<center>**Diversity matters: Some reflections**</center>

<center>**Robyn Henderson** | University of Southern Queensland</center>

Introduction
When I was asked by the editors of *Literacy Learning: the Middle Years* to write about diversity, I felt that I had been asked to write about a topic that was core to my thinking about literacies research and the teaching of literacies. Like many people who have worked in education for a long time, I have seen ideas and innovations come and go, policies and mandates change, and curriculums reviewed and replaced, but diversity is a key and always present aspect of education and it is important to literacies education.

To discuss diversity, I am going to take a personal approach and draw on ideas and research experiences that have allowed me to learn about diversity. I know this probably sounds like an indulgent approach, but perhaps in retirement this might be excused. I use three reflections to guide my discussion. The first is about a book that had a significant effect on my thinking. The second reflection considers the literacy learning of itinerant farm workers' children, based on research I did in the early 2000s. My third reflection shifts to a consideration of the place of diversity in teachers' pedagogical approaches. If you will excuse my play on words, these diversity matters have shaped my belief that diversity matters.

Reflection 1: Learning from reading about research
A very long time ago, when I was a teacher in schools, I was aware that some young people attending school did well, while others did not. It was also apparent that particular groups of young people were more likely to be successful in learning literacies at school than others were. There was clearly something wrong with the accepted logic that suggested that some students were always going to do well in literacies while others did badly. Yet, like so many, I found it difficult to articulate what was wrong with this assumption and even why it was wrong. A significant change in my thinking occurred when I read Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) book, *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Heath's book provided me with an important aha moment and caused me to search for further reading (e.g., Heath, 1982).

Heath's (1983) seminal study investigated Roadville and Trackton, which were small working-class communities located on the outskirts of a middle-class cotton milling town in the Piedmont Carolinas in the USA. Although a long way from Australia, the study provided a way of explaining differential levels of success in areas of literacy. Heath's study found that children in schools in the town community were more successful than the children from the two small communities. The rich stories provided by Heath detailed that, on arriving at school, the Roadville children experienced some initial success, but the Trackton children fell 'quickly into a pattern of failure' (p. 349). Heath (1982) explained that, despite the lack of success of the children in school literacy learning, both Roadville and Trackton were literate communities and their residents could 'read printed and written materials in their daily lives, and on occasion they produce[d] written messages as part of the total pattern of communication in the community' (p. 57).

Although the two small communities could be compared and contrasted to the middle-class town community on the basis of racial and class differences, Heath (1983) argued that these characteristics did not explain the children's lack of school success. However, by examining

the types of talk and socialisation activities the children and their parents were engaged in at home, she realised that these factors determined success or otherwise at school. With regard to the children in the town, she found that they brought linguistic and cultural capital from multiple 'occasions of practising the skills and espousing the values that schools transmit. Long before reaching school, children of the townspeople had made the transition from home to school' (p. 368). In contrast, the children of the two smaller communities had not had opportunities to experience the particular social practices and 'ways' of schools prior to beginning school (Heath, 1982, p. 50).

In the two decades following Heath's (1982, 1983) research, we saw other studies that offered additional examples to support her thinking (e.g., Carrington & Luke, 2003; Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland, & Reid, 1998; Gregory & Williams, 2000). The particular message of these studies was that school literacy practices 'assume the existence of, and in some ways measure and reward, a certain set of family and personal attributes' (Gilbert, 2000, p. 10). Indeed, in terms of student diversity, such studies emphasised the way that students' home literacy practices influence their learning of the specific literacies required and valorised at school. It is not that particular students' home literacies are deficient, but that they are different from the ones that schools value.

Reflection 2: Talking about student diversity
When I moved into a research career, my observations of classrooms and interviews with teachers and other school staff opened my eyes to how students' learning of literacies was understood and explained in the school context. I was researching a group of marginalised students – the children of itinerant farm workers – and I started to understand how deficit stories relating to those young people seemed a commonsense way to explain their lack of success in learning the literacies valued at school. I have written on many occasions about the deficit stories that I heard (Henderson, 2001, 2004a, 2005, 2008a; Henderson & Woods, 2019), but I wish to reiterate a few of the stories here, because they provide some concrete examples of talk about student diversity.

The dominant stories that were circulating in the school community were stereotypical and they linked itinerant farm workers' children to low socioeconomic circumstances and to a range of deficit characteristics, including social and emotional problems. Moreover, the families were generally blamed for these issues. The school principal, for example, told me that 'itinerant pickers … seem to bring in a lot more problems.' He then went on to say: 'I don't want to stereotype itinerant pickers into a low socio-economic category where social problems seem to manifest, but we do seem to have more than our fair share of social problems, social and emotional problems.'

In relation to the learning of literacies, classroom teachers indicated that there was a 'standard expectation that itinerant kids are going to be below the peer group' and that 'itinerant kids and literacy is definitely an issue.' Teachers also described the parents of these children in deficit terms, intimating that they spent little time with their children and did not provide the necessary home materials for their children to engage in school learning. For example, one teacher explained:

> [The parents] have very little time to spend with [their son], to talk about the things he's got to deal with at school, his angst or anger or confusion or emotions, because they're going to be busy working, and when they're not working I guess they'll be stuffed.

Another teacher surmised 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.

In describing aspects of the parents' work and their supposed poor parenting, the teachers highlighted negative impacts on the children. It was not unusual to hear comments like:

> [The children have] social problems, behavioural problems, lack of foundation problems … Maybe they've got no control at home because there are no parents there. I don't know. But when they come to school, they're wild, very wild.

The dominant view amongst the teachers was that an itinerant lifestyle impeded literacy learning and that the children's low academic achievement at school, in relation to the learning of literacies, was a natural and expected consequence of that lifestyle. It was evident that the children's mobility from place to place and their parents' occupations were used as points of reference for explaining unsuccessful literacy learning (Henderson, 2007).

However, some of the teachers in this initial study used the children's language status as a point of reference, referring to their use of English as an additional language or dialect. In these cases, not being a native English speaker was regarded as a deficit. The school principal, for example, said: 'When we talk of itinerants, I mean straight away I seem to think of ESL [English as a second language], a major problem.' Using the term ESL, which was one of the acceptable terms at the time, the principal recognised that he had generalised his view of the children having English as an additional language to all of the itinerant farm workers' children: 'I still identify the fruit pickers as ESL and that's wrong … I've tried to go and see the other fruit pickers or seasonal workers and I realise that it's not just ESL.' Despite this recognition, it was clear that the children's language status was seen as a deficit that impacted on the school.

When I talked with the students, it became evident that many of the itinerant children spoke particular dialects of English, such as Tongan-English and Turkish-English. These variations of English related to the ethnic backgrounds of their families. What became evident as I talked with teachers was that they were quick to highlight the children's difficulties with aspects of literacy learning, including particular challenges in reading, writing and spelling (Henderson & Woods, 2019). However, as I have discussed elsewhere (see Henderson, 2004b; Henderson & Woods, 2019), many of the points identified by the teachers seemed to match the characteristics that Gibbons (1991) described as evidence of 'bilingual children whose English language skills are not yet adequate for the learning demands of the classroom' (p. 4).

One of my learnings from this research was that student diversity is complex. In brief, the students in my study were itinerant; they had experienced what it was like to move from place to place and to attend schools in multiple locations. However, even though that might suggest that the group was homogeneous, that was not the case. The families differed in the lengths of time they had been itinerant and in their reasons for following seasonal farm work (Henderson, 2001). In addition, the students represented many cultural groups and spoke a range of languages and dialects of English.

In addition, I learnt that teachers' understandings about student diversity are also complex. When the teachers in my research talked about the itinerant families, for example, they drew on a complex array of factors, including itinerancy, ethnicity, cultural and linguistic differences, socio-economic status and gender. The teachers' familiarity with particular families also impacted on their understandings. If teachers had been in the school for several years, they knew the children whose families returned to the school year after year. Their understandings of children's itinerant lifestyles and literacy learning were tied to years of 'knowing' those children and others like them. For teachers who had worked at the school for only a short time, their experiences of this type of itinerancy and its effects on the school were often fairly limited.

As a result, teachers' readings of the itinerant students were varied. The principal referred to the arrival of the itinerant students as:

> a logistical nightmare when we get so many kids in that we have to rearrange classes to make more classes … when the numbers go down so do the class levels again and it all starts again. It's just one big cycle.

When asked about the enrolment of the itinerant students, some teachers talked about the disadvantages for the residentially-stable students who lived in the one location all year round. These teachers regarded the arrival of the itinerant students as having a negative impact. For example, one teacher explained the disappointment experienced by the residentially-stable students when they were moved to a different class:

> the sense of disappointment that they've been taken away from their friendship groups and taken away from the teacher they're accustomed to working with.

Other teachers, however, regarded the itinerant students' arrival as a positive event. One teacher, who was new at the school, was caught up in the excitement of her class on hearing about the arrival of a student who had attended the school during previous harvesting seasons. She explained:

> I just remember when [the student] was coming. They were excited. Everyone wanted his desk beside them … They were just buzzing … he was a celebrity.

Despite some positive stories, most of the teachers tended to talk about the itinerant students in deficit and stereotypical terms. They often generalised from an example or two to the whole cohort of farm workers' children. This helped to set up binaries which distinguished the itinerant farm workers' children from the other students in their classes. The itinerant farm workers' children were 'marked' (using the term coined by Davies & Hunt, 2000) by their classification as being out-of-the-normal or in the deviant category of binary pairs. Being itinerant, speaking languages other than English, and being of a particular ethnicity were all marked positions that disrupted the taken-for-granted way that the school's classrooms operated. As Davies and Hunt had found in their research, 'those who disrupt' the order of the classroom 'are "problem students" and are marked as such' (p. 109).

What I was hearing as I collected data was a normative perspective that juxtaposed the itinerant farm workers' children against the students who attended the school all year round. The itinerant farm workers' children were regarded as different from their peers who resided permanently in that location and who spoke English as their first (and generally only)

language. This seemed to establish a set of binaries, whereby the residentially-stable students were seen as possessing a set of positive traits that served them well at school, and contrasted with the itinerant students, who were new and, by implication, not as stable, often unsettled, and not as savvy about how their classrooms worked.

As I pondered these ideas, I began to think seriously about the consequences of the deficit stories and the binaries that positioned the itinerant farm workers' children as marginal to school literacies learning. The take-up of this normative perspective seemed to hide the strengths and capabilities of the itinerant students. Instead, they were explained in terms of what they could not do. I was also intrigued by Gilbert's (2000) observation that it is important for us to recognise the limitations of our Western way of thinking and how it 'predisposes us to look for simple oppositional solutions; how it slides over differences and ambiguities; how it leads to the construction of narratives of blame' (p. 2).

And narratives of blame had been clearly evident in the research data I had collected. In the school context, the itinerant farm workers' children and their parents were blamed for the children's underachievement in literacy learning. Most of the teachers had the view that the parents were working exceptionally long hours on the farms and were therefore too tired to provide adequate supervision, care, or home literacy experiences for their children. Similarly, in the wider community, the farm workers were constructed as criminals, illegal immigrants, untrustworthy citizens and inadequate parents. Even though were also some stories that recognised the diverse cultural and linguistic resources of the workers and acknowledged the importance of the economic role they played within the community, these were in the minority and did not disrupt the negative stories that were circulating.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017, 2020) identifies Australian society as culturally and linguistically diverse, and the documents that frame Australian school education, such as the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2020a) and *The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019), emphasise that education should cater for all students through excellence and equity. In particular, education is expected to ensure that all students are able 'to reach their potential and achieve their highest educational outcomes' (Education Council, 2019, p. 17) through appreciation and respect for 'Australia's rich social, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity,' commitment to 'national values of democracy, equity and justice,' and recognition of the importance of understanding, acknowledging and celebrating 'the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures' (p. 8).

It is clear, however, that different documents have different 'takes' on diversity, from social, cultural, linguistic and religious considerations (Education Council, 2019) to cognitive and corporeal considerations relevant to gifted and talented and special needs students (ACARA, 2020c). Despite different ways of defining diversity, these educational documents focus on equitable outcomes for '*all* young Australians' (Education Council, 2019, p. 4, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the labelling of students' diversity is problematic. As I discussed earlier, different school personnel thought about the itinerant farm workers' children in different ways, some constructing the students' literacy learning as an outcome of the families' itinerant lifestyles and others focusing on the students' language backgrounds. In both cases, the focus on one characteristic seemed to blinker teachers from seeing the other. In addition, as was highlighted by Kalantzis, Cope and the Learning by Design Project

Group (2005), 'the gross demographics of difference – the dimensions of gender, age, ethnicity/race, locale, socio-economic group and (dis)ability' describe 'powerful realities,' but 'they are not in themselves factors which affect learning' (p. 44).

Kalantzis et al. (2005) went on to identify what lies behind those gross demographics. These aspects, which are sometimes invisible, include the 'experiences, interests, orientations to the world, values, dispositions, sensibilities, communication styles, interpersonal styles, thinking styles and the like' that students bring to their learning (p. 44). The students' lifeworld, 'their everyday lived experience,' is 'what has shaped them … what has made them who they are … what they like and unreflectively dislike. It is who they are' (pp. 46, 45). An understanding of the importance of students' lifeworlds means that we start to see the depth and breadth of diversity and realise that, if we are serious about student learning, then we need to focus on individual attributes as well as those of the broader group.

