ORAL READING:

CONSTRUCTING SCHOOL READERS

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Work conducted on the construction of literacy events through talk and interaction around texts has shown how pedagogical, institutional and sociological work can be unveiled through discourse analysis of talk in early literacy events (Baker, 1991, 1997, 2000; Baker & Freebody, 1989). Through the various events, teachers and students construct what it means to be literate. Teachers and students construct norms, expectations, rules, roles and responsibilities in relation to how they interact in the classroom (Green et al., 1992). This paper reports on findings from a study that examined the relationship between the activity of oral reading and learning to read in the primary school. It discusses how the oral reading activities investigated helped to construct a reader's identity and how the nature of these activities afforded some students the opportunity to learn whilst others were denied this opportunity.

Reading: A Sociocultural View

In recent times, sociologists and linguists have referred to reading as 'variable forms of social practice' that are constructed in various sites (Freebody et al., 1991; Heap, 1991; Luke & Freebody, 1997b; McHoul, 1996). It is argued that there is not one universal 'thing' or 'practice' that counts always and only as reading (Barton, 1994; McHoul, 1996). School reading is a particular type of reading, constructed in schools by parents, teachers and students (Freebody et al., 1991; McHoul, 1996). Students learn about what constitutes and counts as school reading by participating in various events, conversations and activities with others in school (Heap, 1991).

Work conducted by those who espouse critical social theories of literacy claim that literacy is not only 'socially constructed' but also 'institutionally located' (Luke & Freebody, 1997a). Further, literacy events in the classroom are not 'neutral' and unavoidably connect to issues of 'discipline and power' (Luke & Freebody, 1997a). The pedagogies valued; the texts that are used; the rules and procedures followed either give access to or deny access to particular 'literate markets' (Luke & Freebody, 1997a). If we favour one particular literacy program or pedagogy in the classroom there is an assumption that the classroom is 'generic' where educators know this is not the case (Luke & Freebody, 1997a). As Luke and Freebody (1997) claimed, classrooms are not 'level playing fields'.

A sociocultural view of reading acknowledges that reading is a social practice and that as such readers draw on a repertoire of resources including cultural, social and cognitive practices to construct and reconstruct meanings from texts. Further, the enactment of reading events varies according to the purpose and context in which they

occur. The resources upon which readers draw are acquired through participation in various social contexts with the guidance of significant others such as parents, carers, community members, peers and teachers.

The Study

The data referred to in this paper resulted from an extensive qualitative study into the practice of oral reading in the primary school (Rennie, in press). It sought to provide answers to a number or questions not addressed in previous studies that investigated isolated aspects of oral reading such as reading rate, fluency and comprehension and interaction within reading groups.

Some of the aspects addressed by the study included the frequency and nature of the use of oral reading activities in the classroom including when, where, why and how it was used. It also examined the social, communicative, interactive and historical aspects of the activity.

The study sought three different perspectives on oral reading in the classroom. The study explored the students' perspective, the teachers' perspective and the researcher's perspective. The data revealed a number of mismatches between the different perspectives. This did not mean that the findings were any less reliable but rather they were three different constructions of the same event. A similar study using a number of different perspectives on news time or the practice of telling news, from Kindergarten to Year 2 also found that there were different constructions of the event for the key participants involved (Cusworth, 1997).

Method

In this study, oral reading was conceptualised as a socially constructed practice (McHoul, 1996) and as one aspect of reading instruction in school. The study, which adopted a sociocultural approach in its investigation of oral reading, viewed oral reading as 'variable forms of social practice'. This meant that the participants who helped to construct the various activities and the groups and institutions where participants were socialised into these practices were also important (Cairney & Ruge, 1997; Gee, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1997b; Welch & Freebody, 1993). Data collection included teacher surveys and interviews, student surveys and interviews and classroom observations.

One hundred teachers were surveyed and interviews were conducted with six teachers from two different school sites. Questionnaires were administered to 122 students and interviews were held with nine students from each of two schools. This sample included three students from Year 3, three students from Years 4/5 and three students from Year 7 in each of the two schools. Observations of oral reading occurred in the six classrooms where individual teachers and students were interviewed.

Data analysis involved two distinct phases. A form of interpretive analysis characterised the first phase. Coding of the data identified recurring themes in the different data sets (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The second phase involved mapping the data. The MASS (Material, Activity, Semiotic, Sociocultural) framework developed by Gee and Green (1977) facilitated this phase of the analysis. Gee and Green claimed it is a useful means to assist in describing and defining classroom literacy events. The framework adopts an ethnographically grounded approach to discourse analysis and assumes that each observation or interview examines a 'slice of life' of the various contexts explored. Every literate practice represents a different event or situation. Within this framework Gee and Green identified four dimensions of social activity - World building, Activity building, Identity building and Connection building (Gee & Green, 1997). World building refers to how participants assemble situated meanings about 'reality', present and absent, concrete and abstract. Activity building describes the construction of situated meanings connected to the activity itself. Identity building concerns situated meanings relevant to the identities in the interaction and includes ways of knowing, believing, acting and interacting. Finally, Connection building relates to how interactions are connected to past and future interactions (Gee & Green, 1997).

Mapping the oral reading events observed, allowed the comparison of the different perceptions and understandings of the various activities from the students', teachers' and researcher's perspectives and highlighted any matches or mismatches between the data. It allowed the identification of the features of an activity, which served to identify it as a particular activity as opposed to other similar activities. In this case, it allowed the identification of some of the common features that characterised oral reading activities. This paper reports on one of the four dimensions of the activity of oral reading, in particular how it serves to build identities and construct readers in the classroom.

Oral Reading: Building Identities

The findings from this study suggest that oral reading practices helped to construct a reader's identity. The public and graded nature of these events, teacher feedback, comments from students and rules of participation all contributed to the ways in which students positioned themselves as readers in the classroom.

All of the interviewed students discussed participatory rules associated with each of the activities. In four of the activities, students read when required. In the Year 3 and Year 7 group-reading activities at one of the schools, teachers said they did not insist students read, although they saw it important that they have a go. The students interviewed in the Year 7 class in this school gave the impression that they all read during these sessions by taking turns at the reading. During my observations of the event, the teacher nominated a reader and asked if he or she wanted to read. The student heard the question, did not answer, and began to read. This is interesting because in most classroom interactions if the teacher asks students a question then there is an expectation they will respond. This was not the case in this situation.

Davies and Hunt (1994) discussed the achievement of a reading circle. Eight children sat in a circular fashion on the floor. The teacher called for volunteers to read. One

child responded. The others followed the text and waited for the call for the next volunteer. The activity continued in this fashion. Finally, a boy named 'Leigh' was the only student who had not read. Although reluctant, Leigh began to read. The students either side of him whispered words he did not know in his ear. They helped him to complete a task that he could not have done easily on his own. In this situation, the teacher allocated turns on a volunteer basis, but students understood that everyone would eventually have a turn at the reading.

Being a willing participant in school events is part of positioning oneself as a successful student. Student reports often refer to the degree and nature of a student's participation. Comments such as 'Mary needs to participate more in discussions' or 'John needs to read more during independent reading' are common. Schools expect students to participate and they value it. Non-participation is something that needs fixing. After all, if all students decided not to participate then the order and structure of the school would be in disarray. Students interviewed inferred that participation in the various events was non-negotiable. There were consequences for not completing the work, for non-participation and non-compliance. One teacher commented that she required students to do the work to the best of their ability. Another commented that all students must 'have a go'.

The teachers' discourse of participation and 'having a go' in oral reading events conflicted with the discourse constructed by the students who listened during these events. Teachers relayed the message that they should have a go at the reading, as practise would result in improvement of their reading skills, public speaking and confidence levels. Generally, teachers present mistakes as a natural part of the learning process. Students interviewed reported that others often laughed at them when they read and that they made negative comments about their reading, in particular when they made mistakes. Further, the activity of oral reading allowed others to make judgements about their reading ability. Struggling readers knew that others found their reading frustrating to listen to. 'Having a go' when they were not competent and comfortable with the task was seen as a 'shame job'. Classroom observations of the various reading events revealed that in some instances readers did receive this type of feedback from their peers. There was tension between positioning oneself as a 'successful student' by 'having a go', positioning oneself as a successful reader through displaying competent oral reading skills and protecting oneself from ridicule by their peers.

Some students figured out ways to minimise the amount of exposure they had during these events. One group described how the teacher insisted they establish a reading order by sitting in a line in front of her. Some students explained how they tried to get nearer the end of the line so there were fewer students around when it was their turn to read.

Students and teachers identified listening as an important rule in each activity although the degree to which teachers enforced this rule varied. One Year 3 group in particular felt empowered to police this rule themselves. They explained how they dealt with offenders when the teacher was not present. In the interviews some students spoke about the frustration they felt when others were talking whilst they read. Some

students felt that others were not listening because of their inability to read well. They also felt that teachers often did not listen when they read to them in a paired reading situation or reading conference.

In all of the small group and whole class oral reading activities, students' reading abilities were public. The public nature of the activities made it possible for students to compare their own reading performance to that of others. Whilst students could not identify what teachers assessed during the activity, they were able to discuss the characteristics of a 'good' reader.

Both students and teachers described what they thought constituted a 'good' reader. Oral reading skills featured prominently in the ways in which students perceived how their teachers described 'good' readers. 'Expression' was the most frequent response, followed by 'volume', 'speed' and 'clarity'. It is interesting but not surprising that 'posture' and 'eye contact' also featured in the responses. Students did not prioritise the ability to 'comprehend' in their perceptions of how the teacher might describe 'good' readers.

Dispositions also featured prominently in the student questionnaire and interview data. 'Confidence', 'tries hard', 'reads lots', and 'enjoys reading' were common responses.

Twenty-one percent of student responses in the questionnaires included comments such as 'excellent', 'very good' and 'good'. These students had great difficulty articulating what a 'good' reader might look like. During the observations of the various oral-reading events, teachers gave feedback similar to this. Teachers often delivered comments such as 'well done' and 'great reading' after students had finished reading. An explanation of what was 'excellent' or 'great' about the reading was lacking in this feedback. Further information about the students' reading performance would have enabled these students to understand what constitutes 'good' reading better.

Teachers' responses in the questionnaires did not vary considerably from the students' responses. They also referred frequently to oral reading skills and dispositions when describing 'good' readers. Only 56 out of the 100 teachers surveyed mentioned 'comprehension' or 'understanding' as an important characteristic. It was also interesting that some teachers measured students' reading ability on their level of confidence, on the amount of reading they did and on the enjoyment they gained from the task. In fact, 24% of the responses related to these attributes.

During the interviews, students' descriptions tended to mirror those areas that teachers identified as needing improvement in their reading. This suggested that when teachers did provide feedback it tended to focus on areas needing improvement rather than what readers did well. This made it difficult for the students to have a comprehensive understanding of what a 'good' reader might look like in their teacher's eyes. Construction of their own reading identities centred on those aspects of their reading which were lacking. Few students articulated what they did well.

Comments and feedback from their peers also contributed to how individual readers positioned themselves. Inattentiveness signalled a message that other students were

not interested in listening to them. Many students in addition to expressing a dislike for the activity also discussed the frustration experienced when listening to readers who struggled with the task. Other studies provide findings consistent with these. They found that skilled readers became bored with the slow pace of the activity and that less skilled readers often read texts above their instructional level leading to high levels of frustration (Hoffman, 1991; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991).

Many of the activities observed featured ability grouping of students. Membership of these groups was public knowledge. Students knew which level they were at, they knew which level their peers were at and were aware of the movement of students between groups. In one situation, students described the movement of a student from the 'middle' to the 'lower' reading group. The student's name remained on the middle group with a line through it and was re-entered on the list of names for the lower group. There was an attempt to mask the graded nature of the groups by giving them names; however students interviewed discussed them in terms of their composition.

For one Year 3 student the grading of the groups was problematic as this prevented her from positioning herself as a 'successful' reader during the group interview. The group of students interviewed in this situation included two students from the 'top' reading group and another who was in a different and 'lower' group. During the interview, the student tried to convince us that the groups were not ability-based. However, when she voluntarily ranked the readers in the interviewed group she was careful to place herself at the bottom of the list, as she knew that the others in the group, due to the graded nature of the activity, were knowledgeable about where she ranked within this group. This student wanted to position herself as a successful reader but was not able to do so because of the graded and public nature of the activity.

The graded nature of these activities had implications for the type of texts students read. Students described levelled books, some, which were marked, kept in different locations and differed accorded to their thickness. Students often described 'good' readers as those who read 'thick' books.

Students openly discussed their feelings associated with the activity of reading out-loud during the interviews. All of the students interviewed said they preferred to read silently. Many talked about the embarrassing nature of the activity. Students did not like making mistakes in front of their peers and most admitted doing this more frequently when reading out-loud. One student in particular became very anxious when it was her turn to read. Literacy biographies of pre-service teachers reflect on the same kind of feelings in relation to reading out-loud as experienced by the students in this study:

> Stacey: I felt that if I could read fast enough, the other kids wouldn't make fun of me. So while I was reading as fast as I could, I never focussed on the meaning. I think this happens a lot because there's such a focus on reading the words right.

