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The visibility (and invisibility) of mobile students in literacy classrooms

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Background

Catering for student diversity and ensuring that all students have an opportunity to be successful literacy learners are widely recognised as essential elements of effective literacy education. The pedagogy of multiliteracies suggested by The New London Group (2000) emphasised that teachers "need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments and purposes that students bring to learning" (p. 18). In fact, there is a growing body of research-teaching projects (e.g. Comber & Kamler, 2004; Dyson, 2003; Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, 2002) that have taken up the challenge of working with diversity and finding ways to use children's 'differences' as resources for learning.

However, recognising 'difference' is not always as easy as it might seem. Indeed, some research has suggested that students' strengths in literacy learning can be invisible in classrooms (Henderson, 2007; Rennie, 2010). Thomson's (2002) metaphor of the virtual schoolbag offers a useful conceptualisation of this. She argued that all students bring to school a bag "full of things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live," but only some children have the opportunity to unpack the contents for use in their classroom (p. 1). If 'good' literacy teaching relies on teachers being responsive to students' strengths and weaknesses, then what teachers 'see', know and understand about their students becomes very important.

This paper analyses different 'readings' that were made of the same students within the context of an Australian primary school where enrolments fluctuated in line with the harvesting season on farms in nearby areas. The students were the children of farm workers who moved from location to location, crossed state borders and hence moved from one education system to another. On the one hand, they were identified by teachers as itinerant students who were not achieving in literacy learning as a result of the occupational mobility of their parents. On the other hand, it was recognised that the students' families had migrated to Australia, they spoke another language at home, and the children appeared to speak a different dialect of English from their class peers. In these complicated stories of 'difference' and diversity, it appeared that teachers' discursive constructions of the students helped to shape the pedagogies that were enacted, with both 'good' and 'bad' effects.

Research Questions

In light of the importance for teachers to be able to recognise students' "alternative starting points for learning" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005, p. 32), this paper investigates how teachers made sense of the itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners. It examines their discursive constructions of the children who changed schools regularly during the course of each year and it examines the pedagogical approaches that they used in relation to literacy learning. The paper addresses two particular questions: What meanings did the teachers make of the students' diverse backgrounds? How did these meanings influence teachers' pedagogical approaches and the students' chances of success in literacy learning?

Methods

The paper draws on data from case study research that was conducted in an Australian primary school. The data were collected during two six month periods, using ethnographic techniques. These included semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, classroom observations, and the collection of artefacts. The data are analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis based on the work of Fairclough (2001) and incorporates both textual and social analysis.

Frame

The paper is underpinned by a view of literacy and literacy teaching as social practice. Teachers play an instrumental role in the selection, construction and distribution of particular types of literacy, in socialising students into particular versions of the world, and in deciding what constitutes satisfactory literacy performance. This view of the world fits well with Fairclough's (2001) text-interaction-context model, which is founded on an understanding that language use is a form of social practice.

By identifying discourse as a three-dimensional concept and any discursive event as simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice and an instance of social practice, Fairclough's (2001) model of Critical Discourse Analysis incorporates three different types of analytical process: description of the formal properties of text, interpretation of the relationship between text and interaction, and explanation of the relationship between interaction and sociocultural contexts.

This approach to the analysis of data allows critical readings of how the children of itinerant farm workers were perceived and positioned within classroom contexts. In this way, the analysis enables a denaturalisation of the assumptions underpinning teachers' discursive constructions of the children and the pedagogies that were enacted.

Research findings

The study found that teachers' narratives about itinerant farm workers' children were predominantly negative and that the children were often constructed in deficit and stereotypical terms. The taken-for-granted assumption that an itinerant lifestyle impacts negatively on children's literacy learning meant that teachers attributed the children's difficulties to time missed at school and problems caused by changing schools, and they had low academic expectations of the children. Therefore, classroom pedagogy tended to promote compensatory teaching and reductionist approaches to learning.

An alternative reading was that the children's attempts at literacy learning were characteristic of learners for whom English was a second language. However, this reading did not seem as accessible to teachers. Indeed, this aspect of the children's literacy backgrounds was at times invisible to teachers. If the children had been framed in terms of bilingualism and second language learning, then different pedagogies may have been enacted.

New insights are offered into the ways that teachers 'understand' the literacy learning of particular children and the effects of these understandings on the pedagogies that are selected. The paper concludes that a reconceptualisation of children's literacy learning needs should take account of the social and cultural contexts of children and their families. These insights are important in a world where family mobility appears to be on the increase and there is growing pressure on teachers to ensure that all students are successful in literacy learning.