

Looking at literacy learners: Making sense of observations

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Teachers' observations of students in literacy classrooms have long been regarded as important components of 'good' literacy teaching. Nevertheless, recent research has argued that the 'lens' that is used to view students as literacy learners can make a considerable difference to what is seen. Drawing on data from a study that investigated the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children, this paper considers narratives told by two teachers about a middle-years student in a North Queensland primary school. In showing the contrasting meanings assigned by the two teachers to the one student, this paper highlights the importance of thinking beyond what has been seen and considering the meanings that are given to teachers' observations, as these may have important consequences for students' literacy learning.

Observing literacy learners

Observations of students and what they do during literacy learning has long been proclaimed a mainstay of pedagogical practice for literacy learning and part of classroom assessment practices (Clay, 1993; Ruddell, 2006; Winch, Johnston, March, Ljungdahl & Holliday, 2004; Wyatt-Smith, Castleton, Freebody & Cooksey, 2003). It would appear, though, that the take-up of understandings of literacy as sociocultural practice has resulted in a shift of thinking about the notion of observing students. Some research studies have highlighted different perspectives from which students have been observed, showing how different researchers have seen different 'things' even when they were viewing the same class in the same classroom (e.g. Luke, 2003; Reid, Kamler, Simpson & Maclean, 1996).

Likewise, teachers and researchers sometimes either 'see' differently in classrooms or make different interpretations of what they are seeing. This was highlighted in research by Malin (1990a, 1990b). Although not focusing specifically on literacy learning, Malin demonstrated how the normalisation of particular sociocultural practices can result in some practices being 'visible' and others 'invisible'. Her study

showed that three Indigenous students were generally invisible to the class and the teacher when demonstrating ‘the considerable competence which they had developed in their previous four years at home’, yet they were visible to the teacher and the class ‘almost exclusively when being spotlighted for “doing the wrong thing”’ (p.312).

As has been argued elsewhere (e.g. Henderson, 2004; Hill, Comber, Loudén, Rivalland, & Reid, 1998), a lens analogy provides a useful way of thinking about the perspectives that are taken when observing students in classrooms and about how those perspectives impact on the interpretations that are made. Just as photographers use lenses to frame their subjects, teachers’ choice of ‘lens’ can determine what they see and the meanings they give to what they see. Hill, Comber, Loudén, Rivalland and Reid (1998) argued that a ‘wide lens’ is warranted for viewing literacy learning and literacy learners. If it is recognised that ‘literacy is not first and foremost an individualised and individual competence or skill, but consists of socially constructed and locally negotiated practices’ (Luke, 1997, pp.144-145), considerations of literacy should move outwards from the ‘individual student’ to include the contexts within which literate practices occur. As Comber (1998) argued, a consideration of contextual factors foregrounds what is generally understood as the ‘background’, including ‘socio-economic *background*, family *background*, poor *background*, cultural *background*, minority *background*, linguistic *background*, and so on’ (p.3). A view of students that incorporates contextual factors accepts that ‘young people’s life-worlds and experiences are by no means “background” in their access to and take up of educational provision and school literacies’ (Comber, 1998, p.3).

One of the advantages of using a wide lens is that it offers a way of ‘seeing’ the cultural and linguistic resources that students bring from contexts outside of school to school-based literacy learning. Instead of focusing narrowly on the putative deficits of culturally and linguistically diverse students, a view using a wide lens incorporates contextual factors and facilitates a view that recognises differences-as-productive-resources for literacy learning. Furthermore, this approach has the potential to expand pedagogical possibilities for working with students from diverse backgrounds (Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, 2002; Janks, 2004; Volk & de Acosta, 2001).

I have previously reported how the literacy underachievement of two brothers of Tongan descent, whose parents were itinerant farm workers, was explained by teachers with reference to the family's itinerant lifestyle (Henderson, 2004). In contrast, as I observed the boys during literacy lessons and collected samples of their writing, I was convinced that the boys were exhibiting the characteristics that Gibbons (1991) associated with the English of bilingual students. However, when the boys' teachers were asked about this aspect of their literacy learning, it was apparent that they had not considered this possibility. As I pointed out in the earlier paper, this was not an example of teachers doing a bad job by using the 'wrong lens', but it was illustrative of the effects of using different lenses and of the challenges of making sense of student diversity.

Something that has always worried me about that example was that it highlighted a teacher's perspective in opposition to a researcher's perspective, as indeed had Malin's (1990a, 1990b) report of her own and a teacher's readings of the three Indigenous children. This paper, then, attempts to move beyond the potential for a teacher-researcher binary, by investigating a situation where two teachers reported on the same student in very different ways. The purpose for doing this is not to pit one teacher against another or one view against another, but to consider how the same student can be socially and discursively constructed in different ways. Such an approach opens up the potential for reflection on what these constructions might mean for pedagogical considerations in the classroom. Whilst the teachers' narratives reported in this paper are quite restricted in scope, they raise interesting questions about how teachers make sense of students in their literacy classrooms, about the links between teachers' observations and their pedagogical decisions, and about the effects of those decisions on students' literacy learning.

