
Can shared understandings about the nature and purpose of second language acquisition and literacy learning enhance achievement outcomes for older NESB students?

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This paper is based on a study undertaken in response to the findings, nearly a decade ago, of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. The study demonstrated that the achievement gap in literacy in New Zealand between those learning in their home language and those who were not, at both 9 and 14 years, was the largest in a survey of 32 school systems throughout the world (Wilkinson, 1998).

Reports about lower than average levels of literacy achievement among Maori and Pacific Island children and those in low decile schools have caused considerable concern and debate in New Zealand since the survey was conducted. More recent research indicates that the situation has not substantially altered (Flockton & Crooks, 1996/1997, Education Review Office 1996).

New Zealand, at the start of a new millennium, is a diverse and multiethnic nation. In 2001 there are over 80,000 New Zealand Born Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students in New Zealand schools and, of these, a massive 72% live in the Auckland area (NZ Education Gazette, 3 May, 1999). This means that in New Zealand's largest city, the setting for the study, at least 30% of primary and secondary school students are said to be from a background where languages other than English are spoken. The majority of these students do not attract the extra funding for ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) support programmes but are dependent on the general levels of resourcing, school organisation, classroom management and the teacher's professional knowledge and skill for their achievement in formal education. This is a significant issue for schools at a time when budgets are stretched to the limit in order to resource and support an expanding curriculum and ever widening educational needs for students (Nicholls, 1999). At the same time the definitions of what language learning is, of what it means to be literate, of what should be included in programmes, how this should be taught and assessed and what teachers should

expect of their learners continues to raise considerable debate (McNaughton, 1999, Timperley, Robinson & Bullard, 1999).

The focus of this study are the older new immigrant NESB students in the upper levels of the primary school. While much is understood about emergent and early literacy processes in the junior school (Clay, 1991/1998,) and about second language learning in general (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000), the middle years of schooling are still relatively unaccounted both in terms of literacy theory and research (Henson, 1991, Education Review Office, 1997, Smith & Elley, 1997) and the effects of transition to a new language at this stage (Igoa, 1995).

At issue then is the way in which teachers of literate but non-English speaking students in the middle years of schooling proceed to maintain their student's first language, pace of second language acquisition and motivation to learn (Literacy Taskforce 1999, Wilkinson, 1998, McNaughton, 1999).

It is commonly held that an interactive and reciprocal relationship between teacher and students may optimise literacy and language learning. Ideally, this will occur when, "Sociological experience and individual functioning are fundamentally tied to one another and are, thus, companions in human behaviour and development" (Rogoff, 1991:329). The relationship is likely to be strengthened where there is interest in and respect for the differences brought to the classroom and a valuing of each student's contribution and unique linguistic and cultural perspectives. A commitment to collaborative or shared learning arrangements to promote problem solving, higher order thinking, advanced literacy skills and a capacity to work successfully within and beyond one's own cultural and linguistic boundaries are also thought to be prerequisites for achievement in language and literacy (Pressley, Rankin & Yokoi, 1996).

Sharing as part of the learning event in language and literacy learning

That shared understandings actually exist, or indeed need to exist between teachers and students for learning to take place is an assumption which may seldom be questioned by the classroom practitioner or challenged explicitly in the research

(Valsiner, 1988). That a more formal description and analysis of the construct may be shown to enhance effectiveness in language and literacy learning extends the research boundaries even further (Wertsch, 1991).

The notion of language and literacy learning as a shared and negotiated event fits comfortably within a sociocultural or social constructivist theory of development, (Vygotsky, 1978) and is based on an understanding that both culture and the social setting in which an interaction occurs is an important locus of and for individual cognition.

