The Queensland Year 2 Diagnostic Net and teachers' explanations of literacy failure

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Abstract

This article reports research into the ways that early childhood teachers in three schools used narratives of blame as part of their theorisation of literacy failure in relation to Queensland's Year 2 Diagnostic Net. The teachers' narratives clustered into three groups: blaming families, blaming children and explanations that moved beyond blame and focused instead on teaching. However, despite the range of explanations, all of the teachers in this study based their pedagogical decisions for literacy failure and intervention on a deficit model of literacy learning. It is argued that a reconceptualisation of literacy that views literacy as a social practice might assist teachers to rethink intervention in the early childhood classroom.

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<u>The Year 2 Diagnostic Net</u>

In Queensland state schools, the Year 2 Diagnostic Net is a mandatory

screening procedure aimed at enhancing early age prevention, identification and

intervention of literacy and numeracy difficulties. The Year 2 Diagnostic Net was

introduced into Queensland schools in 1995, following the extensive review of

Queensland school curriculum that became known as the Wiltshire Report (Wiltshire,

McMeniman, & Tolhurst, 1994).

In brief, the Year 2 Diagnostic Net requires all early childhood teachers in

Queensland state primary schools to use "an explicit way of mapping children's

progress through observation" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1995b,

p.1) in reading, writing and number. Teachers use a "common framework"

(Queensland Department of Education, 1995, p.1) for recording this information and

for identifying children in Year 2 who require additional support in specific areas.

Once children have been "identified," government funding is allocated to schools for

intervention programs.

In literacy, teachers map the progress of all children in Years 1, 2 and 3 using

Reading and Writing Developmental Continua that are based on Western Australia's

<u>First Steps</u> program. These materials reflect "a developmental view of teaching and

learning" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1995a, p.2) and have been

described as being consistent with a whole language view of literacy (van

Kraayenoord, Luke, Elkins, & Land, 1999). Although there would appear to be some tensions between this assessment process and the Queensland English Syllabus for Years 1 to 10 (Queensland Department of Education, 1994), which is based on a context-text model of language in use, recent research on the use of the Reading Developmental Continuum in four Queensland schools found that teachers spoke positively about its use as a framework for monitoring children's progress (Young & Fletcher, 2000).

Theorising Literacy Failure

Literacy education is a contested domain, historically, theoretically and in current practice. Although literacy understandings and pedagogies have varied over time, they can be clustered into three families of approaches (Luke & Freebody, 1997). Traditional understandings about literacy have been described as skills-based approaches and are associated with pedagogical practices that emphasise skill, drill and memorisation. Progressivist child-centred approaches theorise literacy as the active construction of meaning and are associated with pedagogical practices that develop psychological and cognitive processes within individuals, whilst cultural-critical approaches represent understandings that literacy is a social practice, defining literacy in terms of socially and culturally constructed practices and recognising that group membership – in relation to children's socio-economic, Indigenous, ethnic, non-English speaking or rural backgrounds – can be an indicator of success in literacy (e.g. see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, 1998; Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995; Luke, Lingard, Green & Comber, 1999; Queensland Department of Education, 2000).

Classroom pedagogies reflect the different ways that teachers' beliefs and the understandings that they may have about literacy are translated into classroom practice. Although controversy over pedagogy seems to have been played out predominantly through a polarised debate between traditional and progressivist approaches, the situation is in fact quite complex. Indeed, it has been argued that teachers' approaches to literacy teaching are generally eclectic (e.g. Manning, 1995; Mountford, 1996; Whiting, 1992) and that teachers are more likely to draw on "traditional and older theoretical and discursive positions" (Kamler, 1994, p.13), even when they know about more recent approaches (Threadgold, 1997). This situation may be amplified in early childhood contexts. Makin, Hayden and Diaz (2000) found that teachers and non-qualified staff working in early childhood facilities lacked an understanding of literacy as a social practice and tended to hold traditional views that privileged book-based literacy.

Not surprisingly, teachers theorise variations in student achievement in a variety of ways, depending on their beliefs about literacy and literacy learning. Traditional and progressivist approaches, although conceptualising literacy learning differently, tend to focus on psychological, cognitive and social differences amongst students. When these frameworks predominate, the problem of literacy failure can easily be located in individual children or in their home backgrounds. This way of conceptualising literacy failure leads easily to a deficit discourse, with children or their parents being blamed for individual learning problems, a knowledge gap, or an impoverished home or social background.

Hatton, Munns and Nicklin Dent's research on educational achievement in three schools that were designated as disadvantaged found that deficit discourse was often the only explanatory framework accessed by teachers (e.g. see Hatton, Munns, & Nicklin Dent, 1996; Nicklin Dent & Hatton, 1996). Other studies have also found that teachers consistently focus on deficit characteristics in their explanations of literacy failure (e.g. Freebody, Ludwig, & Gunn, 1995; Hill & Crevola, 1998; Tancock, 1997). From within such a discourse, the solution appears simple. When there is a perceived deficit, compensatory measures seem appropriate for "fixing up" children's problems. As Cambourne (1992) explained, "one simply takes steps to ensure that the learners who are deficient are given a large dose of whatever it is that they're deficient in" (p.61).

In contrast to narratives like these that focus on individual children, families, communities and their deficiencies, other explanations for literacy failure have been offered. Even though some of these approaches locate a learning problem in the child (e.g. Cambourne, 1992; Clay, 1993), there have been attempts to swing the focus away from deficit explanations. Instead, teacher actions have became the focus, so that the answer to children's difficulties lies in creating a better learning environment (e.g. Cambourne, 1992) or refining teaching procedures to ensure student success (Clay, 1991; 1993). However, despite the focus of these approaches, their main purpose remains the enhancement of individual children's progress in literacy learning. In this way, the structures and characteristics of school and schooling remain unquestioned and are not implicated in the failure of some children to become competent in the literacy practices that are valued by school communities.

Cultural-critical approaches offer another way of talking about literacy, conceptualising literacy as a social practice and focusing on the ways that particular literacy practices disadvantage specific social groups. This conceptualisation recognises that children's membership of particular social groups – in terms of gender, class, socio-economic status, ethnicity or geographical location – can be a predictor of success in literacy. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that particular social groups are performing consistently at lower levels than other groups (e.g. see Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, 1998; Freebody et al., 1995; Luke et al., 1999; Queensland Department of Education, 2000).

From this viewpoint, literacy can no longer be seen as a simple process or as a set of neutral skills (Luke & Freebody, 1997), but it is instead identified as an ideological practice that varies in certain settings and for particular purposes (Baynham, 1995; Luke & Freebody, 1997). This view offers new ways of explaining literacy success and failure. Instead of focusing only on the attributes of individuals, questions can be asked about which particular literacy is being valued and whose standards are being used for making judgements about success and failure (Kempe, 1996; Wyatt-Smith, 1998). In this way, schooling, teaching and curriculum practices are opened up for investigation, thereby providing a broader range of explanations than was previously available.

Because children come from different backgrounds where different literacies and different literacy practices are used and valued (e.g. see Heath, 1982, 1983; Luke & Kale, 1997; Malin, 1990), this approach focuses on difference rather than deficit. Children are conceptualised as "differently literate" (Dudley-Marling & Murphy,

1997, p.464) and it is understood that children are enfranchised and disenfranchised according to a range of social and cultural constructions. Whilst deficit thinking views membership of particular social groups as the cause of deficiency, this approach acknowledges that members of different social groups have been socialised into different discursive practices and may come to school with cultural resources that are different from those that are valued at school (Gee, 1991, 1996).

Instead of seeing children from non-mainstream families as deficient, a cultural-critical approach recognises children's diversity and attempts to show how the under-performance of children from disadvantaged groups may be explained. Advocates of this approach suggest looking through a "wide lens" to examine literacy within its cultural, institutional and interactional contexts (Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivilland, & Reid, 1998, p.13).

This broader view offers a sociological explanation of school literacy performance (Lingard, 1998) and allows not only a reconceptualisation of literacy, but it also suggests a way of rethinking intervention. Instead of focusing on the symptoms of failure in individual children, it provides opportunities to critique school literacy practices and to identify the extent to which they privilege particular cultural and class groups (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Dudley-Marling & Murphy, 1997) or create barriers to equitable learning outcomes (Henderson, 2001). This opens up a wider range of possibilities for explaining literacy failure and for challenging current school practices. Some teachers and schools have been taking up this challenge, working on whole school-strategies to examine school structures, curricular and pedagogies (e.g. see Lingard, 1998) and focusing on classroom strategies that build on

the strengths that children bring to school (e.g. see Comber, 1999; Luke & Kale, 1997).

The Study

This study set out to investigate the ways that teachers theorised children's failure in early literacy learning in three schools in North Queensland. Because the teachers had to make decisions about the nature of the literacy intervention for children identified by the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, the study focused on the form of intervention that teachers and schools preferred and practised. The practices and procedures of intervention seemed a useful place to document teachers' understandings, assumptions and beliefs about literacy, literacy teaching and literacy learning.

The three schools were located in coastal rural areas of North Queensland, drawing their student populations from the town in which each school was located and the surrounding farming areas. Ferndale State School was a large school with approximately 700 students, Seagrove State School was a medium-sized school with an enrolment of 300 students, and Wentworth State School was a small school with only 30 students. The schools were located in low socio-economic and isolated areas, so had received additional funding through the Special Programs Schools Scheme and the Priority Country Area Program.

At all three schools, children were "identified" by the processes of the Year 2 Diagnostic Net. At both Ferndale and Seagrove, almost 40 per cent of the Year 2 cohort was identified in reading and approximately 10 per cent was identified in

writing. At Wentworth, all three of the Year 2 children were identified in reading although none was identified in writing.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a two-year period at the three schools. Initially, Year 2 teachers were interviewed. Year 3 teachers joined the study as the cohort of Year 2 children progressed into Year 3. The principals at the three schools were also interviewed, as were the key teachers, whose duties were to ensure that Year 2 Diagnostic Net processes were carried out and that teachers had adequate training in those processes. The interviews investigated teachers' beliefs about the causes of literacy failure, changes that had been made to classroom practice as a result of Year 2 Diagnostic Net results, and intervention programs.

Teachers' Stories

Although teachers' stories about literacy failure were varied, they clustered into three groups: those that blamed families, those that blamed children, and those that moved beyond direct blame towards focusing on what could be done to provide effective intervention.

Blaming families.

At all three schools, there appeared to be a common-sense belief amongst teachers that lack of home support was a direct cause of children's poor development in reading and writing. At Ferndale and Wentworth State Schools, however, the teachers' stories were strongly critical of families. They identified parents as being directly responsible for the difficulties experienced by children in literacy learning.

At Ferndale, poor parenting was quickly and readily identified as a cause of literacy failure. In discussing the difficulties experienced by some children in literacy learning, one teacher explained that

> Generally I think it's because they haven't had a lot of books read to them at home. They don't get a lot of support from home.

The key teacher agreed:

> The issues are that they don't have books read to them from an early age. I am convinced that a lot of the children that we identify are children that are so far behind in their literature skills anyway than the rest of the class.

The teachers' beliefs about the role of home experiences in literacy learning seemed to lead them into a deficit discourse, thereby assigning blame for children's lack of success to families and to the nature of home literacy experiences provided by parents.

In contrast, the home lives of children not identified by the Year 2 Diagnostic Net were described in more positive terms and an ongoing relationship between school and home was identified as being important to children's opportunities for success at school. For example, one teacher said that

> The children who are getting the help from home, I can see that they're really improving and they're getting the help at school then the help at home and

then they come back to school and we do the work in class, so they're really improving.

It seemed that home support and reading to children by parents were equated with "good" homes and hence children's successful literacy learning, whilst lack of support and no reading by parents were linked to "bad" homes and children's literacy failure.

Stereotypical discourse seemed to dominate teachers' discussion at Ferndale and teachers labelled children as coming from either bad or good homes or as having bad or good parents. The teachers suggested that bad parents watched television whilst good parents read books, wrote, and played board games with their children. Bad parents had money worries and personal problems and, by implication, good parents were problem free. Bad parents talked "at" and "over" their children, whilst good parents talked "with" their children.

Issues of socio-economic status and social class also seemed to thread through the teachers' discussions. The bad homes appeared to be those of poorer families, whilst good homes seemed to equate with middle-class possessions, values and attitudes. The teachers linked poverty and low socio-economic status with unsatisfactory parenting behaviours, inability to cope and lack of responsibility for children's literacy learning. One teacher explained that, in her opinion, some parents were

also struggling week to week with their own lives that I think that sometimes their children are a bit much for them to handle, with all the financial pressures that they're under.

The socio-economic stereotypes that became evident throughout the teachers' interviews appeared to represent the teachers' common-sense assumptions about successful and unsuccessful literacy learners. Unsuccessful literacy learners came from poor homes, where "their environment and lack of literature" put them "five years behind" other children, thereby causing deficits in literacy learning.

The teacher and principal at Wentworth State School also assigned blame to children's families. The principal disapproved of what he considered were family values regarding education:

> I think perhaps in a community like this one, one of the major, major concerns that we've got is the lack of parent support at home with regards to how they value reading and writing and basically how they value education.

He went on to say that "quite a number of them themselves struggle, struggle academically with literacy and numeracy" and, as a result "they can't provide the home-base type tutoring that a lot of families can provide and that causes a big, a big concern for us."

At Wentworth, parents' lifestyles were also blamed for the literacy difficulties experienced at school. The key teacher linked "not very great" family backgrounds to

literacy problems and limited vocational opportunities. She seemed to assume that the parents would not encourage their children at school, because the children would eventually work on local farms, and that school was unimportant to these families. As a result, the failure of children to achieve was accepted as predictable.

Blaming children.

At Ferndale and Wentworth State Schools, the teachers also told stories that attributed blame to the children who did not achieve in literacy learning, thereby locating deficiencies in the children themselves. When talking about "identified" Year 2 children, a teacher at Ferndale explained that

A lot of those children don't verbalise very well. They don't vocalise and they find it hard to organise their thoughts . . . I found it very hard to motivate them at times . . . They don't know how to organise themselves for learning . . . They still haven't got those skills in place.

In contrast, the successful children were "interested and keen to learn." The teachers seemed to classify the children into two polarised groups, stereotyping them as either successful or unsuccessful. Success in reading and writing was linked to intelligence and motivation, whilst lack of success was linked to lack of intelligence and lack of motivation.

At Wentworth, the classroom teacher described the children as being weak in character, unenthusiastic, not coping with change, tense about learning and not being independent enough. The key teacher and the principal also identified personal

characteristics that, in their opinions, prevented some children from achieving in literacy learning. They suggested that "some kids aren't as bright as others" and "I have a strong belief that their maturity and their self-development has a big bearing on their learning." It seemed that differences amongst children were accepted as natural and helped to explain why some children achieved and others did not.

Moving beyond blame.

However, at Seagrove State School, the teachers told stories that were less critical and negative of children's families and the children themselves. Although the teachers described the children as missing out on aspects of literacy learning and commented that particular family lifestyles were sometimes detrimental to children's progress at school, they seemed to accept the variety of lifestyles that existed and talked about them in a non-blaming way. For example,

Some of the children won't, don't take readers home and things like that and it must make it really hard for them. And I think there are also quite a few parents that can't read and write, so of course that doesn't help . . . and a lot of working parents I suppose.

There's a whole wide range of things varying from developmental stages that the child's in themselves, their home backgrounds . . . their language backgrounds, their attention spans . . . all the things that come into the whole child . . . many many reasons . . . and you can have . . . twelve or thirteen children that have problems, for just as many reasons.

Rather than blaming parents, the teachers tended to talk about ways of trying to overcome the learning disadvantages that might be caused by particular transient and economically-difficult lifestyles. Much of the teachers' talk about parents and their involvement in children's schooling was positive. In their interviews, all of the teachers at Seagrove mentioned particular parents and gave specific examples of communications with parents and their involvement in their children's learning. For example,

> I thought [child's name] needs as much help as he can get, so his mum comes in as well, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday afternoon, to just sit with him and do some writing and reading.

However, despite attempts by the teachers at Seagrove State School to avoid stories of blame, deficit discourses became apparent in teachers' suggestions for parental involvement in school practices. These seem to indicate the wider deficit discourses that circulate about families in poverty. The key teachers' explanation about the need to educate parents, for example, constructs parents as needing to adjust and correct their home practices to suit school requirements:

> I think we need to never stop educating parents about how important it is to read to their children and keep that kind of information in our newsletters and in our notes home to parents and to emphasise how big a help that simple task can be.

Intervention Practices

At the three schools, intervention was implemented in similar ways and consisted of two major strategies. The first intervention strategy was the employment of teacher aides to work one-to-one with identified Year 2 children. This strategy operated at school level and was organised by the key teacher. The second strategy operated at classroom level and comprised changes to individual classroom programs.

The employment of teacher aides was paid for by the intervention funding provided by Education Queensland for children identified by the Year 2 Diagnostic Net. Although schools were free to choose the nature of the intervention, they were required to spend 90 per cent of funding on the employment of human resources.

In all three schools, the funded intervention was a compensatory strategy that worked on the premise that literacy difficulties were located within the children themselves. Such an approach is not surprising, since the dollar value provided to schools for intervention was directly linked to the number of children identified by Year 2 Diagnostic Net processes. The linking of funding to "identified" children, along with the specification that most of the funding would be used to employ human resources, constrained the pedagogical choices that were available to schools. In effect, these limitations legitimised the provision of intervention for individual children and dissuaded schools from investigating other explanations that might have implicated school and/or systemic practices in the underperformance of some children.

The three schools used the funding to operate <u>Support-a-Reader</u> and <u>Support-a-Writer</u> programs that gave one-to-one teacher aide support to identified children in

withdrawal situations. All of the interviewed teachers spoke positively about these programs. For example, teachers said that:

[Intervention is] totally under-rated. I think it should be advertised in every newspaper across the land.

Intervention for me has been the most positive constructive step – <u>Support-a-Reader</u> and <u>Support-a-Writer</u> – that I've seen in my teaching career, in oh something like seventeen years.

The perceived successes of the <u>Support-a-Reader</u> and <u>Support-a-Writer</u> programs no doubt reinforced teachers' views that they were useful and appropriate strategies to use. Their praise seemed a logical extension of their beliefs that help and support were lacking in the children's homes. Teacher aides were seen almost as surrogate parents, providing "daily, every day, five days a week intervention" in a "one-on-one relationship" with the children. This was also the case at Seagrove State School where the teachers were less critical of parents and families, as is shown by comments from the key teacher:

That's something else that has come out, that children that are having trouble learning to read aren't practising the reading skill and don't have people to listen to them read. So that's been a big bonus of <u>Support-a-Reader</u> and <u>Support-a-Writer</u>.

The second strategy used was the establishment of intervention programs in individual classrooms. This varied in both magnitude and type from school to school and from classroom to classroom. Teachers in a double teaching space at Ferndale State School, for example, decided to stream their two classes into a class that comprised the identified children and some "borderline cases," and a class of children who had not been identified. The class of "identified" children was given a program of basic skills, drawing on traditional skills-based pedagogy, whilst the other children were given a "more advanced" and creative program, that was closer to a progressivist child-centred approach.

This strategy of separating low achievers from the other children seemed reminiscent of a classic remedial withdrawal approach. Not only were the low achievers denied access to the "really interesting" program that the high achievers enjoyed, but they had been highlighted as a visible group and were given structured, repetitive and predictable activities that even the teacher described as "dull." It was no wonder that the teacher said that the program "didn't capture their imagination and make them want to say 'Yeah I want to read.'"

