

AARE ABSTRACT: Researching the "taken-for granted" in educational practice: Crossing methodological boundaries

Presenter: Robyn Cusworth  
Education Faculty  
University of Sydney

The distinction is often made between quantitative and qualitative methodology when looking at educational problems and the superiority of one is often promoted over another ( e.g. Bulmer, 1978 c.f Althusser, 1971). While it has been argued that a quantitative, outcome-based approach to research may be systematic in its control of individual differences (Palmiter, et.al., 1993), it cannot examine or explore the variations and complexities of individual experiences. It must also be noted that these distinctions are fairly artificially polarised and that often within each paradigm a range of different approaches to and methods of research are included.

The current study of newstime aimed to develop a rich and layered description of this fragment of the curriculum - an everyday school practice which has wider implications for teaching and learning. It was therefore imperative to use a range of data gathering methods crossing traditional methodology boundaries. Rather than begin with a theory or hypothesis, the intention was that the outcome of the research would lead to a clearer definition of newstime as a curriculum event.

The researcher has attempted to integrate both a careful study of observed practice on a small scale with patterns obtained from a larger sample of teachers about their newstime practices. Initial case studies led to examination of more general teacher practice which in turn led to ethnography. The whole research process was "constantly shaped and reshaped" (Burgess,1984, p.9) during the investigation as the researcher tried to take up the challenge to subject a curriculum event often "taken-for-granted" to critical scrutiny ( Delamont, 1991, p.197).

It follows that to understand how curriculum patterns emerge we should perhaps look less at social systems and structures than at particular situations or episodes in which curriculum power is taken, given, challenged or negotiated, (Shaw in Reynolds & Skilbeck, 1975, p.34-5, my emphasis).

One of the first particular curriculum "situations or episodes" a young child starting school is introduced to is news or sharing time. Its

importance is demonstrated by its inclusion in many fictional stories written for young children (see for example, Ramona the pest; Freya's fantastic surprise and Schulz's Classroom Peanuts comic strip). Some have even claimed it "was the very best part of school" because "it was education that came out of my life experience," (Fulghum, 1980,p.ix). Despite its prominence in school folklore, newstime remains an 'ad hoc' experience in many Australian classrooms and is largely undertheorised and ignored or glossed over. Where it has been theorised in Australian educational writing (e.g. Christie, 1986,1989), it has been conceptualised as a "curriculum genre" and represented generally as one particular type of learning activity. The focus for these investigations has been on linguistic analysis of the teacher-student interaction during these episodes.

Newstime practice provides an example of a school tradition or ritual in NSW K-2 classrooms which has not been appraised from a critical perspective (Apple, 1990). It is the taken-for-granted aspects of our school curriculum like newstime which need to be carefully explored and challenged if educators are to expose the reproductive nature of school as an institution and seek to prepare students for the demands of living in the twenty-first century. Newstime in junior primary classrooms is particularly pertinent as a focus for this case study of a curriculum phenomenon because children are newly arrived in school and are involved in learning how knowledge developed at home and in the community may be framed differently in the school context.

Educational writers and researchers (e.g. Cazden, 1988, Christie, 1986, 1990, Michaels, 1986) suggest a range of purposes for newstime and these have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Cusworth, 1991, 1994 a, 1994 b). Briefly it is asserted that news or sharing time is important because it can:

- \* provide an opportunity for children to share a personal experience or favourite belonging from home in front of a large group building a bridge between home and school experiences;
- \* encourage oral narrative which will facilitate thinking and self-esteem development; and
- \* develop children's oracy as a precursor to literacy development (Christie, 1986, Collins and Michaels 1986, Michaels, 1985).

The current study demonstrates, however, that this curriculum activity can provide insights into the explicit and implicit lessons children are learning about the nature of school knowledge and what constitutes classroom discourse. Through a rich and layered description of this fragment of classroom life in K-2 classrooms in NSW primary schools, this investigation suggests that the purposes of newstime along with its actuality in the classroom need to be critically examined from the perspective of students and parents as well as teachers. This may contribute to the development of a more sophisticated understanding of

the construction of teacher-pupil interaction and the language of teaching and learning more generally. Further, the study challenges the notion of newstime as a generic teaching and learning activity and suggests that the type of learning experiences being constructed through newstime will depend specifically on the type of context being constructed by the participants involved. The concepts of curriculum and pedagogy are "inexorably linked." (Sadovnik, 1991, p.50.)

From a methodological point of view, the study therefore seeks to draw from both qualitative and quantitative paradigms in developing a multi-method framework for this research and permits an integration of analysis that has traditionally been polarised as either macro or micro. In this sense, then, this study encourages discussion about the need to cross traditional methodological boundaries rather than allow different approaches to remain confined to continue as "competing paradigms," (Hammersley, 1993b,p.xiii).

By using triangulation (Burns, 1994, Mathison, 1988, Miles and Huberman, 1984) of different data sources, the researcher has explored the construction of school knowledge through newstime developing a rich description of the practice from the perspectives of teachers, pupils and a small group of parents. The importance of going beyond the general patternings of classroom discourse to examine more carefully the choices being made by both teachers and students and hence the meanings being communicated is clearly demonstrated. Newstime, then, is used as an exemplar of a curriculum event/process through which messages about school/educational knowledge are constructed both

explicitly through language and implicitly through the structuring of the learning context.

The study is a case study of newstime as a curriculum phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, the researcher has used both qualitative (transcript analysis, semi-structured and conversational interviews, participant observation, analysis of student drawings) and quantitative methods (questionnaire) to gather data to provide a description and analysis of existing newstime practice from a number of perspectives. Three initial case studies of newstime in kindergarten classrooms led to a wider survey to investigate more general patterns which in turn led to an ethnographic study of the newstime culture in one kindergarten classroom. The research process itself was therefore developmental and the three phases are summarised below:

- i) three case studies of news/sharing time in kindergarten classrooms in Sydney;
- ii) a state-wide survey of K-2 teachers' newstime practices and their purposes if programming newstime as a regular curriculum activity; and
- iii) An ethnographic study in a kindergarten classroom in which newstime practice is carefully examined from the perspective of the

teacher, the students and a small self-selecting group of mothers.

Each phase of the research has been reported elsewhere (see Cusworth, 1991, 1994a, 1994b). This paper seeks to summarise the findings of the three phases to demonstrate the importance of developing a "thick description" (Spradley and McCurdy, 1979) of such a routine practice. The use of newstime by teachers across all three phases of the research demonstrates that newstime is a regular part of many K-2 classrooms in NSW. The different layers of newstime explored depict different aspects of the phenomenon and reveal different perspectives about the knowledge that is being constructed through newstime.

i) Three case studies of news/sharing time in kindergarten classrooms in Sydney

Kindergarten teachers in three Sydney classrooms were asked to audiotape ten sessions of newstime which they considered representative. Tape descriptions were made of each tape and three sessions chosen randomly were fully transcribed.

The three initial case studies of newstime in Sydney kindergarten classrooms revealed no transcript examples of oral narrative. In Classroom Two and Classroom Three there were some examples of oral recounts. Classroom One and Three discourse patterns during newstime were clear examples of traditional I-R-E interaction (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) which has for so long dominated talk in classrooms.

There were very few instances of student-student interaction during newstime discussion and very little opportunity for children to control the classification or framing (Bernstein, 1971, 1986, 1990) of the talk.

In Classroom One the teacher's comments frequently restricted children's talk as demonstrated by the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1.1( Transcript 1c)

014 R: My parents got me a new bag.

015 T: And what do you notice about the colour, boys and girls?

016 R: Your favourite colour.

017 T: And what colour is that? (confirm, enquire)

018 Black, is it?

019 Chorus: No.

020 T: Is it blue?

021 Chorus: No.

023 Several children: Pink, pink.

024 T: What colour is it? 025 Chorus: Pink.

and later

090 T: A slinky. Am I saying it correctly?

091 Slinky. Could I just...

092 Do you know what shape that is?  
093 Who knows what you call that line ?  
094 When it goes round like that?  
095 An\_\_\_Ah, Anton?  
096 A: A spiral.  
097 T: A spiral, yes.  
098 Ch: A spring.  
099 T: Oh, who said a spring?  
100 Ch: Me.

The teacher of Classroom Three often used the children's newstime offers for her own didactic purposes; for example, to instill the need to cross the road safely. There are instances of her explicitly questioning the authenticity of a child's response, even contradicting an answer as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1.2 Transcript 3b:

038 N: Look what mummy buyed me.  
039 T: No she didn't.  
040 N: Yes.  
041 T: No she didn't.  
042N: Yes.  
043T: \*No she didn't.

The kinds of questions asked by Classroom One and Three teachers in the case study transcripts were shown to be questions which were mostly confirmatory requiring a 'yes' or 'no' response or a specific answer (Hasan, 1991). Very few examples of apprise questions (Hasan, 1991) which expect students to respond by offering their own thoughts or more tentative comments were noted. For oral narrative to be developed, it would be expected that students would need opportunities to talk at some length about their experiences but most of the children's news offers were brief, often only comprised of a sentence or two.

The teacher of Classroom Two, Ms Gray, did acknowledge in her interview the importance of children's storytelling and also introduced shared experiences as a basis for discussion with her students. Transcripts of newstime in her classroom were quite different in terms of teacher-student interaction than those of Classroom One and Two as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1.3 Transcript 2(a)

009 T: OK, good. Cathy?

010 C: And we had groups and one goes sketching and one goes writing and the lady showed us a tree which had been...you got to smell it and smells like [...] and you feed those [ ].