McNaughton (1995) suggests "...the child's construction of knowledge and, more broadly, the child's expertise in action is created first in and through social interactions" (p14). He describes how understandings are "co-constructed" through the socialisation of the learner into the meaning systems of the group. Classroom Literacy events are at once cultural, political, social and personal and as such provide sites for the transference (or transformation) of the values, beliefs and ideologies of the powerful. Without shared and negotiated understandings language and literacy learning might be seen as the imposition of the views, the texts and the practices of others (Delpit, 1988/1991). If a teacher's interaction fails to take account of a learner's prior knowledge, current level of expertise and appropriate next step in the language learning process, the result could be student resistance, rejection, manipulation or denial of the pedagogical processes accepted by the more powerful majority (Goodnow, 1996, Lankshear, 1994).

Cummins (1996) suggests a shared understanding between teachers and their NESB learners is of more importance than pedagogical strategies or techniques;

...fundamental is the recognition that human relationships are central to effective instruction. This is true for all students, but particularly so in the case of second language learners who may be trying to find their way in the borderlands between cultures (p.73).

With an interest in the role of negotiated understandings in second language learning and literacy development in mind I began my own observations and involvement in a local multiethnic year 5 and 6 classroom.

A particular focus was the extent to which classroom interactions provided opportunities for shared and negotiated understandings. I wanted to establish whether the teacher was open to the ideas and developing expertise of the novice or if there was an imposition of the expert knowledge, language and cultural position (Bernstein, 1971, 1990). The question became; “*Are classroom language and literacy events based on ‘understandings shared’ (provided) by the teacher or ‘shared understandings’ (negotiated) between teacher and students?*” In social constructivist terms, the focus is then placed on the intersubjectivity between participants and whether new learning about language and literacy appears on both the interpsychological and intrapsychological planes as internalised, transformational understandings or only at the level of enculturation by the teacher or expert other (Vygotsky, 1978, Rogoff, 1990/1991).

The classroom as a context for shared and negotiated understandings in language and literacy:

Context and Research Design

The year 5 and 6 classroom in which the research took place was within a low decile, inner city, multiethnic school where the majority of the students were of a non English speaking background and where seven children were recent migrants to New Zealand. The school was selected for the level of cultural and linguistic diversity demonstrated and for the reputation it has gained for transformative practices in multiethnic education, strong community relationships, parent support systems and an active approach to staff development.

The study, informed by the work of Yin (1994) lent itself to Case Study design and methodology. This approach places emphasis on the teacher as the key informant and permits the manner in which she orchestrates classroom interactions to become the “units of analysis” in a qualitative approach to research.

The study also involved an Ethnographic Microanalysis (Erikson, 1996) which focused on the form and meaning of interactions within the classroom as a “partially bounded setting” (p298). Though part of the wider world the classroom can be viewed as having a distinct culture of its own where social identity and situational co-membership form a common learning and communicative environment. This, Erikson argues, is a boundary as opposed to a border because the teacher has the power to influence the nature of the culture and the forms of language used, to select the factors which may impose an effect from beyond or within the classroom and to determine the acceptance or otherwise of these factors. This construct becomes an important focus for the framing of the study and may, in the end, permit the findings to be validated in their generalisation to other settings.

I proposed to demonstrate through such measures as participant observation, ongoing formal and informal interviews, self reports, dialogue journals, questionnaires, inter observer agreement and informal assessment procedures in oral and written language, how the multiple layers of meaning could be peeled back to reveal the nature and purpose of the programme. I wanted to understand the nature of the interactions, the roles participants assumed, the form and structure of the literacy events as well as the day to day developments (as opposed to formally assessed outcomes) in language learning and literacy that emerged as a result.

The setting and participants:

Mrs Grace's Room 29

In Room 29 there were 30 students, 20 boys and 10 girls aged between 9 and 11 years, from 12 different cultural groups and speaking as many different home languages. They were drawn from a school catchment area which is also culturally and linguistically diverse.

The seven 9, 10 and 11 year olds selected for the study included Ashok from India, literate in Hindi and learning Punjabi and English, Tahrima from Bangladesh already biliterate in both Bangla and English, Abdi from Somalia who had not previously had any formal literacy education, Marco from Bulgaria whose transition to English began with a year spent in an English speaking International school in Cyprus, Dimitri from Russia, shy and withdrawn and already reading in English at a level commensurate

with his chronological age, Salim from Iran, determined to speak only English and be a “New Zealand kid” and, finally, Sione, a New Zealand born Samoan, the youngest in the study and a child confident in both the Samoan and English languages at school, at church and in the playground.

