of Education and researchers from two local universities.

During the project, the educators read academic and professional literature on literacy written in English, particularly texts published by authors such as Williams and Capizzi-Snipper (1990), Ferdman (1990), Heinrich (1986), Simich-Dudgeon (1989) and Zamel (1987). In project meetings they discussed their understanding of literacy and ways of changing literacy teaching in the *classes d'accueil*.

As well, the educators planned, developed and implemented a set of innovative approaches to teaching literacy that had rarely been used in *classes d'acccueil* at the time. For example, whereas the program traditionally emphasized oral language development and provided students with few opportunities to become familiar with print, educators in the project decided to have students interact with a wide variety of print materials. The

participating classes were equipped with reading corners, teachers read books to students and the latter consulted printed materials independently during daily silent-reading periods. As well, students corresponded with teachers on a daily basis in dialogue journals. This was a marked departure not only from the usual teaching practices within *classes d'accueil*, but also from the dominant practices in the broader secondary school programs where French language lessons focused on teaching grammar and technical skills in a linear progression, and published textbooks were the sole teaching resource.

Methodology

In order to examine the change process and the construction of social representations of *littératie*, I adopted a qualitative research methodology. This approach was inspired by school-based ethnographies that examine meaning making in educational processes (Bolster 1983) and the lived experiences of participants in school innovations (Everhart 1988).

Data collection approaches included interviewing participants, field-based observations and collecting relevant documents. In all, thirty-one interviews were conducted in three fieldwork phases over the two-year implementation of the project. The individual interviews took place during school hours and lasted about an hour each. As well, over eighteen months during the project, I observed classrooms, professional development activities and meetings between the participants. Moreover, I gathered every document related directly or indirectly to the project to glean information about the context. The documents and field notes served as secondary sources for this analysis to triangulate information gathered in interviews.

Two Discourses on Literacy

As suggested above, two types of discourse emerged in discussions about literacy: a discourse focusing on technique and school-based skills and a discourse referring to the social aspects of literacy that extend beyond school.

A Technical Discourse

The technical discourse was primarily about implementing literacy teaching and approaches to reading and writing instruction. Literacy was described in terms of teaching activities, observable behaviours and school language used across the curriculum. One participant associated literacy with learning to manipulate books:

La littératie c'est le développement de toutes sortes de comportements qui sont en rapport avec l'apprentissage de la langue. . . à savoir qu'un étudiant qui nous arrive, qui ouvre son livre à l'envers, un des aspects de la littératie à développer, c'est que cet étudiant-là puisse ouvrir son livre convenablement.
Literacy is the development of all sorts of behaviours related to language learning...such as a student who arrives, opens his book backwards, one of the aspects of literacy to develop, is for that student to be able to open his book appropriately.
(French teacher C, Interview 9: 432-438).

According to another teacher, this development corresponded to an increased motivation concerning school tasks based on writing. He described literacy in terms of knowledge and work habits associated with scholastic activities:

C'est un ensemble d'habitudes et de comportements scolaires que l'on fait passer par certaines activités qui touchent beaucoup la motivation des élèves. . . et qui amène les élèves à se comporter comme des lecteurs, comme des écrivains, comme des étudiants qui aiment venir à l'école.
It is a collection of school practices and behaviours that we communicate through certain activities that address student motivation...and that lead students to behave like readers, like writers, like students who like to come to school.
(French teacher B, Interview 2-609-617)

These descriptions were closely related to traditional discussions of *alphabétisation* that emphasized a set of discrete school-based skills and behaviours students must acquire to become literate. This view of literacy was more narrow and superficial than the social discourse view.

A Social Discourse on Literacy

The social discourse on literacy made reference to developing a conscious awareness of the functions of written language in daily activities. In keeping with this perspective, students were immersed in a literate environment to learn about the relevance of literacy in social interactions. In this view, literacy learning extended beyond the school so that students became aware of literacy in all social situations:

C'est de faire prendre conscience aux élèves ou à ces adolescents-là qu'on est dans une société où presque tout passe par l'écrit.
It is making the students aware or, for these adolescents, that we are in a society where almost everything is communicated in writing.
(Consultant B, Interview 22: 919-924)

According to another participant, this awakening would lead students to understand the place of literacy in their adopted society:

Mais l'idée de la littératie était beaucoup plus de rendre les élèves autonomes, de leur donner, tant au niveau de la lecture qu'au niveau de l'écriture, de leur donner le goût de lire, la conscientisation de ce besoin dans les sociétés modernes et avec les technologies actuelles.
But the idea of literacy was much more to make students autonomous, to give them, as much in reading as in writing, to give them the interest in reading, the awareness of the need for this in modern societies and with current technologies.
(Researcher A, Interview 36: 408-411)

Another participant indicated that literacy enabled students to acquire cultural capital and become members of a society that communicates through the written word:

C'était nécessairement beaucoup plus large que de la lecture...c'est à dire que je développerais chez eux cette perception d'être, de faire partie du monde des lettrés.
It was necessarily much larger than reading...that is, that I would develop in them this perception of being...of being a part of the literate world.
(Consultant A, Interview 8: 1125-1138)

Changing Discourse

In the first phase of fieldwork, two out of three teachers referred to a technical discourse on literacy. At this point in the project, the teachers had just participated in a workshop on school-based literacy activities. In the second phase of fieldwork, a social discourse dominated the discussions of literacy and in the third phase, a bi-dimensional representation took on more importance.