012 T: Did you? We didn't see that, the group that was with

me.

013                      Could you explain a bit?

01 4            C: The lady showed us.

015            T: What do the bees do?

016            C: The bees...the bees go round at the root and then  
the plants eat them.

017            A: Cause they're down in the plant aren't they, Cathy?

While only a few brief excerpts can be provided here, the findings from the case study phase suggested that it is not productive to see newstime as a generic activity or 'curriculum genre'. Despite superficial similarities (circle formation for newstime, each child having an opportunity to share news, newstime as the first activity of the day) it appears that different learning contexts are being constructed through different structuring and organisation of the newstime activity.

Two of the teachers were interviewed about their purposes for newstime and the interview questions formed the basis for the development of an open-ended survey which was then sent to 200 NSW state primary schools, 40 Catholic schools and 20 independent schools.

ii) A state-wide survey of K-2 teachers' newstime practices and their purposes if programming newstime as a regular curriculum activity

A sample of K-2 teachers in NSW across all systems were surveyed about whether they programmed newstime on a daily basis and, if so, what their purposes were. Of the 393 responses, 92% programmed newstime on a daily basis. Time spent on newstime ranged from fifteen to seventy-five minutes with most teachers spending between fifteen and twenty-five minutes on the activity. These teachers have various explicit purposes for including newstime regularly in the early childhood curriculum. In fact seventeen different reasons emerged from the data. Notwithstanding this, teacher emphasis is most frequently on developing more technical ways of knowing (Smith and Lovat, 1991). Oral language skill development rather than oral narrative or storying was cited most often as a reason for programming newstime everyday by a large majority of the NSW K-2 teachers surveyed. Kindergarten (74.1%), Year 1 (74.7%) and Year 2 (72.6%) teachers nominated this reason most frequently.

Implicit in this emphasis on oral language skill development is the

assumption that children need help to become competent communicators. There is, however, much research which suggests that children beginning school are already very capable conversationalists "with a reasonably sophisticated understanding of discourse skills," (Evans, 1984,p.130). This finding may support Michaels and Collins's (1986) claim, that teachers expect only a "narrow literate standard" (p.221) and that this in turn may lead to ' a decline in the quality and quantity of interaction." There is still much to understand about the way teachers evaluate and shape the oral language offers of their students "on the spot" and the consequent literacy development of these students. As educators it is important not to underestimate what children can already do.

The researcher felt it was important to delineate between oral language skill development and the provision of an opportunity to tell a story. She felt oral skill development exemplified a technical way of knowing which would have quite different purposes and outcomes to those envisaged by storying which is perhaps a more interpretive way of knowing. It would seem that newstime is seen by the majority of

teachers who responded to the survey as a time when students can engage in individual performances as a way of demonstrating or even presenting their oracy skills. This is suggested by the terms used by teachers to describe oral skill development in their questionnaire responses: oral expression; vocabulary skills; opportunity to speak in a public forum; allows the teacher to monitor speech and language structure; help develop speech and enunciation in individual children; an introduction to public speaking. Newstime appears to be perceived as a forerunner to public speaking rather than a venue for storytelling. The opportunity to tell a story as a valuable or worthwhile activity in itself does not appear to be well recognised as a purpose for newstime.

Data from the second phase of the research, the open-ended survey, sought to investigate how teachers organised their class for newstime by asking teachers to draw the classroom arrangement for news as well as describe a typical newstime activity. The drawings suggested that a number of traditional classroom structures were most commonly used, even for an activity designed to encourage the students to talk. In addition, the questionnaire provided data about other ways teachers used to structure the newstime experience, and, in fact, demonstrated that the circle formation was not frequently used nor were all children given the opportunity to share news each day. More than half the teachers drew diagrams depicting very traditional arrangements with themselves sitting either at the front of the massed class with the newsgiver or behind the whole class group.

This maintenance of fairly traditional arrangements would probably inhibit interactive questioning and discussion of news topics by

students. Other teachers also indicated that they remained removed from the news session, sitting at their desks. The teacher was most likely to be seated at the front with younger age groups (53.6 Kindergarten, 55.5 Year 1 compared with 39.3 % for Year 2) perhaps reinforcing a perception that younger children needed more adult input.

Year 2 teachers made most use of the whole circle formation. Some teachers used a variety of formations for newstime incorporating a time for a whole class plenary as well as other talk opportunities. Very few teachers set up physical structures which would be conducive to the kind of interactive discussion they nominated as one of the reasons for programming newstime on a daily basis in their classrooms.

