

The construction of the problem learner in South Australian English curriculum documents 1962-1995

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The issue of (il)literacy and its teaching has been in the last twenty years periodically revisited as a site of crisis in Australian popular media and political debate. A feature of these crises and the debates is that they are 'profoundly ahistorical' and, as a result, 'proceed, largely and significantly, on the basis of myth, caricature, and limited forms of binary or oppositional thinking.' (Green & Beavis 1996, p.1). As Green, Hodgens and Luke (1994) point out:

[M]uch of the literacy debate requires a loss of memory. It depends on the capacity of journalists, politicians and public figures, educators and 'experts' themselves to recycle the same claims, the same images year in and year out. (Green, Hodgens & Luke 1994, p.2)

These recycled literacy crises, with their calls to revisit 'grammar', 'phonics' and 'explicit teaching' have thoroughly politicised English/literacy teaching in ways that have impacted negatively on teachers. Importantly, literacy crises and debates tend to be discussed and debated almost exclusively in the terms set by the political and policy context of the time.

We may only be able to conceive of the possibilities of response in and through the language, concepts and vocabulary which the discourse makes available to us. Thus, Offe may be right in stressing that struggle, dispute, conflict and adjustment take place over a preestablished terrain. The essence of this is that there are real struggles over the interpretation and enactment of policies. But these are set within a moving discursive frame which articulates and constrains the possibilities and probabilities of interpretation and enactment. (Ball 1993, p.14)

As Ball shows in his analysis of education reform in the UK, what is needed is a perspective on these debates that examines how they are discursively shaped, to see what counts as English and literacy in different times and places, and how this constitutes the figure of the student and the teacher.

To do this I have found helpful studies by researchers taking a Foucauldian perspective on educational history and curriculum. These researchers take the position that discourse is constitutive and that educational 'truths', including reform movements and claims of progress are themselves products of discursive ensembles available at a

particular time and place (Ball, 1993; Cherryholmes, 1988; Donald, 1992; Green, 1995; Hunter, 1988; Popkewitz, 1991; Walkerdine 1989).

This work, combined with the use of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992), has provided a means to examine how subject positions for teachers, students and others are constituted in particular times and places. Particularly influential for me has been the work of Judith Bessant whose 1995 study of the 'discovery' of an Australian juvenile underclass points to the way the media constructs a particular and interested vision of groups in a society, in this case 'juveniles'. Bessant comments that the reporting of a juvenile underclass in the 1980s and 1990s has used a variety of martial and animal metaphors ('armies', 'guerrilla gangs', 'outlaw children', 'time

bombs', 'wild', 'feral', 'untamed'). Bessant also says that much reporting of youth actually draws on the work of academics and other experts and deploys the discourses of social science, psychology and medicine.

Media and much academic discussion of the juvenile underclass is characterised by extensive use of the medicalisation of 'at risk' groups such as those 'diagnosed' as having 'learning problems', 'school phobias', 'handicaps' or 'disabilities' (Australian, 10 June 1992); Waverly Gazette, 30 June 1993; SMH, 17 July 1993). When 'underclass youth' are not represented as psychologically damaged, then they are represented in psycho-social terms. Experts warn for example of the potential disruption to social order posed by this 'type'... (Bessant 1995, p.35)

Studies such as these have helped to make visible some of the discursive practices that work to mark out some people as problem and to shape up 'necessary' and 'sensible' ways of dealing with them that serve particular interests in a society. These researchers have alerted me to the practical value of an historical perspective for understanding and supporting the work of teachers towards socially just ends.

Now more than ever, given its current state of crisis, controversy and change, English teaching needs to be firmly placed in historical and social context, with due recognition of its complex and contradictory character and of the significant (dis)continuities in its historical record. This will enable practitioners, students, scholars and teacher educators alike to grasp and exploit the larger picture of English curriculum history—past, present and future—as a resource for curriculum praxis. (Green & Beavis 1996, p.1)

My purpose in this paper is to consider the ways in which the problem or 'at-risk' early years English/literacy learner is inscribed in curriculum 'guides' and curriculum statements in one local site and in

so doing to come to an analysis of the present -particularly in the way it is impacting on teachers. In so doing, I hope to make the present, 'a strange, rather than familiar landscape' (Tyler & Johnson 1991).

Re-reading four key curriculum statements produced for South Australian early years English/literacy teachers over the past three and a half decades enables a review of the discourses which have shaped the figure of the literacy student. It reveals the continuities and discontinuities which characterise the student subject of this period.

