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Moving targets, shifting terrain: debates and discourses about literacy teaching

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Abstract

The terrain has shifted once again for teachers who try to determine which account of 'good' literacy teaching is actually best for their classrooms and their students. Once again, in 2004 literacy teachers were set up as shifting targets within this terrain as popular media created yet another 'literacy crisis'. And yet again, literacy teachers are required to navigate this complex terrain while also navigating their ways through discourses about literacy that are present in policy documents.

In this paper, I describe an analysis of the texts of the Victorian Early Years Literacy Program that produced some answers to the following questions:

- What kinds of discourses about literacy teaching and learning are visible within the texts of the Early Years Literacy Program in Victoria?
- How do these discourses work together to produce a rational version of literacy teaching and learning?

The paper provides a snapshot of classrooms using the EYLP in comparison with a snapshot of a family's literacy practices in order to illustrate what is taken for granted about literacy teaching and learning in EYLP classrooms.

This textual analysis provides some insight into the increasingly complex terrain that teachers are required to navigate as they make decisions about the literacy teaching practices that will provide optimal outcomes for their students.

Introduction

At the time of writing this paper, the National Literacy Review Panel is calling for submissions to "identify the ways in which research evidence on literacy teaching and policies in Australian schools can best inform classroom teaching practice and support teacher professional learning." (Department of Education Science and Training, 2004). The Review is an initiative of the current federal education minister and is a response to a 'literacy crisis' that has been covered extensively in the popular media. This review and the arguments that surround it about what is the 'best' way to teach reading, provide part of the contextual terrain within which classroom teachers struggle on a daily basis to determine what is best for their particular students. In my research I work with teachers to map their current and future literacy teaching practices onto the framework provided by Peter Freebody and Allan Luke's 'four resources model'(Freebody & Luke, 2003). In the latest research project one teacher commented:

> I don't know why the goal posts change all the time. You've got your CSF outcomes. We're supposed to use them as guidelines but they're set in concrete to achieve these things. I know we have to have planning documents but I just find you understand one process of doing it and then. I don't know whether we're

refining it but sometimes the goal posts get changed and there's a new set of rules. And I just get bamboozled.

This sense of confusion, of shifting goalposts, and new rules is compounded by the many versions of what counts as literacy present in policy documents that govern teachers and teaching.

This paper provides an analysis of one particular set of policy documents – the Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) (Victorian Department of Education, 1997) in Victoria to shed some light on the nature of the discourses operating within these texts, and how these discourses work together to present a normative, rational view of literacy teaching and learning.

The production of literacy within the EYLP

In what follows I use a rhizo-textual analytic method (Alvermann, 2000; Honan, 2004a) to explore how the discourses operating in the EYLP texts work together to produce a particular version of literacy teaching and learning. Understanding both texts themselves, and the readings of these texts, as rhizomatic disrupts commonplace assumptions about the relations between teachers and policy texts. The ceaselessness of connections between rhizomes shifts attention away from the construction of a particular reading of any text towards a new careful attendance to the multiplicity of linkages that can be mapped between any text and other texts, other readings, other assemblages of meaning. There is no one correct path to take through a rhizome, no one true way of reading rhizomatic texts. Within the EYLP texts, this scrambling and scattered process establishes connections between disparate discursive systems, about literacy, about texts, about students and how students learn, and about teaching, so that the version of literacy teaching that is produced seems to be normative, to be unquestionably rational, and therefore to be beyond critique.

Assumptions about literacy education in the EYLP

The organisational framework of the EYLP presupposes certain conditions of learning that are optimal for literacy teaching. These are:

- literacy is best taught in uninterrupted two-hour blocks of time
- reading and writing are two distinct and separate components of literacy that should be taught separately

- speaking and listening learning occurs as part of reading and writing while at the same time separated from the other modes
- the organisation of the class in the block is whole-small group-whole with emphasis on individual success and interactivity between groups of children and the teacher

There are at least two different discourses about literacy teaching and learning operating within the texts of the organisational framework (not only the framework itself but the explanations of its operation contained in the Professional Development books, Teaching Guides and videos).

