Language Policy in Schools: A Resource for Teachers and Administrators
David Corson (1999)
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Language Policy in Schools (LPS) is a welcome update of Corson's earlier Language Policy Across the Curriculum (1990) and Oral Language Across the Curriculum (1988) texts. Unlike its predecessor, LPS has been adapted specifically to the North American school context. Specifically, it has been written for urban schools that have large populations of linguistic-minority students. The prose is clear and expressed with a personal voice. The book is focused very much on the practical and immediate needs of administrators who have to develop and implement responses to issues surrounding the use of language in education.

The text has six substantive chapters dealing, firstly, with the issues surrounding policy making in schools and, secondly, with the language issues affecting learning which require systematic school-wide responses. A brief introductory chapter and a summary checklist chapter round out the text. Throughout the book, there are illustrative extracts of actual school policy documents, drawn from Corson's post-graduate students' work in Canada and New Zealand. Corson also provides helpful checklists at many places in the text to assist decision-makers in ensuring that they give full consideration to all aspects of a policy issue. Each of the substantive chapters concludes with a series of helpful discussion questions, designed for individual reflection, or group discussion. Both author and subject indexes are provided along with 10 pages of recent and international references.

Corson provides a practical useable definition of policy and policy making that demystifies the processes and empowers school teachers and administrators. A language policy is
"a document compiled by the staff of a school, ... [that] identifies areas in the school's scope of operations and programs where language problems exist that need the commonly agreed approach offered by a policy. ... It is a dynamic action statement that changes along with the dynamic context of a school." (p. ix)

This view of policy making stands in stark contrast to the political and ideological nature of national-level policy formulation that often seems mysterious and out of the control of ordinary teachers. Corson envisages policy making as a process wherein staff, parents, and experts work together to develop trial solutions to well described educational issues and settings, and then adapt those policies in the light of experience. Corson demonstrates that, in today's environment of devolved responsibility, schools are the proper location for policy making in regards to language. In addition, he identifies schools as the center for policy formulation since the language makeup of schools, especially in large urban areas, varies so much one to another and differs so greatly from the majority culture and language norms that normally predominate in large-scale policy-making.

In the first substantial chapter, Corson reviews language planning in its large-scale contexts and descriptive approaches. A quick overview of the evaluative approach to the sociology of language leads into a critical analysis of language planning. Corson draws on a body of critical ideas including: discourse as power (Foucault), ideological hegemony (Gramsci), schools as places of cultural reproduction (Apple), Fairclough's examples of language shaping reality, and Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and symbolic violence. From these he asserts that not only are all aspects of education and language political, but that the practices of a school "can routinely repress, dominate, and disempower diverse groups whose practices differ from the norms" (p.14). Corson’s summary of the various theories, arguments, and studies leading to this analysis is compelling. Those looking for a clear and concise synopsis of the complex arguments involved would be well served by reading this section. However, Corson does not intend that schools throw

up their hands in despair at the ages-long patterns revealed. Rather, it is his intention in the following chapters of LPS to equip and motivate educators to “resist unfair aspects of reproduction and ... help soften social injustices” (p. 25).

The chapter on fact-gathering follows the same pattern as the previous chapter; firstly Corson sketches the big picture of how large-scale language policy research is carried out, before painting in the sketch with details of how teachers at the school level could carry out appropriate research. For Corson, fact-gathering is essential to establish a sound basis for policy-making. Corson outlines the pros and cons of a wide variety of language-pertinent research methodologies including; surveys, questionnaires, interviews, ethnography, transcript analysis, discourse analysis, documentary analysis, and ethnography of communication. Corson reminds policy makers that a variety of methods “when taken together provide a strong case for knowing where you are” (p. 39). It is surprising that language testing, given its widespread use, especially in United States schools, is not described here, with its strengths and weaknesses, as a means of obtaining data relevant to policy making. In the section on school-based fact gathering Corson summarizes useful checklists of questions that elicit data about the attitudes, experiences, beliefs, and opinions of school staff. Corson provides these tools because he believes “schools need to discover the views held by staff and other influential members of the school community about languages other than English and about nonstandard varieties of English, so that these and other views can be used as evidence to build reform on.” (p. 43). In addition to eliciting knowledge about staff views, Corson suggests ways of getting teachers involved in ‘action research’ type activities to find out how students use language, which languages they use, and what types of language are require of students by school activities. Corson provides a sample policy to flesh out how one school proposed obtaining the information it needed to guide and inform its language policy-making.

