Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know.
Edward Sapir (1921, p. 189)

Societies have shown an abiding interest in how their citizens use language. Whether the outcomes of centuries-long attempts to educate and regulate language have been constraining or liberating, inclusive or just massive, and whether or not some notion of research has played a part, governing bodies have rarely regarded citizens’ ways of using language as peripheral, as mere accompaniments to the real business of the social world (Lo Bianco, 2007). Because it concerns the calibre and range of what youngsters will come to value, and talk, listen, read, and write about, language education has been at the heart of educational efforts for centuries, speaking directly to the creation of both persons and a people—citizens, workers, members of families, communities, societies, and cultures.

This chapter begins with a long view from history, showing the longevity of policy’s applications to language education and the conditions that have motivated those applications. It turns then to two recent, contrasting examples of policy interventions, and concludes by outlining some challenges facing researchers and educators interested in English language arts education. Of underlying interest here is how we conceptualize the scope and significance of language education, how different kinds of research designs yield different versions of education in the English language arts, and how each of these versions has, in turn, its own way of presenting language as amenable to transformation via policy.

The concept of the language arts is open-textured, covering a set of goals, materials, activities, and participation settings. Goals include the developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions that relate to social participation via oral and written language communication. Materials typically include materials drawn from valued everyday and literary, aesthetically- and functionally-motivated textual sources, multimodal texts, and digital and print texts, along with increasingly complex combinations of these. Activities generally include reading, writing, listening, making, valuing, talking, and responding to these materials. Participation settings include personal, interpersonal, group, and intercultural communications, from intimate, to familiar, to general.

The term “policy” is taken here to refer to public decisions that name target practices to be institutionally regulated: it thus is made up of action plans, rationales for those plans, and ways of assessing progress and success. Target practices range from resource allocation and dissemination of system data to the adoption of materials in classrooms and the assessment of students’ learning. Policy also articulates how compliance will be monitored and enforced, and how key target practices will be inter-related (e.g., how the outcomes of assessment regimes will determine resource allocation), and how implementing these decisions will serve broader, underlying values and ideological goals (e.g., providing equity of access and participation, passing on a cohesive cultural heritage). Potentially, research can speak directly and consequentially to the full range of these practices and their rationales.

This chapter is written at a high point in the story of policy interventions into the teaching and learning of the English language arts. The high point refers not only to both the overtness and reach of government interventions but also to the explicit use of certain forms of research to legitimate such interventions. Over recent decades three significant developments have brought us to this high point. First, the increasing diversity of learners’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds has been recognized as presenting challenges to teachers, schools, and systems. Second, expectations have intensified that schools will provide increasingly complex communicational skills to meet the demands of contemporary vocational, civic, and personal life. Third, schools have been publicly singled out as especially accountable for the economic, moral, and cultural condition of a society. Finally, there has arisen a sense in the professional,
bureaucratic, and public communities that there seems to be enough research evidence available in and around the topic of teaching and learning the English language arts to afford durable, perhaps even final, answers to the big educational questions of what? and how?

These developments are felt nowhere more keenly than in the practices and policies surrounding English language arts education. Regular waves of pressure to implement reforms in resource reallocation, pedagogy, and professional training have become part of the experience of educators in classrooms, regional offices, and state and national bureaucracies. The following discussion shows that versions of these three developments are evident in both the long and the short history of language, social life, and policy.

Regulating Future Citizens’ Oral and Written Language: A Long View

In the West, the origins of democracy, literacy, and formal language education are associated with ancient Greece. In fact, the extent of the individual and collective reach of language education and the motivation for policy intervention are well illustrated by accounts of Athenian history in the 5th–4th centuries BCE. Decades of both the threat and the reality of war, most notably with Persia and Sparta, had shaken the Athenians’ sense of cultural identity, an identity attached to a distinctive notion of the citizen, a member of the city-state who “had a right to debate, and a right to vote on, the decisions that affected his life and that of his city” (Stone, 1988, p. 9). Public dialogue and debate had become central to the Athenians’ sense of how they were different from their neighbours and predecessors. In Athens at this time “speech became the political tool par excellence, the key to authority in the state … The art of politics became essentially the management of language” (Vernant, 1982, p. 49). Their use of oral and written language was the seed-bed for the Athenians’ form of civic participation and democracy (Robb, 1994).

