Reading Dis/ability: Interrogating Paradigms in a Prism of Power

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Increasingly the teaching of reading has become more defined, precise and subject to government regulation. As part of this process, it has become more regulatory, operating for the purpose of distinguishing between those who make satisfactory progress and those who require further attention. Children exhibiting questionable characteristics are marked as such relatively early in their school lives. This has the constitutive effect of associating difference with disability, and as the stakes are raised with funding being linked to outcomes and improvements in test scores, children who once may have been called ‘slow to warm up’, ‘late bloomers’, or those who may approach reading differently from the norm are being mapped onto a grid of disparity and ‘treated’ for their reading deficiencies. This paper suggests that as a result of recent government decisions in the UK, USA and Australia, there is an identifiably ‘proper’ way of learning to read. It interrogates this ‘proper’ paradigm of reading and locates it as an integral part of a prism of power in which young children are encased. As one part of the prism of power, the paradigm of reading operates in consort with two other dividing practices to ensure that reading dis/ability is identified. The ultimate goal is to remedy the situation, however in the process, children encounter multiple grids of specification that each threaten to find them different. The three parts of the prism work together to not only trap children, but to keep those who do not respond to the proper ways of learning to read within the confines of the prism and in a constant state of flux.

Introduction

Educational practices that locate and describe children in deficit discourses lead to the conceptualisation and spatialisation of students through ‘a controlling logic of ableism’ (Baker, 2002, p. 675), and the construction of deficit schooling identities based on the ‘dichotomy of ability-disability’ (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997, p. 360). These practices are predominantly comparative; comparing student against student (Cremin & Thomas, 2005), and student against construct through statistically-derived age-based norms and arbitrary benchmark standards (Graham, 2006a; Grieshaber, 1997). However, deficit schooling identities are constructions that come to speak to the children involved impacting both how they come to see their own self (Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003) and how they engage or disengage with the institution and practices of schooling (Slee, 1994). That self-knowledge or subjectivity affects not only what children come to believe they are capable of but also what they come to believe they deserve and where in the social hierarchy they belong.

Further, the formation of a deficit schooling identity comes to speak for the child - it acts as a signifier through which others interpret what is possible for the child to know or to be able to do. In effect, labels obfuscate as well as divide (Foucault, 1977). The abilities or actions of individual children come to be interpreted and perceived through the lens already established
by the label bestowed. The obfuscatory effects of labelling and grading of ability into hierarchies of ability, inability and disability effectively removes other relevant factors from the field of inquiry; that is, the child is perceived as “the problem” and pedagogy, curricula and indeed the practices of schooling are left unproblematised (Henderson, 2002). Our aim here is to question the implication of particular schooling practices in the construction of learning disabilities, specifically focusing on reading disability. This is timely research given the current political pressure towards instituting systematic phonics-based instruction “first and fast” following reforms in the US, UK and Australia.

Teaching “Reading”

Debates over the merits of phonics against whole-language approaches to reading instruction reflect struggle over what and whose knowledge is of most worth. However, when a dominant paradigm is in place (let us say, for example, that which privileges systematic phonics-based instruction), any child whose strengths lie in the higher-order skills of syntactic and semantic-pragmatic analysis may be short-changed - if only exposed to graphophonemic or alphabetic “decoding” methodologies (Martens, 1997) - and this has the potential to impede their literacy learning, self-concept and enthusiasm for learning to read (Long & Meyer, 2004).

Our interest is not in fuelling the literacy wars by advocating one approach to learning to read over another. The focus is to elucidate how the comparison of a child’s approach to learning to read against dominant paradigms (Gill & Smith, 2005) operates as a third locus or point in a prism of power; where, in addition to those children not achieving at the rate of their peers (Cremin & Thomas, 2005) and children not achieving to the standards of the day (Graham, 2006a; Grieshaber, 1997), children who fail to approach learning in the “proper” ways (Popkewitz, 2004) can also come to be described as learning disabled. In such cases, theories of reading and learning disability posit neurobiological deficit as the root of the educational problem leading to an alleged cognitive “inability” which comes to be recognised as a “disability” (Heydon & Iannicci, 2002).

