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Literacy under and over the desk: oppositions and heterogeneity

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that a dominant theme in New Literacy Studies research, the differences between literacy practices inside and outside school, has sometimes involved conflating ‘home literacy’ with private, unregulated ‘vernacular literacy’, and the use of an idealised abstract notion of schooled literacy to represent students’ actual everyday experience in the classroom. Drawing on linguistic ethnographic research in two British primary schools, I use examples of ‘unofficial’ and ‘official’ literacy activities from 10-11 year-olds to show that a wide range of different forms of literacy can be found in the classroom and I argue that the division between ‘vernacular’ and ‘schooled’ is not as clear-cut as is sometimes assumed. My analysis of children’s literacy activities suggests that, on the one hand, unofficial activities orientate towards and index official knowledges and the macro-level institutional order and, on the other hand, official activities are interpenetrated with informal practices and procedures. I also comment on some implications of using the New Literacy Studies ‘events and practices’ conceptual framework for understanding what is going on in classrooms.

Key words: classroom literacy, literacy events and practices, New Literacy Studies, sub-rosa literacy, vernacular literacy.

Introduction: New literacy Studies and the home/school opposition

Over the past twenty years the conception of literacy as intricately embedded in social practice has become an increasingly important ‘lens’ for looking at adults’ and children’s reading and writing activities. Developed originally in opposition to a dominant psychological model of literacy as individual cognitive skills and competences, the ‘ideological model’ of literacy (Street, 1984) has itself become a dominant paradigm for an important body of current literacy research. This more socially and culturally sensitive approach focuses on literacy events and practices

across different contexts and cultures rather than on individual proficiencies and deficiencies related to dominant notions of what it means to be literate. Researchers have tended to concentrate on minority group or 'vernacular' literacy practices which are, it is argued, undervalued and frequently ignored in schools and literacy training schemes. There is now a wealth of detailed accounts of people's literacy practices outside the academy (e.g. Street, 1993; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996; Barton et al, 1999).

While what are termed the New Literacy Studies often focus on adults' literacy activities, there has also been a continuing related tradition, rooted originally in the US ethnography of communication work in the 1980s, of research comparing and contrasting children's experience of literacy at home and at school. There is currently a growing body of recent research aimed at bridging between out-of-school literacies and classroom practice (e.g. Moje and O'Brien, 2001; Hull and Schultz, 2002; Street 2005), and a strong vein of US educational research aimed at helping teachers to engage with discursive styles and 'funds of knowledge' from pupils' communities, in order to enrich and transform these students' classroom experience (e.g. Moll et al, 1992; Gutierrez et al, 1999).

It has been suggested that the 'home/school mismatch hypothesis' is the most resilient theme in the last two decades of New Literacy Studies ethnographies (Luke, 2004; see also Baynham, 2004). Contrasts between schooled and out-of-school or vernacular literacy are sometimes related to a distinction between vertical and horizontal discourse (Bernstein, 1996), the former being associated by Bernstein with hierarchical, systematically structured school knowledge and the latter with the local, implicit, context-dependent knowledge in everyday talk (e.g. Moss, 2001). While the home/school opposition has been a productive axis for a considerable number of important studies, particularly in multiethnic and multilingual settings, I would argue that there has been a tendency towards two kinds of conflation in the conceptual framework underpinning some major strands of work in the New Literacy Studies. First, 'everyday literacy' outside school has been conflated with 'vernacular literacy', defined as unregulated by the rules and procedures of institutions, institutionally unvalued, private, secret, often playful and oppositional. In contrast to instructed school literacy, vernacular literacy is seen as learned informally and embedded in social action in the home and community (Barton and Hamilton, 1998). I do not explore this first conflation between 'out of school' and 'vernacular' any further here,

but would suggest that it underestimates the influences of institutions like schools and churches or welfare and health agencies on home and community literacies, and underplays home literacy connected with canonical literatures, music and, increasingly, web-based commercialism.