Interestingly, advice for teachers about planning for the learning of literacies does not always bring the breadth and depth of diversity together. The Australian Curriculum, for example, highlights some aspects of gross demographics (ACARA, 2020c) and some of the lived experience attributes (ACARA, 2020b), but in separate places in the curriculum documents. In addition, some aspects of diversity can be visible and others invisible and this was evident in some of my discussion about the itinerant farm workers' children. As Kalantzis et al. (2005) identified, teachers are face with an important challenge: 'How do we engage all learners in classrooms of difference? In other words, how do we do diversity?' (p. 46).

The prevalence of stereotypical and deficit stories about itinerant farm workers' children, their learning of literacies and the lives of their families prompted me to change tack with my research. I began to document stories of success from schools instead of tapping into deficit discourses, and to think about ways of 'turning around' deficit discourses, using the metaphor suggested by Kamler and Comber (2005).

In thinking about the deficit stories, I was struck by the commonsense logic, expressed by the teachers, that it was natural and expected that itinerant students would experience difficulties in learning school literacies. In fact, parents were often blamed for what teachers saw as the students' disrupted learning. To my way of thinking, this logic is problematic, because success in the learning of literacies was seen as situated outside the control of the school and the teachers. However, the thing that gave me hope was that not all teachers used the itinerancy frame of reference in a negative way.

The construction of itinerant farm workers' children as successful literacy learners was not a dominant discourse, but it did exist. As described in Henderson (2007), one teacher, for example, talked about the strengths of the itinerant children she was teaching. She said: 'I found that generally with the itinerant children that they are much more mature, socially much more mature as well, very capable, and I'm very sorry to have seen them go.' When I asked for more information, she explained that:

> I think they have a more interesting life probably, and it's more challenging, more stimulating and it seems to show with all the ones that I've got [in my class]. And I think I've lost another boy, an itinerant one, and he was excellent too … Superb, you just set the work and they get on with it. They're very independent. That's the key word, independent.

The teacher regarded the itinerant farm workers' children as capable, mature and independent and she noted their enthusiasm for learning in her classroom. She specifically described one student:

> 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.

The teacher had identified what Moll and colleagues referred to as *funds of knowledge* – the strengths and resources that students bring to school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). From this perspective, all students are competent and they 'have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge' (González et al., 2005, pp. ix–x).

The idea of funds of knowledge complements the notion of student lifeworlds and highlights the importance of identifying the resources, including experiences, knowledge and skills, that students bring to school and can use as the basis for further learning. If teachers are able to move away from deficit discourses, to see their students in terms of what they *can do*, rather than in terms of what they cannot do, then this shifts the focus to the actions that teachers can take to ensure student learning.

Reflection 3: Thinking about pedagogies
Comber and Kamler (2004; Kamler & Comber, 2005) made it abundantly clear that it is possible to turn around student disengagement with, and underachievement in, the learning of school literacies. They argued that pedagogy – the work of teachers – was 'central to turning around trajectories of school literacy failures and resistance' (p. 8), referring to these particular pedagogies as *turn-around pedagogies*. It is probably no surprise, then, to consider that teachers' selection of pedagogies can have important consequences.

If, for example, a teacher takes up 'a deficit gaze' (Dudley-Marling, 2007, p. 7) in relation to a particular group of students, then a compensatory approach for teaching literacies can seem commonsense and thus result in a pedagogical focus on topping up students' skills and knowledge (Henderson, in press; Henderson & Woods, 2019; Woods, 2019). Even though such an approach might seem logical, it is rather simplistic and founded on some shaky assumptions. In fact, the consequences of such an approach can be severe: a narrow approach to curriculum and the teaching of low level skills, sometimes to the exclusion of other teaching (Henderson, in press; Woods, 2019). This logic assumes that unsuccessful literacy learning can be remedied by teaching more basic skills. It does not take into account that literacies are produced and consumed in sociocultural contexts and that the practice of code-breaking needs to be accompanied by semantic, pragmatic and critical practices (Ludwig, 2003; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Luke and Freebody (1999) emphasised that literacy proficiency is about the mixing and orchestration of these practices and that 'each is necessary … but in and of themselves, none is sufficient' (pp. 7–8). Their arguments suggest that one-size-fits-all solutions to literacy learning are unlikely to work.

