

Questioning the underlying assumptions of practices in literacy education

by

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Teachers working in contemporary 'Western' educational contexts face challenges that are increasingly complex. The evolution of multiculturalism, hybrid student identities, youth cultures, child/youth oriented marketing, information technologies, and the globalization of business, communications and culture, have made it necessary for teachers to be increasingly conscious of their educational practices, and more importantly, of the beliefs that underlie those practices. Discussions in education now focus on local sites, on issues of power and oppression, and on the multiple differences that characterize specific contexts and people. They challenge teachers to recognize that taken-for-granted educational practices stem from assumptions of homogeneity that are often incompatible with the diversity of contemporary classroom contexts (Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997). The beliefs underlying these practices are constituted and reconstituted through teachers' participation in discourses that organize and systemize social and cultural practice (Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997). Ministry imperatives, standards and province-wide tests play a prominent role in the discourses in which teachers engage. With their emphasis on conformity to standards, these externally produced documents embody dominant discourses that and encourage the perpetuation of unquestioned adherence to conventional practice and fail to address issues of marginalization for those outside the mainstream.

The influence of dominant discourses on teachers' practice was recently underscored in two diverse research projects we completed in language arts education. The studies had a common focus on teachers' assumptions about literacy teaching. The first study examined teachers' views on their use of rubrics in assessing girls' and boys' writing, and the second explored teachers' selections of Canadian and non-Canadian trade books for their classrooms. As we discussed the results of our studies with each other, we were struck by the consistency and strength of teachers' unquestioned adherence to conventional practice.

In this paper we explore teachers' awareness and recognition of the need to look beyond their taken-for-granted, comfortable practices and perspectives on writing assessment and literature selection. We also examine the ways in which teachers can begin to question their practices. We contend that the resulting intense exploration of beliefs and practice, the seeing of oneself and others as though for the first time, can move teachers into some uncomfortable places. It can also move teachers into spaces that challenge them in new ways and lead to new areas of exciting awareness.

Theoretical Framework

From a socio-cultural perspective literacy instruction and assessment are fundamentally social and political (Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997). Bigelow claims, "All teaching is partisan. Whether we want to be, all teachers are political agents because we help to shape our students' understandings of the larger society" (1990, p. 445). Similarly, Ellsworth (1997) maintains that teachers' and students' cultural positionings shape what counts as school knowledge. The ways in which that knowledge gets constructed affect the daily lives of teachers and students in schools. As a result, teachers' assessment and literature selection decisions (among many others) shape students' identities as readers and writers, emphasizing particular ways of being and thinking over others.

The values and beliefs that are highlighted through teachers' writing assessment practices and literature selection "did not evolve arbitrarily nor to serve the best interests of all students by ensuring equity, access, or inclusion" (Lee, 2000, p. 35). Indeed, the privileged perspectives that are embedded within these pedagogical practices support "the organizational needs of the institutions of schooling and the stratified interests within social organizations" (Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997, p. 191 - 192). When teachers carry out instruction and assessment practices in traditional ways that seem natural and "tried and true," they allow those social

hierarchies to be reinforced and maintained.

Ellsworth (1997) challenges teachers to examine the 'gaps' that are opened up between the conscious and unconscious responses that students and teachers make to teaching and learning contexts. She asks, "Is it possible to address the 'stuck places' in our work as teachers and researchers with questions that, in the very process of their construction and articulation, change our theorizing and practice already?" (p. 13). We take up Ellsworth's challenge in this paper, examining the stances that teachers take towards the "gap" between the conscious taken-for-granted knowledge about writing assessment practices and literature selection and the unconscious socio-cultural beliefs that are embedded within and transmitted through their practices. Our discussion is based on the findings of two research studies that examined elementary teachers' stances toward their roles as evaluators of student writing and of literature for classroom use. We discuss common threads regarding the need to interrogate dominant discourses in the assessment of student learning and in the selection of appropriate learning resources.

