item 11

set RESEARCH INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS
number two 1993

LITERACY

In Classrooms, Curriculums, Assessments and Politics

A review of the work of

Peter Freebody

Griffith University, Queensland

Introduction

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION IS, in 1993, frantically busy with literacy. Research into literacy is well funded and literacy programmes have sprung up at every level of schooling and beyond. This 'literacy' is not, however, what was studied under that name in the past. Nor is it the literacy United Nations' statistics deal with. It is the literacy defined in the Commonwealth Government White Paper *Australian Literacy and Language Policy,* 1990 - 'The Dawkins Report.'

New Zealand does not have the same busy-ness. The Employers' Federation members continue to say New Zealanders are not well educated and right-wing pressure groups keep repeating that prosperity will arrive only if education levels are higher. The emphasis has been on new qualifications. But international comparisons (mainly the IEA studies) get good publicity and they keep saying that New Zealand children are the best (or second best) readers and comprehenders in the world. New Zealanders consider Australians can't be *very* far behind. So why all the fuss?

In this review article an attempt is made to show

(1) what researchers have discovered goes on in class when literacy is being inculcated,
(2) how literacy could be properly assessed,
(3) how there is a mis-match between what the current political vision asks for and what real literacy is.

Part 1. Classrooln literacy teaching

(A) Practice

A classroom where literacy is a major aim is, these days, one where the programme produces individual readers and writers who can be assessed for that one set of skills, a set of skills about which there is no doubt.

Unfortunately for the people who see literacy as a clear, undoubted, set of skills, there are very few studies of how teachers accomplish this in the first months of sChooling, and those few studies do not paint a picture of simple teaching, easy learning and straightforward assessing. However, I am able to give an example of some work by myself and Dwyer in 1992. Recording classes at work gave us transcripts for examination. Here is an extract from a reading lesson about eight weeks into the first year of formal schooling, the average being about five years.

In this class there is one child, Zac, who arrived at school fully literate. In literacy lessons Zac took to cruising, helping other children, and responding to the teacher's complaints or queries about other children's efforts. It is clear that part of the teacher's work is to inculcate what counts as getting a task done successfully.

EXAMPLE 1

241	teacher	Well, how would you find out where it said *slobby?*
242	Jane	You'd look at *slobby.*
243	teacher	Well, how would you do that?
244	student	Oh
245	student	It's easy.
246	Jane	Find... find the... find the person, like Zac.
247	teacher	Yes, that's one way, you could go and ask Zac, because he knows how to write *slobby.* But if Zac were busy, what else could you do?
248	Jane	Look on the board.
249	teacher	mm, where would we look... Christine? No, just stay there and tell me darling. Hmm? where?
250	Christine	Next to the monster.
		***
254	teacher	But how do you know that says *slobby?*
255	Christine	Because it has / s/ .
256	teacher	So does this one.
257	Christine	I know that//.
258	teacher	/ / so does this one.
259	student	'Cause, 'cause they know 'cause it's got a 'b', two b's over there.
260	Zac	And a 'a'.
261	teacher	Oh, that's a good idea, Zac, yes you can look for some other sounds that you can hear. *Slo - obby* Good boy.

There are a number of points to make about this excerpt, even from a brief examination.

First, the student, Jane, hears the first question (241) with 'how' as a request to locate a word as if she were already a reader ('how would you find out where it says *slobby?).*

Second, she next hears 'how' (243) as 'how actually would you accomplish the task', to which she indicates that she would recruit Zac. Zac's hypothetical unavailability leads Jane to revert to 'looking' (248), and the teacher selects another student to rebuild the exchange.

Third, the teacher responds only when she receives an answer based on the alphabetic features of the word (255-6). Zac, out troubleshooting, has by this time entered the fray and clinches the exchange by mentioning a distinctive letter in the target word, for which he is rewarded.

So, to master literacy (what the teacher wants) Jane must get the hang of special school talk ('find out where' means in class 'locate, by yourself, a written word from internal clues only.') Secondary teachers will hear echoes of this special sort of talk - which they themselves use - when they ask for 'genuine responses' to literature.

