Exposing vacant core policies:
Tracing authorization claims regarding use of first language in ABE for English language learners

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Introduction
This critical policy analysis pairs an ethnographic approach with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how adult basic education (ABE) policy delimits the use of adult learners’ first languages in support of English language and literacy development. Use of CDA as defined by van Leeuwen (2007) to analyze policy reveals unfounded claims of legitimation & authorization, and examination of broader context elucidates dominant discourses which shaped the policy.

Methodology
CDA Policy Analysis
‘Language policies and educational practices are always situated in relation to wider issues of power, access, opportunity, inequality and, at times discrimination and disadvantage.’ (May and Hornberger 2007)

Framework
van Leeuwen’s legitimacy
Social recontextualization
Discourses represent what is happening; also evaluate and justify expressions and actions
(van Leeuwen, 2008)

Legitimation by authorization
“...defining discourses as socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality which can be drawn upon when that aspect of reality has to be represented, or, to put it another way, context-specific frameworks for making sense of things” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 144).

Historical & political events
Policy written in context of conservative ascendency and resulting scrutiny of Minnesota state budget

State Statutes
MN statutes (2009 & 2014) refer to “other literacy”; MN 20014 Education Policy Bill – use L1 for ESL literacy

Ethnography of policy examined through multiple contexts

Historical & political events

Policy written in context of conservative ascendency and resulting scrutiny of Minnesota state budget

State Statutes

MN statutes (2009 & 2014) refer to “other literacy”; MN 20014 Education Policy Bill – use L1 for ESL literacy

Federal Law

WIA II - Old law neither supports nor prohibits L1
WIOA (2014) New law mandates use of instructional activities based on “rigorous research”

Findings
Authorization from...

• Claims of authorization reveal a “vacant core policy” - a policy that refers to one or more authorizers yet at its core is unsubstantiated by those very authorizers.

• Decisions about ABE policy are possibly motivated by issues of funding and political expediency rather than learner outcomes and current research-based understandings of second language acquisition.

Implications
Findings validate instructional strategies of teachers who may employ practices in opposition to an English only policy as they rely on researched-based strategies supporting second language acquisition.

A larger-scale implication of this study is the the disruption of binary covert or overt language policy distinctions through the addition of a new level of specificity (i.e., “vacant core policy”).

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