Research Methods

In the first study the data were collected through telephone interviews with 15 randomly selected third-grade and 15 randomly selected sixth-grade teachers from across the state of Ohio, USA. These teachers responded to questions about their observations of gender characteristics in students' writing, about the ways in which they deal with the challenges of fairness in writing assessment, and about their thoughts on the phenomenon repeatedly occurring in large-scale writing assessments in which girls outperform boys (Alberta Education, 1995; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1995; Ohio Department of Education, 2000). In the study, 22 teachers were female and eight were male. Further demographic data were not gathered so we cannot provide information about the social and cultural backgrounds of the teachers. The teachers had volunteered to take part in the interviews following participation in an earlier study where 104 teachers were surveyed by mail (AuthorPeterson, 2001).

Data in the second study were collected in the form of field notes generated during 12 two-hour meetings with 9 volunteer elementary school teachers (1 male, 8 female; all of middle class white European heritage) over the course of one year. The teachers explored the values they saw, or did not see, in using Canadian children's literature and ways of deliberately including Canadian literature in their classroom instruction. The teachers wrote notes and observations, and collected artifacts created by their students in response to Canadian literature. These notes and artifacts formed a secondary source of data for the study. A second set of data was collected in the form of audio-recorded and transcribed telephone interviews with 13 volunteer teachers (1 male, 12 female; further demographic data were not gathered) from across Alberta regarding their literature selections and their thoughts about children's literature and its role in their classrooms.

Data Analysis

Interviews from both studies were transcribed and, along with field notes, were analyzed using the same coding system. We worked with graduate research assistants, coding the data independently and then comparing our analyses until we reached consensus. Using Ellsworth's notion of gaps between teachers' conscious and unconscious responses to teaching and learning contexts, and Rose's (1991) four stances from which teachers negotiate their roles, we derived the following four categories. The categories represent stances from which teachers approach their assessment of girls' and boys' writing and their selection of Canadian literature for their classrooms.

(1) Overlooking: a subconscious ignoring of the gaps that exist between dominant discourses of objectivity and neutrality, and the social and cultural diversity within teachers' classrooms;

(2) Denying: consciously denying that gaps exist between dominant discourses of objectivity and neutrality, and the social and cultural diversity within teachers' classrooms by using Ministry-designed tools to ensure

objectivity;

(3) Recognizing: recognizing the gaps but being unwilling to disrupt dominant discourses to align practice more closely with the reality of social and cultural diversity within teachers' classrooms;

(4) Recognizing and taking action: recognizing problems created by the gaps and being willing, with guidance, to do something to address the problems.

Results

A summary of the stances teachers adopted regarding writing assessment and literature selection is presented in Table 1. Our discussion of the data is similarly organized around the four stances.

Table 1: Teachers' Stances

Stance	Writing Assessment	Literature Selection
Overlooking	There are no gender differences in student writing. Any differences among children are simply a function of the amount of reading and other experiences children have had.	Teachers focus on quality children's literature. Where it originates is irrelevant. No definition of "quality" literature is provided other than citing award-winning books.
Denying	Using rubrics neutralizes the effects of any gender bias a teacher might have.	Using Canadian children's literature is "good". It is used to teach facts in social studies and science topics.
Recognizing	Gender differences do exist in student writing. Girls are perceived as better writers than boys.	Canadian children's literature is good to use but it is hard to get and there's not much of it.
Recognizing and Taking Action	Not found in the data	It is important to use Canadian children's literature. Teachers use it and note Canadian children's positive responses to it.

Overlooking Sociocultural Influences on Writing Assessment and Literature Selection

The majority of teachers participating in the two research studies did not seem to recognize the presence of gender differences in student writing, nor of cultural values transmitted through literature used in their classrooms. Indeed, 24 of the 30 teachers in the writing study asserted, "I don't think about gender. I just try to look at the writing." It appears that they subconsciously overlooked social and cultural values and perspectives transmitted through students' writing and through the published texts used in their classrooms.

In an effort to be as fair as possible to all students, most of the teachers in the writing assessment study said they did not consider the writer when marking their students' writing. Indeed, 24 of the 30 teachers asserted in the interviews that they were able to mark writing in an unbiased manner because they "just try to look at the writing." A few teachers maintained that there are no gender differences in student writing. They felt that any differences among children are simply a function of the amount of reading, oral language and other

activities children have experienced.

