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Children in Search of their Place and Voice as Literacy Learners at School

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Abstract

How do children find their place as readers and writers in their classrooms? A place where they can give voice to their ideas and bring to the fore their resources that they continue to accumulate across their home, school and community settings? These questions form the focus of this paper, as it explores observational and interview data of children's literacy experiences in the early school years. This exploration is framed by a Social Model of Reading and Writing (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2001 & 2003) that takes stock of practices involved in literacy and the contexts in which literacy is used.

Introduction

Some years ago, I published a paper that began with an interaction I had with a six-year-old child in his Year One classroom (Harris & Trezise, 1999). The child was called Lenny. At the time I was interested in connections he made between texts. Now, as I revisit this same interaction sequence from my classroom research, I am interested in the reading practices that Lenny brought to bear and the contexts that shaped his choice of reading practices.

Lenny was reading a book of stories about families in silent reading time in his classroom. When he finished one of the stories and turned the page, he came upon a double-page spread of a tree that signified a family tree. Branches were labelled according to family relations, such as 'mother' and 'father'. Lenny wasn't too sure what to do with this page as he looked at it. He turned to me and asked:

Len: Do I have to read this?

Pau: Do you want to read it?

Lenny nodded and began reading aloud the labels. He came to 'nephew' and stopped:

Len: I don't know this one [pointing to 'nephew']

Interpreting his comment as a request for help in decoding the word, I obliged:

Pau: "Nephew".

Lenny quickly rejoined,

Len: Duckville.

So quick was Lenny's response that I took it as an aural miscue and repeated the word 'nephew'. Again very quickly, he rejoined, 'Duckville'. Still interpreting his response in a decoding frame, I answered, 'It says "Nephew".'

It was then that Lenny made clear his own intention, not as a decoder but as a meaning maker:

Len: Yeah, I know, but that's like "Louie" and "Dewey". I've got a book about it.

Finally 'getting' that Lenny was operating in a 'meaning' frame and not a 'decoding' frame, I asked him more about his book:

Pau: What's its name?

Len: "The Giant Pearl". I'll bring it in for News tomorrow.

In elaborating on his 'Duckville' utterance, Lenny built a bridge across space and time, to a remembered text and to situational contexts at home and school. He built this bridge by mustering his literacy resources – texts he knew and reading skills he had for decoding and interpreting text. Building this bridge was part of building meaning – and in so doing, he was locating his sense of place with this particular text in his classroom, and asserting that place as he voiced his idea and brought to the fore resources from his home setting.

This place that Lenny had found was a virtual intersection where a classroom text met cartoon texts encountered in print and on television at home; where an analogy was to be found between the family tree in the reader and the family situation of Donald Duck and his nephews in Donald Duck texts; and where a six-year-old child successfully negotiated the gap between abstract and generalised labels on the family tree ('uncle', 'nephew') and particular, fictionalised examples from another time and place (Donald Duck as Uncle and Huey, Dewey and Louie as nephews).

Interactions like these provide clarifying moments that shed light on how children find meaning and how they locate their sense of place and voice in the texts they read at school and the classrooms where they read them. Such is the focus of this paper.

A Social Model of Literacy

A social model of literacy frames how this paper views children's sense of place and voice as literacy learners in their classrooms. This model is based on the theoretical work Luke and Freebody (Freebody, 1992; Luke & Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Luke, 2000) which, with colleagues, I have further developed in terms of reading and writing in the primary school years (Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2001; Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2003). This model is shown in **Appendix 1** and is explained throughout the course of this paper in relation to literacy episodes in a Year One classroom.

This social model of literacy consists of four interrelated sets of literacy practices. These practices are:

- Text code breaking and encoder practices whereby readers decipher text and writers render written/visual texts – text such as 'nephew';

- Text participant practices whereby readers and writer interpret and compose meaning – meaning such as ‘Duckville’;
- Text user practices, whereby readers and writers use and produce texts to achieve social purposes – purposes such as enjoyment; and
- Text analyst practices whereby readers detect underlying ideological meanings in texts and identify how they are being positioned, and writers consciously or unconsciously reflect particular values, beliefs and world views in their texts, and write to position readers to take a particular stance – practices such as bringing text and lived experiences together, checking one against the other.

Each of these practices provides a frame through which to view children’s functioning as literacy learners. For example, through a decoding frame, an observer might note that ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ were words in Lenny’s sight vocabulary. It might also be noted that ‘nephew’ is a more difficult word to decode, and despite the initial sound and the context of the family tree, Lenny needed assistance with this word.

If one was to look at how Lenny functioned as a meaning-maker, then reflection might be made on the connections he made, how these connections spanned time and place, and these connections resourced his meaning-making process.

Putting focus on Lenny’s reading purposes, it might be noted that Lenny was reading to meet his teacher’s expectation of silent reading time. As well, as engaged as he seemed to be with the text, he was reading for enjoyment.

Moving to a focus on to more critical practices that might see readers interrogate and reflect on texts and how they relate to their own experiences, then Lenny was engaging in such practices by virtue of the connections he was making to other texts that he had read – checking one text against the other to make sense of the text in hand.

Indeed, all these frames are relevant to viewing how Lenny functioned as a reader in this sequence – as they are to all children as readers. Part of looking at how children find their place as readers in their classrooms is considering the literacy practices they engage in.

Nexus Between Literacy Practices and Contexts of Situation

As children engage in these literacy practices, they do so in contexts of situation. These contexts shape how children function as readers and writers – the practices they deploy and the choices they make as they locate their place in classroom literacy tasks (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2003).

Context of situation refers to the immediate setting in which writers write and readers read. After Halliday (1978), this context is made up of three features:

- Roles and relationships among participants in a reading or writing situation – such as Lenny as pupil and his teacher as a figure of power and authority and his peers as co-participants in a shared yet individual event;
- Subject matter, such as what is the content focus of the situation, what is it about – Lenny’s ‘Duckville’ situation was about reading and silent reading in particular, with a text about families; and

- Language mode, in terms of whether the text readers and writers are dealing with involves language that is more like spoken language or more like written language.

To Halliday's features this paper adds setting (after Harris *et al*, 2003), which includes the immediate environment and its conduciveness to reading and writing generally and to certain kinds of reading and writing specifically.

In the Duckville example, Lenny brought together almost seamlessly practices of code breaking, meaning making, reading with purpose and an eye to connecting with what he knew and lived. He did so in a situation in which, to all intents and purposes, he was more or less 'master of his domain'. There was no direct, interactional mediation, save what he sought from me. None the less, he was still subjected to the greater power of his teacher that set expectations about how silent reading was to be done; he could only do 'silent reading' at school at times his teacher deemed appropriate, not just when he felt like it; and what his peers were doing around him could help support or hinder his own functioning.

Similarly, in another Year One classroom from another study (Harris, 2004), I observed six-year-old Charlie engage in 'Free Choice Silent Reading Time' in his classroom. As was invariably his way, Charlie chose a factual text, this time a book about marine life. The book was substantial in volume and text, with accompanying illustrations and captions. Charlie flipped through the pages, and skimmed and scanned the text as he went. Sometimes he stopped to scrutinise an illustration, sample a piece of the text, or read a caption. For example, at one point he stopped and looked at a photo of a fish. He commented to himself, 'I tell you, that's weird! He looks like he's got a tree growing out of his head!' Another moment, he stopped at a photo of a shark, then scanned the text nearby. Reading softly to himself, he stopped on the shark's name, 'Macau Shark'. He sounded it out slowly, '/Ma/-/caw/ shark' then commented, 'That's unusual.../ma/-/caw/ shark.' A little later, he sampled a chunk of text elsewhere in the book, then stopped and said to himself, 'I learned something new. I learned that some fish have bigger gills than others.'

This Silent Reading Session went for twenty minutes, during which time Charlie remained intently focused on this book. His sustained focus resonated with his comment that 'I like reading Science... It's interesting to hear other people's ideas'. He would critically reflect on these ideas – often relating what one text said to what he had read elsewhere, and sometimes questioning the veracity of what he was reading. At home, Charlie read factual texts as well as watched television documentaries. He also gleaned facts from the movies he saw – such as facts about Australia (its desert and native animals) from 'Crocodile Dundee'.

Like Lenny, Charlie found his place and voice in a situation where he had choices to make about what he read and he could deeply engage on his own terms.

However, other situations did not see these children make similar kinds of choices. For example, in small group activities at a literature-based learning centre, Charlie was expected to engage in tasks based on fictional picture book narratives, written by authors he did not always care for, about topics that seemed to have little relevance for him. A class unit on Pat Hutchins picture book narratives was a case in point. Time and again, Charlie approached these tasks with strong resistance – loudly and persistently raising his 'text analyst' voice against the texts and their related tasks, while

denying the teacher's intended 'text user' role of reading for enjoyment and completing tasks to nurture reading competence. Rather than comply with task expectations and his group's agenda, he sought an alternative place where he resisted the texts and subverted the tasks at hand. Using his teacher's points system for clean table, he would tidy up task materials just as the group was getting started – saying, 'Come on, everyone, this will save time. We all want a nice table so we can get points'.

Charlie's 'One Eyed Jake' episode illustrates how context of situation impacted on his choices (Harris, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2004). The class had been studying Pat Hutchins narratives. For this particular writing task, each child was required to choose a 'favourite Pat Hutchins story'. Charlie, needless to say, didn't have one. Children were to illustrate the book and write a caption on a small 10cm x 10cm piece of paper. These squares were then to be collated as a column graph showing class preferences for various Hutchins books.

As Charlie's group approached the task, he loudly said, 'I hate Pat Hutchins!' While his peers set about the task, Charlie instead focused on the torn packet of marker pens in the middle of their tables. He complained about people not taking care of the pens, implicating one of his group peers who had been caught for taking the pens home. This led to some heated discussion, until the group set back to task. Charlie continued to distract himself with other matters, disrupting his group. Once his teacher intervened, he produced his text, writing on the small paper with a thick black pen, 'One Eyed Jake had a TELL-L-I-BLLLLLLE temper!!!!!!'

The words he encoded and the meaning he composed reflected his sense of place and voice in tasks like this in his classroom – he was at odds with texts and tasks that did not resonate with his experiences and interests, and he conflicted with his peers in the group that sought to comply with their teacher's expectations.

From a text user perspective, Charlie's text served a purpose not of expressing 'favourite Pat Hutchins books' as his teacher intended, but rather to give voice to his own resistance and sense of displacement. In so doing, he positioned himself as a text analyst to the text and the task at hand, and all the structures that were inherent therein.

However, as will now be seen, these choices that children make are not only shaped by their sense of comfort, competence and interest with texts and tasks at hand and the situations in which they are encountered – but also by the broader institutional context of the classroom.

Contextual Influences on Young Literacy Learners

Surrounding contexts of situation are contexts of culture. These contexts of culture shape children's choices about literacy practices they deploy and their sense of place and voice that they find (after Harris *et al*, 2003).

Context of culture is made up of values, beliefs, world views and endorsed behaviours that are shared by members of that culture. Practices in which children and their families engage reflect and promote for children a system of definitions of themselves and their world - 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1992), which is internalised as so-called second nature and predisposes children to certain views and behaviours.

From experiences across home, school and community settings, children gather cultural resources for knowing, learning about and understanding their world. These resources have been referred to as 'funds of knowledge' (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994, p.441)

that children bring to school and which are validated or not to varying degrees there. These funds constitute children's cultural capital, described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) as an individual's possession of knowledge, skills, and formal and informal qualifications, by which that individual may gain entry into and secure a valued position in a particular social setting, such as school.

In some of the previous scenarios, we saw children readily finding their place where their resources supported their effective literacy participation in ways expected by their teachers. For example, in their silent reading encounters, Lenny and Charlie readily drew on their resources accumulated from their home and community settings. These resources – be they comic books, television cartoons, factual books, movies, TV documentaries – all counted in these situations as 'cultural capital' and enabled the children to function effectively in ways their teachers expected and valued.

However, children's resources may not always find a place in classroom instruction. In part, this difficulty may be attributable to the classroom's context of culture, imbued with participant structures, power relations, time pressures and policy requirements inherent in an institutionalised setting.

For example, in another classroom I observed – this time a Kindergarten (see Harris & Trezise, 1997) – five-year-old Cathy was listening to her teacher read 'Meg's Eggs' (Nicoll & Pienkowski, 1977) to the class. Telling a comical story about a witch whose spells always go hilariously wrong, the teacher came to the end and revisited a spell inside the text:

T: Listen to this. "Lizards and newts, three loud hoots, green frogs' legs, three big eggs." What does that sound like?

Cathy: Like a rock-a-bye.

T: It doesn't sound like something that would put me to sleep.

Edward: It's a spell.

T: Good boy. What's a spell?

Like Lenny, Cathy was drawing connections between her experiences at school and home. At home, she listened to nursery rhymes every night before going to sleep. This ritual immersed her in the aural qualities of texts – the rhymes they contain resonated with the rhymes she heard when the spell was read aloud. Thus she bridged the gap between home and school, between different genres of texts, and between a formal lesson and a much-loved bedtime ritual. In so doing, Cathy found her place in this lesson, and gave voice to an idea that came from that place. That idea was an important part of her functioning as a reader, with respect to matching aspects of texts' codes (rhyming features in this instance) and constructing meaning through the connections she builds. These connections could only enhance her engagement as a text user in this situation, for rhyming texts was something she very much enjoyed, as reported in her interviews (Harris & Trezise, 1997).

In trying to locate their place in classrooms, children draw on their resources. However, these resources – and ways children express them – may not always be compatible with teacher expectations and systemic pressures (Harris, Trezise & Winser, 2002). For example, teachers are necessarily constrained by mandatory curriculum requirements and outcomes; and often deal with pressures of time to get the curriculum covered. When children's contributions digress from their teachers' planned agendas,

tensions emerge between following children's initiatives and ideas on the one hand, and 'getting through' the instructional plan on the other hand. In the face of these tensions, classroom protocols and power relations inherent in the classroom's context of culture come into play. Hence the teacher's reply, 'It doesn't sound like something that would put me to sleep.' Under such circumstances, some children may struggle with finding their place and voice— as we saw with Cathy.

The extent to which the context of culture in classrooms impacts on children is mediated by the context of situation. Lenny and Charlie in the situation of free choice reading was less subjected to authority structures that mediate their text selection and interpretations, than in a teacher-directed lesson. In the 'rock-a-bye' lesson, Cathy's literacy practices were constrained by direct mediation that enacted the agenda at hand.

Ways in which context of culture conflate with context of situation and together shape a child's positioning in the classrooms as a literacy learner may be further explored by returning to Charlie, whom we previously saw engrossed in reading about marine life in a silent reading session.

Charlie's previous free choice silent reading scenario may seem unproblematic, productively engaged as he was. Yet surprisingly, it is problematic – not because of Charlie's behaviour during this episode, but because of very different choices he made in other class situations. As Charlie tried to slot into other class literacy activities, he located his place and expressed his voice in very different ways. It is in working to understand reasons behind these different and often counter-productive choices that we can further appreciate the significance on context of culture as well as situation on a child functioning as a literacy learner in the classroom.

