

Literacies as social practice: sociological perspectives on reading research.

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Abstract

This article considers the distinctive contribution that sociological perspectives have made to understanding reading as a profoundly social and cultural activity, differentiated by the specifics of time and place. Literacy researchers, using a social lens, have sought to explore, explain and redress inequalities in access to and uses of literacy in its different forms. This has often meant championing pedagogies premised on dialogue and connection. Yet this may conflict with an emphasis in current policy on children mastering a relatively narrow skills-based definition of literacy as they begin to learn to read. The article explores how the tension points in the literacy curriculum, intensified in test-based accountability systems, can be navigated in this light.

Key words: literacy; social practice; reading; pedagogy; policy

Introduction

‘Viewed sociologically, literacy training is not a matter of who has the right or truthful theory of mind, language, morality or pedagogy. It is a matter of how various theories and practices shape what people do with the technology of writing – and of how, once institutionalised, these selections and constructions serve particular class, cultural and gendered formations.’ (Luke, 1997, p308)

This paper sets out to explore what sociological approaches contribute to understanding reading from a socially-situated perspective. It reviews some of the key ideas that have shaped thinking about literacy as a social practice and what they can contribute to understanding inequalities in literacy attainment and how they might be addressed.

Literacy as social practice

The distinctive and sizeable body of work on *literacy as a social practice* (sometimes known as the New Literacy Studies) has developed from foundational studies in social anthropology and sociolinguistics (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Michaels, 1986; Prinsloo and Baynham, 2008). This literature focuses on how acts of reading and writing are shaped by the social contexts in which they take place. The presumption is that reading and writing are best understood as culturally mediated activities rather than as discrete and decontextualized cognitive skills.

The disciplines of anthropology and sociolinguistics give the literature two key concepts that have become integral to the exploration of variation within and between communities in their uses of literacy: the *literacy event* and *literacy practices*. The *literacy event* is defined by Shirley Brice Heath as ‘any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretative processes’ (Heath, 1982, p 93). Making the event central to data collection, rather than restricting study, as psychology might, to the cognitive processes involved at an individual level, draws attention to how the broader social context helps shape what goes on, through the social interactions between participants that render any event meaningful, as well as the affordances of any material and discursive resources that participants draw on. Studying literacy through the literacy event decentres the role of the written text in meaning making, drawing attention to what else helps define ‘what counts as reading’ here (See Heap, 1991). Reading in school thus instantiates a different logic than reading in the home; and reading in a religious context makes different requirements of readers than reading as part of informal social interactions online. Different roles and resources make things turn out differently.

Studying socially-situated events means taking account of what is particular to this event, involving these participants, in these interactions, taking place at this specific

moment in time. But it also means exploring how that event is connected in time and space to other events that participants will already be familiar with, and other settings the resources in this event have travelled through (Brandt and Clinton, 2002). Each particular event taps into broader material and discursive histories, acting as a pivot point between past, present and future. Stretching the frame in this way leads to questions about what travels across from one event to another. How do participants recognise the roles they are expected to play here? How do prior knowledge and the constituent resources shape what happens this time round? How does the unexpected or new in this event add to and reformulate what has gone before? In all these ways, studying the event, rather than isolating the individual's response to a particular text, opens up the possibilities of reviewing how literacy functions as part of a broader communicative repertoire, alongside other modes (visual, oral, gestural) and potentially other languages and different scripts too. Elsewhere, the terms multimodality and multiliteracies have helped bring these issues into focus.

The generalised conceptions of reading and writing that participants form through the range of social events in which they participate constitute *literacy practices*. These are the regularities in ways of conceptualising and using literacy that become part of a group or community's cultural repertoire and which they navigate between (Street, 1984; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). For those using the concepts of literacy events and practices, this is less a matter of identifying a fixed number of stable forms that remain the same across time and place, so much as researching the possibilities that events offer to remake what it means to read and to write each time. Accounts are dynamic. Although the language used to describe events and practices has altered over time, this conception of the ebb and flow to the social dimensions to literacy remains at the core of the literature.