Back to basics and whole language

One of these discourses reflects a traditional skills-based approach to literacy teaching that resembles that found in syllabus and curriculum documents set in historical contexts as disparate as 1886 and 1941. In New South Wales in 1886 for example, Inspector Wilkins wrote:

> The first subject that strikes us as necessary for a primary school is Language, by which is to be understood a full knowledge of our mother tongue, including Reading, Writing, Grammar, Analysis of Sentences, and (Green & Hodgens, 1996 p. 231).

This 'back to basics' discourse affirming the value of skills that can be separately defined and addressed connects closely with the discourses used in popular media accounts of what counts as literacy. Its presence within the EYLP could be seen as an attempt to assuage the anxieties and tensions that arise whenever debates about a 'literacy crisis' is mounted in popular media contexts (See Comber, Green, Lingard, & Luke, 1998)

A second discursive system operating within the organisational framework could be seen to directly contradict this skills-based approach. There is an emphasis on individual responses, on small group work, and on interactions between groups of children. This emphasis reflects the whole language approach Whole language proponents would be pleased to recognise Cambourne's "conditions of learning" (Cambourne, 1988) and Donald Graves 'process writing' within the EYLP.

From whole language to child development

The teaching 'guides' and the professional development manuals explicitly and implicitly take up both the skills and whole language discourses while also using at least two other discursive systems about literacy teaching and learning. The particular points made about literacy in these texts are:

- children learn how to read and write in developmental stages and achievement in these stages can be measured by normative standards achievable by all children
- reading and writing are best taught through the use of particular and specific strategies
- reading is "primarily" about gaining meaning from texts
- texts can be categorised as 'print' and 'non-print' or 'visual' texts
- a range of 'text types' should be used in early years writing activities

There is a close connection between the discourses of whole language and those surrounding child development that are reflected in the texts describing the 'developmental stages'. As Valerie Walkerdine has pointed out, there is an inextricable link between the ideas of "individualized pedagogy" and Piaget's theory of child development: (Walkerdine, 1984 p. 177.). The EYLP makes a seamless connection between this individualized pedagogy, the 'natural' progression of children through stages of development, and the measurement of this progression through normative standards. [In the EYLP children who do not meet this standard are (conveniently) removed from the classroom that operates within the organisational framework and subjected to Reading Recovery one-on-one tuition]. So on the one hand, there is a discourse operating that claims individual children naturally progress through sequential stages of learning how to read and write, while on the other hand, children who are seen not to be progressing at the same pace as a significant number of their peers, do not meet the standards required, and are diverted from the natural progression. (SeeNichols, 2004 and others in AJLL's special issue on 'Questioning literacy development').

Sociolinguist approaches to literacy

The (relatively) recent development of sociolinguistic approaches to literacy teaching and learning is also taken up in the EYLP within the discourses related to texts. In the EYLP, genres are known as 'text types', drawing on what Erica McWilliam (1994) calls "folkloric assumptions" about teachers' inabilities to engage with 'difficult' concepts (such as 'genre'). As well there is a clear indication that only a certain number of these text types are suitable

for children in the early years of school. While a 'range' is suggested, this does not include expositions, arguments or discussions.

Sociolinguistic accounts of the multiplicity of texts are reflected in the discourse describing the categories of texts. It is acknowledged that texts are not only print based, and 'visual' texts are referred to. However, the primacy of print is explicated clearly: "Teaching Readers in the Classroom is primarily about assisting students to gain meaning from print text" (Victorian Department of Education, 1997 p. 3). There is no mention of the use of digital texts.