In this paper I concentrate on the 1962 document and the most recent 1995 training and development program touching on the two intervening curriculum guides. My view is that the 1962, 1978 and 1984 documents share a common language for constituting the child subject and that the 1995 document marks a discursive change in the representation of the child with consequent revisions of the role of the teacher.

How then, is the problem child constituted? There are two useful ways of addressing this issue analytically in studying curriculum materials. First, the figure of the or 'usual' or 'ideal child can be delineated. By establishing a 'normal' child, these documents also infer an 'other' to that norm, the child who that norm establishes as deviant, different, or even invisible for the teacher. The establishment of such a figure provides a basis for the normative gaze of the 'teacher-judge' (Foucault 1977, p.304). The second way of determining the problem child is to look for the categories of student who are marked out as

different, not in the 'mainstream', as in need of 'special' attention or response, or the child who is seen as 'at risk'. Both of these figures - the normal and the problem child - can be examined for continuities and discontinuities.

1962 The natural, free and joyful child

In the construction of the child subject in the document, there are tensions and patterns of difference that are evident between the various areas of the subject (speech, reading, phonics and word study) which are also evident in the ways that children are described and named.

In the teaching of stories, poetry, speech, oral and written language - there is a great emphasis on the joyful and free child and the naturally developing child. For example, when introducing stories the infant teacher should 'prepare the children to enter the full joy of the shared experience' (p.12). In speech, the 'programme should follow the natural pattern of the child's speech development' (p.20).

It is in the sections on reading and phonics and word study that different ways of naming and describing children are deployed. Here,

the child is described as product of a background and as having individual ability. The child's background is described in relation to what 'he' has to learn in school . Background is seen as causally related to whether the child is ready or not ready for learning.

Children differ in the extent and variety of their social contacts. Those who come from happy homes with wisely exercised control will probably feel secure and confident enough to join in group and class activities and to carry out simple tasks. Such children are emotionally ready to read. On the other hand children who have not been accustomed to playing with other children, or who have been continually thwarted, will require time and help to mature. (p.34)

In addition to being the product of their background, children are also described as having individual 'ability' -differences between children are seen as evidence of children's differential facility with language. Ability is not necessarily fixed but can be improved by the teacher who is alert to deficiencies and who provides the instruction required by that child - the appropriate way of doing this in reading is through ability grouping.

Children differ widely in their reading ability. Some form of grouping will enable each child to advance according to his individual ability and to be given more practice in reading. (p.38)

Notions of background and ability come together at many places in the document in the concept of 'readiness' in relation to reading. For example, teachers must determine readiness by taking into account factors such as physical, emotional and mental maturity. Such maturity is determined by background experience (a home where there are interested parents, family outings and books in the home), and ability as evidenced by mastery of speech and visual and auditory skills.

There is a growing awareness of the range of individual differences among children. This has led to a greater flexibility in the teaching of reading and to a greater sense of responsibility for the teacher to recognise the right time at which each child should begin to read. (p.34)

Overall, there are some key words for the ideal/normal child. Where gender is specified the child is 'he' -a boy (taught by a 'she' a

woman teacher). Children are to 'love' and 'enjoy' their work, especially in speech. They do this by being 'natural', 'joyful', and 'confident'. There is to also 'mastery' along with 'accuracy and speed', especially in reading which is evidenced by the ease of reading and fluency. Teachers are to avoid situations which will engender 'fear and anxiety' and are to encourage the 'timid and self conscious' or 'discouraged' student.

The students who are singled out as a special case or problem in the 1962 document are the 'remedial reader' and the 'migrant child'. Each of these is the subject of an appendix.

The remedial reader is defined very much in cognitive terms via mentalist notions of ability and 'backwardness'. Nine reasons are listed for backwardness and include those attributed to:

- internal cognitive facility - limited mental ability, sensory defects, faulty perception
- speech defects
- social factors - inadequate verbal experience ('children from homes where limited vocabulary is used and where books, stories are rare'), frequent illness and changes of school, 'unsuitable teaching', emotional upsets
- language difficulties due to migration

The migrant child is delineated as the non-British migrant arriving after World War II. Even in this section there is great optimism about the migrant child's ability to 'assimilate'. Indeed a prominent minister in the Menzies government (Hon A.R. Downer) is quoted as saying:

Children facile and resilient as they are, probably constitute our most adjustable as well as our most valuable migrants (Hon A.R. Downer in Education Department of SA 1962, p.93)

This quote captures the feel of optimism about children and the faith in education to shape them that underpins the 1962 document. The teacher's position in the 1962 document is somewhat paradoxical, in that she is to have 'faith' that children will develop, yet she is to maintain a constant surveillance of the performance of each individual in order to diagnose and remedy deficiencies. This is the lot of the early childhood teacher: to continue the maternal nurturance of the naturally developing child, to oversee his transition to the literate and language practices of the formal educational institution, and if the child does not 'develop' it is her responsibility to spot the problem and fix it.

The teacher is continually reminded of her 'responsibility' to correctly diagnose and to provide the right instruction for each individual. The need for the teacher to set up situations in which the child can be free to use language naturally is in part to ensure that each individual can be monitored and diagnosed. The point of diagnosis is where the teacher is to use her professional knowledge in classifying the abilities of each individual child in order that the child is placed in the right reading group, given the right texts and practice and so on. The logic is that the child should feel free to produce without fear of mistakes under the gaze of the watchful teacher who is in fact looking and listening for 'defects', 'weaknesses',

'errors'. The trick is to convince the children that errors and mistakes are to be expected and are normal, whilst the teacher must be vigilant in diagnosing and correcting such deficiencies.

The teacher should not only be encouraging in her manner and convey to

each child that she is sincerely interested in what he has to say, but she must also be convinced of the right and need of each child to express himself freely and courteously. A sympathetic audience is essential. The teacher should set an example to the children by her own attentive listening. She should not interrupt the natural free speech of a child, in order to correct his mistakes, but should make a mental note of any error and attempt to correct it in a special period (Education Department of SA 1962, p.28)

1978: The child as language user

There are continuities from the 1962 document in the construction of the child subject. The 'joyful and free' child is still present and this child gains pleasure and enjoyment from involvement in language arts. The naturally developing child remains too and is evident in the ways teachers are cautioned not to form barriers to children's learning:

Insistence that all children should use "standard" forms of language on entrance to school will erect barriers to learning and to the formation of a positive self-concept. (p.7)

However, in the 1978 Guidelines, the emergence of theories of language acquisition and use reconstitute the child first and foremost as an effective language user and developer of competencies. The 'child of a particular background' is maintained from 1962 into the Guidelines. However, while children's backgrounds in 1962 mainly served to identify which children did and did not have appropriate preparation for school, in 1978 there is an attempt to move discussion of 'background' to new territory. The focus on acquisition and competencies is key to this move. According to the Guidelines competencies exist along a range and some may be considered as "unique to their [children's] cultural groups". Teachers are urged to see these unique competencies as a resource of "rich opportunities for language growth," rather than a marker of problems (p.7). Standard forms of language and the conventions of print are represented as other sets of competencies to be experienced and acquired in the appropriate school environment.

The aim is to develop and extend the language competencies and language range of all children by building upon the language they bring to school. In this way children will retain the rich resources of personal language as well as becoming increasingly competent in the use of socially accepted conventions of language appropriate to particular situations. (p.9)

In 1978 then, background is represented as contributing to a set of competencies and a set of possibilities for the teacher to act upon. The normal child subject is aware, has a 'desire' to learn and use language, develops 'competencies', displays enjoyment and concentration, and writes freely and often.

In the Guidelines overview document the focus is almost exclusively positive. There are no sections marking out particular groups or characteristics as special or in need of different support. Indeed, one section entitled 'Attitude towards the language of children entering school' is an attempt to bring the migrant child and the non-standard language user into the mainstream, as someone the teacher should expect. The optimism that teachers can and will make a difference for these students is a strong continuity from the 1962 document.

1984: The healthy functioner

As well as codifying experience and providing a model of "natural development", the Early Literacy Inservice Course (ELIC) provides an

account of the naturally developing child specifying the observable behaviours which count. The child who is functioning healthily as a "self-motivated, self directed and self regulated learner" (Unit 5, p.14). ELIC provides lists of behaviours which teachers are to use to "assure ourselves that children are developing, or at least on the right track" (p.17, Unit 5). The naturally developing child can therefore be brought into the gaze of the teacher and checked for appropriate 'progress'. ELIC goes further than describing generic evidence of healthy functioning to describe student behaviours in relation to stages of reading and writing development. In reading there are 'emergent', 'early' and 'fluent' readers (unit 5), while in writing there are the stages labeled 'beginnings', 'print orientation' and 'power over print' (unit 7). The naturally developing child is normalised and codified as a staged learner, facilitating the teacher's role as diagnostician.

ELIC combines a psychological child subject with theories of language development. With the right language development 'conditions' children will learn literacy naturally. In 1984 "adults have no choice but to trust that children can do it themselves" (Unit 5), just as in 1962 "the school should provide the kind of environment in which speech can develop naturally" (1962 p.12). While in 1962 the naturally developing child was mainly restricted to the 'speech' division of English, ELIC inserts this child into reading and writing.

ELIC continues to assert the importance of the joyful and free child, just as it does the naturally developing child. A combination of post-war optimism and faith in the supremacy of democracy produced an ideology that the child must speak and write 'freely'. Enjoyment and

satisfaction are thus inserted into 'natural development' and recast as evidence of 'self-motivation' and a sign of 'healthy functioning'. Views of the subject and views of the learner are intertwined and influence the construction of the teacher.

The teacher of 1984 was constituted as 'observer' and was provided with training to ensure that she knew how to diagnose the behaviour which children presented. Her observations were to be 'systematic'. The booklets include proformas where the teachers chart such observations across pre-specified categories.

ELIC provided teachers with a model of the ideal naturally developing literacy learner - 'the healthy functioner'- a 'normal', 'natural' child against which children's behaviours could be interpreted. The teacher's role was to diagnose where the child was on a developmental grid - emergent, early, or fluent. This would help the teacher match each child with the right book. Teachers were provided with specific techniques to make these professional assessments, including The Running Record and ways of analysing writing behaviours and written products.

As in 1978 there is little evidence of marking out specific groups of students as problem or in need of special attention. If there are problems, they are likely to be caused by 'inappropriate placement on books' or the early learning of 'inappropriate' behaviours and understandings. Ultimately, the child only becomes a problem if the teacher fails to diagnose and correct early.

Unless detected early, inappropriate understandings and behaviours can become longterm problems which limit children's reading progress. (Unit two, p.29)

Teachers are cast in the role of facilitator and provider who must

'trust' the children's ability to learn.

The complexity of the tasks of learning to speak and to read are such that adults have no choice but to trust that children can do it themselves. The role of adults is to provide the help, resources and encouragement which will support children's learning. (Unit 5, p. 19)

1995: The at-risk learner

The usual or ideal child learner is almost absent in Cornerstones. Very little attention is given to what the teacher should expect to see in the everyday life of the class, except to emphasise that teachers should expect difference, diversity and to deal with students who will have difficulty with the classroom program. It is almost as if the problem child has become the norm. For example, a brief six page article in module 6, on 'Explicit teaching in the early years', has

many different ways of referring to the problem child. There are children who:

- are currently not achieving at the level we would expect;
- fall through the net
- fail to make adequate progress
- (are) at-risk
- (are)lower achieving
- (are) slower learners
- (have) learning difficulties
- lack independent learning skills and strategies
- (are) not adept at teaching themselves (Module 6, pp.20-25)

The Cornerstones training and development program does not outline a curriculum or program for teachers as do the earlier documents. It is defined as a complement to the definitive curriculum statement: The Statements and Profiles for Australian Schools (Curriculum Corporation 1994) and assumes that as the basis of teachers' programs. From this base Cornerstones overwhelmingly concentrates on the problem student, asking teachers to monitor their children using the statements and profiles as grid of specification for determining those 'at risk'; providing strategies for 'explicit teaching' of early reading; and establishing management practices for school-based monitoring and intervention programs.

The titles of the modules of Cornerstones signals the changed emphasis from earlier documents:

- 1Socio-cultural issues in early literacy learning
- 2Finding out what learners know
- 3Identifying students needing early assistance in literacy learning
- 4Frameworks for critical analysis of teaching
- 5Family, community, school, preschool links
- 6/7Explicit teaching
- 8Planning for early assistance

There is an interesting blend of continuities and discontinuities here from the three previous documents. First, the teacher's role as diagnostician is maintained. However in Cornerstones this role is foregrounded in comparison to other roles such as those of facilitator, model and enabler which were strong in the previous documents. Children's backgrounds are emphasised, but in Cornerstones are raised to new levels of specification and examination. Cornerstones discusses programs and practices in relation to poor students, students with disabilities, Aboriginal students, non-English speaking background students, students in 'multicultural' settings, girls and boys. Notions of ability and the importance of reading skills, an emphasis of the 1962 document, but not of the 1978 and 1984 materials, are reinserted as key in the constitution of the child as literate subject.

On the evidence of Cornerstones, the 1990s marks a major discursive change in the construction of the child subject. The 'child' has been reconstituted over the last decade in ways that impact on the role of the teacher. The child of the sixties, seventies and eighties documents was to be afforded time and freedom in order to develop. Teachers were to provide opportunities and watch and wait the development occur. Only if the child displayed problems which were likely to impede normal development was the teacher to intervene. The teacher was to use her professional knowledge to make judgements about which mistakes/ errors were evidence of signs of healthy growth and which needed to be remediated. However while the child was to be watched and closely diagnosed there was a sense in which there was time for the teacher to wait, that literacy development was a life-long process and that provided there was progress, that all would be well.

In the nineties the child is problematic and at-risk on arrival at school, particularly if a member of an identified disadvantaged group. Teachers are given no time to wait, or to provide pleasure and motivation, they must intervene and teach important skills. It is almost as if the norm is early failure unless the teacher diagnoses and intervenes. Faith and optimism have been supplanted by fear and concern.

If we don't use the early years to teach at-risk children the very knowledge and skills they require in order to become confident and independent learners we are guilty of doing nothing to prevent them from experiencing early failure at school. (Module 6, p.21)

New kinds of discourse work to shape the figure of the teacher in the face of this newly foregrounded child 'at-risk' as the main business of early schooling. A key discourse is that of managerialism. Cornerstones is not presented to teachers as a considered education department perspective on the teaching of literacy. Rather '(i)t is the result of the combined efforts of educators within the Department for Education and Children's Services and a range of consultants from universities and other educational institutions in South Australia.' (Foreword) Teachers are presented throughout the materials with perspectives on literacy, the child subject and on pedagogy which are highly varied and even contradictory. Thus in module 1 teachers are introduced to literacy as social and cultural practices, while in module 8 guidance and psychology based services present a skills-based view. Units 6 and 7 present very different versions of what 'explicit' teaching means. Cornerstones is almost a marketplace of perspectives from which teachers must choose. The solution to these contradictions and choices it seems, is the establishment of management plans for early monitoring and intervention in individual school sites.

Responsibility for development, implementation and evaluation of an early assistance plan rests with school principals and preschool directors. They will manage the development of specific school and

centre plans. Decisions about how they will design or adapt their early assistance programs should be made through the normal decision making procedures of each site. (Module 9, p.11)

Thus teachers are recast as corporate citizens who, through their involvement in Cornerstones and through a management plan, avail themselves of various support services and who align their work with others under the surveillance of their managers.

The contrast of Cornerstones with the 1962 (and the similarly constituted 1978 and 1984 documents) is stark. In 1962 the early years

teacher was told:

The guiding principle behind the writing of this English Course has been the recognition of the range of individual ability and of the teacher's responsibility to take this into account. Every child must be afforded the opportunity to develop to his full capacity. This calls for patience and faith and the belief that others will build on the foundations so laid. (Education Department of SA 1962, p.12)

In 1995 the reconstitution of the problem child as central and as expected has resulted in the politicisation of the teaching of literacy.

The project was funded by the government in fulfilment of a commitment to address the literacy learning outcomes of students in the early years of schooling. (DECS 1995, Foreword)

Now teachers are not to be trusted and a program is needed to:

support teachers to develop their own critical frameworks for analysing assumptions and practices, and for recognising the strengths as well as the blind spots, in the teaching methods they employ. (DECS 1995, Foreword)

Thus teachers find themselves, through managerial practices, inserted, like their at-risk students into a grid of surveillance and specification of their roles.

[management theories] are coming to be widely accepted by administrators and teachers as the 'one best way' of organizing and running schools. And they are increasingly evident in the 'measurement of outputs' (effectiveness) and in forms of appraisal, what Foucault would describe as 'normalizing judgements' (Ball 1989, p.225)

Teachers could well ask what this overwhelming focus on literacy in relation to falling standards and at-risk children is really intended to achieve. On the basis of this analysis it is serving to reconstitute

the figure of the teacher as a corporate worker, more tightly controlled and specified through management practices.

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I examine four curriculum documents - The English Course of Instruction (1962), the R-7 Language Arts Guidelines (1978), the Early Literacy Inservice Course (1984), and Cornerstones (1995). The 1962 document was the last primary English syllabus produced in this state and described how the subject was to be taught in Grades 1-2 and 3-7. The 1978 Guidelines was described as a revision of the 1962 course and accompanied by documents on reading, writing, listening and speaking, planning and programming, handwriting and spelling. The 1984 Early Literacy Inservice Course was a voluntary ten week professional development program, incorporating ten booklets of readings and activities. Cornerstones is a compulsory professional development program including nine modules, and is currently being implemented in South Australia.

See Cormack & Comber (1996) for a discussion of the range of teacher roles constituted in these documents.