Re-describing what counts as reading: Ethnography and multimodality

Literacy as social practice perspectives generated early interest from educationalists, not least because they made visible conflicting definitions of what counts as literacy in and out of school. Research was able to demonstrate the routine privileging of (selective) social norms within school which led to the marginalising or exclusion of other ways of doing literacy, particularly those associated with disadvantaged communities. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983) remains the seminal work here. In her study of children growing up in the two communities of Trackton and Roadville in the south-eastern United States, one black and one white, Heath drew out the very different orientations to the business of language and literacy learning within each community. She showed how these in turn created different kinds of disjuncture for each communities' children as they encountered a very different set of practices in school, while their own went largely unrecognised.

By revealing the logic to each communities' 'ways with words' Heath's research data became a way of prompting schools to think again about presumptions of similarity, based on the school's own values and preferences, that she characterised as much more fully aligned with 'mainstream' or middleclass communities. Her work helped shift the debate over literacy attainment from looking for deficits within marginalised communities to challenging the lack of recognition that schools afford children who bring very different 'funds of knowledge' with them to school (Moll *et al.*, 2009).

To challenge and widen teachers' perceptions of how else literacies can be constituted and mobilised within communities, researchers have adopted a variety of strategies. Eve Gregory, Charmian Kenner and colleagues began to study more closely

how multi or bilingual children navigate between different scripts as well as different languages in the process of learning to read and write (Gregory et al, 2004). This meant documenting the literacy practices of children and their families in the multilingual and diverse communities of East London. These studies revealed the differently literate worlds that helped shape children's literacy learning in bi or tri lingual family settings. Gregory's work in particular highlighted the important role that siblings play in supporting school literacy, something that has often been overlooked in the case of bilingual children (Gregory et al, 2004). Kenner (2004) drew attention to young children's visualisation of different scripts as part of learning to read and write in more than one language, an observation that was taken up by Gunter Kress. Researching in a very different context, Kress himself in his work with Theo van Leeuwen (1996) on *Reading Images* re-framed how to think about texts by taking into account the varied role that combinations of images and written language play in constructing reading pathways and guiding meaning making, whether in print or online. The concept of multimodality that emerged from this research has laid the groundwork for an increasing number of studies of the changing pattern to literacy practices that combine visual, oral and written modes in new ways (Bezemer, Jewitt and Van Leeuwen, 2019).

Identifying forms of text that have value for children and young people outside of school (See, for instance, Kress and Rowsell's discussion of Snapchat and Instagram, where image carries more of the meaning than the written language (Kress and Rowsell, 2019, pp41-46) and that may be marginalised in school raises questions about the kinds of texts schools privilege as the object of school pedagogy. Are these necessary or arbitrary selections, when it comes to the business of teaching literacy? These questions become more urgent as policy becomes much more central in determining literacy curriculum design and delivery.

Many researchers adopting literacy as social practice perspectives are committed to the view that revealing and respecting differences in literacy practices can act as a vehicle for engineering educational change, enabling home and school practices to become more interconnected, and in this way more meaningful to students (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006). Yet whether such acts of re-description can actively challenge and reorder literacy teaching in school in ways that substantially advantage marginalised communities has turned out to be much less straightforward than at first thought (Rios-Aguilar *et al.*, 2011). Not least because, as policymakers increasingly emphasise education as a one-way delivery system in which teachers are expected to follow a set curriculum with fidelity, so the space in which to validate other texts and other ways of reading beyond the bounds of the formal curriculum shrinks too (See for instance, (Dernikos and Thiel, 2020)). In this context, the kinds of exchanges given value by teachers and by students alters also.

Reconceptualising policy and pedagogy

Policy-driven education reform has brought about changes to teachers' professional standing, a reshaping of teachers' professional knowledge and expertise, as well as the re-ordering of schools' relationships to their local communities. Through the policy tools deployed in high stakes accountability regimes, education has become simultaneously a focus for investment *and* a vehicle for generating stories of comparative failure (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016); 2017). This combination of attention and blame may help contain the stresses and strains that economic restructuring brings. It does not solve them.

Keeping this context in mind, this kind of analysis of the interdependent relationship between education and wider social structures leads to a different

perspective on what can be changed in and through the literacy curriculum and what cannot. By looking more specifically at the precise economic and material contexts in which schools function locally, the ways in which these wider social conditions impact on pupils' and families' experience of and relationship to education become all too apparent (Hayes et al, 2009; Fine and Weis, 2003). The weight of material and social disadvantage that marginalised communities carry, especially when they are disconnected from routes out of deep poverty and can only find limited opportunities for meaningful and well paid employment (Weis, 2004) all matter. Indeed, in many respects the distributive principles underpinning education accountability systems only exacerbate matters, leading to schools serving the most deprived communities being the most heavily penalised. High staff turnover and high-pressure management may well follow, resulting in a much poorer curriculum offer for the children concerned (Biesta, 2004). Changing curriculum content or emphasising meaning-making at the heart of the literacy curriculum cannot be enough on its own to substantially alter these wider circumstances.

To try and turn this broader state of affairs around, researchers have made concerted efforts to imagine more 'productive pedagogies' that will better meet the needs of economically marginalised communities ((Lingard, Hayes, and Mills 2003; Munns 2007; Singh et al, 2013) . The hope is that by reclaiming and rearticulating what constitutes worthwhile pedagogy, it might be possible to create more socially just outcomes for pupils from socially disadvantaged communities that can be sustained over time. Such re-imaginings take into account 'the policy and structural conditions that work against the valuing of teachers and their work' (Lingard, Hayes and Mills, 2003) recognising also the challenges that poverty poses marginalised communities.

Re-framing pedagogic practice

Buried behind different approaches to making literacy pedagogies more productive for socially disadvantaged communities lie the works of two different theorists: the social psychologist, Vygotsky and the sociologist, Bernstein. Both theorise education as profoundly social processes but through different lenses (Daniels, 2004). Vygotsky's theoretical framework emerged from his studies of child development and in particular his focus on the role that language, as a culturally-mediated tool, plays in reordering children's thinking and ultimately their knowledge of the world, in and through social interaction with others (Vygotsky, 2012). By contrast, Bernstein's theoretical framework developed through studying the principles that underpin the social organisation of education (Bernstein, 1996). He focused on how instructional and regulative dimensions interact in the formation of pedagogic discourse, the relay system that produces education as a socially differentiated practice. For Bernstein, the distributive rules pedagogic discourse creates can be seen in the social organisation of the curriculum and in particular the principles of selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation that any given curriculum might embody.

Both Vygotsky and Bernstein have helped shape thinking about how to create more socially just pedagogies, though their insights have been variously interpreted in the process of transfer into educational contexts at different moments in time. Different readings of the implications of their theoretical frameworks for the social organisation of teaching and learning depend upon: differing conceptions of student agency within educational settings, and their connection to generating purposeful learning environments; how equitable access to valued forms of intellectual inquiry is conceived, when what counts as valuable knowledge and ways of knowing are matters of debate; and the terms under which the school curriculum benefits from being connected to

community practices outside its formal structures ((Ladwig, 2007; Mills *et al.*, 2009).

Despite these differences some shared principles have emerged. For instance, Luke (2010), based on a large corpus of systematic lesson observations and a review of the school reform literature, comments

sustained achievement gains among the most “at risk” students require:

- (1) An everyday focus on curriculum content and issues of substantive intellectual demand and depth;
- (2) Sustained scaffolded student talk and dialogue around issues of cultural and intellectual substance; and
- (3) Visible connections of school knowledge to everyday civic, cultural, political and social life. (Luke, 2010)

The Queensland Productive Pedagogies Framework proposed four dimensions, three of which substantially overlap with Luke’s: intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment, and valuing and working with difference (Mills et al, 2009).