Likewise, in evaluating children's literature for use in the classroom, many teachers at first overlooked the presence of cultural values in the books they selected. They claimed they focused on "quality" literature. Where the literature originated was irrelevant. They maintained that any cultural values presented through the literature would be offset by the fact that it was "good" literature. None of these teachers went on to describe what they meant by "quality" literature other than referring to award winning books, especially Newbery award winners and honor books (presented by the American Library Association).

Denying Sociocultural Influences on Writing Assessment and Literature Selection

In both research studies, many teachers steadfastly positioned themselves within the dominant assessment and literature selection practices by emphasizing objectivity. They looked to externally imposed rubrics and curriculum as tools that allowed them to overcome/neutralize possible sociocultural influences on their practice.

Teachers in the writing assessment study identified scoring rubrics, often the state rubric used in proficiency tests, as the tools they used for an objective reading of students' writing competence. They seemed to place great faith in the rubrics as objective representations of global standards that privileged no social or cultural group over another. One male third-grade teacher asserted, "I use the state rubric every time I grade writing and it's very, very, very consistent." These perceptions appear to have led many teachers to use rubrics that narrowed their assessment only to writing conventions. A grade three female teacher said, "When I'm marking writing, I'm usually going on mechanics and spelling." All of the teachers talked about subtracting marks based on grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It seemed to be the best way they could find to suppress and eliminate the possibility for bias in their assessment of student writing. In the previous mail-in study (AuthorPeterson, 2001), in spite of their best efforts to be objective, teachers did not assign consistent scores to any of the narratives they were asked to evaluate.¹

Taking a similar position in terms of evaluating literature, teachers acknowledged that incorporating Canadian books in their teaching was "a good thing", but they were more concerned about how the Canadian materials they used fit the curriculum in specific subject areas than in the cultural values or perspectives that Canadian books might contain (See AuthorBainbridge and Wolodko, 2002a). They engaged in searches to find books that would support the 'curriculum-as-a-written-document', e.g. the "China unit" or the "Greece unit" in grade six social studies. They looked for specific content such as stories about Chinese immigrants coming to Canada or life in Canada during pioneer times. Content (e.g. setting, time period, historical event) rather than the values inherent in the work, was uppermost in the criteria they used for the selection of literature for their students.

Recognizing Sociocultural Influences on Writing Assessment and Literature Selection

In both research studies, some teachers recognized the ideological nature of writing assessment and literature selection. They identified gender differences in student writing and cultural advantages in using Canadian literature. They did not carry their thinking further to assess how these influences impacted on particular children's lives in their classrooms.

In terms of writing assessment, teachers recognized gender differences in students' writing. Teachers' responses to questions about gender differences revealed a perception of girls as better writers than boys in terms of the use of writing conventions, vocabulary, and the inclusion of details. One male grade six teacher expressed a perception shared by many of the participating teachers: "Girls are more effective than boys. Guys can come up with great ideas but they just don't know how to express themselves in written form." The criteria the teachers used to describe girls' writing mirrored that of the highest standard on the rubric. Teachers did not perceive that such perceptions might influence their assessment of boys' and girls' writing

and did not see the need for further discussion or action to examine and address possible influences.

In the area of children's literature, teachers indicated they felt it was a good idea to use Canadian materials, and felt there was some inherent value in encouraging Canadian children to read Canadian books. Teachers suggested that in many ways Canadian literature offers information and insights on Canadian history and identity that cannot be gleaned elsewhere. Teachers in the literature group explored sources of information about Canadian literature and they suggested titles and authors to each other. The teachers who resisted the deliberate inclusion of Canadian literature in their classrooms had largely relied on foreign materials for years. Their decision-making was dominated by concerns about covering specific topics and concepts in particular ways. These teachers needed a great deal of support in trying something new – locating Canadian materials and developing a level of comfort with them. Their discomfort appeared to be associated with using materials that were not the usual resources used by their colleagues in their own schools.

