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From individual to group: changing discourses in the teaching of reading in England

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Background

For many years in England, the teaching of reading to children in the early-to-middle stages of primary schooling (5-11 years) was accomplished primarily by way of an individualised 'reading-to-the-teacher' routine, coupled with a system of 'taking books home' to read with family members. By the 1990s, this practice faced strong criticism, notably from Ofsted. The perceived need for change by policy-makers contributed to the conditions leading to the creation of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998, which established an expectation that teachers would adopt instructional (guided) practices based on reading in group contexts, rather than relying on individualised approaches. The very limited research literature available, however, suggests that the imposed shift towards the teaching of reading in a social context may have been implemented very unevenly by teachers; in particular, the opportunities for pupil learning inherent in the social group context appear to have been under-exploited.

Research Questions

The focus of this paper is therefore a theoretically and empirically informed discussion of issues in the transition from individualised reading tuition to group instruction which may have contributed to tensions and difficulties for those obliged to alter their practices.

Methods

The discussion which features in this paper derives from, and is illustrated by, in-depth case study research which explored how three teachers, all positively positioned towards guided group reading, conceptualised their practice. Data analysis focused on the teachers' commentary on video-recordings of their own lessons, complemented by data from interviews in which each participant reconstructed her own biography as a 'reading teacher'. All had experienced their own primary education in the era of individualised reading, and so had experienced the transition to group tuition at some point in their careers. The empirical data therefore illustrates how these individuals experienced and understood the pedagogic change, and what they saw as its challenges and its opportunities.

Frame

Moving beyond the empirical research base, the individual-to-group reading shift is analysed more broadly in terms of constructs derived from the social reproduction theory of Basil Bernstein (1996). Bernstein's conceptual partnership of 'classification' (concerning power relations) and 'framing' (concerning relations of control) provides a useful mechanism for considering principles of pedagogic interaction which operate at a less visible, more abstract, level than the observable behaviours of the discourse through which they are revealed. Importantly, these apply at multiple levels; teachers, as well as their pupils, are repositioned as pedagogic subjects in relation to the altered discourse. Reconfiguration of the discourse of the teaching of reading alters classification and framing relations, requiring a shift in what is understood to be normal - or even natural - by teachers: the 'rules' have changed, for teachers as well as their pupils. A Bernsteinian examination of typical features of individualised and guided reading practices, pre- and post-NLS, can be helpful in exploring the nature of the invisible tensions which may have created barriers for teachers required to jettison familiar practices in favour of others. Clearly this was not the case for all teachers, and insights from case study data demonstrate how some teachers adapted successfully to new ways of teaching. It is suggested that the nature of teachers' engagement in such a change impacts not merely on their

practice - whether gauged 'effective' or otherwise - but on how they reconstruct their identities as teachers of reading.

Research findings

Although the individual-to-group-reading transition occurred in most schools some twelve years ago, and may now appear historic, discussion of the associated issues has ongoing relevance. Firstly, anecdotal evidence suggests that many teachers remain unsure of their own role during guided group reading. Secondly, as policy-makers continue to spin the wheels of change in curriculum and pedagogy, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, it is essential that they consider the relationship between teachers' established practices, underpinned by often implicit ideological assumptions, and the intended innovations, with a view to some form of mediation which extends beyond mere 'training' or procedural guidance to scaffold at a deeper level teachers' reconstructions of pedagogy and their own positioning in relation to the altered discourse.

Bernstein, B. (1996) *Pedagogy, identity and control*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield