Assessing and Producing the 'child-student'.

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Many cultural sites, such as historical texts (Luke, 1989), television
(Luke, 1990), popular culture (Luke, 1991), kindergarten (Tyler, 1993),
childcare institutions (Polakow-Suransky, 1982), and classrooms (Baker
and Freebody, 1987, 1989; Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn, 1995; Hammersley,
1977; Speier, 1976) have been interrogated both for the versions of the
child that are constructed there and the manner in which suppositions
about the nature of the child are enacted. Such studies have
recognised 'the child' as a concept, as a socially constituted
category, historically and culturally specific, rather than treating
the 'child' as a natural category. This paper expands on recent work
which examines the routine interactive procedures by which the category
child is constructed and sustained in classroom talk (Austin, 1997a;
Austin 1997b). The theories of 'the child' built and sustained at the
site reported by Austin are here revisited in considering the
implication of these versions of the child for assessment.

The enactment of the category 'child' in classroom talk

Austin interrogated a novel, the teacher's planning, the classroom talk
and the students' writing produced in the course of an eleven lesson
unit of study based on the novel Magpie Island (Thiele, 1974). The
concept 'child' was examined in terms of the Membership Categorisation
Device (MCD) -'stage-of-life'. The MCD is an analytic apparatus

(Sacks, 1974:218) which describes the sets of categories into which we

commonsensically divide persons. A MCD is a collection of categories

that 'go together'. 'Stage-of-life' for example, is a collection of

categories which 'commonsensically' go together in our culture another

would be, say, 'family'. For stage-of-life then, we routinely orient

to a persons stage-of-life category as relevant, and behave towards

them in terms of their incumbency of the category say 'baby' or 'child'

or 'teenager' or 'adult' and so on. The defining features of a

category are culturally and historically determined.

The crucial point about categorization work is that it is a routine

member practice, not just an analytic device.

Members do not routinely use category concepts as mere labels, but as

methods for organising their knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, tasks,

moral relationships ...

(Jayyusi, 1984:136)

The routine categorization work of the members, in this case the

teacher and students, in assembling the category child as interactively

relevant in the moment-to-moment construction of meaning is available

in the everyday classroom talk. To set the scene for a detailed

investigation of the assessment of the students' writing, the

categorisation work of the participants will be briefly noted and 'the

child' as relevant to the classroom talk will be summarised.

In planning the unit of work, the teacher discussed with the researcher the questions she intended ask the students:

EXTRACT 1

Initial Interview

17 T... WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT MAGPIE?

They should relate to the fact that he's young and free and adventurous and a little bit silly actually. ((laugh))

- - -

19 T DO YOU THINK MAGPIE WAS SILLY TO

CHASE AFTER EAGLE? ...

(from Austin, 1997b)

Turn 17 embodies an assumption that the students, being children, will relate to the character on the basis that he is also a 'child' (a

juvenile bird). The assumption is that they will relate to other members of the same category and that alignment will be in terms of the child category attributes 'young, free, adventurous, a little bit silly'. Having determined Magpie's 'youth' (17) the teacher's question at 19 associates youth with 'silliness'. The possibility of 'silliness' as a reason for Magpie's actions is utterly founded in his youth. The cultural characterisation of the immature as susceptible to silliness and foolishness is a resource in devising this as a possible

and reasonable question in the first instance, and points to the moral work afforded by the use of that category.

The routine categorisation work which assembles the attributes of the category child is a sense making procedure of all the participants on the scene. In a later discussion with the class about why Colin Thiele wrote many books about animals and children the students participate in a characterisation of child interests:

EXTRACT 2

Lesson Nine

118 T - - - what sort of style does Colin Thiele have

(2)

Tonie?

119 Tonie Umm a sort of

(3)

nice style? Sort of kids style? Like he can make it really dramatic but he can make it nice sort of//

120 T What makes it nice, I know you're using that word nice and I

121 Tonie Umm, well the way he uses animals and - like -- he puts it from the animal's point-of-view and stuff [like that.

122 T [So you can] relate to it he does things that you think

(2)

you enjoy reading [about.

(from Austin 1997b)

At 119, Tonie articulates firstly that there can be such a category as 'children' who share certain characteristics such that a text can be devised specifically for those category members. She then goes on to define the features this category would enjoy: 'dramatic' but still 'nice'. Turns 119 and 121 assemble category attributes of the category child as being enjoyment of fiction that is both 'dramatic' and 'nice' and having an interest in animals. Tonie's description at 121 'from an animal's point-of-view' refers to an assumed susceptibility to anthropomorphism among this specialist readership (Baker and Freebody 1989:71).