Many of the teachers interviewed by telephone maintained that Canadian books were difficult to obtain because "there are so few of them". Most of these teachers relied on browsing through book stores when they wanted to find new materials for their classrooms and were unaware of the many professional resources available, in print and on-line, that could facilitate their searches (See AuthorBainbridge, Carbonaro and Wolodko, 2002b).

Recognizing Sociocultural Differences and Taking Action

Only in the second phase of the literature selection study did teachers show that they were willing to disrupt dominant discourses of social and cultural objectivity and neutrality. Teachers participating in the writing assessment study did not indicate a need or desire to examine the ideological underpinnings of their assessment practices and the ways in which these practices might privilege girls over boys. They appeared unwilling to position themselves as reflective readers who recognized gender as an element that might influence the fairness of their writing assessment practices.

In the literature study, three of the 13 teachers interviewed by telephone were well informed about Canadian literature and believed that Canadian literature can speak in a special way to Canadian children. They spoke about the differences between much of the Canadian literature and the mass-market materials distributed through companies such as Scholastic (though Scholastic does distribute Canadian materials among its resources). The teachers commented on the pleasure and pride their students derived from *knowing* a piece of literature was Canadian, and how interested their students were in learning more about Canadian authors and illustrators.

When the teachers in the literature study group began working together many of them knew very little about Canadian children's literature. Over the course of the year they explored Canadian books, both fiction and nonfiction, developed lists of Canadian resources appropriate for the grade level they taught, and discovered professional support for their work in the form of professional organizations and publications. Seven of the nine teachers developed special projects for their students, including author studies and novel studies for their language arts programs. They invited Canadian authors to visit their classrooms and they celebrated the work of Canadian writers and illustrators. Two teachers developed a joint project with their very different classrooms (kindergarten and grade eight special needs). The five K-3 teachers found it relatively easy to integrate Canadian materials into their programs of study across the curriculum.

By the end of the twelve-month duration of the study group, all the teachers had located Canadian resources for use in their classroom teaching. Most of the teachers were more aware of the subtle values, beliefs, themes and images transmitted through Canadian literature than they had been at the beginning of the study. For some teachers, however, Canadian literature remained separate – an 'add-on'.

Conclusions

Predominant among the teachers participating in our research studies was a perception that commonly-accepted and recognized writing assessment and literature selection practices provided them with unquestionably reliable and valid practices for their classrooms. They felt comfortable with the values of homogeneity and universality embedded within those dominant practices and were particularly willing to accept the notion of objectivity inherent in them. The teachers were willing to focus their assessment of student writing on the features highlighted in the scoring guide used in the state proficiency tests, adopting the perspective on good writing offered in the rubric as valid for assessing their students' writing abilities. Teachers were also willing to accept the criteria of "quality literature" established by awards committees such as the American Library Association's Newbery Committee (not one teacher mentioned Canadian or British awards for children's literature) without recognizing the individuality of readers or the cultural values inherent in the award winning books, or in the members of the adjudication panel. They believed that "quality literature" was a universal, objective concept that was largely free from socio-cultural influence. Rather than questioning how these values clashed with the heterogeneity and specificity that characterized their classrooms, teachers generally either overlooked or denied such inconsistencies, or they accepted them and took no action to address them.

We argue that practices underpinned by assumptions about common experiences across student and teaching populations do not serve all students equally well. Universals do not exist in classrooms. The specifics are evident in every piece of writing students compose, in every text teachers construct when they assess the writing, in every published book, and in every text that students and teachers construct when they read it. Furthermore, students who have not had access to the materials and social interactions of the dominant culture will continue to be marginalized if the dominant practices persist (Delpit, 1988; Martin, 1991). The dominant practices may seem comfortable to teachers, but there is ample evidence to suggest that these practices can disadvantage many students. The gender disparities in the scores assigned during writing examinations and the predominance of American literature in Canadian classrooms are only two examples of such evidence. By ignoring or refusing to consider the sociocultural nature of such practices as writing assessment and literature selection, teachers perpetuate discourses that systematically exclude certain students whose experiences are not valued or viewed as "normal" within dominant discourses.