The timetable as a framework for analysis

The timetable of the midmorning literacy block provided a predictable framework for the students and teacher and a constant baseline for the investigation.

Each session began with Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) or Shared Reading. Texts selected for both approaches were often related to the focus topic (“Birds” for example) and for the specific vocabulary or key concepts they contained. The new ideas and words generated would often feature next in the spelling session.

This multi grouped spelling programme was conducted every day and relied on parental support and involvement through a negotiated contract which all parties had signed. Each session was brief but permitted a whole class “mini lesson” to be taught and a related, group based task to be completed. A feature was the teacher’s didactic and very explicit attention to formal grammar and spelling.

The “instructional reading block” came next at about 11.15am. A “tumble” or rotation system was used which allowed Mrs Grace to meet with all five instructional groups for Guided reading or Reciprocal teaching over a two or three day period. Students who were not working in the focus group with the teacher would be engaged in independent or small group literacy tasks. At noon the whole class regrouped for a shared response to the texts read and tasks completed during the reading rotation. The teacher expected each child to account for their independent activities while she used this time to develop or showcase oral language skills and protocols. The last 30 minutes of the programme were for theme and topic work, this often closely linked to the shared and guided reading that had preceded it and integrated across the curriculum. Of importance to this part of the morning session was the development of independent and group based study or research skills.

A Summary of the Results:

Negotiating shared understandings about curriculum content, pedagogy and evaluation: The selection, organisation and pace of learning.

Formal educational knowledge can be considered to be realised through three message systems: curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realisation of this knowledge on the part of the taught (Bernstein, 1971:203).

Bernstein's framework (1971, 1990), permits an effective method by which to analyse the manner in which the teacher and students negotiated and sustained shared understandings in the language and literacy programme. When these three categories were used to orient the data five significant themes emerged: forms of classroom organisation, rules and roles adopted for teaching and learning, the negotiation of language and identity, the impact of explicit and metacognitive pedagogical practices and the integration of content knowledge and literacy events across the programme. Each of the themes revealed a developing pluralistic conception of language and literacy practice as it occurred within the bounded setting of Mrs Grace's classroom. While these themes described the curricular, pedagogical and evaluative processes it also became clear that the social forces operating provided an interesting and possibly even more significant overlay to the shared understandings and their effectiveness for achievement in language and literacy. The social markers of gender, ethnicity, language, status and ability and their manifestation in compliance or resistance were evident within each of the themes above.

Organisation:

The structure and climate for learning

The organisation of the language and reading programme revealed a negotiated system of behaviour management, on task application, an expectation of high quality outcomes and of effective time management. These expectations were seen to be both a collective and individualised responsibility. Consistency of the routines, behavioural protocols, the vocabulary of instruction and predictable teacher responses

were reported by the children as factors which help them to feel secure and confident in the programme (self reports, April-November, 1999). Each child was grouped and regrouped for different purposes and achievement targets or goals were set for each of these purposes. Transitions between the different components of the session were brief. Several of the thirty students on her roll had been placed in her room for the purposes of behaviour management and at times the needs of these students presented a significant challenge. She insisted on, and nearly always achieved, a “professional” tone in the room where the emphasis was on the tasks at hand and the negotiated “reasons we come to school”. Again these factors were reported as “significant” by the NESB students in their approval of the classroom environment (self reports, April-November, 1999). She sat alongside the children as she was working with them and spoke very quietly so an air of confidentiality was maintained. She usually carried a checklist of achievement objectives to track progress and to target individuals about whom she had concerns. At times the students themselves referred to or added to this data as they worked towards the completion of a unit of work.