Assumptions about teachers' work in the EYLP

These discursive systems about the purpose of literacy education interweave and connect around and with each other to produce persuasively 'reasonable' versions of what counts as literacy. Crossing over and interconnecting with these discourses is the thread of another discourse about the nature of teachers' work. This is especially evident in the texts concerning the recommended teaching strategies for teaching reading and writing. While these strategies would be part of an effective teacher's repertoire of practices, the texts take up a narrowly defined view of these strategies. Each strategy is carefully explained in the Guides, with clear descriptions of how teachers should use the strategies, including a series of steps, and examples of questions to ask children in each step. Here, the texts take up new managerialist discourses about teachers' work, where the teacher is seen to be technician, "a routinized and trivialized deliverer of a predesigned package" (Apple & Jungck, 1990; Goodson, 1997 p. 137; Robertson, 1996).

Provisional linkages between discourses

These quite disparate discourses about literacy, the teaching of literacy, and about children's learning of literacy are connected, and interconnected, by "provisional linkages". These linkages are commonalities and taken-for-granted assumptions that seem reasonable and unquestionable. The first of these linkages is provided by the notion of the individual child, a creature of progressivist discourses that has become a commonplace assumption in many policy documents related to schools and teaching.

There is a dichotomy here that allows this developing child to be described in terms of individual characteristics, while at the same time she is representative of the whole of society.

This dichotomy underlies one of the fundamental tensions in teaching today, especially in early years classrooms: the tension between paying attention to each child's unique and individual differences while at the same time teaching that child using homogenous practices in small group or whole class situations.

The second of these provisional linkages connecting different discursive systems in the EYLP is the assumption that literacy is best learned in classrooms. This denies the postmodern realities of children's lives today as they interact and engage with varieties of textual representations almost from birth. There are clear indications in the EYLP texts that textual interactions, occurring in the home, playground, and in other social contexts outside of the classroom are to be ignored. The use of 'book boxes' and 'take home readers' is illustrative of this assumption. Each child takes home one of these readers and parents are required to read this text with their child and sign a sheet that indicates their compliance. The parent guide and video that is included in the Reading Kit outlines the process for parents to use in this reading time. Here, school reading practices and processes are taken into homes while the home literacy practices are ignored, as is the significant and sustained research that reports on the importance of making home/school connections (See for example, Freebody, Ludwig, & Gunn, 1995; Heath, 1983; Moll, 1992).

A classroom snapshot

These competing and conflicting discourses about the teaching of literacy provide the background for many classrooms in Victoria. The snapshot described below is an amalgam of the observations that I have made during my visits to classrooms, the written and verbal observations that my students share after their school practicum experiences, and descriptions of the models for the teaching strategies included in the EYLP videos. The snapshot is therefore not meant to provide empirical evidence of what is occurring in Victorian EYLP schools, but is intended to provide an illustration of classrooms where EYLP is in operation.

There are about 22 small children sitting cross legged on a large square of carpet at one end of the classroom. Their posture is largely determined by their distance from the teacher, who sits on an upright chair in front of the group. So those directly under her gaze sit straight backed, hands neatly folded in their laps. As the distance grows, so the posture detiorates until you find, hidden from the teacher's gaze by the bodies of the rest of the class, two small

boys lying on their backs. One is quietly humming to himself and rocking his lower body and legs from side to side, almost as an adult does in a physiotherapy exercise. The other boy is wriggling his whole body in a snakelike attempt to move closer to his neighbour.

The teacher's chair is located close to a blackboard that stretches the width of the classroom. On one part of the board is a brightly coloured chart, with the heading Task Board, and a table of five columns and four rows. The days of the week form the headings for the columns. At the beginning of each row is a pictograph, a symbolised representation of one of the teaching strategies from the EYLP. There are four small cards attached to the chart with velcro, and each card holds the image of an Australian animal, platypus, wombat, kangaroo, echidna.