In the fourth chapter, Critical Policymaking, Corson makes an impassioned plea for policies that require school leaders to give up some of their power by sharing with the diverse language communities served by the school in order to achieve greater degrees of social equity. Corson argues for social justice, not from some sort of revolutionary perspective, but from a commitment to “both of the following basic tenets of democracy ...

*Everyone’s point of view and interpretation of the world would be consulted.
*Everyone’s interests would be taken into account when shaping the dominant narratives through which the distributions of power, position, and privilege were accounted for and justified.” (p. 65)

He provides a lengthy summary of Richmond Road school in Auckland, NZ as a demonstration of what happens when ‘emancipatory leadership’ is exercised. Corson suggests that school leaders, especially in urban multi-ethnic schools, will more easily achieve their goals of academic success for all students by voluntarily collaborating with and encouraging the participation of communities that the school exists to serve.

Having established that schools should be gathering facts about language use and should be making policies, Corson then examines in great detail the nature of language in school curriculum for students from both English as first language and English as other language backgrounds. The primacy of language as both the object of and the means of learning is established through reference to the seminal work of Barnes, Britton, and Torbe wherein expressive communication is viewed as the key to children’s growth in classrooms. Corson identifies the need, providing checklists and examples, for teacher professional development if this view of language in the school is to be effective. It is at this point that Corson discusses language testing, pointing out dangers of testing especially for students who do not share the cultural capital of schools through their membership in different social communities. Examples of assessment and evaluation policies are given from whole school and departmental documents. Corson then examines the language factors and dimensions involved in reading, writing, oral discourse, and media literacy. He summarizes concisely and thoroughly the theory and research behind the full gamut of the English curriculum, at least as it is understood and expressed in the New Zealand English curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994). However,
it must be pointed out that Corson's description of media literacy is very brief and is heavily ‘defensive’. This is in contrast to the perspective of Buckingham (1993, p.20) who argues that critical views, such as Corson’s, tend to “suppress or deny the significant emotional and aesthetic pleasures young people derive from the media”. Thus the role of the teacher in media literacy is not just to demystify and thus protect children, but is also to enable children to identify, express, and validate their enjoyment of media.

It is this viewpoint that stands in stark contrast to the major thrust of Corson’s next chapter on Critical Language Awareness in School and Curriculum. As before, Corson begins with a broad brush approach before focusing on key details. First, he presents a summary of nine areas of language awareness, based on a descriptive approach to knowledge about language. These nine areas range from knowing the structuring patterns of one’s own language to developing metacognitive language skills. Corson rejects this approach to language awareness since it leaves unaddressed the political nature of language and its use. Corson provides quite detailed summary discussions, from a politically critical stance, of such topics as taboo & slang language, varieties of English, labelling, gender & sexist language, bias, propaganda, prejudice and rhetoric in language. Having reviewed the topic areas of language that teachers need to equip students with a critical awareness, Corson argues for classrooms that encourage critical oral discourse as a precursor to critical academic discourse.

Corson’s penultimate chapter is the last of the substantive chapters; being a discussion of the policy dimensions of ESL and Minority Languages in School and Curriculum. It is here that most ESOL teachers will find themselves in familiar territory; maintenance bilingualism, bilingual immersion education, heritage language programs, Cummins’ threshold & interdependence hypotheses, and types of language competence. Again Corson does a good job of overviewing complex material and provides helpful lists of questions, definitions, and policy extracts. Though this does come at the price of seeming to underplay some of the contrary evidence in the field; for example Baker’s (1998) critique of bilingual education, and Palij & Aaronson’s (1992) results on the inverse language proficiencies of bilingual Hispanics in New York City. Corson concludes with a call to change school practice in order to achieve social justice for these minority students. He provides thinking and planning tools to assist schools in moving towards taking deliberate steps to place a high value on minority languages or even using minority languages as a medium of instruction.

This book, notwithstanding my own reticence to adopt Corson’s full ‘critical’ stance, is well worth owning, studying, and using. ESOL teachers will find it extremely helpful in their struggles to get administrators and decision makers in their schools to fully understand what language minority students need. Professional development staff will find it extremely useful in putting together resources and strategies for staff training sessions. Principals will find it invaluable in leading staff and school governors through any changes that need to be implemented in response to changing school demographics. Post-graduate teacher trainers will also find it worthwhile in their courses when dealing with either policy or language topics. David Corson is to be congratulated for writing a purposeful text that delivers exactly what the publisher promises.

References