Creating a Shared Culture for Teaching and Learning:

Negotiating classroom rules

The culture of the classroom was shaped to a large extent by a school wide policy commitment to the “Quality Schools” approach developed by Glasser (1992/1993). This involved whole school professional development and close collaboration with the families and wider school community. The impact of this initiative was apparent at once; student and teacher negotiated “rules” were displayed prominently in the classroom and referred to on a regular basis. The commitment of the teacher and learners to their negotiated rules and roles was manifest in both social and academic interactions. The classroom culture was generally warm, inclusive and productive. When a break down of the shared understandings occurred, it was resolved with reference to the collective agreement. This in itself assisted the NESB student’s vocabulary development, time on task, quality of interaction and comfort in the classroom environment. Abdi, still in his first year of schooling after arriving from Somalia the previous year, saw the rules as very beneficial;

They (sic) rules are the most important things. They are much better than anything. They do everything for you to keep you doing your work...I only

came in this class this year and now she doesn't need to help me. I don't need any helps (sic) now (Interview, 3 August, 1999).

Later he described how the rules extended to the social protocols of the classroom, *...you've got to know the rules in the classroom like putting your hand up, respect other people's belongings. I didn't even know how to put my hand up and I'd speak while other people were talking!* (Interview, 22 August, 1999).

Marco, however saw the rules as less helpful.

Here you get into trouble because there are too many rules and...the kids all go whoo! But the kids aren't as mean here and a bit friendlier (Interview, 11 August, 1999).

The rules and roles, while explicitly acknowledging respect for others and specifically a “respect for difference” also served to create a classroom culture of “sameness” in that every child quickly learned how to act within the group without drawing attention to his or her own unique cultural or linguistic background. This may be an issue for children in this pre adolescent phase of social development, where, as Evans (1996) suggests, students are keen to minimise the visible aspects of gender, ethnicity, language and ability. It was significant too that each of the NESB students saw the prescribed classroom “roles” as exceedingly important in prescribing and maintaining their comfort and status in the classroom.

While Mrs Grace described to the children her role as teacher and her commitment to helping the NESB children in particular to,

settle into the new environment, make friends to communicate (by organising mother tongue buddies) and to provide opportunities to speak English with other children and myself, surround them with written and oral language, support their learning and promote and accept their first language and encourage it's use.

The students variously saw her role as

“her job to find the right groups”: “sort out the buddy system”; “to know how good kids are at reading”; “to teach kids to do good reading and writing”; and “to teach us new things not old things like we already know like the first man on the moon” (self report data, 31 May, 1999).

For most children the teacher’s diversity awareness became central to the transition they were making from schooling elsewhere to the approaches to language and literacy typically encountered in New Zealand primary school classrooms.

Language and Identity:

First language maintenance and the pace of learning

An issue at this level of the school is the pace of transition and second language learning required if students are to enter the intermediate and secondary systems equipped to cope with the academic and cognitive demands of a wide curriculum. Although Mrs Grace acknowledged the need for the pace of learning to be balanced with the motivation to learn, her concern was the time and sheer amount of English language learning needed for the NESB children to catch up and then keep pace with the mainstream English speakers in the class. For this reason Mrs Grace placed a great deal of emphasis on developing a sense of personal responsibility and independence in her students. She demanded a high level of individual accountability but worked hard to make the criteria, the challenges and the assessment of a task explicit to the students.

Two findings of interest began to emerge from the data. Firstly, the oral language of the classroom was consistently focussed on the topic although the teacher appeared to be tolerant of personal conversation when it did occur. She spoke regularly of being committed to a highly communicative environment and indicated in her practice a willingness to allow children opportunities for informal talk. She recognised the need for NESB learners to practice their developing language skills in a range of contexts and for a range of purposes. She viewed the programme as one intentionally designed to be interactive, discussion based and demanding of a full contribution from every child.

Abdi's comments provide a rationale for this communicative classroom environment;

The hardest thing is speaking it (English). That's like if you didn't speak it you can't read it, you couldn't write it. You don't know what they say. You can't! (Interview, 24 August, 1999).