Contextualising the narratives of two teachers

This paper considers the narratives told by two teachers about Mustafa, a boy of Turkish descent, who was enrolled in a middle-years class in a primary school in North Queensland. The data is drawn from a study that investigated the social and discursive construction of itinerant farm workers' children as literacy learners. The study focused on a school in a North Queensland town, where large numbers of farm workers arrived annually to harvest the winter vegetable crop. At the time of data

collection, Mustafa's parents were employed on a farm in the district surrounding the town where the school was located. His parents were not 'permanent' farm workers, but they had decided to travel to North Queensland for consecutive winters, thereby combining visits to relatives with periods of working holiday. The family's usual place of residence was in a town approximately 2,500 kilometres to the south in Victoria.

The school in this study experienced annual student enrolment fluctuations in line with the harvesting season. With the arrival of up to 60 students during the winter months, it was not unusual for a new teacher to be employed and for classes to be re-organised, in order to comply with regulations for maximum class sizes. Whilst teachers within the school found this situation frustrating, it was the re-organisation of classes – and Mustafa's subsequent move from one class to a newly-formed class – that allowed the collection of the data reported here.

The data were collected during the family's second visit to the north and the second time that Mustafa had enrolled at the North Queensland school. Mustafa's parents were concerned that he had not coped well with changing schools in the previous year and requested that he be allowed to 'repeat' a year level. The school complied with this request and Mustafa was placed into Teacher 1's class where the children were one year younger than he was. Three months later, when so many itinerant farm workers' children had enrolled at the school that an additional class had to be formed, Mustafa was one of the students moved into the 'new' class. Mustafa's 'new' teacher, Teacher 2, was transferred into the school to teach the newly-formed class.

Teacher 1: Narratives of personal, family and lifestyle deficits

Teacher 1 recognised that Mustafa was ahead of other class members in some aspects of literacy learning, although comments about Mustafa's strengths were generally qualified by his being a year younger than the rest of the class. For example, Teacher 1 explained that:

He was good at composition ... and strung together some pretty good little articles and stories and recounts and things like that ... I don't need to put the rider in that he was a bit older and he was performing well in the class. And

he was pretty good at articulation, so he was a talker and good at expressing ideas ...

I don't think his reading was that flash ... He could get away with not working very hard because he was a year older , because he'd done [the work] last year ... and a lot of the stuff he finished fairly quickly and then wanted to move on to something else ... it was just annoyance that he called out like that.

The teacher described reading as a particular area of weakness in Mustafa's development as a literacy learner. When I asked why that might have been the case, the teacher attributed Mustafa's low reading ability to family deficits, suggesting that Mustafa's parents were providing limited experiences with print materials. Teacher 1 said:

Well he mightn't be exposed to much written material at home, might spend a bit of time in front of the box instead of reading. His parents mightn't supply him with any reading books. His only reading might be at school, so that would slow him down. It might mean that his parents aren't helping him choose books in English. If they're not shooting down to the library to get books themselves, because there's probably not many Turkish books in the library here.

Teacher 1 went on to suggest that the family's itinerancy played a role in Mustafa's less than satisfactory performances in reading, saying that:

Because they're itinerant, I imagine what they bring is what they can fit in the car. So you don't bring your library, if you fill one up.

Teacher 1 also implied that the parents neglected Mustafa's reading by allowing him to watch too much television and play too many computer games and by not helping him to choose books for reading in English.

And then, you know, like so many kids, I think he's into computer games and TV and stuff like that, not reading.

It was noticeable in Teacher 1's talk that most of these comments were speculative, based on suppositions that helped to weave stories about the presumed deficits of Mustafa, his family and their itinerant lifestyle. In particular, Teacher 1 used the family's itinerancy and Mustafa's age as explanations of Mustafa's behaviours and poor performance in reading. The teacher's views seemed to be founded on assumptions that home book reading in English was essential for success in reading at school and that Mustafa's parents were deficient by not providing the necessary experiences and resources. In focusing on what Mustafa's parents 'mightn't' do, the teacher implied that they were not engaging in the normative activities that the teacher believed would ensure school literacy success for their son.

Teacher 2: Narratives about 'a really good boy'

As explained earlier, school enrolments grew to such an extent that a new teacher was brought into the school. After three months in Teacher 1's class, Mustafa was moved into the additional class that was formed, taught by Teacher 2. This class was a composite class and comprised students from Mustafa's year level and students who were one year ahead and therefore of the same age as Mustafa.