Lorraine: I don't remember anything about my first-grade reading experiences, but I do remember loving to read aloud in second grade. I also remember hating it when a few kids would read, because they were behind the rest of us and it took a long time.

Charles: Whenever it was my turn to read I would get cold sweats, I was so frustrated because I could only figure out maybe three words of a sentence. So when I would try to read to the class *everyone* would laugh at me. I would always try to sound words out, waiting for the teacher to go ahead and tell me the word (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002, p. 334).

This particular study found that both experienced and less skilled readers had negative experiences of oral reading events in school (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002). It is interesting that these comments made by pre-service teachers mirror comments made by students in this study.

Students also expressed dislike for some of the discussions held between readers. Many students elected not to participate in these discussions and some said they would rather monitor their own comprehension by listening to the answers provided by other students. Observations of one oral reading event revealed that a small number of students dominated the discussions between readers and that a large number of students elected not to participate. As discussed earlier at least 8 of the 22 students did not participate in the discussion and 2 of the 22 students who dominated the discussion contributed to 63% of the turns held. I found that the participation rate for students increased as group sizes became smaller.

The nature of oral reading events were detrimental to some learner readers. They served to help construct students' reading identities. In the case of struggling readers, these events only served to reinforce the negative perceptions these students had of themselves as readers. The public and graded nature of the activities meant they could compare themselves to other more able readers. They often endured negative feedback from their peers. It was difficult for students to keep their reading abilities private. Students knew who the good readers were and they knew how they ranked against other readers in the class. A study which examined students' perceptions of better readers in elementary classrooms found that by the second grade students rated their own and others' reading ability in a manner consistent with that of their teacher. The manner in which teachers organised instruction influenced this. Students' ratings were more accurate in classrooms where there was high incidence of public performance both in large and smaller groups (Filby & Barnett, 1982).

Implications

The findings from this study suggest that the nature of many of the oral reading activities observed contributed to the ways in which students constructed themselves as readers in school. Further, the nature of the activity denied some students the opportunity to be seen as a successful reader.

One minute of reading was often a very stressful time for some students and only served to reinforce the negative view they had of themselves as readers. The negative consequences of having students read out-loud in a public forum are well documented in the literature (Allington, 1984; Dwyer & Bain, 1999; Gill, 2000; Heathington & Alexander, 1984; Hill, 1983; Hoffman, 1987; Ingram, 1985; Palardy, 1990; Reutzel, Hollingsworth, & Eldredge, 1994; Worthy, 1996; Worthy & Broaddus, 2002; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991).

The graded and public nature of some of the events observed was problematic for many learner readers. Students reported feeling uncomfortable, anxious and nervous. The other participants in the event, the listeners, reported being equally frustrated having to listen to readers lacking in confidence. There was limited enjoyment gained from the activity from both readers and listeners. Teachers felt that students learned about reading through listening to good role models. 'Good' role models were rare in the activities observed. Students reported enjoying listening to their teachers read. In some group reading activities, using a competent reader as a role model would have benefited readers more.

There were attempts by some teachers to normalise aspects of these oral reading practices. Teachers suggested that participation in some of the events was voluntary whilst most students indicated that participation was strongly encouraged. Teachers gave the impression that it was okay for students to 'have a go' and that this was more important than making mistakes. Students on the other hand reported being on the receiving end of negative comments and laughter from their peers when they made mistakes. Teachers gave ability-based groups names to mask their composition, yet students were very knowledgeable about their own and others' reading abilities.

Some teachers attempted to renegotiate relations of power during the activity. They adjusted their language so as not to direct feedback to particular students, they voluntarily joined in the activities and they attempted to disrupt some of the practices often associated with the activity such as assessment and accountability. Despite this, students still spoke about the rules, the assessment practices and accountability measures that governed oral reading.

Many students interviewed for this study indicated that oral reading was not their preferred way of reading. The nature of the activity made it difficult for these students. They found it difficult to pronounce words, comprehend what they read and experienced anxiety and stress. These readers in particular did not benefit instructionally or personally from the experience.

Students reported finding the activities stressful and said that they generally found it more difficult to read out-loud than read silently. This difficulty increased when they were required to read to a large group. The data suggest that providing reading instruction in a context where students are required to read in front of their peers is problematic, particularly for those readers who struggle with the task. It did not afford them the opportunity to learn to read in ways that they felt comfortable with and made it difficult for them to position themselves as successful readers in school.

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