Cultural identity, where practicable, was meshed with the processes and content of the curriculum. The children were actively encouraged to talk about their experiences and points of view and to assume the role of expert where appropriate. For example, the teacher used Sione's expertise in kilikiti (Island cricket) to lead a small discussion group to record a description of the game. Another time Ashok was asked to introduce a story about Indian food with which he was familiar. On both these occasions however, the authority the teacher had vested in the students was challenged by other English speaking students who blocked the boys from making the contributions the teacher intended they should. Sione reflected on the rejection of his ideas when he said,

(they) are greedy...like they won't let other people talk and stuff...I don't mind that sort of group work to help us learn so you can say what you want to say and other people can say and you learn. I'd rather it was mixed so girls, they can work good with boys (Interview, 31 May, 1999).

Mrs Grace was not defeated in her effort to create experts among her NESB learners though;

The more they are asked the more confident they become at sharing and the more they want to share. The sharing in small groups ...is less threatening. Teacher interest is a major factor in their success. Sione sits with a group who are monocultural but hopefully with more input from the other children from other cultures their views may change (Dialogue journal, 31 May, 1999).

English was clearly dominant as both the medium of instruction and for the social discourse of the classroom. Although school policy emphasised the empirical and affective importance of first language use and the teacher actively encouraged it, very few children during this study were seen or heard to be using their mother tongue.

Only two children in the study, Sione and Tahrima, reported the importance of using mother tongue in the classroom. While Tahrima spoke at length about her pride in the Bangla language her family worked hard to maintain at home she was opposed to the use of it at school:

*If you live in an English country you should always keep your mother tongue.
It's something extra that you have that makes you proud*

but she understood that other NESB students in the classroom ...

want to fit in , not stand out, but blend in. If they don't blend in they look like a loner. If they stand out they might get liked or not but if they blend in no one notices or cares. Some people like the new people don't want to stand out
(Oral questionnaire, 15 September, 1999).

In this respect Sione, a New Zealand born Samoan, was the exception in the study. He discussed the importance of his first language in the family's involvement in church activities as well as his willingness to use his oral and written Samoan language skills at school when appropriate. He commented;

It's good to speak English but you need to speak Samoan to be able to speak to your friends...You understand the words in Samooan and it might help in English. The language helps the other language (Interview, 24 August, 1999).

Salim, on the other hand spoke of his embarrassment at having another language and an accent. He was observed on several occasions trying to remain unobtrusive in group discussion lest he be asked to contribute. He also avoided drawing attention to his heritage and appeared to be very uncomfortable when asked to share his experiences of this, preferring to watch and listen to discussions of this kind. Dimitri too preferred to listen;

By listening to other children's questions and how they say the words make you able to speak English normally. It's best done ...by listening to other children and how they say the words. But other children can help with ideas too (Interview, 15 September, 1999).

The children have indicated both explicitly and implicitly their desire to be “like everyone else” and in middle childhood this seems to become increasingly important. The children’s reluctance to use the mother tongue may reflect their age, their prior knowledge of first language and their prior experience of schooling in general.

Two aspects of this are of interest; First, Mrs Grace understands her students need to conform and the pressure some have to meet parental expectations to learn to speak English. Secondly she is willing to modify her own beliefs and even the policies of the school to accommodate this. She was frequently observed working hard to promote cultural identity and to manipulate the content of the literacy programme to “showcase the special cultural features” of the minority groups while not insisting on their using mother tongue in the classroom.

At some stage over the year Mrs Grace would ensure each student would have his or her identity made visible and important through the topics, texts and learning experiences she provided. Within the context of guided reading texts or a read aloud book she would ask individuals to discuss experiences relating to their homelands, make comparisons and share key words from their language as they related to the context of the study.

Unless there was a stated commitment to first language maintenance by the students or their families she was willing to accept this “cultural identity” approach as a compromise to her own pedagogical viewpoint, working harder to strengthen the English the students needed to make pace within the mainstream programme;

I have to assume that pace and depth plus questioning assists me to move them forward...they need the vocab to communicate proficiently, not only with their peers but with other people too...I establish their programme first in oral language...I like it when they are talking and collaborating because the language is being used, especially for children like Abdi from an oral background. I like an environment where kids can communicate...the whole thing is talk (Interview, 8 June, 1999).