The second kind of conflation involves an idealised abstract notion of a strictly regulated, formally instructed, autonomous ‘schooled literacy’ which is taken to represent students’ actual everyday experience of literacy in the classroom. School literacy is often critiqued in the New Literacy Studies as too focussed on autonomous notions of the presumed cognitive effects of literacy and the ‘essayist text’, (Street, 2003), dominated by skill-and-drill pedagogies (Gee, 2004) and connected with policing and punishing the practices of sharing, copying and collaborating which are routine in workplace literacy (Barton and Hamilton, 2005). Autonomous conceptions of school literacy have been strengthened by the focus in most classroom research on teacher-student interactions and dialogue, with a concomitant lack of detailed attention to talk around literacy among students themselves (although this usually forms a greater proportion of their active language experience in school). In contrast, where researchers do focus more closely on talk among students themselves, a rather different kind of picture emerges about school literacy and classroom discourse. This shows, for example, teenagers’ use of texts for the negotiation of rights within relationships (Shuman 1986) or children’s blending of textual resources from popular culture with those from school in their writing (Dyson, 2003), and unsettles traditional ideas about talk and learning in the classroom (Rampton, 2006).

In this article I want to contribute to a re-examination of what counts as ‘school literacy’ and ‘classroom talk’, by building understanding on an analysis of empirical data which does not assume the powerful home/school or vernacular/schooled dichotomous framings. I take the notion of ‘under and over the desk’ from Gilmore (1983), who suggests that pupils’ unsanctioned covert talk and secret notes provide a ‘sub-rosa’ stream of activity which runs in parallel to the official teacher-led schedule, and occasionally erupts at the intersections between the two streams. However, my position is different from Gilmore, who sees pupils’ unofficial activities as remaining separate and unconnected with the official business of the classroom, and I also interpret the unofficial activities of pupils in a rather different way from Gutierrez et al (1995), who saw older students’ discourse as providing an oppositional counter

script to the teacher's agenda. My own argument is that, in the two classes of white working-class 10-11 year-olds I studied, official literacy activities were not necessarily 'schooled' and unofficial activities were not completely 'vernacular'. The relationships between children's activities and the literacy practices connected with schooling and other institutional domains were more complex than the New Literacy Studies would suggest. Using the New Literacy Studies conceptual framework of literacy events and literacy practices I shall discuss examples of the texts and literacy activities that I found, and I will also examine how far the events/practices framework itself can take us in understanding what is going on in children's informal engagements with literacy in the classroom.

Researching literacy events and practices in the classroom: methodological considerations

Within the New Literacy Studies, literacy events are often defined as social activities that can be observed and documented. Heath (1982:50) saw a literacy event as 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interaction and interpretative processes'. Bloome et al (2005), emphasising individual agency, use the term 'event' as a way of directing attention to the social construction of literacy, and to the ways in which 'people create meaning through how they act and react to each other' in relation to texts (ibid: 8). Barton (2001: 99-100) elaborated the notion of a literacy event, suggesting that the role of a text may be central, symbolic or implicit and that relations between events may be serial, coordinated and chained, embedded or subordinated or 'fuzzy'. With some variations of emphasis, a literacy event is treated within the New Literacy Studies as a social interaction which instantiates a literacy (cultural) practice or practices. Street has employed the phrase 'literacy practices' (Street 1984: 1) as a more general abstract term focussing upon 'social practices and conceptions of reading and writing', although he later elaborated the term to take account both of 'events' in Heath's sense and of the 'social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them' (Street, 1988). The concept of a literacy practice, like that of other social practices (Bourdieu 1990), links individual agency in situated activities with broader social structures.

These definitions of events and practices have important implications for how literacy is researched in the classroom. First, at a theoretical level, a focus on events and practices gives oral language a centrally important role because events are frequently constituted through dialogue, and talk, often relating to text or images, provides clues about their meaning for the participants and therefore about the underlying cultural practices. At an empirical level, the majority of talk in the classroom is related to texts of one kind or another, whether a school worksheet, a note about dental inspections, a TV programme viewed the night before or the graffiti on a cloakroom mirror. Investigating literacy events and practices in school, therefore, has to involve a close attention to oral language as well as to the materiality of the texts and their multimodal features. Secondly, researching literacy practices must surely always involve ethnographic work, in order to discover the meaning and significance that the insider participants give to their interactions with texts. Only through close attention to the perspectives of the participants themselves can we learn about the nature and significance of particular literacy practices within their lives. In the research described below I take the insider participants to be the students, and ethnographic work to involve entering, as far as possible, into their perspectives on classroom literacy activity.