On the other side of the teacher's chair is an easel which supports a large 'big book'. The teacher is reading the big book to the class. The class all seem familiar with the text, with some children reading loudly along with her. Two children talk loudly to each other about what is coming up, As with the posture of the children, their attention to the book reading seems to be directly related to their proximity to the teacher. The teacher's gaze seems to be divided between the pages of the book she is reading, and those children who sit close to her. There is an invisible circle of literary appreciation drawn around the teacher and those eight or so children who appear to be enjoying the reading.

The teacher finishes the reading of the big book and draws the children's attention to the Task Board. She elicits group and individual responses to her questions from the class. To the two wriggling boys at the back, she asks: 'What group are you in Troy and Toby?'. The boys sit up and call back, 'Wombats miss!!'. 'And what will the Wombats be doing this morning?'. After a few seconds of silence, she asks, 'Can one of the Kangaroos help the Wombats – what will the Wombats be doing this morning, Sarah?'. Sarah, one of the girls sitting directly at the teacher's feet replies, 'Reading with you miss'. 'Good girl, Sarah. And what will the Kangaroos be doing?' There is a choral response as many of the class shout, 'sheets!!!'. 'That's right, Kangaroos will be working on their worksheets at their desks'. The other two groups of children are reminded of their activities, (reading from the Book Boxes, and reading with a parent helper, who is sitting quietly at the back of the classroom , close to the door). The teacher reminds the class of the rules for the morning: 'What happens when I'm

working with the Wombats, girls and boys? – what do you have to remember – Echidnas?'. The Echidnas' responses are varied: 'Don't talk to you'; 'Stay away!', 'Sit in our seats til we've finished'. 'That's right, good girls, when I'm working with the Wombats I don't want to be interrupted, so you read your book quietly, and if you finish reading your book, what do you do?'. 'Read it again!', the Echidnas reply in unison.

The signal to move is almost invisible to the outsider. The teacher merely says, 'Right, off we go' and many of the children stand immediately and walk purposefully around the room. One girl goes to a corner and pulls out a large plastic crate filled with 'levelled readers'. Another girl goes to the teacher's desk and collects a cardboard folder with a Kangaroo drawn on the cover. The Wombat group, four boys and two girls remain on the carpet. Some children sit at desks and pull out pencil cases containing pencils and coloured markers. Within a few minutes all children seem to be 'on task', reading quietly or aloud, writing on worksheets, or responding to questions from the teacher. There is a 'working buzz' in the room. Gradually though the buzz is subsumed by the sounds of giggles and loud conversations.

The Echidnas have all read their Book Box readers, and have obeyed the instruction to read them again. All five children have now read their texts twice, and now discard the books. They are giggling, telling stories, there is the occasional pinch or tweak of an arm or leg.
The Platypus group with the parent helper are taking turns to read aloud from a reader. They too have finished this 'round robin' once, but the parent has begun the reading again. The children who are waiting for their turn do not follow the text, but whisper to each other.
The Wombats are still working with the teacher, but she seems to find it difficult to hold all their attention at once – so when she asks one girl a question about the text they are reading, the other five children appear to be daydreaming.
The Kangaroo group seems to be the quietest, and seem to still all be on task. However, they have all finished answering the questions on their worksheets, and are quietly and carefully colouring in the illustrations that border the sheets.
Occasionally the teacher looks up from her reading and questioning and glances at the wall clock. At exactly 9.40am, she stands up and claps her hands in a short rhythmic pattern. The children all fall quiet, some instantly while others are nudged into silence by their neighbours or by a certain look from the teacher.