The studies reported above demonstrate the categorisation work of the members on this scene in assembling the category 'child' in the classroom talk in terms of a stage-of-life Membership Categorization Device. The talk assembles category attributes in terms of:

* childhood as essentially temporary, the child as always in a state of change, as always developing, and what is more, developing in accordance with a 'normal' sequence;
* normalized child behaviours and propensities, and,

* representations of child-adult and more specifically, child-parent

relations.

(Austin, 1997b).

The routine classroom talk establishes the category 'child' as relevant

and consequential. The participants at one time orient to the category

attributes as relevant and sustain them as relevant.

The relevance of the category 'child' in the teacher's assessment of

students' writing

The student's writing is an integral component of the classroom

literature unit and of the students' display, to the teacher, of their

understanding:

* of the novel;

* of the classroom talk about that novel, and,

* of the questions which framed the writing.

As such the writing is a pivotal site of assessment. Indeed, the

teacher articulates the writing as a site of assessment:

EXTRACT 3

INITIAL INTERVIEW

57 T - - - Now some of the kids will simply write the physical

differences, that's ok, that's alright, but it gives the better

children an opportunity to extend

The teacher here references the writing as available to her as a

measure of the students' capabilities. Her statement indicates that

she will be able to determine which students are 'better' by her

reading of their text. The students, then, are assessed by the teacher

on their reading of the novel for the purposes of the school literature

lesson, in part, according to the writing they produce.

The teacher's assessments of the students' writing are available to the

students, and the analyst, as the teacher's account of the ways in

which that piece of writing 'counts' (Heap, 1985, 1990) as writing for

school. The student, and analyst, can read the teacher's evaluation

for information about what features of the writing the teacher is

orienting to, on this occasion, in her assessment of the writing and,

as will be shown below, her assessment of the student. As the norm is

most obviously available to us in its breech we will here examine some

breeches. The following extracts are instances wherein the teacher has

evaluated a piece of writing as 'unsuitable' in this context.

In answer to the task,

5) Imagine that the two magpies are able to talk. Write a conversation

of what might have been said between them when they first meet.

Phillip's conversation, possibly designed as humorous, reads:

PHILLIP

(students' spelling and formatting recreated here)

'What's your name?' asked Magpie inquiringly

* 'I don't know,' she replied.

* 'I've an idea,' Magpie spoke again.

* 'What is it? Come on out with it.'

* 'Do you want to do it?' Magpie asked.

* 'Do what,' replied the female bird.

* 'You know,' hinted Magpie with a wink.

* 'No. I'm afraid I don't.'

[next page]

'Don't you even know what 'Do it' is?'

'Oh, yeah, I know (youre) you're going to

show me around - aren't you.'

'Yes, of course. You didn't think I (ment)

meant anything (fo) foul did you?'

Phillip's writing attracted censure - the teacher noted in the margin

(at the asterisks):

I really feel this conversation is getting out of hand Phillip - don't

you?

The final teacher comment on Phillip's unit of work is:

A very good unit of work Phillip - don't spoil it by careless, rude

writing please!

Phillip's writing has been assessed as 'out of hand' and 'careless and

rude'. In discussion with the researcher the teacher elaborates on

this evaluation:

EXTRACT 4

Final Interview

16 T And it's interesting. Phillip, who is at camp this week, you know

how he wrote three different endings, just look at the last one

17 R ((reads Phillip's written conversation))

18 T I didn't really think it was suitable

19 R No:o

20 T No:o. So he's feeling his oats a bit isn't he?

The teacher expresses the writing's unsuitability and the criteria upon which it is unsuitable: 'feeling his oats'i. Cultural expertise informs the analysis that Phillip's writing is unsuitable in its reference to sexuality - evidenced by both 'feeling his oats' and 'rude'. It is apparent, then, that Phillip's sexual references are oriented to by the teacher as unsuitable in this context. Member expertise suggests that the 'unsuitability' can be described as being on the basis of both Phillip's 'childness' and his 'studentness' - that is, the criteria of this writing's unsuitability enacts an intersection of the relevances of the child and the public forum of the school.

Dillon's writing is assessed in terms of his choice of vocabulary. In responding to this question,

5. Imagine you were Magpie learning to fly. Describe how you felt when you started ... what could you see? ...how did you feel when you actually began to fly?

Dillon wrote:

DILLON

- - -

to go to the thunder box' tactic when mum gave me a swift kick in the butt. I shot throw the air and felt that wonderful thing the

ground.

'Trying to show off are you.'

