

How cultural models about reading mediate classroom (pedagogic) practice

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Received 6 April 2006; received in revised form 18 June 2007; accepted 28 July 2007

Abstract

This paper shows how cultural models mediate children's 'Discourse about reading' (in Gee's sense), which is considered as a boundary object between the community and school. An empirical case study of the stories of 7- and 8-year-old children, in conjunction with classroom ethnography show gendered positioning in a Discourse about reading, which marginalised boys' participation in reading. It is argued that cultural models may provide the essential tool for analysing the sociocultural impact of outside communities on educational participation and outcomes. Activity Theory informs an analysis of classroom pedagogic practice, which illustrates how cultural models about reading, largely drawn from children's Discourses of reading outside of school, mediated classroom pedagogic practice.

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Keywords: Primary; School mix; Cultural models; Activity Theory; Discourse; Reading

1. Introduction

As children step into life in the classroom, they encounter *pedagogies*, pedagogic cultures and their corresponding Discourses (Gregory, Williams, Baker, & Street, 2004, p. 86). They also, collectively, bring to the classroom Discourse knowledge that is constructed within practices of everyday life when away from school. Researchers have argued that the socialisation processes in which children are engaged have a strong influence on the ways in which they participate in the pedagogical routines of school classrooms (e.g. Comber, 1993; Hicks, 2002; Luke, 1997). Hicks (2002, p. 2) states that since 'the forms of action and knowledge that children embrace are strongly tied to the identities that emerge from family and community contexts. Conflict can arise between an institutional system aligned with middle class practices and the life world of working class students in particular'. She explains this has a particularly negative impact on poor and working-class children's daily struggles within a middle-class educational system. However, whether or not the social practices of children can systematically influence classroom pedagogic culture has been the matter of some debate, and frequently has been contested, especially in school effectiveness research.

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However, over the last decade, even research in school effectiveness has nudged towards an acknowledgement of the influence of sociocultural circumstances in classroom practice; although relatively few in this field have embraced sociocultural theoretical perspectives wholeheartedly there are some exceptions (e.g. Borich, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Metz, 1990; Thrupp, 1997, 1998; Willms, 1992). Thrupp (1998) has claimed that it is the social class composition of schools that is decisive in the sociocultural production of qualitatively different conditions for the daily operation of classroom practices. This he terms a ‘school-mix’ effect. Borich (1996) reported qualitatively different effective practices regarding the teaching of literacy for schools in areas of low and high social class. More recently, Lauder, Robinson, and Thrupp (2002) found that schools where more than 50% children are in receipt of free school meals may indeed evolve different pedagogies than the majority of schools. This they put down to the tension between the sociocultural influences on children and the culture of schools as institutions.

The intention behind the recent work on compositional effects is to *model* learning outcomes in relation to the collective make-up (the composition) of the children in a classroom or school; understanding how children learn together as a group in a classroom will be crucial to the interpretation of such studies. Compositional effects research promises to yield significant new knowledge about teaching and learning. This is mainly quasi-experimental research, incorporating follow-up case studies to aid interpretation; however, across all fields where classroom pedagogic culture has relevance, the theorising of classroom practice as a socioculturally produced local practice has not kept pace.

This paper shows how children’s identities about reading emerge largely from practices in their outside-school communities, but impinge on their participation in school, and hence in the negotiated classroom practices that result. The relevant theoretical model that supports this interpretation is that cultural models (Gee, 1999; Strauss & Quinn, 1997), evidenced in Discourses that mediate classroom practices, may provide the essential tool for analysing the sociocultural impact of outside communities on educational participation and outcomes. Activity Theory informs an analysis of classroom pedagogic culture, which illustrates how the cultural models about reading mediating children’s Discourse about reading became embedded within classroom pedagogic practice.

2. A framework for identity in classroom practice

Identity processes are no longer seen as connecting individuals in homogenous or fixed ways; our identity work is never ‘done’, it is always ‘on-going’ (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Although a person’s identity is not determinable, the meaning making involved in identity work is mediated by the Discourse and practices of people’s social activity systems (Engeström, 1995). Talk about identity in social terms does not deny individuality but views the very definition as something that is part of the practices of specific communities (Holland et al., 1998).

Hence, ‘a recursive relation between children’s identities as pupils and classroom pedagogic culture is assumed, enabling a view of children’s meaning making as embedded in their social and cultural milieu’ (Gregory et al., 2004, p. 86). As Rogoff (1990, p. 89) says ‘this involves a relation between the individual and their social and cultural environments in which each is inherently involved in the other’s definition. None exists separately’. It is this dialectical perspective of identity/practice that gives impetus for this paper. Situated human creativity exists not despite, but because of social structures and concrete activities (Marx, 1887) which are framed by particular tools, social rules and division of labour (Engeström, 1987; Engeström & Cole, 1997; Leont’ev, 1978). ‘From a social practice perspective, it is through cultural practices as people ‘do life’, through their Discourses and practices, that social identities are constructed’ (Nasir & Saxe, 2003).

Identity is considered in two ways, by examining (a) children’s participation in the pedagogic classroom activity and (b) their positioning in relation to reading. For participation in classroom activity, I draw on Gee (1999). ‘When language in use is melded integrally with non-language ‘stuff’ to enact specific identities and activities’, Gee (1999, p. 24) refers to this as Discourse with a big D (p. 7). The ‘other stuff’ is distinctive ways of thinking, being, acting, interacting, believing, knowing, feeling, valuing, dressing and using one’s body. It is also distinctive ways of using various symbols, images, objects, artifacts, tools, technologies, times, places and spaces. Ways of participation in pedagogic practice are taken as the enactment of a particular Discourse or Discourses. Gee’s Discourse provides the analytical connection between identity and pedagogic practice.

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