It quickly became apparent that Teacher 2's constructions of Mustafa were very different from those of Teacher 1. Mustafa remained in this class for approximately six weeks, until the harvesting season began to finish and his family departed North Queensland and headed south to their home in Victoria. In an interview with Teacher 2, immediately after Mustafa's departure, the teacher described him as 'a really good boy' who achieved at the 'top of the class'. Teacher 2 continued:

Mustafa was a delightful boy. I really miss him ... His English was very good. A couple of little idiomatic things that he said incorrectly, but his reading, oral reading was excellent, comprehension was excellent. He took a sort of outstanding part in the class to answer questions.

Teacher 2 also praised additional effort that Mustafa put into his schoolwork:

Written work, I sent one of his books up to the office so he could get a sticker for it, because it was so beautifully done, for a Bush Christening, when he wrote out the poem. And often he used to say on the weekend, can I do some extra work and is it all right if, instead of writing four stanzas from the poem, can I write the whole lot? And he'd bring it in on Monday with everything done and a special printed heading as well. I didn't see any problems with him at all.

At all times, Teacher 2 made positive statements about Mustafa and his attempts at literacy learning. Indeed, Teacher 2 described all of the itinerant students in her class positively and talked about their experiences of mobility as being 'more challenging, more stimulating', providing 'a more interesting life', and developing attributes that were useful in the classroom. In particular, she regarded the itinerant students as 'mature', 'very capable', 'really keen to work', 'very independent', and having the 'best manners'. The departure of the itinerant students was framed in terms of personal loss – 'I really miss him' (in relation to Mustafa) and 'I'm very sorry to have seen them go' (in relation to all of the itinerant students who had been in her class). In the context of the school where I collected data, deficit discourses about itinerant farm workers' children were prevalent and positive descriptions, such as those presented by Teacher 2, were unusual.

Looking but seeing differently

Even though Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 were looking at the same student, Mustafa, they told different narratives to explain his literacy learning in the classroom. Despite recognising that Mustafa was doing quite well in some aspects of literacy learning, Teacher 1 highlighted Mustafa's weaker capabilities in some aspects of literacy and his perceived inappropriate classroom behaviours, framing most of the talk about Mustafa and his family in deficit terms. In contrast, Teacher 2 spoke positively about Mustafa, his literacy learning and his classroom behaviours.

The narratives offered by Teacher 1 to explain Mustafa's literacy learning reflected the stories about itinerant farm workers that circulated in the community in which the school was situated. These stereotypical stories, which suggested that itinerant farm workers were neither 'good' citizens nor 'good' parents, were possibly the basis for

the commonsense understandings and expectations that many teachers seemed to have – that the children of itinerant farm workers would exhibit poor classroom behaviours and achieve poor school results. It appeared, however, that Teacher 2 refused to go along with these stories and was able to make resistant readings of Mustafa and other itinerant farm workers' children. Teacher 2's readings of the itinerant children seemed to disrupt the deficit discourses that were so prevalent within the school and community contexts.

Nevertheless, it appeared that both teachers had looked at Mustafa through a lens that focused on itinerancy, with Teacher 1 identifying the negative effects of being itinerant and Teacher 2 arguing that an itinerant lifestyle provided challenging and stimulating experiences that were not always available to residentially-stable students and were useful in the classroom context. Although 'looking' at the same student, the two teachers presented quite different readings of itinerancy and its relationship to literacy learning.

Deficit logic that blames children and their families for literacy underachievement locates 'the problem' in the background, outside the school setting and beyond the control of teachers. Such views tend to be constraining, limiting pedagogical approaches to those that attempt to 'fix up' students like Mustafa. On the other hand, approaches that use students' strengths as productive resources help to expand the pedagogical possibilities for working with students from diverse backgrounds and are therefore more likely to be successful (Gutiérrez et al., 2002; Janks, 2003; Volk & de Acosta, 2001). Indeed, the data suggested that Teacher 2 successfully foregrounded Mustafa's background (Comber, 1998), identified positive attributes as potential starting points for literacy learning, and engaged Mustafa in literacy learning within and beyond the classroom. Unfortunately, however, the departure of Mustafa's family prior to the school's end-of-year testing period meant that no official records were kept of his literacy achievements in Teacher 2's class.

This single example has demonstrated how the meanings that teachers give to their observations can play an important role in classroom practice and in a student's literacy learning. It provides a reminder of how necessary it is to be aware of the assumptions that underpin observations of students and to think about the meanings

that are made of those observations. The intent of this paper has not been to consider whether one teacher was more successful than the other at engaging Mustafa in literacy learning. Instead, it has been to encourage reflection about the often-taken-for-granted practice of observing students and to begin the challenging task of considering pedagogical possibilities for enabling all students to be successful in school-based literacy learning?

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