Whether these children would have made a more rapid transition to English given more opportunities for first language instruction remains, in this context, a moot point.

Making Learning Explicit:

Teacher modelling and direct instruction

A key feature of the pedagogy to emerge from the observations was the very explicit manner in which skills, and what the teacher considered to be important understandings about learning, were taught to the students. An important method used to make strategy use explicit in Mrs Grace's classroom at language and reading time was teacher modelling. She provided the learners with an "expert demonstration" of a skill or a strategy and accompanied this with a "think aloud", a commentary on what she was doing and why. This was usually a whole class session and related to tasks or topics everyone was involved in. Generating ideas for writing, brainstorming vocabulary, demonstrating maps or diagrams and setting out features were often recorded on the whiteboard. Some children would then begin their work independently while others, the NESB children often among them, would remain with the teacher for further work or conferencing. This is not the shared and negotiated learning of the other pedagogical structures evident in this classroom but a teacher led learning arrangement where the balance of power in the relationship was significantly, albeit temporarily, altered. The learners, however, accepted this part of the programme as Mrs Grace's area of expertise in the same way that she acknowledged theirs in other contexts. The newer NESB students appeared to enjoy the familiarity of this approach. It was, they said, much more like school in their homelands. The focus though was not so much on a didactic approach to content knowledge as on making explicit the metacognitive strategies and processes employed by successful readers and writers. Perhaps as a pedagogical approach it defines the teacher's belief in particular forms of literacy skills or understandings that must be controlled and delivered in a systematic fashion and not left to the discretion of a more integrated, incidental and negotiable approach.

Once again the students reported that English had to be the priority in their primary schooling. The teacher appeared to recognise and assist this in the explicit way she

delivered understandings about the English language and the metacognitive strategies that underpin not only decoding but comprehension of text. While this form of teaching may run counter to the interactive and experiential approaches of a more integrated code she viewed it as a fast, effective way to address writing and reading processes,

It's (a process) specifically for the NESB children. I suppose it's a reinforcement for giving instructions and sequences so they get the visual as well as the aural. They also see what my expectations are before starting their work. I'm not sure where I picked this up from, probably a junior teacher (Dialogue journal, 26 May, 1999).

She saw the modelling as particularly important,

If I didn't model a lot of them would wonder what was going on. It makes it clear, makes a sequence...It gives them security...it extends vocab and reading and sets them up for success (Interview, 4 August, 1999).

She believed that for the NESB students this more expository style of teaching was critical to the pace of learning needed for them to get ahead. Delpit, (1988) makes this same point;

I have come to conclude that members of any culture transmit information implicitly to co-members...I contend it is much the same for anyone seeking to learn the rules of the culture of power. Unless one has the leisure of a lifetime of 'immersion' to learn them, explicit presentation makes learning immeasurably easier (p283).

Integration of the Language Programme:

Pulling oral, written and visual language together: Theme and topic studies.

In the last phase in the morning timetable, "topic time", major themes and topics were introduced and developed through direct teaching or shared experiences and completed as group or as independent tasks. Understandings about a field of interest were mediated by the teacher, peers and texts and by the nature and the purpose of the learning activities themselves. What was really important for the language and

literacy development of the NESB students was the way in which this part of the programme was integrated across the curriculum framework. Science, Social Science, Health and Well Being and The Arts were used to frame the learning and to make links with the curriculum in English. This allowed for the more fragmentary language skills, understandings and content knowledge developed previously to be practised and extended in context with a real purpose and for a real audience. The teacher and her planning team worked with care to hold concepts, new knowledge, skills, key vocabulary and the forms of assessment and evaluation constant and relevant across the curricula for this block of time. This is consistent with what is understood to be best practice for the NESB learners who appear to need repetitive exposure to new vocabulary and predictable forms of language support for rapid access to the content of the wider curriculum (Cummins, 1989, 1996). Mrs Grace comments;

(The topics) can be focussed on at this time of the day but linked to what we are talking about in all the other areas as well. It helps to get through the curriculum, a chance to revisit the content or the vocabulary. I can pick up on something in their reading groups, it can be thematic and I can use it in writing for homework. I can backtrack making sure they understand
(Interview, 22 August, 1999).