'no'

'Oh yeah'

'Yeh'

'Here then take this' mum said handing me her

quick cheap life insurance.

'So thats what this plastic hunk of crap is' but

I took it anyway. I needed it because the next time

- - -

Dillon's use of 'butt' and 'crap' are questioned by the teacher in her

written comment:

Although I was happy for you to put your

own feelings and opinions into answering this

question I feel you have gone 'off the track' too much.

I would like to see slang and swearing left out of your work please.

The teacher's written assessment of Dillon's vocabulary is repeated in

the classroom talk - to Dillon, with the class as over hearing

audience:

EXTRACT 5

Lesson 4

5 T - - - Umm - Dillon took the liberty of -- projecting his thoughts

into the flying one I felt too far. You actually lost the thread of

the story completely, and, and literally you took the idea of flying

and wrote totally different story. Also umm some of the words that you

used I don't think are suitable for using in stories. Ok, it was very,

you've got a wonderful sense of humour - - -

Phillip's cynicism is censured. In his narrative, he writes:

PHILLIP

- - -

"No!" exclaimed Freddy Froglegs, when

Steven (a) shared his thoughts with his

father. "You've got to learn at school. I am

not allowed, by law or by Darren Hinch, to

let you stay home unless you are sick.

And that doesn't include WORRIED SICK."

"OK dad, whatever you say." replied Steve

miserabely. And all the time he was thinking,

"That's Life, good night. I'm Darren Hinch."

When he came home his father was (out)

out, but the lounge room window was open, - - -

The teacher's written comment is:

You have some lovely ideas Phillip and are

using good vocabulary. I feel at times

you are trying to be too 'smart' and

in so doing spoil the effect of your story!

How many books do you read with dialogue such as ... 'by law or by

Darren Hinch'? Think about it in your next story.

The teacher's comment indicates she reads Phillip's reference to

'Darren Hinch', an evening current affairs presenter at the time, as

inappropriate. This reference can be heard as social commentary on the

self-assumed authority of evening current affairs presenters. The

teacher does not 'hear' it this way it seems. The teacher's failure to

read Phillip's cynicism as social commentary can be heard to reference

a theory of the child in which 11-year-olds do not produce such

counter-readings of popular culture. The 'childing' work of this of

this comment is particularly available in the teacher comment:

How many books do you read with dialogue such as ... 'by law or by

Darren Hinch'? Think about it in your next story.

Such critical comment is available in many texts. The 'you' the

teacher refers to above however, is a very specific 'you'. It is a

child you, and, furthermore, an institutionalised school-child 'you'

who is, according to the cultural theory of the child reflected in this

teacher's comment, neither a reader nor producer of social commentary.

The assessment of the students' writing can function as an assessment

of some facet of the student's cognitive functioning.

In response to the, explicitly imaginative, task quoted above:

5) Imagine that the two magpies are able to talk. Write a conversation

of what might have been said between them when they first meet..

Anna wrote

ANNA

'Well then I spose I can't get back to

my husband and children'

'No I guess not, but we can start

again'

'Oh I don't know'

'Come on I've never had a girlfriend before'

'I spose you wouldn't have stuck

out here all alone my poor little

darling'

'oh'

'Well I'm here now and I'm hungre

take me to some food honey bunch'

She said kissing magpie on the cheek

Magpie began to blush as they flew

off into sunset to find food

The teacher's comment reads:

Do you really think this was the sort of conversation they'd have had?

Carmel writes a conversation in which the participants live 'unhappily

ever after'.

CARMEL

- - -

So they both lived unhappily ever after.

Mate lived unhappily ever after because she hated the island and Magpie

lived unhappily ever after because he hated Mate because she wouldn't

be quiet.

The teacher comment reads:

Do you really think this is what would have happened?

Both Anna's and Carmel's imaginative writing has been assessed as 'wrong' or at least questionable. The teacher questions Carmel's conclusion. The imperative that stories for children have a 'happy ending' had been explicitly stated in the classroom talkii.

Carmel has devised an 'unhappy ending'. Her unhappy ending is not dissimilar to the actual ending of Thiele's novel. Anna has devised a conversation in which the magpies negotiate their relationship. Their writing has here been assessed as inappropriate. Having been asked to imaginatively anthropomorphise, Anna's and Carmel's anthropomorphic narrative is here referenced as assessably 'wrong', they have failed to anthropomorphise correctly, they have imagined inappropriately, or indeed, they have imagined incorrectly.

These teacher assessments demonstrate two things:
* the teacher orients to the students as children in her assessments, that is;
* the students' writing is assessable as writing by child-students,
* the students' membership of category child is relevant to their writing's assessability;
and,
* The teacher's evaluations demonstrated that the students' writing as an assessable object, is oriented to as a site of the evaluation of the

individual. A student's writing is oriented to by the teacher as

available as a gauge of the maturity of the student. 'Maturity' is

assessable by many criteria, including here for example, suitable

subject matter, vocabulary, critical content and appropriate use of

imagination and anthropomorphism. These students referenced relevances

of stage-of-life category other than that which they are accountable

for appropriately displaying in this context. Paradoxically, a

student's reference to over-mature relevances can result in an

assessment of the student as 'childish or silly', for example,

Phillip's writing is described as 'rude' in its reference to sexuality.

Above are instances in which the students' writing has been assessed in

terms of its 'maturity'. Furthermore, these assessments can function

to assess the students themselves:

in terms of their cognitive functioning,

Carmel is asked

Do you really think this is what would have happened?;

in terms of their perception,

Phillip is asked

How many books do you read with dialogue such as ...', and,

in terms of their maturity,

Phillip is described as 'feeling his oats' on the basis of a piece of writing.

The students' writing above can be described as 'precocious' in that the features by which they were decreed unsuitable for this context are features which can conceivably be appropriately part of an adult narrative, both by an adult and for an adult. The complexity of the 'child's' maturity is demonstrated here. Being an appropriate 'child' is relevant to being a successful 'student' in this context. The category 'child' was here enacted in terms of its status as a category in a stage-of-life Membership Categorisation Device with a clearly discernible set of category-bound attributes evidenced by both teacher and students. The students' participation demonstrates the paradox MacKay described: In order to be a successful participant in the enculturating institution of schooling, the students must already enact this institutionalised version of themselves (MacKay, 1974a, 1974b). The students are held accountable for their embodiments of the category 'child' and are assessed in terms of their enactment of the category 'child'. The data of this paper have demonstrated some of the ways in which an institutionalised version of the child is utterly consequential to these members' enactment of their studenthood. The category child is here revealed as not just 'a set of abstract ideas on which rhetoric is based; it is also a working category that is enacted in everyday social experience' (Freebody, 1995a:18). The students' success in school has been documented here as depending to some extent

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on their apparently natural collaboration in adult theories of the

child as these theories are enacted in the subtleties of, in this case,

talk about literature and writing about literature.

Institutionalised schooling in Australia is organised as an age-graded

system that is founded in culturally pervasive theories of maturity and

development. Pedagogical strategies that aim to cater to the student's

'individual needs' do not question the fundamental premise of

development, simply gauging a student to be more or less developed

within a bounded continuum. Such pre-theorisations must be examined

for their potentially distorting effects. This is true also of

theories of, for example, gender, class, race, or religion.

Identifying and questioning such pre-theorisations of identity as they

potentially disrupt the articulated educational goals of schooling as

an institution and teaching as a personal pursuit is an important part

of the ongoing efforts to demystify criteria of assessment (Farrell,

1997; Freebody, 1992; Gilbert, 1989; Wyatt-Smith, 1997).

Acknowledgements

classroom.

Transcript Conventions

(talk) not easily transcribable

(...) untranscribable

- short pause, less than 1 second

-- pause less than 2 seconds

(2) pause in seconds

/ latched turn, no pause between speakers

// next speaker interrupts at this point

[ ] square bracketed speech overlaps

((comment)) transcriber's comment or description of context

italic speaker emphasis

? upward inflection (not necessarily a question)

i 'Feeling his oats' refers to a young person's initial understandings
of sexuality, commonsensically linked to the beginnings of puberty when
sexual hormones take a greater role in the person's physiology. As a
saying it is a derivative of 'sowing his wild oats' which refers to a,
historically male, person's sexual freedom prior to commitment to a
long-term monogamous relationship

ii Lesson Eight

1 T ((Reads conclusion of novel)) Ok, so ended Magpie Island.

2 Anna I didn't think it was going to end like that

3 T You didn't think it was going to end like that?

4 Tonie I thought it was going to be happy at the end like they have

have umm

5 T Who thought it was going to have a happy ending.

(3)

((Some students raise hands))

Why did you think it was going to have a happy ending.

6 Amber Because most stories do.

7 T Because most stories do.

- - -

13 T He had to start all over again.

(3)

It's a very interesting ending. As Amber said - a lot of books that

are written, particularly for children - have a happy ending, because

most people like things to end up happily. Why do you think - Colin

Thiele perhaps choose to end his book that way.

Austin and Freebody

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Page 10

Helena Austin Page 1 23-11-97S

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