We invite teachers to take up the challenge offered by Luke and Freebody (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997) to use "discourse and literacy to reinvent institutions..., to critique and reform the rules for the conversion of cultural and textual capital in communities and workplaces, and to explore the possibilities of heteroglossic social contracts and hybrid cultural actions" (p. 9). We encourage teachers to articulate their beliefs about teaching and learning and to ask questions about whose interests are served through these practices. Gee (1997) argues that responsible pedagogy requires a "juxtaposition of differences in such a way that commonness can emerge (variable and changing patterns, associations, or generalizations) without obliterating the differences as lived and situated realities. [He encourages teachers to] view each child as a network of associations formed by his or her sociocultural experiences, a network from which specific ways of knowing the world emerge" (p. 296-297).

Suggestions for Professional Development

Our suggestions for helping teachers refocus their practice and explore their underlying beliefs and ideas are based on Freebody and Luke's model of reading (1990, p. 7) which encourages teachers to frame their teaching and assessment around four roles of literacy learners: as code-breakers, as text participants, as text users, and as text analysts. Teachers and students must go beyond the first three roles traditionally found in elementary classrooms, and focus increasingly on becoming text analysts. Being a text analyst means reading critically, or having "conscious awareness of the language and idea systems that are brought into play when a text is used" (p. 13). For example, teachers would be able to recognize the ideological perspective of a text and to stand outside that perspective and question it. We encourage teachers to examine elements of good writing/literature (the readily recognized—taken-for-granted views that have become standards for quality writing/literature), together with the cultural resources that they and their students bring to their writing and

reading. It is important to take this examination a step further by hypothesizing the intended response of readers to the writing/literature and discuss whose interests seem to be emphasized and whose interests are overlooked. Teachers and students take up the text analyst role by identifying stereotypical perspectives and recognizing the values inherent in the text. If teachers assess the writing of boys and girls using a ministry rubric, for example, they need to make explicit the characteristics within the rubric that identify a writer as competent. If teachers use American books in Canadian schools, generalizations about American economic and political dominance need to be made explicit.

Refocusing practice and exploring underlying beliefs and assumptions also requires that teachers examine how Ministries of Education regulate teachers' thinking and practice. They need to consider how Ministry documents such as recommended book lists, approved text lists, and assessment rubrics, direct teachers into marking (and therefore teaching) in certain ways. Luke (2002) maintains that teacher compliance and standardization of methods can lead to teacher de-skilling and a lack of flexibility in instructional strategies and responses to students. To overcome the pressures toward compliance and standardization, teachers need to remain open to socio-cultural factors such as gender, student-teacher power relationships, and cultural identity, and continue to develop their own critical social literacy.

Our experiences in the two research studies reported here lead us to believe that teachers make more gains in professional development and are better able to question their taken-for-granted beliefs when they are part of a learning community. Those groups are most likely to be successful when they are self-selected by teachers and when they are run along informal lines, much like a Book Club. Teachers who volunteer to be part of a professional development group do so under their own initiative and follow their own individual interests. These groups appear to be more successful in the long term than school or district-wide initiatives that channel teachers into learning specific skills or approaches to literacy teaching. While the latter may be effective in introducing teachers to new instructional strategies, self-selected groups are more likely to be effective in encouraging teachers to open-ended exploration of their ideas, to the questioning of their practices and the sharing of their readings and new learning with other group members. In other words, they provide teachers with opportunities to increase their own critical literacy.

In summary, we encourage teachers to move into spaces in their teaching that may not feel familiar and natural to them at first. Through taking the risk of getting to know the differences, multiplicities, heteroglossia and specificity of their own students – all those things that seem foreign and sometimes 'unacceptable' to teachers – they can move towards creating learning contexts that are more comfortable for a greater numbers of students. Through this enterprise all students will have a greater chance of success in literacy classrooms.

Note

For **each** of the three papers in the study, the range of scores assigned by the 104 teachers was from 2 to 4 or from 1 to 3 on a four-point scale, with 4 being an above grade level score and 1 and 2 being below grade level scores.

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