In this article I draw on research in a class of 10-11 year-olds (some of whom were 12 years old by the end of the fieldwork). The children mainly lived in the white working class housing estates where their schools were situated, and teachers tended to see their work as remediating rather than building on what they identified as pupils' out of school uses of language and literacy. I wanted to document children's informal language and literacy practices in order to investigate the role of these in their construction of knowledge and identity, as they moved from childhood into adolescence (Maybin 2006). I used a radio microphone and small tape recorders to record students' continuous talk throughout the school day, also collecting as many of the written texts they used and produced as possible and making detailed observations within one class over a three day period and a second class over a three week period. I acted as a participant observer, helping children who were not being recorded with their work, changing tapes for the recordings and making brief notes which I wrote up later, outside the school. I followed up these observations and recordings with lengthy interviews with the children in friendship pairs, in order to clarify and expand on

topics and issues that had cropped up in the continuous taping. These interviews revealed quite intimate details about children's personal lives, and provided further data on particular uses of language.

My ethnographic focus on obtaining children's perspectives was combined with discourse analysis (which continued over a number of years) of some eighty hours of tape recordings (cf Maybin 2003; 2006). This combined work provides the basis for my interpretation of the literacy activities I observed and recorded, which involved many different kinds of texts, some supplied or produced by teachers, some produced by the students themselves and some 'found' in the environment around them. While I shall refer to students' interactions with texts in the classroom as 'official' or 'unofficial', depending on their relationship to the activities in which students were supposed to be engaged, I shall suggest that these interactions invoked, and were underpinned by, a heterogeneous mix of literacy practices.

Under the desk

In the classrooms I researched, there were a range of unofficial literacy activities which appeared to be clearly 'off-task' in terms of institutional norms. These activities seemed to be embedded in what Bernstein calls horizontal discourse, where knowledge is local, segmental, tacit, context-dependent and multi-layered. As I mentioned above, Bernstein contrasts this kind of informal, everyday discourse with the vertical discourse of schooling, which he sees as a 'coherent, explicit, systematically principled structure, hierarchically organised, or a series of specialised languages' (Bernstein, 1996: 171). The examples analyzed below are representative of the range of unofficial literacy activities I observed. They include surreptitious magazine reading under the desk, play sparked off in the course of carrying out official classroom activities, writing and passing notes, copying out popular songs, graffiti and making lists of the members and rules for children's made-up 'clubs'. These activities were highly collaborative, sometimes playful, closely embedded in children's local negotiations of relationship and identity and associated with what looked at first sight like fragmentary knowledge. The texts connected with these activities mainly fell outside the official curriculum, were usually hidden from the teacher and were often ephemeral. However, as I shall discuss below, they also involved a range of different kinds of engagement with text.

One of the least ‘schooled’ examples of unofficial literacy activity occurred around some of the magazines that children brought into school and looked through together at break time, or clandestinely in class. The boys’ magazines tended to feature cars, computers and wrestling and the girls’ magazines focussed on celebrities and romance. Typically, children shared and chatted about photographs or other visual images, often in relation to shared fantasies and pleasures. These fantasies and pleasures were in many ways antithetical to the purposes and identities of schooling, but nevertheless percolated through into unregulated spaces. Talk around the magazines often focussed on speed, power and strength (boys) or glamour and attractiveness (girls), as in the example in Example 1 below. Transcription conventions are listed at the end of the article.

Example 1

Julie Which picture do you like best? Who do you like best?

girl Imagine having a princess at your birthday! Love it!

Julie That looks like Marilyn Monroe

girl *(in answer to Julie’s first question)* That one

This kind of exclamatory, collaborative style of interaction with a text (cf Moss, 2000) suggests that there are interstitial spaces in the classroom where what might be called ‘horizontal literacies’ are the norm. In relation to this example they could be seen as informal vernacular literacies which have somehow snuck into school, to be savoured surreptitiously behind the teacher’s back.

There were, however, a variety of magazines circulating among children and some invited a rather different kind of interaction with the text. For instance, while a parent helper (Mrs. R.) was encouraging Julie and two friends to look at a library book on snails in relation to a live snail they had collected, Julie also turned to help a student next to her who was looking at a puzzle magazine and trying to make as many as possible new words out of the letters spelling ‘peanut’. Interactions with unofficial texts (marked below in bold) were often, as in this case, carried on ‘under the desk’, in parallel to an interaction with an official text:

Example 2

- Kirsty 'Thousands of teeth'. It says here.
- Mrs. R. Those are tentacles. It's got four tentacles.
- Julie Yea, teeth, teeth.
- Mrs. R. (*reads*) 'to touch, feel and smell, and it breathes through the hole in its side.'
- Julie Teeth
- Mrs. R. So there must be a hole somewhere
- Julie** 'eat' (*a suggestion to the pupil with the puzzle magazine*)
- Mrs. R. We saw its eyes, didn't we? At the end of its tentacles, and it can only see light and dark
- Julie** (*to puzzle magazine pupil*) 'tune'
- Pupil** **It can only be three letters**
- Julie** / (*reads*) 'or more', **three letters or more.**
- Kirsty Miss it's got a thousand, thousands of teeth on its tongue

Here, Julie's advice to her friend involves the use of a text as an authority in not such a different way from Mrs. R.'s use of the library book. This kind of checking and acting on particular phrases like 'three letters or more' during a collaborative interpretation of instructions also occurred in the context of more official tasks, for instance when Kevin and Kieran had problems locating the worksheet which was listed on their Activity Record Sheet as 'Co-ordinates Stage 4 TB 17—19' and two older girls sitting opposite them, Tina and Louise, explained that '17-19' did not mean pages 17 *and* 19, but pages 17 *to* 19:

Example 3

- Kieran Is that Coordinates?
- Tina Yea

Louise Yea, that's 17 and 18, 17 and 18, 19 here (*points to page numbers*)

Kieran What's that?

Tina (*exasperated*) Coordinates! That one, that one and that one

Kevin Put it on your worksheet, anyway, Kieran

Kieran It only says 17 and 19

Louise It says '17 TO 19'

Tina 17 TO 19

Kieran Oh

Tina You silly wally!

There is an exact parallel between the two activities:

Pupil It can only be three letters

Julie / (*reads*) 'or more', three letters or more.

And

Kieran It only says 17 and 19

Louise It says '17 TO 19'

Magazine-reading under the desk, then, could involve meaning-making strategies that looked very different from official literacy activities (fantasizing about images), or very similar (the attention to detail in instructions which were then applied to an activity).

Similarly, children's play outside the teacher's gaze when they were meant to be working together on a classroom activity seemed clearly 'off-task' in the official sense, but could also involve contingent or implied connections with the official curriculum. On one occasion, in the course of following written instructions for a light-splitting experiment with a projector and a prism to produce a 'rainbow' or spectrum, Martie showed Karen how she could look straight at the light in the projector and then close her eyes and see different colours. The children had been

asked to write down the colours they saw, the relative thickness of the colour bands, and answers to questions about how these had been produced. But as Martie and Karen played about with the projector and prism, they found they could move the spectrum in different directions, so 'it looks like a jellyfish' on the wall (Martie), or appeared in the mouth of another pupil, who pretended to eat it. They also managed to produce two spectra simultaneously, in different parts of the room. Two boys nearby explained to Martie and Karen that the day before, when they were supposed to be doing the same light-splitting activity, they had held pieces of white and black paper in turn at an equal distance from the projector bulb and timed how long it took before they started to smoulder. Through this unofficial experiment they had concluded that black paper ignites more quickly than white.

Thus an official activity on light splitting was turned into play with colours and movement where knowledge was momentary, provisional and multilayered (the metaphor of the jellyfish and eating). On the other hand, an unofficial activity using an alternative affordance of the projector bulb, as a source of heat rather than of light, echoed official work children had done in the past on 'fair testing' (in the holding of the black and white paper at an equal distance from the bulb and comparing ignition times). This kind of play by children could be seen as creating fragmentary unofficial knowledge about spectrums and combustion which emerges at the margins of curriculum activities with only a tangential connection to official practices. But, on the other hand, Martie and Karen's manipulation of light was in many ways a direct extension of an official activity, even though there was no immediate official mechanism to tie their discoveries in to the vertical discourse of scientific knowledge underpinning the curriculum. Again, the burning experiment might not have been accessible to teacher monitoring and assessment, but it did index an official procedure for organising activity used on previous occasions in the past, 'fair testing', which was associated with the production of systematically principled, hierarchically structured knowledge. In this sense, therefore, the boys' unofficial experiment was informed and structured by vertical discourse.

Examples of activities like the play above, where there are contingent or implied connections with texts (the current worksheet giving directions for the light splitting and written instructions for fair tests children had used in the past), could be identified as literacy events, according to Barton's definition given earlier. But are

Martie and Karen's play, and the boys' reporting of their play from the day before, subordinated events nested within the official light-splitting event (thereby privileging its official importance)? Or, taking the children's perspective, is the vernacular play the foregrounded event where burning the paper is more interesting and 'tellable' than the official activity? Furthermore, because it was difficult to precisely delineate the boundary between Martie and Karen's work completing the task they had been given and the interwoven play, it was also difficult to say whether their explorations with spectrums were exemplifications or enactments of 'vernacular play literacy practices' or 'school literacy practices'. While activities such as these looked like a bit of light relief from work, I have argued elsewhere that the intertextual connections children make with school practices, like the boys' invoking of the fair test procedure to manage their activity and knowledge production, constitute an important driving force in children's own active self-socialisation into the practices and procedures of schooling (Maybin, 2003). Identifying Martie and Karen's play with the projector, or the boys' reporting of their unofficial experiment as 'literacy events' was therefore problematic because of ambiguities about the nature of literacy events, their boundaries, the perspectives from which they are defined and their links with official and unofficial practices.

As I mentioned earlier above, unofficial meaning-making around texts also included notes passed in class, copying down and sharing the words of popular songs (among girls), graffiti and lists for made-up clubs. Children told me they used notes to have secret conversations during silent reading, and occasionally a child received an anonymous note telling them that another child in the class wanted to 'go out with' them. There was intense discussion among friends over such notes, often centring on their authorship and authenticity. (Numbers of children said they had boyfriends or girlfriends but these relationships seemed more significant at a discursive level than in terms of actual activity, given these pairs might not see each other outside school and spent little time together during the school day.) I captured on tape a similar discussion about a piece of graffiti that Nicole had found 'smeared' on the mirror in the girls' toilet, as she reported when she returned to a group of friends who were working on maths together in the classroom. The graffiti read: 'Laura Clark for ?', and Nicole's report sparked off a heated exchange of accusation and counter accusation among the girls about who might have insulted Laura (who was not sitting

with the group) in this way. Who the question mark might stand for was never addressed and a more important focus for the girls seemed to be questions about affinities and loyalties within a tight but unstable friendship group. The question of the graffiti-writer's identity was not resolved, but was left fluid and provisional as the conversation moved on to other topics.

Texts produced by children were often used more explicitly to draw social boundaries. Gary, for instance, often wrote lists during the morning that set out the positions of players for informal football at lunchtime and these lists were used to help organise and regulate the game. There were intense negotiations around who was to be included in the teams in which position, and who was excluded. And Sam and Simon told me in their interview that they had made a list of the people they wanted to be members of a club in the shed in Simon's garden, and a list of rules: 'What they're not allowed to do'. The listing of rules for clubs (which rarely developed beyond this planning stage) was a common practice among the children, for instance Melissa and Laura began writing out 'Our rules of our club' (Example 4) one evening together at Laura's home and I noticed them completing the list at school the next day. I asked the girls where the different rules came from and they later gave me the list.

Example 4 (spelling as in the original, which also included different coloured writing for each rule)

Our rules of our club

- 1 No smoking.
- 2 No useing and you must always use your manors.
- 3 No swearing.
- 4 No going off.
- 5 No staying in during Playtime.
- 6 No trowing your fod at lunch time.
- 7 allways sit with a patner.
- 8 No calling any other member of the club names.

- 9 No Kicking, punching, pulling hair.
- 10 Do not lie or cheat.
- 11 No swoping with some one outside of the club.

Melissa and Laura's list includes orientations (at the discursive level) towards various different sources of authority. Some rules refer to conventional expectations of good behaviour for girls in their community (the second part of rule 2 and rules 3, 9 and 10). Other rules (5 and 6) repeat school regulations discussed in class the previous week, rule 1 echoes public signs and the girls' own strong personal antipathy to smoking by other children and rules 4, 7 and 'No using' in Rule 2 relate to peer friendship conventions. In relation to this last category, the girls told me that 'going off' meant leaving someone without explaining why and 'using' meant falsely pretending that you wanted to be someone's friend. Sitting with a partner was important because 'you want to sit with your friends'. Finally, Rules 8 and 11 stipulate behaviour in relation to other children in and outside the club, thus expressing its boundaries.