The consensus thus rests with a balance of challenge and engagement in the curriculum as enacted in classrooms, such that students are motivated to engage with and at the same time are stretched by the teaching and learning environment. In fact, all too often observational studies have found that regardless of the orientation of teachers to the business of teaching and learning, whether as progressivists or traditionalists, there are high frequencies of lessons where students completed worksheets, copied from the board, answered questions at the end of chapters and engaged in “busy work”. Further, the assessable tasks set by teachers often focused on lower order domains of activity, such as recall, reassembly of existing and provided information, and skill repetition. The overall picture counters the Vygotskian axiom of stretching students beyond what they can readily do. (Luke, 2010)

Lingard, in a review of the Queensland Productive Pedagogies model in action, similarly comments

What we saw were very supportive and caring teachers, teachers practising an almost social worker version of teachers' work; teacher work as therapy. We believe that teachers should be praised for this, their commitments to social support for students, but that the absence of intellectual demand, connectedness, and working with and valuing difference carries significant social justice implications. (Lingard 2007, p257)

The diagnosis is the reverse of what many policy makers seem to think. The issues are not to do with teaching the basics, still less the question of which particular method of teaching children to read in the early years should prevail – as if that choice alone will make all the difference. Rather it is about opening up what Luke calls 'improved achievement and engaged life pathways, especially amongst the lower performing groups and cohorts' (Luke, 2003). Looking over the long term, he argues these pathways should offer students opportunities to meaningfully engage with teaching and learning in the present, and equip them with the resilience to navigate successfully from education into fruitful futures. Creating resourceful, active and engaged students is serious work.

Redesigning the reading curriculum

The challenges of developing more productive pedagogies in schools that can better serve disadvantaged communities rest with the possibilities of creating sustainable pathways through schooling that can combine intellectual challenge with engagement. **Work towards a new curriculum settlement from** the outside in, and this puts the emphasis on finding ways to include students' interests in the literacy

classroom. **Work backwards from the existing** curriculum to generate better outcomes, and this may place more emphasis on making accessible to a wider range of students the kinds of ‘powerful genres’ that formal education systems value (Hicks, 1997). These logics arise and are developed in different contexts. In their own terms both can be understood as inclusive strategies. From a Bernsteinian perspective it is also possible to read them as operating with contrasting modes of social regulation and control: the different forms of pedagogic discourse they deploy imagine the responsibilities and obligations of teachers and pupils differently. Neither is innocent, both will have costs. They will simply fall in different ways. This is as true for literacy as for other areas of the curriculum.

The outside-in approach to shaping productive pedagogies - steering by the objective of incorporating children’s interests into the literacy curriculum - fits well with teaching writing. After all, children’s intentions as meaning-makers are expected to shape what they write, even in a literacy curriculum dedicated to teaching children powerful forms whose rules they are expected to acquire in order to participate fully within their society – the hope expressed for a curriculum predicated on genre theory (See Luke, 1997 for a critical account of the latter). Anne Haas Dyson and Barbara Comber’s attempts to reimagine socially just pedagogies start very much from the bottom up, with what children might have to say (Comber, 2016; Dyson, 2013). But they also work from an acute sense of how the experience of growing up in poverty shapes the resources that children bring to that task, highlighting the need to create times and spaces where matters of concern for pupils can be listened to and respected within school settings. Their work stretches how we might understand those starting points. A vignette in Dyson’s (2013) work shows this dynamic vividly at work: she recalls a school trip to an abandoned building with a large parking lot which the teacher

wants pupils to reimagine as a garden. The pupils imagine it as housing – a much more acute need in their lives. The terms of the conversation change.

Being able to acknowledge and articulate the impacts of deprivation in the communities children belong to is as vital for productive literacy-based activities as celebrating the multimodal resources that pupils draw on and can share. Both Dyson and Comber use the full range of children's experience as jumping off points to build 'new ways of talking, new vocabularies and, most importantly, new ways to harness language and other symbolic modes ... for critical ends', as Dyson puts it (Dyson in Comber, 2016, pxi). Place-based pedagogies of the kind that Comber advocates stress the importance of reflecting on the resources in the immediate locality and using them to design curriculum activities that are conceptually rich. These are ways of working that incorporate agendas that matter to children into the warp and weave of the literacy classroom. They may be particularly important to hang on to in teaching contexts that privilege a skills-based curriculum, where what children have to say is increasingly being drowned out by the long lists of what they need to learn.