My analysis of interviews and observations of project meetings revealed that it became difficult for the participants to construct a shared representation of literacy. Participants were confronted with their

different interpretations of this concept:

> *Ce qui a handicapé le projet, c'est un petit peu une différence de philosophie du principe littératie...plusieurs conceptions de la littératie.*
> What handicapped the project was a bit of a difference in philosophy about the literacy principle...several conceptions of literacy.
>
> (Resource Person, Interview 7: 651-727)

Differences in expectations concerning how to change literacy instruction were the source of heated debates and led to conflict:

> *Il y a eu des débats assez importants; ça nous a pris un certain temps pour essayer de voir clair, je dirais, dans ce projet. Le point de départ des uns et des autres n'était pas clair; il y avait des écarts, je dirais, considérables quant à la compréhension même du projet, de la littératie. ...Ce qui a pris plus de temps, c'est de savoir, de définir exactement qu'est-ce que c'est la littératie et l'application de la littératie dans une démarche pédagogique...ça a été un peu plus ardu.*
> There were important debates; it took us some time to try to see clearly, I would say, in this project. Each person's starting point was not clear; there were considerable gaps, I would say, as to the understanding of the project itself, of literacy. ...What took more time was to know, to define exactly what is literacy and the application of literacy in a pedagogical process...that was a bit more difficult.
>
> (Ministry of Education Administrator, Interview 6: 313-436)

In summary, the participants constructed a heterogeneous representation of literacy composed of both technical and social discourses. These two discourses were not equally important, however, since the social discourse dominated discussions of literacy in both the second and third phases of fieldwork. The following section explores how contextual factors linked to the change process led to a preference for a social discourse and explains its appeal for participants in the project.

Conclusions

Research on change and the construction of social representations provide conceptual tools that help us understand why participants in this project tended to shy away from a technical discourse on literacy. Before implementing the project, details about pedagogical practice and literacy teaching were not defined because the people who initiated the project wanted to distance themselves from innovations that aim at testing materials or prescribing a particular approach. This lack of precision about how to put changes into practice may actually have allowed the participants to retreat to a zone of security during the change process. Within this zone, they could intervene in the project in their own way while everyone tried to make sense of what was meant by literacy and how to change literacy instruction. Crozier and Friedberg (1977) propose that this type of uncertainty actually allows members of an organization to preserve a margin of freedom when they are expected to implement change.

Thus, it is possible to imagine that over time participants may have affiliated with a social discourse in order to avoid formulating a more operational definition of literacy. Talking about literacy in broad social terms may have been more appealing because it was less risky than talking about it in terms of school practice. The latter was a thorny issue because there was a lot of confusion and it became apparent that participants had very divergent ideas about how to teach literacy.

Moreover, participants who adopted a social discourse on literacy indicated to all that they supported the objectives of a project such as this one that promoted equal access to society and school success for low literate students. The social discourse enabled participants to subscribe to a shared vision of the future. This corresponds to the notion of vision building presented by Fullan (1991) in his discussion of school change. According to Fullan, vision building is a vital process in educational innovation. Adopting a social discourse on literacy served to rally the project participants around a democratic notion that was valued by the group and mobilized them to collective action.

Similarly, Gilly (1989) suggested that in contexts of school reform, some participants can choose to affiliate with a particular social representation for strategic reasons, to signal publicly that they are conforming to the intentions of the innovation, or conversely, to resist or mask non-change. In adopting a social discourse on literacy composed of general statements about society that shift the focus away from describing actual classroom practice, some participants may have been avoiding criticism and conflict. It is also possible to conceive, following Gilly (1989), that participants adopted a social discourse on literacy because it provided them with a possibility of maintaining

some stability and buying time while they tried to develop a more concrete and school-based interpretation of this concept.

One can wonder what the impact of adopting a social discourse on literacy had on pedagogical practice in such an innovative project. While adopting a social discourse on literacy may have served to protect participants for a while during the change process and allowed them to expand their understanding of literacy to include language processes beyond the school context, it did have an important limitation.

As Carrington and Luke (1997) suggested, discourses on the social benefits of literacy play an important educational role. They raise critical reflections on the socio-political implications of literacy but present few solutions for classroom practice. In terms of this project, by favouring a social discourse on literacy, the educator group was never able to clearly construct a shared representation of how literacy teaching would change. Yet, the fact that several individuals leaned to a social discourse on literacy while a number of others adopted elements of both a social and a technical discourse, did not necessarily mean that there was no change in pedagogical practice or no movement toward articulating how classroom instruction might change when talking about *littératie* as opposed to *alphabétisation.* It simply indicated that, while participants were willing to adopt a broader discourse on the social and political dimensions of literacy, several were still reluctant to advance a more

operational definition of this concept. Thus, it seems that the degree of pedagogical change in such a project may depend not only on the importance accorded to a critical examination of literacy learning in larger society, but in carefully exploring how introducing a new term like *littératie* to educators implies a change of terminology or of perspective and a change in teaching practice as well. ■

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Notes

1. Though the use of the term *littératie* has gained ground in francophone Quebec and Europe in the last decade, some educators still refer to *alphabétisation.* Generally, the use of *littératie* is more frequent in academic and professional circles among those who take the position that literacy is a social practice.

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3. This text is adapted from an earlier article published in French (Dagenais 2001) and builds on arguments presented in July 2002 at the Portraits of Literacy Conference, University of British Columbia.