'Right, thank you Grade 1s, onto the carpet please', the teacher commands. She then resumes her straight backed chair at the front of the class – this seems to be an invisible signal to the class, many of whom begin to try to catch her attention – hands waving frantically in the air, calling out, 'Miss, Miss, me please, me!!'. The teacher selects one child, 'Tanah, your turn I think today'. The small girl clambers through the group and stands beside the teacher. The teacher asks, 'What did you do today Tanah?'. Tanah replies looking directly at the teacher. During her reply the teacher gently holds her shoulders in an attempt to direct her gaze towards the class, but Tanah's body resists the gentle pushes and swivels around again to look at the teacher. Tanah's reply seems well rehearsed, there are phrases within her reply that the teacher mouths silently along with Tanah. 'This morning, the Kangaroos wrote a lot of B words. Then we wrote our words in sentences. Then we coloured in our pictures of balls, and baskets and biscuits. Then we packed up our sheets.' The teacher asks three other children, representing each of the four groups, to come to the front one at a time. They each describe the activity engaged with, each using similar words and phrases. The other children sit on the carpet in much the same positions and postures as they had taken at the beginning of the morning. The same children sit upright and cross legged close to the teacher and the same two boys lie on their backs on the edge of the carpet square, hidden from the teachers' gaze by the other children.

What are children learning about reading during this snapshot?

- Reading involves being organised into small groups
- Teachers read to whole class, children read aloud in small groups
- Reading is writing words beginning with the same consonant
- Reading is colouring in pictures of words beginning with the same consonant
- There is a connection between ability to read, and ability to listen to instructions, recall previous activities, and sit with straight backs and crossed legs (Kamler, Maclean, Reid, & Simpson, 1992)
- Reading is about reading the same text repeatedly until you are completely familiar with the text
- Reading is about gaining operational skills, or being able to draw on codebreaking resources to make meaning from a text (Freebody & Luke, 2003)
- When we talk about reading, we talk about what do with texts, rather than our feelings or understandings of the content of the texts

A family snapshot

To illustrate that the versions of literacy outlined above are only versions that appear to be rational and normative because of the context in which they occur, I now attempt to enter into the world of young children at home, through a snapshot that produces one version of the literacy practices engaged in by a (non)representative family. I attempt to describe what I have observed as commonplace and unremarkable in these homes in which young children I know live.

The living area is open plan. The kitchen is bounded by a high bench that serves as a place to eat breakfast, talk on the wall mounted telephone, talk to people working in the kitchen preparing food, serving drinks, stacking the dishwasher. It is cluttered with school notices, mail including junk mail catalogues, take away food flyers, bills and other textual features of a busy family. A computer is set up on a desk in a corner of the living area, with an internet connection and colour printer attached. A large carpet square delineates a television viewing area, with two couches and a low table organised around a large screen television with DVD player attached. 'Surround sound' speakers and amplifier are also connected to a CD player. An adult visitor has brought her laptop computer which is open on the low table, with The Sims loaded and temporarily paused. A sliding glass door leads to an outside area: there are external speakers mounted to the outside wall here, a large wooden table and chairs, a barbecue, and bar fridge.

There are three bedrooms in the house. There is a television with gaming machine attached in one bedroom. On the floor of this bedroom is an assortment of figurines, trading cards and magazines related to Pokemon and Digimon cartoon series. Electronic games for the gaming machine are stacked on top of the television. There is another television with VCR attached in the second bedroom. In this bedroom there are large posters of popstars, soapie actors, and football players adorning the walls. A bookshelf and study desk are stacked with various types of texts: Total Girl and Girlfriend magazines; copies of fictional texts written as series (as diverse as Goosebumps series by R. L. Stine, the Famous Five series by Enid Blyton, and the Just.. series by Andy Griffith; a copy of Lord of the Rings is also on the bed); and school artefacts such as report cards, certificates of achievement, exercise books and folders filled with worksheets.

There are four adults and six children in the house, although only two adults and 3 children actually live here. The father is in the kitchen, talking on the phone and stacking the dishwasher. The mother and two adult visitors are sitting in the outside area talking and listening to a CD that is broadcast through the outside speakers.

Two girls sit at the computer using the internet connection and instant messaging software to chat online with school friends. A younger girl is sitting on a small chair in front of the television in the living area, watching a DVD of The Lion King. There are two boys in one bedroom playing an electronic game.