A prism is used for three purposes: to refract light, to reflect it and to break light into the colours of the rainbow. Dispersive prisms are used to break up light into its constituent spectral colours. It is this type of prism with which we are drawing an analogy because in our estimation children’s reading abilities are split into a myriad of components, just as white light is broken into its spectral colours. The reading prism of power (Figure 1) is characterised by the location of pupils at the centre. The ‘proper’ paradigm of reading, which is endorsed by the Commonwealth government and is phonics based, is found at one apex of the prism. Comparison of pupils with each other operates at another apex. On the third side and set against proper approaches to reading and comparisons with others is comparison (of pupils) with constructs. Children are located at the centre of a maelstrom of assessment that involves comparison with others and measurement against constructs that are generally normed. Their reading abilities are split and dispersed endlessly around the prism, being measured, assessed, compared, evaluated, and tested, and the results quantified and reported. There is no escape –
only more intensity for those whose abilities are questionable as a result of being compared with others and with constructs.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 1: Reading prism of power

Drawing on the work of Foucault (1972; 1977; 1988; 2003), this paper offers a poststructural analysis of what lateral effects might derive from the different grids of specification applied to children’s performances in the name of schooling. Extensive work has been done on the effects of comparing children’s rates of learning progress against each other at the level of the school and this has been both complemented and informed by research that questions norms-based assessment practices, against either developmental norms or minimum benchmark standards. These delineate well-researched avenues that lead to particular constitutions of the child who experiences difficulty in learning (Artiles, 2003; Baker, 2002; Cremin & Thomas, 2005; Damico & Augustine, 1995; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995; Reid & Weatherly Valle, 2004). A third avenue bracketing notions of the “reading disabled” child is emerging however. This is a child who does not learn to read in the “proper” way.

**Reading the ‘Right’ Way**

Proper approaches to reading are increasingly defined in new times by the proponents of phonics-based instruction, leading the return to ‘criteria for literacy narrowly defined as discrete psychological “skills” internal to the subject’ (Luke, 1992, p. 107). The problem here however is not that phonics or “whole-language” approaches are locked in a superior/inferior binary relationship, as is popularly characterised in the literacy wars. Our concern is not even so much with disputing neuro-psychological accounts of how children might learn. Instead we question the political and constitutive effects of cordonning children into deficit identity groups: those who do not progress at the rate of their peers, those who do not attain normative standards at the “correct” developmental stages and those who fail to approach learning to read in the “right” way.

In what follows, we illustrate how certain children identified for any of these reasons can come to be trapped in a negative prism that despite rhetoric about accommodating different learning styles functions to punish children who approach learning to read in novel ways. Practices that aim to throw light on different facets of learning progress (or lack thereof) can also work to trap
and re-trap children on the intervention roundabout. By this we mean that examination of learning behaviours or styles becomes a very real problem when used in tandem with normative and prescriptive understandings of one best way of learning to read. As Thomas and Loxley (2005, p. 176) so aptly describe, ‘phenomena as we “discover” them are shaped by our methods of discovery’. In this way, highly visual/spatial children who may otherwise draw on their word recognition skills to become strong and avid readers can find themselves pathologised and treated for “poor phonemic-awareness”, when assessment is restricted to testing graphophonemic decoding in word attack strategies. Likewise though, at the other extreme, children who prefer sequential rule-based methodologies may find themselves in a sea of words with whole-language immersion techniques. Bearing this in mind, this paper progresses with a discussion of practices that function as mechanisms of visibility within regimes of light (Deleuze, 1988, 1992) that serve to highlight, contrast and magnify individual differences in learning to read.

**Student vs Student**

Beliefs about appropriate rates of learning progress are socially constructed but, as Ewald (1992, p. 172) points out, such “normative individualisation comes about without reference to any nature or essence in subjects... it is purely comparative”. Under the sustained influence of developmental and educational psychology, educators have become used to thinking in terms of the ‘norm’ and categorising educational endeavour according to bell curves and developmental age/stage theory (Walkerdine, 1984). The ‘norm’ however, is a convenient fiction - a man-made grid of intelligibility that attributes value to culturally specific performances, privileging particular ways of being. Although the idea of “normality” has become commonplace, Ewald (1992, p. 173, added emphasis) argues, in relation to the construction of normative ideals that ‘it is not the exception that proves the rule. Rather, the exception is within the rule’.

There is however, no definitive rule defining what it is to be ‘normal’, precisely because there is no singular manifestation of either normal or abnormal. Not only is normal typically described by what it is not but what it is to be normal is defined through the juxtaposition of culturally-specific, dominant codes with minority ways of being that subsequently come to be known as Other. This doesn’t just happen by magic, although dominant conceptualisations have become naturalised to the point that we think things are the way they are because that was the way they were always meant to be. Discourses emanating from powerful knowledge-domains, such as medicine and psychology (see Figure 2), perpetuate this intellectual inertia by producing the discursive fields that dominate and delimit what is possible for people to say and think (Foucault, 1972). These discourses also produce constructs that cohere with and codify practices that link back and confirm the diagnoses and knowledges in which they are embedded (Graham & Slee, 2006).
Notions of what it means to be “normal” come about purely by comparative means. If the majority of babies tend to first sit unaided at the age of 6 – 9 months, then it is considered normal for a child to first sit somewhere within that time. Similarly, if most toddlers begin to walk at the age of 10 – 18 months, then it is considered normal for babies to crawl until 18 months. Concern begins to set in when a child does not do something within the developmental “stages” considered acceptable for the achievement of a particular capability. The comparison of what individual children do and when is the foundational knowledge used to constitute norms of child development and behaviour, however such norms, in failing to encompass genuine appreciation for human diversity, wield much collateral damage. Comparison with others is precisely how we construct more concrete deficit identities around the premature tag ‘something other than normal’ (Graham, 2006c).

There are now countless ways in which difference is rearticulated as disability, disorder or deficit. The rush for early intervention has increased the intensity of the clinical gaze in the early years and, as such, the phase in which children are initiated into the literate community and the process of learning to read has come under increasingly intense scrutiny. The result is that certain behaviours (or the lack of others) come to be constructed as outside the norm and requiring intervention. This “hunt for disability” (Baker, 2002) means that behaviours (strengths, strategies, abilities) that work for the child can be ignored in the rush to fix up those highlighted by blunt assessments that fail to ask the right questions.

Here, we restrict ourselves to an analysis of a set of practices used within Queensland primary schools to examine the rates of progress (or lack thereof) in learning to read and examine these as mechanisms of visibility that individuate and contrast in the effort to normalise primary school children. We do not dispute that some children need more specific help in the
complicated process of learning to read – instead our concern revolves around the influence that particular knowledge-domains and the biomedical paradigms they produce may have upon the mis/recognition of ability as disability and the effects therein. The Developmental Continua is one such construct, developed via the comparison of young children and the learning phase behaviours they exhibit at different stages along the journey of becoming literate. The Queensland version of the Developmental Continua was adopted from West Australia’s First Steps Program (Luke et al., 2001), however, the aim in the First Steps version was to provide teachers with a reflective practice tool and a way of clearly mapping the different learning stages of individual children in their class (First Steps: Reading, 1995). Whilst the individualistic focus on learning is a culturally-specific and problematic practice in itself (Dudley-Marling, 2004), our concern here is not necessarily with the concept but how the ensuing construct can come to be taken up and used.

**Student vs Construct**

The Queensland Developmental Continua/Year 2 Diagnostic Net is a charting system that maps a child’s progress through ‘commonly agreed milestones’ that Education Queensland supporting literature states are ‘grouped into phases of development’ considered ‘typical in young children’ (Year 2 Diagnostic Net, 1998). Currently, in Queensland children enter their first formal year of schooling, known as Grade One, the year they are to turn 6 years old. Upon their entry into Grade One and through to Grade Three, children are ‘individually assessed three times by the teacher in order to be placed on a scale for reading, writing and number’ (Grieshaber, 1997, p. 30). This scale, known as the Developmental Continua, was constructed in response to a review of the Queensland education curriculum and a back to the basics emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic or ‘the traditional three Rs’ (p. 28).