'Our rules of our club', with its repeated use of 'our', consolidated Melissa and Laura's friendship and identified them as similar kinds of people through their shared choice, at least at a rhetorical level, of authoritative reference points. It indexes both personal aversions and local peer-group social practices, and also more macro-level social institutions in terms of school regulatory practices, public signs and community conventions. This same double orientation, to the personal and local on the one side and the more macro institutional on the other, can be identified in the other unofficial activities discussed earlier above. Children's play during work was linked to, or indexed, formal knowledge and procedures. While glancing through magazines, passing notes, copying down the words of songs and reading graffiti in public places may appear inconsequential and ephemeral literacy activities, fantasizing about princesses and film stars, invitations about 'going out', the imagery of romance and relationship in songs and the putative couplings in graffiti are all part of children's induction into teenage practices around sexuality. These practices, in their turn, reflect and instantiate the broader culturally regulated expression of sexuality and ordering of sexual relations within the children's community.

Pahl (2002) suggests that ephemeral texts produced by young children in the home can be seen as a playing out of the habitus, a momentary ‘sedimentation’ of iterative practices of home narratives and family history. In a similar way, the patterns of attraction and conflict, inclusion and exclusion and cross-gender relations expressed and discussed by the 10-11 year-olds in my research are momentarily crystallized within the literacy artefacts of notes, lists and graffiti. Researching and entering to some extent into the children’s perspectives shows that, even within these ephemeral activities, writing is used for planning, organising and regulating activity and interpersonal relations, and to express particular aspects of identity (personal social preferences, gendering, orientations towards particular sources of authority). Whatever their provenance, texts instantiate a kind of crystallisation of meaning, a ‘this is how things are’ moment of reification, however fleeting, which provides some kind of held focus within children’s continually ongoing processes of meaning-making.

Hybrid literacies

Researching the full range of literacy activity in the classroom foregrounds the intrinsically multimodal nature of meaning-making around texts, which has been overshadowed in the past by a pedagogic emphasis on printed text (Unsworth 2001, Kress 2003). An integral part of the meaning of the examples discussed above (magazine photos and word puzzles, graffiti on toilet mirrors, notes and lists of rules, popular songs, school instructions for scientific experiments) was conveyed through visual images, various design formats and music as well as writing. Their material nature (scrap of paper, glossy magazine page) and location (textbook, toilet mirror) were also centrally important to the ways in which they were interpreted and used.

Children’s official literacy activities were also clearly multimodal, and they overlapped with and incorporated vernacular practices. For instance, Kevin and Kieran were working together on written questions about ‘Finding positions’ in a grid plan of a zoo. Each square in the grid plan contained a picture or words indicating, for example, bushes in A3 and B3, tigers in C3, lions in D3, toilets in E2, reptiles in 1A and wolves in H3. Kevin said ‘Don’t know what we have to do. Ask Miss’ and Kieran responded ‘We have to try and write it. You have to make it a grid. How to get to all the things. Look’. He started reading from the worksheet: “This is a plan of the zoo”.

The two boys then tried to work out the answer to the first question, which asked what they would find at the grid reference C3. The correct answer was ‘tigers’ but Kevin thought the answer should also include the bushes which were in fact located in A3 and B3. At this point they attracted Mrs. Kilbride’s attention:

Example 5a

Kevin Tigers and bushes. Do we have to write that down? *(to Mrs. Kilbride)* Is that how you do these?

Mrs K. What’s this?

Kieran Coordinates.

Mrs. K. Which, where, which way do columns go?

Kieran Downwards

Kevin Downwards

Mrs. K. Or upwards. Yea, okay, vertically. Right

Kieran /Yea

Mrs. K. The rows, which way do the rows go?

Kieran That way, Miss

Mrs. K. Horizontally, right

Kieran You have to, em, find these, Miss, got to

Mrs. K. /Right so you

Kieran /got to see through and you go and see through so you end up tigers and the bushes,

Kevin tigers and the bushes, Miss

Mrs. K. Well, no, what is actually in this, where is the, that’s the “C”

Kieran And there’s the 3

Mrs. K. And the 3. So it's where they join. Actually inside that square. Where they actually join. Cause this is B 3

Kieran So this one is tigers

Mrs. K. And this is A 3, so you just write 'tigers'. Yea?