The reading curriculum often seems more resistant to being reworked in this way, particularly in the early years. In part this is because many education systems now exercise considerable external control over pace and sequencing in the teaching of reading in the early years, through the tools of assessment and curriculum specification. The reading process is broken down into its component skills, isolated one from another, with the sequence and pace in which each set of skills should be taught tightly specified. This seems to be a consequence of following experimental research traditions in psychology that theory build through studying individual aspects of the reading process separately, then model how they come together and interact (Kendeou, Savage and Broek, 2009). It also fits with the pedagogic assumptions of a synthetic phonics

lobby fully convinced that phonics taught in the sequence it specifies, and followed with fidelity, is not only the necessary but also sufficient approach to teaching children to read. The strong version of this belief - that synthetic phonics teaching must take precedence over every other approach or children's futures as competent readers will be jeopardised - is at odds with the wider research literature that recognises that systematic phonics teaching is an important element in learning to read as part of a rich literacy curriculum, but cannot do it all on its own (Savage and Cloutier, 2017; Suggate, 2016).

When the strong version of the value of synthetic phonics teaching gets taken up in policy, unintended consequences can follow. In the case of the early years literacy curriculum in England, it risks marginalising children's own reading interests in favour of the limited diet of the school's reading scheme, 'closely matched to their developing phonic knowledge' (DfE, 2013, p11). This can lead to an increasing push towards restricting reading not just to a reading scheme but to decodable texts where the vocabulary introduced is limited to the phoneme-grapheme correspondences already taught. This is reading as reinforcement for synthetic phonics teaching. Yet, there is little research evidence for the benefits of restricting reading in this way (Cheatham and Allor, 2012). Indeed, there are risks that decodable texts may limit comprehension through the contorted syntax they deploy in order to meet their lexical constraints ((Price-Mohr and Price, 2020)). The emphasis on fluent decoding skills as the essential preliminary to reading, rather than a by-product of exercising the skill, leads to an odd positioning of comprehension and reading for pleasure in the curriculum for KS1. These are kept apart from 'word reading' in the National Curriculum with comprehension represented as best supported by listening to the teacher read aloud, on the assumption that this act alone will help pupils learn new vocabulary and understand the structure to written language:

listening frequently to stories, poems and non-fiction that they cannot yet read for themselves, pupils begin to understand how written language can be structured in order, for example, to build surprise in narratives or to present facts in non-fiction. (DfE, 2013)

This is very much a literacy curriculum divided into its constituent parts, each taught in isolation, using different modes. Deviation from the compartmentalisation of the literacy curriculum, and the specified pace and sequence in each of its parts are seen as undesirable. The founding assumption seems to be that the unexpected and unforeseen might disturb the learning process:

The meaning of some new words should be introduced to pupils before they start to read on their own, so that these unknown words do not hold up their comprehension. (DfE, 2013)

This exhortation implies that the meanings of words are fixed, can be known outside of context and can be usefully taught in this way. This departs some way from the radically different theory of learning that Vygotskian social-constructivist perspectives adopt and the radically different theories of language developed in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and social semiotics. Here children are understood to actively appropriate and then refashion, through use, the forms of language they acquire in social interaction with others. This is a necessary part of development. The exercise of pupil agency forms an essential part of learning.