With respect to the learning of reading, in Queensland primary schools the Developmental Continua describes what is considered developmentally appropriate learning-phase behaviour in young children and thereby actively predicates notions of what it is to be a normal young child. Reflecting a preoccupation with learning progress and the atomisation of learning into discrete skills (Dudley-Marling, 2004), the Developmental Continua facilitates what Thomas & Cremin (2005) refer to as ‘contrastive judgement’ – the comparison of student against student, which they argue is used to categorise and hierarchise children in schools. Thomas and Cremin caution that such constructs endorse, magnify and institutionalise practices of student comparison, working to:

> ...systematically elevate the status of notions such as ability, intelligence, talent and learning difficulty... [particularly] the umbrella signifier of ‘learning disability’ – a signifier that putatively objectifies difficulties at school, as though there were some set of clear standards for measuring them, while simultaneously endorsing the comparison of one student with another. (Cremin & Thomas, 2005, p. 432-433)

The use of norms aid in processes of individuation and contrastive judgement. Children can be singled out, remediated and withdrawn from the scene of the “mainstream” – their abilities and strengths becoming invisible in the process. The proliferation of norms has meant that
processes of identification have become far more sensitive, however, the quest for the quick fix has meant that our methods for dealing sensitively and comprehensively with difficulties in learning have become far less so. This is evident in Queensland where, in combination with the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, the Developmental Continua operates as a thread within a categorical grid of specification that aids in the categorisation, spatialisation and normalisation of difference. Informed by developmental psychological discourse, the Developmental Continua operates as a locus constituting both whom a problem group is (learning problematic children performing under an age–grade–content based norm) and, together with the application of another testing regimen, the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, actively constitutes how the group becomes known (the mechanism by which the group is located or identified). The Developmental Continua/Year 2 Diagnostic Net not only capture children performing under the specified norms but also act as a conduit; funnelling the children who either display significant deviance from the specified age-based norm and/or those whose difficulties are not ameliorated through the resulting short-term learning support programs. These children then become subject to further Education Queensland identifying mechanisms, Appraisement Intervention and Ascertainment Procedures (Graham, 2006a).

Although the Developmental Continua is applied from Grades One to Three and serves to elucidate children’s progress or non-progress during that period, its main locating function is called upon 15 months after a child begins Grade One. Towards the end of second term in Grade Two, each child is assessed and their position is plotted on the Developmental Continua and then examined in reference to normative standards. Through the application of this process, called the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, those children falling below the specified level of acceptable proficiency in reading, writing and number are identified and provided with short-term withdrawal programs. The expression for their capture is that they have been ‘Caught in the Net’.

When first implemented in 1995, the Developmental Continua/Year 2 Diagnostic Net was organised around a set of desired ‘benchmarks or standards ... established to enable identification of children at risk’ (Grieshaber, 1997, p. 30) of developing ‘inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy’ (Wiltshire et al., 1994, vol. 1, p. xiv, cited in Grieshaber, 1997, p. 29). However by the end of 1996, schools were requested to reduce the number of children identified through the Net via the application of further qualifying criteria, as too many children were identified resulting in unprecedented referral for intervention and a subsequent funding crisis (Grieshaber, 1997). This ‘tweaking’ aimed at reducing the catchment to acceptable numbers in order to fit the ultimate determinant of funding, as opposed to the original imperative of attaining acceptable literacy and numeracy standards, demonstrates the arbitrary nature and artificiality of normative standards applied within the field of education. However, Queensland is not alone in this experience, as Snow’s (1990) historical study relating to the introduction of age–grade–content policy in New South Wales, and Sleeter’s (1986) elucidation of the social construction of learning disability through educational standards reform during the 1960s in the USA will attest.
In identifying deviance from a normative standard manufactured through political imperative (Grieshaber, 1997), the Developmental Continua/Year 2 Net operates to define the ‘normal’ young child, creating a reified space for children who achieve within the parameters set by the standard of the day. Those children who do not achieve to the set standards are then eligible for intervention through Support-a-Reader.