At Wentworth State School, the teacher appeared to base intervention on the traditional skills model of literacy. She regarded literacy as a finite set of skills that needed to be taught until children had acquired them. Her approach to classroom intervention involved repetitive and intensive teaching, aimed at overcoming the children's deficiencies:

Constantly just running through the strategies all the time with them and so that it sort of becomes stuck in their brains . . . They need help. Let's get on with it.

At Seagrove State School, classroom intervention seemed to focus on the provision of as much individualised instruction as possible, with teachers drawing from a mixture of traditional skills-based and progressivist child-centred approaches. Whilst the teachers had talked in non-blaming ways about the causes of literacy failure, it was obvious that, like the teachers in the other two schools, they also based their pedagogical decisions on a deficit model. For example, one teacher introduced a phonics program that she believed was effective:

It's working. And I'll follow that through right to the end of the year . . . with some of the kids . . . And I don't know how that happened. I don't know how they missed their sounds and their blends.

Although this teacher seemed to focus on remediating the problems experienced by individual children, she argued that they should neither be blamed for their difficulties nor separated from other children in the class:

I have got such a broad spectrum of kids, from the incredibly advanced and you feel you have to extend them, to the plodders and strugglers. And I didn't want to have a classroom where I had a division and where the kids perceived themselves as being dumb.

Another teacher argued that intervention was the role of teachers, because

Teacher aides, you know, as wonderful as they all can be, still don't have the

expertise of good teachers and the background of good teachers that comes

with experience.

For that particular teacher, the employment of teacher aides to provide literacy

intervention was a compromise. However, she recognised that teachers' duty of care

made it difficult for them to provide one-to-one intervention, as they are always

responsible for the whole class.

Conclusion

Teacher data from this study suggested that teachers theorise literacy success

and failure by drawing upon a range of discourses and that this results in varied and

often inconsistent and contradictory beliefs and understandings about literacy. Even

though the teachers' interviews contained references to a range of explanations and

understandings, a dominant way of talking about literacy seemed to operate in each

school. At the three school sites, the dominant talk appeared to transcend the

individual characteristics of teachers, whose teaching backgrounds in terms of

experience in different sectors, teacher training and years of teaching experience

varied considerably.

The teachers built narratives to explain their understandings about the causes

of literacy failure in children identified by the Year 2 Diagnostic Net. At Ferndale

and Wentworth State Schools, the teachers tended to locate blame for children's

literacy difficulties in families and in children, whilst at Seagrove State School the teachers seemed to focus on ways of achieving the goals of intervention rather than being directly critical.

The teachers at Ferndale and Wentworth focused positively on the families they regarded as having provided acceptable home circumstances, appropriate home values, and home support that complemented school learning. These families were described in normative terms and provided the basis from which to judge other families. Teachers focused negatively on families who did not provide their children with "appropriate" literacy experiences, understandings and skills. By polarising families into "good" and "bad", the teachers stereotyped families, linking family characteristics including their socio-economic status to literacy achievement.

Whilst research has found that it is not unusual for teachers to offer deficit explanations (Freebody et al., 1995; Hill & Crevola, 1998; Tancock, 1997), the teachers at Ferndale and Wentworth seemed to extrapolate their beliefs into expectations that children should bring particular background experiences to school. Families that modelled literacy behaviours and immersed children in literacy events in particular "real-life" contexts appeared to meet teachers' expectations. The teachers applauded homes where children played board games, read literature and had literature read to them, whilst they criticised homes where children supposedly watched television or played electronic games.

As a result, certain types of home experiences were given privileged status over others. There appeared to be no consideration of the possibility that children could

come from homes that are "differently literate" (Dudley-Marling & Murphy, 1997, p.464) or that mainstream practices may have become normalised. Teachers at Ferndale and Wentworth offered only one possible explanation of the relationship between low socio-economic status and literacy underachievement. To them, the relationship was a causal one and the consequent blaming of families for children's literacy difficulties was a common-sense conclusion that fitted their observations and their data.