From a Bernsteinian perspective, the approach to literacy teaching in the English National Curriculum exemplifies strong classification and framing, through the visibility of curriculum boundaries and the barriers to access they sanction. Synthetic phonics teaching in the prescribed manner is enforced through a phonics screening check with a mandatory pass mark, coupled with the requirement that pupils re-sit the

same test in the following year if they fail. Testing decoding skills by asking children to read nonsense words strengthens the belief that skills must be decontextualized to be fully mastered. In all these ways, phonics knowledge becomes the gate-keeper to other reading experiences. Reinforced in England by the high-stakes accountability regime, the reading curriculum narrows. This is not to underestimate the importance of children acquiring good decoding skills. Getting to grips with phoneme-grapheme correspondences in the English writing system is an important part of developing fluent reading. Phonics benefit from being taught systematically, but the evidence does not support fidelity to any specific sequence of segmentation and blending, coupled with restrictions on what children can read for themselves (See Moss et al 2019 for a very different approach to phonics instruction designed for use with adult learners.) This is a policy choice, not a necessity.

Reviewing the tension points in the reading curriculum: proficiency and choice

In tracking the impact of the early reading curriculum in England, there are distinctions to be drawn between phonics research, as a body of knowledge about phoneme-grapheme correspondences and the role they play in developing children's reading fluency; the role that policy plays in shaping phonics pedagogy through curriculum specifications and assessment tools; the reinterpretation that follows in reading schemes and in guidance to teachers; and what actually happens on the ground. Classrooms are themselves dynamic contexts and teachers play an important part in mediating policy and pedagogy in situ. The ways in which the curriculum is enacted, through the social interactions of which it is composed, will help shape how children perceive and understand what it means to read and to be a reader.

Literacy as social practice perspectives provide a useful set of tools through which to capture children's experience of the literacy curriculum. They do so by making central to analysis the literacy events of which the curriculum is composed and the forms of social interaction they sanction in the classroom setting (Moss, 2007). Rather than evaluate the merits of a particular method or check the convergence between what policy or a reading scheme stipulates should happen and what actually does, this orientation to research focuses on what the boundaries to practice in each event make visible, and how in their totality these produce different understandings of what it means to be a reader or a writer here (Moss, 2007) with consequences for the social dynamic to learning.

Ahead of recent phonics policy, I and fellow researcher Dena Attar used this approach to develop a social explanation for boys' comparative underachievement in reading (Moss, 2007). By auditing the terms under which different kinds of texts were mobilised in different literacy events over the course of the day, it was possible to identify three different orientations to the business of reading in class which seemed relatively stable across time and place. These were

- Reading for proficiency – in which how well children read is paramount, often evidenced by the teacher or other adult recording a measure of the child's proficiency as a formal part of the event.
- Reading for choice – in which concepts such as enjoyment or interest were mobilised to justify the choice of text. Choice could be very differently exercised by teacher or child, and with some children's choices restricted by their perceived proficiency
- Procedural reading – reading to get things done. Often little commented on in the classroom, although an important element in keeping the business of teaching and learning going on, this included reading worksheets or reading instructions written on the board, so that other things could happen. The reading itself was not evaluated.

We observed that reading for proficiency was most dominant in terms of how children understood 'what counts as reading here' (Heap, 1991). Indeed, children's perceived competence at reading is fundamental to the social geography of the classroom right

through the primary school. This predates the introduction of phonics first and fast as policy for literacy pedagogy in English schools. It is reflected in how children are grouped on entry to school, the kinds of texts they are given access to and the choices they can make about what to read, when and how. Language used in the classroom to describe readers – free readers, independent readers – and to describe books – readers, reading scheme, read alones, chapter books – all reflect the hierarchical organisation of reading in the classroom, a reading ladder which positions children in comparison to their peers.