The heterogeneous groupings often required the students themselves to take responsibility for the content of learning in a particular area where they were knowledgeable. This generated another opportunity for the use of provisional authority vested in those with the expertise or experience. The children were encouraged to draw on the expertise of their peers and to use “table time” as an opportunity for task related talk.

The teacher was assiduous in her attention to the task in progress, individual and group conferencing and to the marking afterwards. Again her methodology was overlaid with a clear commitment to the cultural identity of the individual as well as an expectation of his or her commitment and responsibility to the group as a whole. Shared understandings were borne of classroom interactions and linked to all points of a continuum between collective and integrated approaches. At times the sharing was

in the form of a “giving out” of expert knowledge and at others it took the form of a collaborative “construction” of understanding. The teacher’s strength was in her ability to recognise that for the NESB students any approach that provided for the development of intersubjectivity or shared understanding was invaluable for the promotion of rapid and effective language learning and literacy development.

Discussion:**Shared and negotiated understandings: Outcomes for language and literacy learning**

A negotiated understanding of the importance of dialogue in interaction - a social constructivist perspective where the origins of knowledge and knowing are seen to reside in social interaction and where learning proceeds *between* individuals with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other characterise this programme. The ideal would see new knowledge internalised as the transformed, reconstructed and unique understandings *within* the individual (Rogoff, 1990, Vygotsky, 1978, Wertsch, 1991, Valsiner, 1988).

This study investigated the nature and purpose of these shared understandings and the relationship of them to enhanced outcomes for language and literacy learning. This meant establishing the extent to which these were “understandings shared” (by the teacher for an enculturating effect) or “shared understandings” (negotiated and reciprocal as evidence of a more transformative approach) as manifest in the interactions and shared construction of meaning in the activities of the midmorning reading and language programme (McCarthy, 1994).

The children reported that the culture of the classroom was at first very different from that they were used to and for some, notably Ashok and Dimitri, both new and shy, formidably challenging. Later however, this culture of shared understandings, responsibility and independence can be seen to become the bulwark for their confidence and a framework for rapid access to the mainstream.

The success of the approaches used and the shared understandings which emerge as a result seem to lie in the interactions and the dialogue taking place in a “noisy

classroom” and in the delegation of authority for expertise to the person who knows the most about a particular topic - not always the teacher.

With two exceptions, Sione a New Zealand born Samoan, and Abdi from Somalia who had no previous formal schooling, each student in the study reported entering the New Zealand classroom from schools where the teacher was in charge and children were quiet. Their descriptions suggest more tightly framed transmission or expository systems of learning (Bernstein, 1971, 1990) where teachers hold the authority for knowledge, pedagogy and assessment. While we have no way of establishing the veracity of the children’s comments they had been prepared in basic reading and writing skills and understandings in their mother tongue. None, however, were fully prepared for the levels of interaction, independence and personal responsibility demanded by the pedagogy of this classroom.

Becoming a member of Room 29 meant a quite different approach to learning and teaching. Here, while the assigned authority still rested with the teacher in a conventional manner, provisional authority for specific areas of expertise was negotiable (Peters, 1973). Difference was viewed as a point of interest to be made visible and cultural and linguistic identity was not to be compromised. Behaviour and time management systems and attention to individual roles and classroom rules were understood to be a shared responsibility. Evaluation, assessment and goal setting were viewed largely as a collaborative process with explicit outcomes to be set for both individual and collective future learning and the overall goal, and one made explicit by the teacher, was for their development as independent and effective speakers, readers and writers.

