

Chapter 6

Rethinking Literacy in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Literate demands on our youth today have become increasingly more complex due to a technological revolution, increased local diversity and a stronger connectedness with our global neighbours (New London Group, 1996). Contemporary classrooms are characterised by a diverse range of learners that come from different places, with different life world experiences and preferred ways of learning and knowing. Texts are no longer confined to print and comprehending texts involves understanding how different modes such as the audio, visual and spatial integrate to make meaning. Despite this, schools continue to measure and describe student's literacy in relation to their ability to encode and decode print. The recent Program for International Student Assessment results (OECD, 2006) show that Australia has dropped from 5th ranking to 6th in the world in terms of reading literacy. More disturbing is the fact that this assessment showed a continuing widening gap in academic achievement between Australia's Indigenous and non Indigenous students with very little improvement since 2000. Similarly in the United States recent literacy results show that despite some gains in the achievements of minority groups, there has been little narrowing in the gap between white students and minority students (Lee, Grigg et al., 2007). This chapter adopts a socio-cultural view of literacy and calls for a rethinking of what might count as literacy in school. It reports on a study which documented the literacy practices valued in the home community, community school and urban high school of seven Aboriginal students as they moved from Year 7 in their community school to Year 8 in their new urban high school (Rennie, Wallace et al. 2004). It discusses theoretical ideas related to a multiliteracies framework (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), literacy as an act of translation (Somerville, 2006) and Aboriginal world views and knowledge (Martin, 2008) as a means to explore ways we might rethink the teaching of literacy in diverse and culturally rich classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

Kelly comes home from school. He drops his bag and makes his way to the kitchen to prepare an afternoon snack. He then goes to his room where he turns on the computer, signs on to MSN and starts chatting with his mates. On a different afternoon Kelly goes down to the local swimming club for training.

Arnie finishes school. He doesn't go home but drops by the local art centre to see his Mum and Dad. He talks to his Mum about the painting she is doing. He then heads up to the sport and recreation centre where he grabs a snack and plays football with his mates. On a different afternoon Arnie stays at school and plays games on the computer.

Kelly and Arnie are both young boys who live in two different places in Australia. Arnie lives on a remote Aboriginal community in the North and Kelly in a large urban centre. The two scenarios described would be common activities that the boys might engage in after school.

A SOCIO-CULTURAL VIEW

Depending on how one defines literacy some might argue that both boys are 'doing' literacy and that literacy is an integral part of their afternoon activities. They might also say that literacy helps to shape these activities and that each activity requires a different set of literacies. Further they might argue that these literacies are better understood through the relationships between the boys and their mates and the individual communities in which they live. This thinking is characteristic of those who espouse socio-cultural views of literacy, literacy teaching and learning where literacy is not simply understood as a discrete set of skills but rather as variable forms of social practice, see for example, "New Literacy studies" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), "social literacies" (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993), or "situated literacies" (Barton, Hamilton et al., 2000).

Many scholars from different fields have contributed to knowledge about literacy including psychologists, sociologists, linguists, educationalists and policy makers and the way in which it is defined largely depends on their beliefs about how it is learned, how and whether it can be measured, what it does and what it is. Although Kelly and Arnie went to different primary schools they both went to the same high school. This was due to the fact that Arnie's community did not have access to secondary education. Despite the similarities in their afternoon activities during primary school they had very different experiences at high school. Kelly is a day student and Arnie stays at the school as a boarder. Both boys are not that fond of school and would rather be home doing other things. Kelly does well in his English classes and although he enjoys reading does not care much for what he is required to read and write in school. Arnie on the other hand was placed in an Intensive English class and he does not enjoy reading and writing probably because he struggles with the task.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to present, critique or debate different perspectives on what literacy is or how it should be taught. These debates have been well documented elsewhere (see for example Chall, 1967; Christie, Devlin et al., 1991; Flippo, 1999; Loudon, Rohl et al., 2005; DEST, 2005). However, it is important to understand that one's beliefs about what literacy 'is' or 'does' directly influences the ways in which it is taught in schools. It is also important to acknowledge that a student's personal experience with and understanding of literacy can affect the ways in which they engage with literacy in school. Recent research that has investigated the literacy practices of homes, schools and communities have found marked differences in the literacy practices and values of schools and their families in the ways they used and defined literacy (Cairney & Ruge, 1997; Flear & Williams-Kennedy, 2001; Heath, 1986; 1998; Hill, Comber et al., 1998; Hill, Comber et al., 2002; Rennie, Wallace et

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