Once she had checked what the boys were working on, Mrs. Kilbride started with scaffolding-type questions (Maybin et al, 1992) 'which way do columns go?', 'which way do the rows go?' She used the opportunity to introduce the specialist labels 'column', 'vertical', 'row' and 'horizontal' and added 'or upwards' to the boys' 'downwards', reformulating both of these within the more academic term 'vertically'. In appropriating and rephrasing Kevin and Kieran's suggestions in the course of the typical Initiation-Response-Evaluation pattern of teacher-student dialogue, Mrs. Kilbride is shifting them into schooled 'vertical' discourse involving more abstract and literate conventions. When it became clear that the boys were confused about the term 'position' (they seemed to be focussing on what could be a mini-picture, i.e. tiger + bushes, running 'C3' together with 'A3' and 'B3'), Mrs. Kilbride stopped questioning them. She directly explained the convention that the reference A3 referred to what was 'actually inside that square', where a letter and a number 'join', so that it was only the tigers which were 'C3', and she instructed them to 'just write 'tigers''. In this way children learn to shift their attention from reading iconic representations of tigers with bushes, to reading the abstract textual and diagrammatic conventions of grid references.

The scaffolding questions, reformulations into more academic discourse and introduction to literate conventions and schooled multimodality were typical of many of the teacher interventions with students that I recorded. On other occasions Mrs. Kilbride rephrased pupil suggestions of 'beach' into 'coastline' and 'none' into 'nought', and she taught Karen to shift her attention from an iconic representation of a hill to an expression of its height in contour lines. However, in order to successfully complete the zoo map coordinates exercise and learn to use grid references effectively, Kieran and Kevin were involved in a further series of activities, none of which looked very much like schooled literacy. Before the interaction with Mrs. Kilbride in Example 5a above, they had to physically locate the pages they were to

work on. This involved the interaction with Louise and Tina recorded in Example 3, which was followed by further acrimonious exchanges about what the boys were going to use to write on. And after Mrs. Kilbride left them, an interactive pattern developed between Kevin and Kieran which contrasted both with their exchange with the girls, and with the exchange with Mrs. Kilbride. Kieran who, unlike his friend, had understood Mrs. Kilbride's explanation, began to model aloud how to find and record the first answer:

Example 5b

Kieran Right, let's go. Got to go C 3, so we know what that is. We end up at tigers, we end up at tigers, yea?

Kevin Draw the square?

Kieran No, just write it "End up with the tigers in C 3"

The boys continued with Kieran modelling aloud what he was doing for each question and Kevin listening to Kieran and responding. For example, Kieran said 'To the shop, the shop is E4' and Kevin vocalised that he was going to write: 'End up at the shop'. Kieran appeared to have no problem in simultaneously completing and voicing his own answers while also monitoring Kevin's responses, which sometimes lagged a question behind. For his part, Kevin listened to Kieran's modelling of the answer to a question he was just about to get to, while also occasionally receiving feedback on the question he was currently on. For most of the half hour in which they worked on this worksheet Kieran took the lead in this way, but towards the end of the session Kevin became more confident in answering the questions for himself, and also began to play with the exercise:

Example 5c

Kieran Done that. (*reading*) 'Where do you find the, where do you find them, a, shop.'

Kevin (*vocalising his own answer for an earlier question asking where the lions are located*) D 3

Kieran Find the shop

Kevin *(story voice)* ‘The lions’. I’m writing ‘You end up dead in the lions’ cage’ *(giggle)*

Kieran There ain’t no lions

Kevin Oh, oh yea, I done that *(puts on voice again)* ‘end up dead in the lions’ cage!’ *(giggle)*

Kieran You would be, there.

Children often dipped briefly into a playful frame alongside the business of getting their work done (cf Lytra 2003). Such playful frames were usually fleeting and fragile as students needed to be able to revert back to ‘doing work’ within a few seconds, if they saw the teacher heading in their direction. The play was closely intertwined with work at an oral level, but was ‘edited out’ of written work. In this case the boys’ written responses to the worksheet, which I later photocopied, listed identical correct answers, each starting with the slightly unconventional wording ‘End up with’, but there was no suggestion, on Kevin’s part, that ‘You end up dead in the lions’ cage’.

At the beginning of the lesson, both boys had been uncertain about how to tackle the questions on the worksheet, and were even unsure about which worksheet was ‘Coordinates Stage 4’. Each of the three different kinds of literacy activity: the irritable conveying of information by Louise and Tina, the scaffolding teaching from Mrs. Kilbride and the more relaxed, drawn-out give and take of the informal modelling, checking and play between Kieran and Kevin contributed to each of them learning how to use the grid references, at different times and in different ways.

Kieran and Kevin’s work together after Mrs. Kilbride had moved away, was centrally structured around sharing, copying and collaborating and, like Martie and Karin’s light-splitting, involved a mixture of what we might define as work and play.