Charlie aspired to be a 'palaeontologist when I grow up'. He said, 'Science is very interesting. It has to do with things all around you.' Charlie pursued his interests through reading factual texts and watching TV documentaries. However, in Charlie's classroom, narratives were the prioritised genre that resourced the class literacy program. In particular, narratives were used as springboards to literacy tasks that were implemented on a daily rotational basis at a learning centre called 'Station Three'. Groups were called 'team' and were led by 'team leaders'. Children were expected to be on-task, co-operate with group peers, and compromise amongst themselves. During the enactment of Station tasks, the teacher worked with groups elsewhere, and so internal group monitoring was put into place through appointment of team leaders, monitors and points system, previously described.

Charlie struggled to find place and voice at Station Three. There, the narrative books and their themes and related tasks did not directly tap into his own resources, predispositions and aspirations. Instead of compliance, Charlie chose a stance of resistance that brought him into ongoing conflict with his group peers and his teacher.

Roles and relationships in Charlie's group at Station Three significantly shaped the literacy practices that he chose to deploy. In turn, these roles and relationships were shaped by the broader classroom context. A child with uneasy standing as a reader in his classroom, his concern with his classroom status was made manifest in choices such as: packing up his group's materials before the group had even started the task at hand, so that his group might earn points for tidy tables; taking on the actions of a marker pen monitor after some pens went temporarily missing the previous day; self-nominating as a lego monitor; and earning points at the expense of another child who had been caught in

the 'marker pen' misdemeanour. In these choices, Charlie took up text and task analyst positions that expressed resistance to narrative texts and related tasks and to the dynamics of his group setting; and concern with the power relations of his classroom context that prioritised texts that he did not value and, conversely, did not value texts in which he did have considerable interest and mastery.

Relevance of Social Model of Reading and Writing to Classroom Teachers

Stories from the experiences of Lenny, Cathy, Charlie and Jimmy in their respective classrooms provide some important insights into how children find their place and voice as literacy learners at school.

In any of the instances noted in this paper, we can consider each child's functioning as a reader and writer from the four perspectives of code, meaning, purpose and critical literacy. These perspectives respectively relate to the four families of literacy practices of encoding or breaking codes of text; making and composing meaning; reading and writing for purpose; and analysing texts for their veracity and point of view (after Luke and Freebody, 1999a, 1999b; Harris *et al*, 2001, 2003).

These four practices provide a comprehensive set of lenses through which teachers and researchers alike may observe, monitor and assess children as readers and writers. For example,

- How children grapple with the various conventions and rules of written and visual codes, and the encoding choices that they make from the choices that are available to them.
- Meanings children choose to compose into a text or interpret from a text, and the influence of their experiences and histories on those meanings.
- Purpose/s children set out to achieve as readers/viewers and writers/drawers, how effectively, and whether or not their purposes match those of their teacher.
- Beliefs and values that children construct in the texts they draw and write, whether implicitly or explicitly; and how they detect the same in texts they read and view.

However, as seen, considering these practices alone – interactive with one another as they are – is not enough. Just as importantly, we need to consider the contexts in which a child deploys these practices – so that we can understand how the context helps to shape choices a child makes as they find their place and voice in their classrooms. The situation in which a child reads, views, writes and draws, and how situation influences the child's work. As importantly, and dialectically interacting with situation, the broader context of the classroom and how it shapes what a child does as a reader and a writer, as well as a child's home and community contexts and their influences.

Children's perspectives of classroom situations and the choices they consequently make are further understood in terms of their cultural capital at school – that is, the uptake of their resources at schools, as well as what children themselves construe to count towards school success. In classrooms, the prioritisation of some texts and genres over others, the marginalisation of some texts and genres from mainstream literacy lessons, and their relegation to free choice situations; power relations and the distribution of status by virtue of scholarly merit, compliant behaviour, and assigning special roles such as team leader and marker pen monitor, all shape how children find their place and voice and perform as literacy learners.