Even at Seagrove, where the teachers had not engaged in a discourse of blame, teachers operated within a normalising perspective of literacy. Although their dominant talk was different from that at the other two schools, intervention in all three drew upon pedagogically similar practices. All still operated on a deficit view of literacy learning, a view that was reinforced by the funding and intervention agendas imposed by the school system and by wider discourses regarding poverty and its effects on families.

Whilst the use of institutionally-approved intervention programs, such as <u>Support-a-Reader</u> and <u>Support-a-Writer</u>, was praised by teachers, it is possible that the implementation of a limited range of intervention strategies may have negative effects. Packaged literacy programs such as these may in fact deter schools from considering whole-school change or from developing culturally-appropriate strategies that acknowledge community literacy practices and work towards engaging all children in classroom literacy learning opportunities (Lingard, 1998; Luke & Kale, 1997; Luke et al., 1999).

Many of the teachers in this study implied that traditional skills-based instruction was the most appropriate teaching for children experiencing difficulties in literacy learning. Indeed, intervention at classroom level generally focused on programs that involved repetitive routines and activities relating to letters, sounds, words and sentences. The teachers claimed that the low achievers had missed out on learning basic skills and that didactic, skills-based teaching was necessary to overcome this deficiency. However, the teachers' tendency to focus on code-breaking activities was not reinforced by the Reading or Writing Developmental Continua, which focus on observable behaviours that contribute to children's attempts at making meaning.

At all three schools, teachers seemed to assume that structured and repetitive teaching-learning situations provided desirable, if not essential, instruction for children who were unsuccessful in literacy learning. Although teachers demonstrated an eclectic approach to teaching strategies, they generally focused on traditional skills-based approaches for low achievers and progressivist child-centred approaches for high achievers. There was no evidence of teachers' drawing on cultural-critical approaches to literacy learning. The eclecticism of teachers seemed restricted to the older and more traditional discursive positions, as has been noted by Kamler (1994) and Threadgold (1997).

In the current study, teachers appeared to be confined by approaches to literacy that maintain an inherently narrow perspective focusing on and foregrounding individuals. By locating school literacy failure in the children themselves and directing their attention to the cognitive and technical aspects of literacy, teachers had

access to only a limited range of intervention options. Regardless of whether teachers used narratives of blame or not, the obvious remedy for literacy difficulties seemed to lie in "fixing up" the children.

In contrast, a wider view of literacy, that recognises that it has social as well as cognitive and linguistic dimensions, allows a broader range of explanations and offers other possibilities for intervention. Such an approach gives teachers the means to look beyond what is wrong with individual children towards investigating the ways that school, curriculum and teaching practices may advantage some groups and make the underachievement of other groups of children so predictable (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998). In opening up institutional, social and cultural practices for examination, other ways of conceptualising the causes of literacy failure become available. With a broader understanding of literacy learning, teachers should be better able to cater for the diverse range of literacy learners with whom they work.

Views of literacy that focus on individual children can mask the relationship between poverty and school literacy achievement (Comber, 1998) and make it difficult to conceptualise that taken-for-granted schooling practices or curriculum could be implicated in children's literacy difficulties. If schools are serious about working towards equitable literacy outcomes, then there is much work to be done, work that Alloway and Gilbert argued is "conceptually demanding" (p.259), especially when contextual factors, such as current political agendas, limited funding or inadequate resourcing, can be quite constraining. Both whole-school and classroom approaches are needed, to allow opportunities for teachers to make sense of the differences that children bring to school (Luke & Kale, 1997), to unpack their own

assumptions about children, families, poverty and other issues (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998), and to problematise and work against vocabularies, texts and narratives that help to marginalise specific groups of children (Comber, 1997, 1998, 1999).

However, for a reconceptualisation to be successful, teachers would probably need to be convinced that this approach will not shift blame for literacy failure to teachers and schools. Teachers need to be reassured that this is not about shifting blame, but about focusing on and interrogating the broader social and cultural structures of the institutions of schooling and society in general. Whilst this idea is not a new one (e.g. see Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; Comber, 1999), it offers teachers a wider range of explanations of literacy failure and increases the options for preventing literacy difficulties and for enhancing literacy learning.

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