By 450 BCE debates about how to educate aspiring young Athenians in the oral and written skills of political and civic participation were underway (Harris, 1989; Thomas, 1994). The puzzling trial and execution of Socrates is partly explained by his critique of Athenian forms of governance. But he was also charged with “corrupting the youth of Athens” (Plato’s Apology, Ap. 24, b8-c1) through his direct, disputative language education practices with his students and, more dangerously, their powerful fathers (Colaiaco, 2001). Undecorated, personally engaged debate about genuine moral problems Socrates saw as the only valid form of meaningful political and civic participation, and he taught essentially a form of philosophic rhetoric on that basis. It was as a language educator that Socrates was condemned.

Two thousand years later, in 1647, the first known law mandating schooling—the Ould Deluder Satan Law—was passed. It was about the English language arts. The Puritan authorities of Massachusetts instructed every community of 50 or more families to have a school and to employ a reading and writing teacher, to outwit the ways of the Evil One by the teaching of reading and writing (Monaghan, 2005). Here is the original rationale for the Ould Deluder Satan Law:

It being one cheife project of that ould deluder, Satan, to keepe men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknowne tongue, so in these latter times, by perswading from the use of tongues, that so at least the true sence & meaning of the originall might be clouded by false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers, that learning may not be buried in the grave of our fathers in the church & commonwealth. (cited in Monaghan & Barry, 1999, p. 2)

As with the Athenians, a sense of being surrounded by potentially menacing and benighted neighbors, and a commitment to the enhancement of their distinctive cultural and, in this case, religious citizenry led these communities to mandate a specific form of language and literacy education. From the earliest days of legally mandated schooling, writing, as “a tool for the attainment of learning”, was to be a focus of instruction, not just reading (Monaghan, 2005, p. 38). Harvard College had been established 11 years earlier, and a notion of a religion-informed, active citizenry drawn from among the young men of the ruling and aspirational classes had motivated the law. It was a futures- and a participation-oriented policy.

The development of a competent, but, perhaps equally, distinctive kind of language user, for both ancient Athens and the Puritan communities of Massachusetts, was taken to play a key part in the maintenance of their special identities, both individual and communal, in the face of their inauspicious circumstances. Systematic education in those individual and collective resources that we group under the heading “Language Arts” has long been of interest to the political class and to public administrators. In the European tradition, they became objects of policy surveillance and regulation over 2000 years ago, and they have remained so (see Freebody & Zhang, 2008, for applications to early language arts education in China).

Research in Policy, Policy in Research: Examples from Literacy Education

Centuries after the Ould Deluder Satan Law, language arts education remains a target of policy, but research now accompanies rhetoric in policy formulations. Two recent policy interventions in literacy education are discussed here to exemplify the different roles that research can play in the formulation of and public rationale for policy.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB, signed into law in 2002) was a broad-ranging U.S. policy intervention whose bases were stated as follows:

[The NCLB Act] will help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. It is based on four basic principles: stronger
accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. Test data will be reported by economic background, race and ethnicity, English proficiency and disability. Measuring progress by subgroups will demonstrate not just that overall student performance is improving, but also that achievement gaps are closing between disadvantaged students and other students. Holding schools accountable for the academic achievement of all subgroups ensures that no child is left behind. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

This intervention operated with a clear definition of rigorous research as the warrant for regulations and guidelines about “teaching methods that have been proven to work” (National Reading Panel, 1999): replicated experiments with standardized or psychometrically defensible outcome measures (but see Camilli, Vargas, & Yurecko, 2003, on the inappropriateness of the analyses). Regulations and guidelines applied to many aspects of educational activity. Literacy education was a significant part of this blanket initiative, and guidelines relating to it were based in large part on issues established in the report of an earlier U.S. government sponsored expert review of research (National Reading Panel, 1999).

These initiatives, at the time of writing, have been reshaped and incorporated into the Race to the Top Program (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This program also explicitly singles out “reading/language arts and mathematics, as reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the assessments required under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act” as key indicators (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, pp. 6–7). The combination of terms is informative: First is the distinct-but-conflated status of reading and the language arts, signalling the special status of reading over and above writing, speaking and listening, and reflecting the priorities of No Child Left Behind; second is the embodiment of these in the previous assessment regimes; third is the naming of “reading/language arts and mathematics” at the same level of generality, in terms of systems’ achievements, as “increasing high school graduation rates ... and increasing college enrolment” (U.S. Department of Education, pp. 6–7).

Thus reading/language arts and mathematics, as assessed by standardized measures, are taken to reflect the highest order benchmarks of school and system well-being, comparable in terms of accountability and informativeness to graduation and continuation rates. On the matter of the evidence base for these initiatives, the National Reading Panel, No Child Left Behind initiative and the Race to the Top program, taken in tandem, intersected with debate and government intervention on the matter of what was to count as evidence (one outcome of which is the What Works database; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). So policy, in this instance, included not only a reference to supporting evidence, but an explicit indication of what kind of methodological and analytic choices would be taken seriously in policy debates.