One girl leaves the online chat to resume playing The Sims on the laptop. She provides a running commentary on the onscreen actions of the characters for the girl who remains at the computer desk, who offers suggestions for movements of the characters ('get them to dance', 'she needs to go to bed') while at the same time reading aloud some of the online chat to her friend who is playing The Sims ('he says he likes Tam!'). The younger girl uses the indexing feature of the DVD remote control to find and replay one scene of The Lion King, reviewing this scene three times. She sings loudly and stands up to dance along with the music from this scene. In the middle of dancing for the third time, she moves out into the outside seating area and switches to singing and dancing along with the music of The Beatles coming from the outside speakers.

One of the boys from the bedroom appears in the outside area and describes to no one in particular the actions of one of the characters in the electronic game (he slayed the dragon, I slayed the dragon and now he's, we've only got one more level and we've won!!). He moves into the living area and sits in front of the television for a few minutes, watching The Lion King.

What are children learning about reading in this space?:

- Reading is about gaining information, following instructions, and sharing with friends
- Reading involves making meaning from texts displayed on screens
- There are many types of text that we read onscreen – instructions for video games, online chat, digital 'menus' for DVDs, text boxes within simulation games.

- There are also many types of print texts that we read – children's series books, catalogues and newspapers, take away menus, handwritten notes, school artefacts.
- Reading is not a static activity – reading can be undertaken simultaneously with other activities, reading can be undertaken while moving around a room
- Reading does not usually involve adults and children reading together
- Reading texts are closely related to television, movie and computer game texts with the same topic, similar content, and sometimes the same structural layout.

Conclusion

There are many contradictory and conflicting assumptions about reading and literacy observable in these two snapshots. These contrasts highlight the routine exclusions and endorsements of certain kinds of literacies occurring in early years classrooms. The contrasting snapshots also serve to highlight the production of normative accounts of literacy within the policy texts of the EYLP that inform the teaching of literacy in early years classrooms. It is only possible for teachers to engage with 'real world' literacies, such as those evident in the family snapshot, if they ignore and resist the patterns of discourses that surround them that continually and incessantly provide a narrow and technical version of what counts as literacy.

This is an increasingly complex and difficult challenge to ask teachers to accept. Evidence of the impossible position teachers find themselves in today as they grapple with competing versions of the 'best' approach to teaching literacy is provided here by another of those teachers I worked with last year. He says:

> In-service is just absolutely totally shitting me right now. Simply because I've got that much in my mind about how to do things…that much in my mind right now to do things based on…I've got literacy circles. I've got 4 resources. I've got inquiry approach. I've got peer support program. I've got genre writing. Genre reading. And I got 5 days to do this. And I just can't do it. I feel like at the minute like this term for me I reckon I've taught nothing at all simply because I'm trying to do all these things and fit them in and all of a sudden its just one little thing. And to me its like…I just don't know what I've done this term.

The last thing that I want to do as a literacy educator is to add to the burden of teachers like John. And I would suggest that it should also be the last priority of any part of an education system that is truly dedicated to improving literacy teaching and learning. The textual analysis undertaken of the EYLP sheds some light onto the complex field in which John and other teachers are required to operate, and gives us some insight into the reasons for his frustration. In my research with teachers like John (Honan, 2004b), I work with them to highlight the exemplary and professional work they do on a daily basis. I turn again to Allan Luke and Peter Freebody who said about the four resources model:

> One of the strengths of the "four resources model" is that it attempts to recognise and incorporate many of the current and well developed techniques for training students in becoming literate. It shifts the focus from trying to find the right method to whether the range of practices emphasised in one's reading program are indeed covering and integrating a broad repertoire of textual practices that are required in new economies and cultures. The model, then, is a map of possible practices (Luke & Freebody, 1999)

Rather than introducing newer and narrower versions of literacy through the development of more and more complex policy documents that construct teaching as a technical skill, departments, policy advisers, and literacy researchers and academics could help teachers to highlight the possibilities of improving outcomes through engaging with such a 'broad repertoire of textual practices'.

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