Cummins (1996) has described models like Mrs Grace’s classroom as “intercultural orientations (where) the micro-interactions between educators and students form an interpersonal or interactional space within which the acquisition of knowledge and formation of identity is negotiated” (p144). Mrs Grace’s knowledge and understanding of the learners and the wide pedagogical repertoire she drew on lends veracity to Wilkinson’s (1998) suggestion that, “In large measure, factors that

moderate the achievement gaps in reading literacy are those that reflect teachers' capacity to handle diversity" (p162).

Negotiating identity and maintaining self-esteem

While the teacher tried hard to encourage and even to manipulate opportunities to ensure the student's lives and languages were included and reflected in forms of content and organisation there was a tacit reluctance evident in the way the students responded to this expectation. It appeared not to be a defection from the culture of the classroom or from their loyalty and respect for Mrs Grace but an effect combined of parent expectations that English should be the currency of the classroom and the desire of some children to be like "everyone else" at this pre-adolescent stage of their lives.

Although first language maintenance is a stated school policy and a goal for Mrs Grace's own curriculum content there was little evidence of it on a day-to-day basis. The acceptance of peers seemed to be a compelling reason for some of the NESB students to adopt the culture and language of the mainstream group. Mrs Grace was understanding and accepting of this and responded by making cultural identity an important part of content and process. That this was a successful strategy for literacy success is a moot point. The learners appeared to accept Mrs Grace's selection of texts and topics uncritically and seemed to be resigned to accepting the provisional authority for expertise when required.

This may be consistent with the views of Goodnow (1996) that if a task has no perceived social or personal value, non-compliance or ignorance becomes an acceptable response but challenges Cummins (1996) assertion that resistance is a likely response to exclusionary practices rather than to the inclusive approaches practiced by this teacher.

In spite of these factors (or even perhaps because of them) each child in this study lifted his or her reading and writing levels of achievement up to or beyond their

chronological level and within the curriculum level anticipated. These largely positive outcomes for literacy achievement were not only vested in the teacher's assigned authority and knowledge but in her ability and willingness to distribute expertise for learning and teaching to her students. Each member of the class had to be prepared to give and receive a "share" of knowledge and expertise in the manner described previously. In Room 29, share was actively defined as both a noun and a verb; the former as the portion a person gives or receives from a common amount or commitment and the latter as a giving out or having, to participate in, to divide and distribute, to give away part of, in the manner described by Cole (1991).

The culture for learning was based on a collective approach to both definitions of the word. While sharing itself was not often referred to in a concrete way, the structures of the classroom and the manner in which it operated indicated the complexity, the difficulty and, ultimately for this setting, the success of shared understandings in action. As McCarthy (1994) suggests, children in classrooms may just be doing what they think they should be doing and the shared understandings the teacher has negotiated may in fact be an enculturation of the learner rather than the cognitive transformation or "appropriation" (Rogoff, 1990) of a socio-cultural point of view.

Given these constraints of a very small sample, the study has extended the research boundaries at this level of the school in a limited manner. Much is yet to be done. At the surface level the construction of shared understandings appear to have assisted the participants to establish a degree of intersubjectivity in their work and in the culture of the classroom. That this has had a positive and ongoing effect for the language and literacy achievement of this small group of NESB students remains a further project. It becomes necessary to track the intersubjectivity established to the point of intrasubjectivity (Vygotsky, 1978) where dialogue and interaction is transformed to become the unique, highly personalised and internalised response to the language and literacy supports provided by others (Rogoff, 1990, 1991).

Of interest are the challenges faced by these learners at a critical and frequently very challenging stage of their broader intellectual, physical, social and emotional

development. What is the relationship of this to second language acquisition and literacy achievement?

Herein lies, I believe, the next investigation. That this should occur is of critical importance as teachers strive to narrow the gap between the mainstream and NESB learners in the middle levels of the primary school. Classroom interactions will always confound neat classification. While this setting reflects the challenges within the ongoing political debate in literacy education it also points to a range of philosophical, theoretical and practical orientations which may cast new light on the transformative possibilities of language and cultural diversity for the literacy development of all our learners.

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