The use of special 'school talk' points out that what we have here are not some sort of basic, primeval, absolutely necessary, steps in learning but examples of a traditional way of teaching. In this case the *tradition* is *contemporary western-style schooling.*

Example 2 is from a session following the chorus reading, with the teacher, of a book. The class is about halfway through the second year of schooling, with an average age of about six and a half years.

EXAMPLE 2

291	teacher	If you had a chance to be one of the things in our story, which... or someone in the story, which would you like to be?
292	student	hh!
293	teacher	Carl?
294	Carl	The cricket. I mean the big weta.
295	teacher	The big weta.
296	student	Oh so would I.
297	teacher	Why would you like to be the big weta?
298	Carl	'Cause he comes last.
299	teacher	He comes last, but what's what happens to him that's so uh so good do you think?
300	Carl	'Cause he, he gets to stay in the bed.
301	teacher	He gets to stay in the bed. Yes.

This exchange illustrates that some forms of answers count as complete answers and some do not. The answer called for by 297 appears to be a description of the student's own self-reported consciousness. However, it is unacceptable. The teacher reforms the question in 299. The teacher has a pre-determined form of answer: one that calls for a plot-specific statement.

From the two transcripts it appears that, to accomplish a reading lesson special traditional or *ceremonial* ways of answering need to be understood. This is certainly what the Russian theorist Vygotsky thought. John Heap, drawing on his ideas says the concept that is being taught is not a fact or skill but

> 'whatever the teacher permits to pass, uninterrupted and apparently unchallenged as an adequate display of reading skill, counts, procedurally as adequate, until further notice.'

(B) Curriculum

The curriculum guideline documents, textbooks, worksheets, and media resources used in school serve also to make particular versions of domestic and public experience into the ones that must be accepted. In the first year or so of schooling, classroom reading materials recast the everyday domestic experience of children. For instance, 'boyness' and 'girlness' are portrayed in Example 3.

EXAMPLE 3

"We have to jump this," says Peter.
"Come after me. I know how to do it. Come after me, but keep out of the water."
Jane says, "Mummy said that we must keep out of the water."
"I know she said so," says Peter, "but we are not going in the water. I know how to do this."
Peter jumps again. "You can do it, Jane," he says.
Then Jane jumps. She says, "Yes, I can do it. Look at me, Peter. I can do it."

A particular version of what is proper for girls and boys to do is used in this exchange, the most startling being that the girl acts *in loco parentis* - judging actions from their parents' point of view. So readers have to go along with this particular 'myth' - that girls act like parents - to make sense of the words read.

Such 'mythical' children, so unlike real children, so 'proper' in their behaviour, are common in beginning school books. Their use of expressive words has been summarised as follows:

EXAMPL£4

i) The term *like* is applied to the case of one person liking another only six percent of the time, it is used by and about parents almost never, and the boy/s-characters are statistically more likely to *like* objects and events, and the girl/s-characters animals.

ii) The term *good* is statistically much more likely to be used by persons to or about one another than is *like*. Further, the statistical patterns of association of use among characters are: mother/s to and about girl/s; father/s to and about boy/s; boy/s to and about events.

iii) The term *laugh* has the following associations: boy/s *laugh* more than girl/s; adult/s *laugh* at boy/s and animals, while girl/s *laugh* at boys and adults. Girl/s rarely *laugh* and are never *laughed at.*

iv) The term *cry* is never applied to adults; girl/s *cry* at being lost, hurt,' or losing objects; boy/s almost never.

The adult-characters in these reading materials produce almost no expressive talk or activity and appear to act as surveillance, even when they are not present! More obviously, feelings and judgements are firmly cast along gender and generational lines. Thus an unreal, 'virtual', naturalised, domestic world, for consumption only in the classroom, has been created.

But it is not just the classroom that creates mythical unreal worlds. There are plenty outside. This is seen most clearly at the other end of the schooling process. Example 5 shows a selection from a senior economics text which expects students to see the world as 'free market' economists describe it. Despite being about 'underdeveloped' countries note that the facts are presented (1) without any reference to history, (2) without reference to religion, (3) without any reference to political realities (4) and the people are all free to do as they like (family responsibilities, traditions, laws, police, organised crime and other constraints are not mentioned). The people in this myth are free to join groups and they have the cash and access to birth control procedures and control primary produce prices:

EXAMPLES

Less-developed countries (LDCs) tend to be characterised by the following features [a selection from a longer list]:

1. ... most individuals in less-developed countries use their output for their own family ... and exchange little of their production ...
2. Business motivation or entrepreneurship of a productive nature may be lacking.... Capitalistic entrepreneurship may be lacking.
3. Unemployment, labour-intensive methods, underemployment.
4. Life expectancy is low, nutrition and health poor.
5. High growth rates of the population and a distorted age distribution of the population add to poverty. The higher rate of (population) increase in the LDCs may suggest the less frequent use of birth control techniques...
6.

Here we have an account which is stripped of all non-economic factors. It makes individuals alone responsible for the problem, the explanations, the blame, and the solutions of poverty.

This myth making is a powerfully political activity. And this leads us to the problem of assessment.

Part 2. Assesstnent of Literacy

In our first example the teacher not only assessed the usefulness of Jane's answer but also addressed the level of learning. Zac was praised for being at a higher level. At this stage of schooling simple questions will suffice. But when we want to assess, in school, how well a child has learnt the literacy skills needed 'out in the world' the tech-

nique changes. The technique most often used is to invent test items that simulate the outside world. Here is a test item that attempts to get at the sort of comprehension (a literacy skill) a repairman needs.

EXAMPLE 6

A manufacturing company provides its customers with the following instructions for returning appliances for service:

> When returning appliance for servicing, include a note telling as clearly and specifically as possible what is wrong with the appliance.

A repair person for the company receives four appliances with the following notes attached. Circle the letter next to the note which best follows the instructions supplied by the company.

A

> The clock does not run correctly on this clock radio. I tried fixing it, but I couldn't.

B

> My clock radio is not working. It stopped working right after I used it for five days.

C

> The alarm on my clock radio doesn't go off at the time I set. It rings 15-30 minutes later.

D

> The radio is broken. Please repair and return by Priority Post to the address on my slip.

There are a great number of mismatches between this attempted simulation and the 'real world', some more subtle than others. Here are a few:

- Has anybody ever received notes of this kind? Moreover, has anybody, ever, had to nominate one out of a group of notes that 'best follows the instructions'? Do repairers ever rate the relative efficacy of notes except with the usual 'The blxxxy notes are blxxxy useless!'?
- What could happen if the answer given were right or wrong?
- Will the good note writer get better service? Will the repairer who can recognise a good note get promotion?
- Students in tests are left do it (or parts of it) in whatever order they like; this is seldom the case beyond school - most processes require strict attention to order.
- School tests usually have a start and finish time: in the real world a task may be left for days or weeks, until some necessary action or tool becomes available.
- In a school test everything that is needed to get an answer is there. Out in the real world finding the right resources (or rejecting useless bits) may divide the good from the poor worker. In the real world finding Zac may be the best possible answer.

When in school you assess, every question (even if it is answered by ticking a box) is imbedded in a moral order. 'Where is slobby?' involves *learners* doing what *teachers* want. A social order is implicit. And learning is carried out by the ceremonial actions of question (by teacher) and answer (by pupil).

Here is a very current example.

EXAMPLE 7

Draft National Profiles for English

Speaking and listening

LEVEL 1:

- 'explore(s) the possibilities and routines of school'
- 'responds *appropriately* to non-verbal cues'
- *'observes agreed* ground rules in structured large group settings'
- 'asks, accedes to and refuses requests in *appropriate* ways'

***

LEVEL 8:

- 'asserts own point of view or idea with determination and conviction, but without *aggression, condescension or disrespect'*
- 'conveys a sense of genuine, active communication by, for example, *sounding* relaxed and spontaneous during a speech even though the speech was carefully rehearsed'

Again, what are considered inseparable parts of competence are nothing to do with the subject - in this case competence in English includes doing what the school expects (...responds appropriately...), being rational (without aggression...) and obeying the moral order (observes agreed ground rules...).

A transparent example of how assessment of literacy is also assessment of moral, rational and conforming-to-the-schools-ideal is in the draft National Profiles for English highest level (Level 8) in which the top student is imagined writing speech notes. Here is a selection:

EXAMPLE 8

> When I think about English... I think of opportunities for self expression, personaL .. and REFLECTION which had made me more aware....
>
> Writing is important in our lives and the English classroom offers us MANY IDEAS for writing in different ways. SELF EXPRESSION is encouraged and we are urged to express ourselves, communicate... with others through WRITING... DISCUSSING DIFFERENT ISSUES. THIS WAY WE DEVELOPE (sic) OUR OWN OPINIONS.
>
> ANOTHER WORLD OR TO ANOTHER VIEW OF THE WORLD... INVITED TO VISIT... EXPERIENCE VICARIOUSLY THROUGH LITERATURE.
>
> Provides the chance for growing adolescents to individually express personal feelings. It is THE subject... creativity of ideas. Imagination is allowed to flourish.

This is an example ot what is regarded as the highest level of achievement of oral language a school can manage to impart. Note that it entails the presentation by a speaker of himself or herself as a person whose apparent personal voice is morally, dispositionally, and stylistically full of the imperatives of the English curriculum. The pupil not only claims particular traits ('more aware'), but also sees himself/herself as *developing* within the parameters of the institution. This student publicly says he/she is a 'growing adolescent', who is 'being encouraged' and is 'still discovering'. That is, is made in the image of the school.

Bourdieu, the great theorist of schools as class-bound institutions, would describe what is going on here as the processes by which cultural gifts are systematically mistaken for academic or intellectual gifts.

Part 3. Mistnatches in policy and method

The International Literacy Year was a milestone for literacy education in Australia. But this was not only in the ways envisaged by the Commonwealth Department of

Employment, Education and Training: the Department saw it as an occasion to highlight the significance of literacy for employment and the economy in labour markets whose demands are becoming increasingly fluid and complex. And it is true that the Commonwealth's initiatives have stimulated debates on the nature and uses of literacy practices in the school, the community, and the workplace.

However, the current theory of how to bring about prosperity says that human labour is a thing you can buy and sell, just like oranges, insurance, or computer time. Education similarly: literacy is seen as a resource or commodity, or investment, which makes a person worth more (more expensive to hire, but more productive.) This is clear in the opening paragraphs of the Dawkins Report.

EXAMPLE 9

> Australia has embarked on a thorough-going appraisal of its education, vocational training and labour market preparation systems. Schools, TAFE, higher education, industry training and labour Inarket programs have all been subject to major review. Governments have joined with educators, students, parents and business to rethink policies, programs and structures and to work towards national goals that will benefit the nation and better serve the needs of individuals. A heightened concern for quality has emerged - quality in content, in delivery, and in results....
>
> There is a strong and well-demonstrated relationship between low levels of literacy or English language competence and high levels of unemployment and other forms of social disadvantage. To illustrate this, unemployment rates at the time of the 1986 Census varied from 8.6% for those who spoke English only, to 11% for those who used another language but spoke English 'well' or 'very well', to 20% and higher for those who spoke English poorly or not at all. While other factors also are involved, English language proficiency has a vital bearing on the labour market prospects and the general welfare of individual Australians.
>
> We cannot afford the inequities and inefficiencies which such a waste of human resources would entail.

The theory that education is something that improves the worth of people (measured by the wages they can get) involves using 'literacy' in a certain way. It is not the way research scientists have used it. It means something pretty close to 'can read and write in English and do arithmetIc, and these skills can be measured simply.'

In the third paragraph of the example, there is an attempt to establish the key relationship: unemployment is related to your first spoken language. Then two conclusions are drawn:

(1) speaking another language *causes* you to be unemployed;
(2) speaking another language is being illiterate.

Somehow the fact that there are 100 or so indigenous languages in Australia and 100 more migrant languages has passed the writers by - to them you are illiterate, and not properly an Australian if you are not fluent in English.

According to this White Paper there is a 'strong and well-demonstrated relationship between low levels of *literacy or English language competence* and high levels of unemployment and other forms of social disadvantage.' (italics added). Similar cultural bias can be found in present day New Zealand.

Is literacy really 'unidimensional'? Perhaps the strange, unreal, mythical world that school is, a world we expect children to deal with before we can teach them to read, write and count, is what hinders our attempts. Perhaps this world of school narrows what we call 'literacy'? We are teachers and work in schools, and therefore to us schools are not unreal nor filled with myths. Perhaps we need to educate those who create the myths of people without history, people without language, people without political awareness. And this may include re-educating ourselves.

Notes

DR PETER FREEBODY is Professor of Education, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia 4111.

This *set* item follows from a key-note paper presented to the Literacy strand of the joint Australian and New Zealand Associations for Research in Education, Deakin University, Geelong, November 1992. The paper is called *The Politics of Literacy: Classrooms, Curriculums, and Assessments,* and may be obtained from the author.

The Dawkins Report is
Dawkins, J. (1990) *Australian Literacy and Language Policy.* Canberra: Government Printing Press.

The idea that the classroom with a literacy aim has a simple programme easily assessed is discussed in
Baker, C.D. and Freebody, P. (1989) *Children's First School Books: Introductions to the Culture of Literacy.* Oxford: Blackwells.

Good examples of research studying how teachers teach literacy skills in the early years are
Willes, M.J. (1983) *Children into Pupils.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
and
McDonald, G. (1993) Learning to be Intelligent. 'Oh Good. That Was Clever!' in this issue of *set,* Item 2.

Example 1 is from
Freebody, P. and Dwyer, B. (1992) *Inventing Disability in Classroom Talk Routines.* Paper presented to NSW Special Education Annual Conference, Darling Harbour.

Example 2 is from
Baker and Freebody (1989) - see above.

Vygotsky's ideas can be found in
Vygotsky, Lev. S. (1978) *Mind in Society.* Cambridge USA: Harvard University Press.

Heap's comment comes in
Heap, J.L. (1991) A Situated Perspective on What Counts as Reading. In Baker, C.D. and Luke, A. (Eds) *Towards a Critical Sociology of Reading Pedagogy.* Amsterdam: John Benjamin. pp.128-9.

The way curriculum guides, textbooks and workbooks make particular versions of life into the one that must be accepted in school is detailed in
deCastell, S., Luke, A. and Luke, C. (1989) *Language, Authority and Criticism: Readings on the School Textbook.* London: Falmer Press.

Examples 3 and 4 are from
Freebody, P. and Baker, C.D. (1987) The construction and operation of gender in children's first school books. In Pauwels, A. (Ed.) *Women and Language in Australian and New Zealand Society.* Sydney: Australian Professional Publications, pp.80-107.

Example 5 is from
Tisdel, C.A.(1979) *Economics in our Society: Principles and Applications.* Milton, Qld: Jacaranda Press, pp.173-9.

Example 6, and points about it are drawn from
Kirsch, 1.S. and Jungblut, A. (1986) *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults.* Princeton: National Assessment of Educational Progress
and, discussed in some detail, from
Heap, J.L. (1989) *Effective Functioning in Daily Life: A Critique of Concepts and Surveys of Functional Literacy.* Paper to the National Reading Conference, Tuscon, Arizona.

Examples 7 and 8 are from
National Profiles for English (Draft) (1992) Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation.

For Bordieu's theories and the idea of cultural gifts being mistaken for academic gifts see
Bordieu, P. (1974) The School as a Conservative Force. In Eggleton, J. (Ed.) *Contemporary Research in the Sociology of Education.* London: Methuen.

Example 9 is from
Dawkins, J. (1990) *Australian Literacy and Language Policy.* Canberra: Government Printing Press.

The idea that literacy is not 'unidimensional' is discussed in
Street, B.V. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

© Copying Permitted
Copyright on this item is held by NZCER and ACER which grant to all people actively engaged in education the right to copy it in the interests of better teaching. Please acknowledge the source.