A second kind of intervention, called Literate Futures (Luke, Freebody, & Land, 2000), inquired into literacy teaching in primary and secondary public schools in Queensland, Australia, to locate a set of emergent issues that could form the bases of reform. The data for this study comprised observations in schools, interviews with several thousand teachers, principals, students, parents and interested community members, the analysis of policy documents, data relating to general educational achievement in schools, and analyses of demographic and economic features and projections of the regions across the state. The rationale for the recommendations rested to a significant extent on an analysis of “futures” based on demographic and labour-market trends. The relevant research literature was contextualized by the concerns that emerged from these data bases, rather than the other way around. Recommendations were made about: (a) student diversity, including a focus on regular “distance travelled” targets using a wide range of assessment data; (b) whole-school literacy plan to be developed by teachers, parents and other stakeholders; (c) the teaching of reading reshaped through “balanced, multi-method approaches” (Luke et al, 2000, p. 81); and (d) the incorporation of new technologies and multiple modalities into classroom work across the school years and curriculum areas.

These two policy formulations (discussed more fully in Freebody, 2007) embodied contrasting views of

- how teachers should implement the intentions of central policy, comparably, in all of the settings within a jurisdiction,
- the degree of agency and professionalism that can and should be exercised in those implementations,
- how clearly the future language and literacy demands on workers and citizens should be formulated and simulated in schools across a jurisdiction,
- how statutory bodies and central offices should mandate and monitor the use of certain teaching methods, and
- how definitive and generalizable the guidance should be that research provides regarding those methods.

No Child Left Behind and Literate Futures differed dramatically on these counts, not just on the extent and nature of their research base. The contrasts show that these debates revolve partly around optimal levels of specificity in the application of research findings (from experiments or elsewhere) to classrooms, and the relation of that to optimal degrees of professional, on-site adaptation by classroom, school and district personnel.

One of the minority statements to the U.S. National Reading Panel (1999) report clarifies this set of issues:

the Panel needed to assess the implications for practice growing out of research findings. As a body made up mostly of university professors, however, its members were not qualified to be the sole judges of the “readiness for implementation in the classroom” of their findings or whether the findings could be “used immediately by parents, teachers,
and other educational audiences.” Their concern, as scientists, was whether or not a particular line of instruction was clearly enough defined and whether the evidence of its experimental success was strong. What they did not consider in most cases were the school and classroom realities that make some types of instruction difficult—even impossible—to implement … the work of the NRP is not of poor quality; it is just unbalanced and, to some extent, irrelevant. But because of these deficiencies, bad things will happen. Summaries of, and sound bites about, the Panel’s findings will be used to make policy decisions at the national, state, and local levels. (Yatvin, pp. 2, 3)

Debates about NCLB and Literate Futures persist, but it is clear that the aspiration of these two policies was to improve language and literacy learning, and that both were predicated on an understanding of the importance of language arts education for equity and access of educational provision to traditionally disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and residualized groups. The debates generated indicate that this connection, so self-evident in most policy formulations, is in fact complex and multifaceted. The nature and extent of the connection between the English language arts and educational disadvantage may vary in extent and in kind from site to site. To inform policy strongly, clearly, and reliably, therefore, research on this connection itself needs to accompany more generically-oriented experimental research on what works in laboratory, classroom, or community settings.

We can observe that familiar distinctions among ways of doing research are associated with distinctive theorizations of language teaching and learning. For instance, there is an obvious connection between, on the one hand, the conduct of experiments that compare the relative merits of different ways of teaching and learning in the language arts and, on the other, a notion that features and uses of language are readily measurable individual attributes that are distributed evenly across all the possible clients of a school system or indeed a nation—reading levels, English spoken proficiency ratings, scores on standardized writing tests, and so on. Testing relative effects of different educational approaches (pedagogies, materials, and so on) via experimentation conceives of the teaching-learning contexts across a system as directly comparable in all of their key knowable features. Other research frameworks emphasize and document the nature of effective teaching and learning in terms of strategies for teaching (e.g., Langer, 2001), or the details of the linguistic aspects of the home-school interface and its implications for language learning in and out of school (e.g., Brice Heath, 1983), or the knowledge-building potential of particular interactional formats in different curriculum areas (e.g., Freebody, in press).