It would seem to make sense, then, that pedagogies for the teaching of literacies need to be able to facilitate learning in multiple ways. This suggests that if teachers want to ensure that they cater for diversity, then they need to be diverse in their thinking *about* pedagogies. If I return to consider pedagogies suitable for the itinerant farm workers' children, then The New London Group's (1996) pedagogy of multiliteracies provides a way of thinking about a range

of pedagogies used in conjunction with each other. For example, situated practice immerses students 'in activities and practices that allow them to experience or re-experience both known and new knowledge' (Henderson, 2008b, p. 198). This allows students to revisit what they know, extend their knowledge of particular topics, learn about the literacies they need to use, make connections between present and past knowledges and capabilities, and experience a sense of belonging with the learning on offer (adapted from Henderson, 2008b, p. 198).

Activities like these also offer opportunities for teachers to observe newly arrived students, to see 'where they are at' in terms of the learning expected in their new school, and to gain insights into their lifeworlds. In addition, situated practice can open up the way for students' diversity – in particular, their different ways of being, doing and knowing – to be a resource for other students, especially for sharing worldviews, different experiences and different perspectives.

Yet, situated practice alone is not enough. There also need to be opportunities for teachers to intervene actively in students' learning by scaffolding specific learning through explicit teaching – the overt instruction of The New London Group's (1996) pedagogy – and to ensure critical practice and transformative practice. Being able to weave together (Cazden, 2006; Kwek, 2012) different pedagogical approaches provides opportunities for students to learn in different ways and enables teachers to adjust and adapt their choices of pedagogies in order to ensure that their students are learning and continuing to learn.

What I am saying here is that it is important for teachers to have repertoires of pedagogies at their disposal and to be able to draw in suitable pedagogies as they are needed. Teachers require, therefore, what Freebody (2005) referred to as 'professional sophistication' (p. 177), to do the intellectually challenging work of pedagogically embracing students' diversity, particularly in the face of persistent 'counterproductive discourses that constitute certain students as "deficit"' (Comber & Kamler, 2004, p. 293). The New London Group's (1996) pedagogy of multiliteracies offers one example of an integrated pedagogical model and informed my discussion here, but it is not the only one that teachers might use.

A final thought about pedagogies
I worry, though, that there are times when narrow pedagogical approaches are nominated as useful for school-wide literacy interventions. I say this because of a very small piece of research that I undertook about three or four years ago. At the time, some education systems had mandated that schools put their pedagogical frameworks on the public record, as was the case in Queensland (see Queensland Department of Education, 2020). To investigate the decisions of schools around pedagogies, I conducted a Google search and examined the first 20 frameworks for Queensland schools that the search revealed (Henderson, in press).

In analysing these frameworks, I found that 17 of the 20 schools nominated explicit teaching as their pedagogical framework and some of the plans included statements such as 'our students learn through drill and skills' (Henderson, in press). I am quite aware that my investigation was limited and I certainly cannot make any claims about the day-to-day pedagogical actions of teachers in those schools. However, even though explicit teaching to scaffold learning is a necessary component of effective pedagogical practice, I would be rather concerned if it was the only pedagogy in use, especially in light of the importance of pedagogies in ensuring that learning is occurring for all students.

As stated earlier, the weaving (Cazden, 2006; Kwek, 2012) of different pedagogies opens up opportunities for learning in different ways, and it caters for the different knowledge, skill and experiential backgrounds of students. It also provides opportunities for teachers to adjust and adapt their pedagogies for ensuring ongoing student learning. This means that teachers need repertoires of pedagogies and they need to be professionally competent: to have knowledge about pedagogies and how to weave them (Freebody, 2005; Kwek, 2012) as they work with diversity in their classes.

Conclusion

My three reflections meandered through my thinking about diversity, from reading significant works, to doing research and to applying ideas to pedagogical practice for the teaching of literacies. As I hope was evident, I recognise that knowing about student diversity is an important aspect of teachers' daily work, but knowing how to work with diversity and ensure that all students are successful literacy learners is paramount.

My reflections on research have provided opportunities for thinking about the complexities of student diversity and how teacher talk that is focused on deficits and binaries can impact negatively on teaching and on students' learning of literaces. My conclusion is that knowing about diversity requires a diverse understanding of pedagogies, of teachers and of children and their families and communities. Teachers need diverse pedagogies at their fingertips and the wherewithal to move from one pedagogy to another, so they can shape their teaching and adjust to their students' learning needs. Diversity matters in multiple ways, particularly in relation to students, teachers and pedagogies.

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Robyn Henderson currently holds an honorary professorial appointment at the University of Southern Queensland. Although supposedly retired, she is still doing lots of writing and supervising doctoral students.