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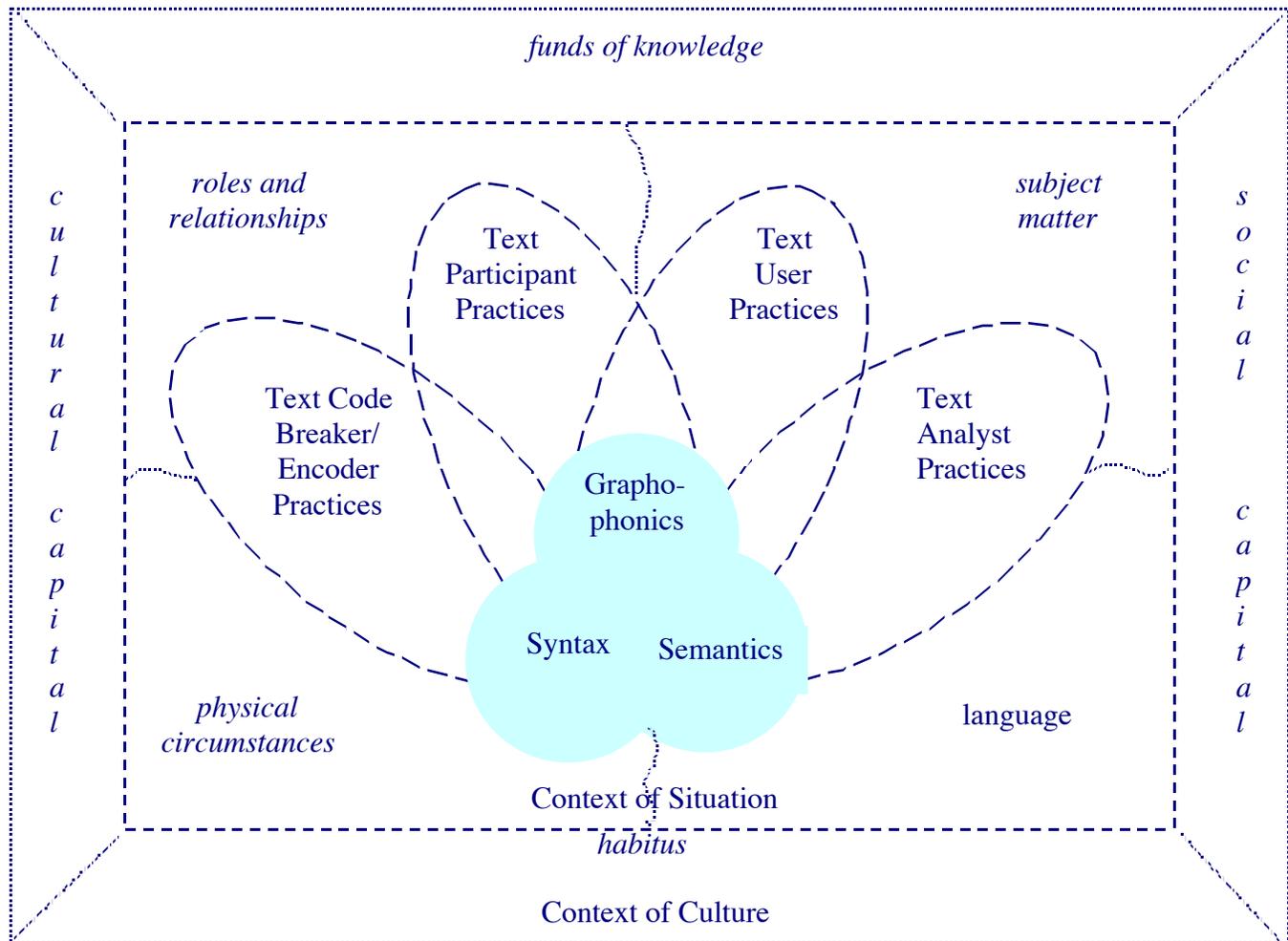
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HANDOUT

A Social Model of Literacy

(from Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2003, *Writing in the Primary School Years*, p. 39
See also Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2001, *Reading in the Primary School Years*)





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