Some of the richest research in the English language arts presents some of the clearest challenges to policy makers, for instance:

- Murphy and Edwards (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 49 studies examining the effects of various types of small-group discussions on higher-level thinking and comprehension. They found that, in the most productive discussions, teachers retained considerable control of text and topic while allowing students considerable interpretive flexibility and the opportunity to elaborate their ideas for extended periods of time. Notably, this problem-solving basis for classroom discourse had strong effects for below- and average-ability students.
- Kuiper, Volman, and Terwel (2005) reviewed the literature on the use of the Web as an information resource by students from early schooling to Year 12, drawing together theoretical and philosophical as well as empirical studies. Two of their main conclusions were (a) the vast amount of information on the Web results in access to information, but students generally lack the skills to decipher, weigh up, analyse, and compare that information with other sources and (b) that there is an urgent need for empirical research on this topic.
- Gregory (2005) explored the ways in which young children use school language at home and home talk at school, observing the socio-dramatic play of children as they “played school” at home, compared with the way they talked about home during school. She found that students used cultural resources such as poetry to bridge home and school learning and that, in the home, older siblings acted as teachers to their younger siblings in both their action and their talk. Gregory argued that children need to enact these experiences, so that when they encounter them again they can link the appropriate language with the objects and feelings associated with those experiences, experiences often provided through socio-dramatic play with siblings and peers. Gregory argued that in order for schools and teachers to understand and build on the resources of home learning, playful talk at home needs to be observed and understood, and teachers need to attempt to find out how school talk is mediated in home environments.

How to legislate on such findings? How to guide strongly enough to avoid dilution and eclecticism in practice, while allowing professionals to adapt and re-enact the findings in diverse settings?

Conclusion

In her discussion of what we might learn from the rise of literacy in Ancient Greece, Rosalind Thomas commented on the fascinating tension between the obvious fact that writing makes certain activities possible or easier, and that different potentials are seized upon by different communities. In some, writing means bureaucracy, control and oppression by the state, in others an enabling skill that frees an individual’s creative potential. (2009, pp. 13–14)

Researchers in the English language arts have generally made choices in design and analysis that operate, however
explicitly, on one or the other of these assumptions: Has an instance of research on the English language arts been designed to search for and highlight deficiencies that need to be regulated or controlled through a different kind of education? Or does it signal opportunities to enhance the efficacy, knowledge, breath of communicational repertoire, and creative potential of its young, to propagate language diversity? The choice of one or the other relates directly to choices about research method and methodology. These choices also both reflect and organize relationships among teachers, policy makers, and researchers, relationships of expertise, support, and power. There is much research operating on one or the other of these dispositions, and very little that, through design or analyses, theorizes, studies, or even acknowledges the fascinating tension between them. In diverse, dynamic, and increasingly globalized societies, even more so than in ancient Greece or Puritan Massachusetts, the key research is that which inquires into this double-edged nature of education in the English language arts, analyzing site by site, in the details of interactional and material features, how those potentially contradictory imperatives are acted out.

For the work of educational practitioners and policy makers alike, there is a need to re-chart continually the contents and boundaries of education in and around the language arts. Cultural and linguistic demographics, patterns of social exclusion and of civic participation, technologies of communication and knowledge production and access, and the communication demands of the curriculum and of the vocational, civic, and domestic environments toward which school students are headed, are all changing rapidly, simultaneously reshaping one another. There is therefore a need to view research into education in the English language arts as an ongoing, essential program that aims to renew our knowledge, practice, and policy, rather than to clinch definitive, timeless answers to the core questions of pedagogy and learning, regardless of how convenient to the administration and comforting to the community such answers may seem. The imperatives emerging from the experiences of teachers, students, and the communities served by schools need to reshape our continually research and policy agenda.

The English language arts embody the productive tension between convention and creativity, the aesthetic and the functional, acquisition, production, innovation, and critique. Education in the English language arts can entail an exploration of how the personal is, and can be, made public, and vice versa, or they can ignore that part of its reach; they can be inclusive and artful, a key zone in which youngsters come to see, articulate, and become part of what is noticed in a culture and what is not, or they can be simply massive, standardizing reading, writing, and smoothing over the sometimes uncomfortable interpretive possibilities of the business of the social world. The issue is that researchers also have these choices. Researchers need to make these choices with a focus on learners and teachers; but also, in these times, researchers need to retain a lively understanding that the choices they make in design and analysis speak to policy makers. Motivating such an understanding is an awareness that policy makers will revert to ever-more sophisticated, intricate modes of regulation alone unless they can be informed by healthy research traditions that consciously live in the contested zone of expression and constraint.

Notes

1. The author is pleased to acknowledge the valuable input of his editorial colleagues, especially David Bloome and Thandeka Chapman, in the preparation of this chapter.

2. Queensland is a state whose area (1.74 square kilometres) is approximately 2½ times the area of Texas, and whose population (4.4 million) is about one-sixth that of Texas.

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