Although Kieran’s close modelling of correct procedures for Kevin did not fit into the conventional notion of scaffolding talk, Kieran did seem to offer Kevin a form of ‘vicarious consciousness’ until he could tackle the questions independently. Kevin’s final written answers looked as though he had simply directly copied his friend but, although some copying was certainly involved, the tape recording indicated how Kevin gradually moved towards independent competence by the end of the session. ‘Finding positions’ entailed an orientation towards schooled, vertical literacy and the

visual modality associated with grids, but actually doing the work involved a more hybrid mix of what could be termed schooled and vernacular procedures.

Conclusion

I have argued that the home/school opposition embedded within the New Literacy Studies conceptual framework has been associated with the conflation of ‘home’ and ‘vernacular’ literacy and with an abstract conception of ‘schooled literacy’ which does not take account of students’ actual everyday experience in classrooms. While forms of literacy practices and knowledge are of course related to the social contexts in which they emerge, I have suggested that the school as a domain is far more heterogeneous than a sharp contrast with the domains of home and work in some strands of the New Literacy Studies would suggest. I have also argued that the relationships between children’s literacy activities and the literacy practices which underpin them cut across the schooled/vernacular dichotomy.

The nature and range of literacy activity in a classroom, and the patterning of what might be termed schooled or vernacular practice, will depend on the social makeup of the class, school and community, the teaching style and classroom ethos, and the age of the students. For the 10-11 year-old white working-class pupils I studied, there was a vernacularisation of official literacy within peer interactions over ongoing work, with a periodic dipping into play that often, however, linked back to children’s experience of school activities. I have argued that unofficial literacy activities which appeared to be embedded in horizontal discourse also included links and orientations to official formal knowledge structures and to the more macro-level institutional order. Some unofficial activities, like the discussion of magazine images and the graffiti, pointed to these pupils’ positioning at the brink of adolescence and their beginning explorations of teenage gendered identity, possibly foreshadowing a future oppositional counterscript in the more pressured academic ethos of British secondary schooling.

I found that official classroom activities did entail teachers’ use of scaffolding questions, their reformulations of pupil contributions into academic discourse and their introduction of pupils to schooled literate conventions. But, in the spaces before and after teacher interventions, official activities were interpenetrated by informal practices and procedures. Without in any way detracting from the central importance

to children's learning of skilfully managed teacher-pupil dialogue, and of the key significance of those eureka moments when students seem to shift to a higher level of understanding in classroom tasks, I would suggest that a large part of children's day-to-day learning in many schools is mediated, like Kevin and Kieran's and Karen and Martie's, through an unstable hybrid mixture of schooled and vernacular exchange.

I have argued that ethnographically informed discourse analysis is necessary to trace the role of literacy in ongoing social interaction, and to understand the meaning and significance which their various literacy activities hold for the participants themselves. I found the New Literacy Studies concept of 'literacy practice' productive in a general sense, in directing my attention to how the wide range of children's literacy activities in classrooms also involves a range of 'social practices and conceptions', ie different interactions with texts, and the expression of different evaluative positions, relationships and identities. In my classroom data, however, it was difficult to identify precisely what counted as a literacy event, or to pinpoint where events started and finished. This was particularly problematic because I was focussing on children's dynamic meaning-making over time rather than on their learning as defined by the official school curriculum. In addition to questions about event boundaries, I would suggest that labelling events reifies a particular perspective, for instance the teacher's, the children's, or the researcher's.

As I have discussed, literacy activities did not necessarily instantiate a single coherent social model of literacy or 'literacy practice' (e.g. a schooled way of taking and reproducing meaning from specific kinds of texts), but often involved a mixture of schooled and vernacular orientations and values. Instead of the rather structuralist notion of empirical events underpinned by abstract practices, I would suggest that we need a more fluid and dynamic language of description for children's ongoing meaning-making around texts which may, simultaneously or sequentially, invoke different complexes of institutionalised beliefs and values associated with reading and writing. This could point the way towards a more theorised understanding of children's literacy learning in the broadest sense, and of the ways in which their micro-level activities link to different forms of knowledge and to broader aspects of cultural practice and social structure.

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Transcription conventions

Names of people and places have been changed, to protect anonymity.

Comments in italics and parentheses clarify what's happening, or indicate non-verbal features e.g. (*points to page numbers*), (*giggle*).

(...) indicates words on the tape which I can't make out,

/ indicates where another speaker interrupts or cuts in,

indicates simultaneous talk. The overlapping talk is also lined up vertically on the page.

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