Not only were children fully aware of this, it mattered in terms of how they engaged with the curriculum. In particular, boys placed at the bottom of the proficiency ladder reacted quite differently to that designation from girls. Struggling girl readers were more likely to accept that status, and live with the designation of books that matched their competence, even in contexts where free choice was allowed. Outside of ‘proficiency events’ – events where the teacher listened to children read texts matched to their competence – some would willingly read ‘easy books’ with friends much higher up the proficiency ladder. Boys would not. Instead we documented that struggling boy readers consistently exercised a preference for highly visual non-fiction, whenever they could in the classroom. In distinct contrast to children’s fiction texts, such texts created picture-led reading paths on the page in which size of typeface signalled salience of image or commentary, not the reading skill required to deal with the text. These texts became the focus for shared conversations with more able boy readers, with the pictures acting as prompts for what each knew about the topic. In essence this strategy preserved struggling boy readers’ self-esteem but at the expense of getting to grips with the skills they lacked. Looking across the dataset it became apparent that the conflict between preserving self-esteem and accepting that they needed help hindered this group

from making progress. (See also Moses and Qiao, 2018; Solsken, 1993; Scherer 2016). Gender and the designation of ability intersected to create different pathways through the literacy curriculum

Re-orchestrating the parts: building challenge *and* engagement in reading

Studying the events that constitute the enacted curriculum and paying attention to what children make of it, as well as what the teacher intends, are all ways of making sense of literacy learning from a social perspective. It remains an open question how far the changes in the policy environment and a new curriculum settlement have impacted on what children take reading to be and how they react to the hierarchies the reading curriculum creates now. Hierarchies in the reading curriculum are in-built through the formal specifications that control pace and sequencing in the teaching of reading and determine how quickly children will make their way up the reading ladder, via what route. The reading curriculum in the early years instantiates most visibly the modes of social control Bernstein sees running through pedagogic discourse. This is so, regardless of the particular pedagogic approach adopted. Some set out to mask differences between learners, as Basil Bernstein argued invisible pedagogies try to do; others render them highly visible, as the old monitorial system and the division of the student body into ability groups for teaching purposes does. The question is not so much whether such hierarchies exist as how do children navigate them?

Certainly, the literacy curriculum in England in its current instantiation risks marooning those who do not acquire phonic decoding skills quickly enough, in line with curriculum expectations, in a decoding cul-de-sac, with fewer and fewer possibilities for finding any other way out. Endlessly repeating what hasn't yet been learnt can only put this group at further and further distance from their peers who plough on. The National Literacy Strategy, through its emphasis on whole class teaching and differentiated group

work, tried harder to keep everyone moving along at the same pace, and certainly went to some lengths to ensure that those struggling most with basic decoding weren't shut out from other opportunities to reflect and engage in the rest of the literacy curriculum. Yet it did not work for everyone (Moss, 2004).

Moses and Qiao's account ((Moses and Qiao, 2018)) of how a particular teacher 'made space for positive identity negotiations for students with strong or emerging decoding skills' shifts the focus back to the enacted curriculum – what actually happens in the moment by moment interactions between children and teachers in classrooms. From documenting such moments, they show how two focus students were acutely aware of their status as struggling or successful readers in class, and that this influenced how they interacted with their peers. Yet the teacher kept open the possibility of their being more than that by drawing on the struggling reader's meaning-making skills in talking about texts shared in the whole class. Children do not have to be imprisoned by what they cannot yet do. The dosage metaphor in teaching – that children only learn according to the precisely measured inputs they are given – fundamentally obscures how challenge and engagement work as levers for change.

Conclusion

In the introduction to *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*, Bernstein (1996) argued for three pedagogic rights: the right to individual enhancement; the right to be included; and the right to participate. He glossed the right to individual enhancement as 'a condition for experiencing boundaries, be they social, intellectual or personal, not as prisons, or stereotypes but as tension points condensing the past *and* opening possible futures' (Bernstein, 1996, p6). The boundaries to current curriculum specifications are amenable to change. We can do this through research, through teachers' mediating actions and most importantly by offering pupils more than the curriculum imagines for

them. There is certainly more space to flex teaching and learning in this way in what Luke et al (2013) call a ‘low definition’ curriculum. That is a curriculum that anticipates and encourages local adaptation by virtue of being ‘less elaborated, detailed and constrained’ (Luke et al, 2013, p7). This helps create conditions that ensure broad areas of the curriculum are opened up to all pupils, as matters of equity and inclusion. These are principles worth remembering in policy-constrained times. We should put them into practice where we can.

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