Many teachers intimated a tendency to control the newstime activity, searching for what they considered correct answers to 'sensible' questions, restricting rather than elaborating children's talk opportunities during newstime through timing each newsgiver or limiting the number of questions that other children could ask about a particular news offer. Others wrote explicitly about using newstime to control children's talk: By providing a venue to enable children to talk, other learning tasks during the day would be less prone to chatter. Given the importance of talk in learning and the crucial links between talking and thinking development, it is of concern that teachers still express the need to control children's talk-time during learning activities which are intended to provide a venue for children to talk.

### iii) An ethnographic study in a kindergarten classroom

For the ethnographic phase the researcher chose a kindergarten class in which two less traditional organisations of the newstime were used: small conversation groups of four to five followed by a whole class circle. This was a deliberate choice. Having identified both traditional and less traditional ways of structuring the same

classroom event, it was thought that an in-depth study of less conventional formations in a specific context might be helpful. Data was collected using a range of methods including participant observation, conversational interviews with teacher, students and a small group of mothers, analysis of student drawings of newstime and research journal notes.

Despite the conversation groups being seen by the teacher to be a very important element of her newstime organisation, neither she nor the children nor the small number of parents interviewed focused on this part when discussing newstime. Their focus instead was on the whole circle formation used at the conclusion of the "buzz" groups. Drawings made by the children also focused on the whole class circle time. Organisation of the whole circle varied as the year progressed, but it seemed that the teacher gradually took a less prominent role during the



sharing of news in the circle, by the end of the year withdrawing and allowing a child to substitute as the chair person.

Through a series of data gathering methods during the ethnographic phase of the research a number of metaphors for newstime were suggested. The ethnographic phase demonstrated that students and parents in KY had different images and constructions of the newstime experience to that of their teacher. Lorelei expressed her view that newstime was about communicating. For her students newstime was most typically seen as a showing or a telling presentation to their peer group, a time when everyone would listen to them. For those parents interviewed newstime was viewed as an oral presentation. It was suggested that newstime provided a precursor to a public speaking performance.

While there is obviously some overlap between the metaphors of communicating, listening and oral presentation, the differences need to be further investigated. Teachers may need to be more explicit about their purposes and willing to share them with both their students and the parent community. The perspectives of students and parents have often been ignored in curriculum models. Students may need to be encouraged to share their constructions of learning tasks explicitly.

## Conclusions

The findings from the three research phases suggested that intentions for newstime were not often realised through the structuring and organisation of the activity as it was described or observed. Where teachers were keen to impose very tight classification and framing boundaries it would seem less possible for the children to tell stories or discuss issues in an interactive manner. As Bourdieu (1990) has written:

in the case of ritual practices: if you take logical control too far, you see contradictions springing up at every step (p.70).  
Newstime practices seem characterised by contradictions.

The researcher has attempted to integrate both a careful study of observed practice on a small scale with patterns obtained from a larger sample of teachers about their newstime practices. Initial case studies led to examination of more general teacher practice which in turn led to ethnography. The whole research process was "constantly shaped and reshaped" (Burgess, 1984, p.9), evolving during the investigation as the researcher tried to take up the challenge to subject a curriculum event often "taken-for-granted" to critical scrutiny (Delamont, 1991, p.197). Each research phase grew out of and

built upon the preceding phase(s).

Another challenge to conventional notions about validity has been demonstrated through the use of triangulation. While it is often suggested that

if different methods of assessment or investigation produce the same results then the data are likely to be valid, (Burns, 1994,p.240). The triangulation of a number of different data gathering methods in this study has not lead to convergence (Mathison, 1988) about the newstime phenomenon. Rather they have highlighted some contradictory, inconsistent perspectives of newstime proposed by some of the key participants in the process. This does not mean the findings are any less valid. Rather, there are alternative constructions of the same phenomenon which need further exploration.

The conventional model of teacher-pupil interaction as embodied in the I-R-E/F (Sinclair and Coulthard,1975) sequence has been critiqued for the past twenty years (see, for example, Perrott, 1988) without much evidence of change in practice. Even in a part of the program when children are given opportunities to talk, the language being generated in newstime exchanges in a number of classrooms in the 1990's are, according to the findings of this study, no different in real terms to that being generated for many decades and remain heavily dominated by the teacher. If some of the newstime transcripts in the case study and ethnographic phases are truly representative of the newstime interaction in those classrooms then the language codes in use may in fact be more restricted than the restricted codes postulated by Bernstein (1971). So much is tacit or assumed knowledge, so much is being taken for granted. The language use in many newstime situations remains ancillary restricting the use of imaginative language to explore the unknown. Do the newstime experiences in many of our K-2 classrooms provide opportunities for children to think " the unthinkable, the impossible"?(Bernstein, 1986,p.209 ).

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