Whilst these programs are generally regarded positively by teachers, Henderson (2002, pp. 50, 51) has demonstrated how children “caught in the Net” and supported through such compensatory programs, can become negatively conceptualised by educationalists using ‘narratives of blame as part of their theorisation of literacy failure’. We would add that there are additional problems associated with pull-out programs:

1. they are stigmatising and, in tandem with deficit discourses, work to produce deficit subject-identities;

2. because they are guided by views of individual deficit and the belief that the problem can only be within the child’s head (Dudley-Marling, 2004), withdrawal programs fail to address what is happening (or more precisely not happening) within the classroom (Luke et al., 2001). Pedagogical practices that were perhaps not speaking to some children remain unperturbed and, upon their return to class, the child is squashed back into a space that didn’t fit well in the first place. Thus, the cycle is in danger of continuing.

Figure 3: Becoming caught in the glare
3. Unlike the more expensive Reading Recovery, Support-a-Reader is not conducted by a literacy specialist or even a trained teacher who can provide more specific guidance in the complicated dance steps of learning to read (Luke et al., 2001, p. 59).

Beyond providing supervised practice for reading, Support-a-Reader does little except provide the illusion that “something” is being done. As described by a district officer in regional Queensland:

Support-a-Reader and Reading Recovery are seen as the “fix-it” solution: take under performing kids out of the mainstream class and let someone else take care of the issue - we are not integrating practice into the mainstream class. It’s often teacher aides that take care of the issue. (Luke et al., 2001, p. 45)

Methods that seek to attribute blame or causality for literacy failure (whether the gaze falls on the “deficient child” or on “deficient teaching”) can ensure that the ‘structures and characteristics of school and schooling remain unquestioned’, discouraging interrogation of the intrinsic inequity and arbitrary construction of ‘practices that are valued by school communities’ (Henderson, 2002, p. 51). Problematically, the Developmental Continua/Year 2 Net results are also used as an indicator of school performance and a mechanism to make teachers more accountable for learning outcomes (Grieshaber, 1997). It is interesting to note though that the results of benchmark testing are only invoked when they can be politically useful. Australia’s consistently high performances in national reading benchmarks and international comparative assessments such as PISA (see Luke et al., 2006), are generally ignored or minor aspects sensationalised. For example, the success of Australian students in higher-order analytical skills is bypassed with a narrow focus on how well Grade 3 Singaporean students do in spelling tests (Macnamara, 2006). OECD comparative analyses in which Australian students do well are also discounted because, according to critics:

PISA tends to be one of those New Age life skills tests, where students are not corrected for faulty grammar, spelling and punctuation. What are you going to do? On your job application at Merrill Lynch, write: ‘Look how good I done on the PISA test?’ (Ruehl as cited in Gare, 2006, p. 29)

It appears that with respect to the credibility of PISA, the paradigm informing the construct measure is important. We agree and take this opportunity to caution that paradigms informed by particular conceptions of the literate child, find only information deemed important by the paradigm informing the assessment. At the same time, they can fail to recognise and locate other information that still plays an important part in the sophisticated act of reading.

**Student vs Paradigm**

Debate about the teaching of reading in the first years of school continues to be plagued by literacy wars, which have been dragged over from the closing years of the twentieth century. While the arguments remain much the same, the conditions of learning in the early years of the twenty-first century continue to change and pose challenges of racially, ethnically, and
culturally diverse multilingual students, new communications technologies and forms of representation, and social inequalities that accompany globalized economies (Luke & Grieshaber, 2004). Learning to read and the practices of teaching reading are ideological representations that reflect particular values and beliefs. The selection of specific approaches by governments, systems, schools and individual teachers thus marks out the territory of what counts as proper ways of learning to read and proper ways of teaching reading. With government and systemic intervention, teachers are increasingly restricted as to the choices they have about the approaches used when teaching reading. And just like the construction of learning disabilities, those who do not learn to read in the ‘proper’ way are increasingly tagged as being ‘at risk’. In Queensland, these children are typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, indigenous, and those for whom English is an additional language (van Kraayenoord et al., 1999).

Longitudinal studies of children’s literacy in Australia (Comber et al., 2002; Hill et al., 2002) involving children from different socio-economic and cultural circumstances have shown that the gap between those who struggle initially with school literacies widens as children grow older, rather than closing. In England, increased use of within-school assessment of children’s reading has been shown to increase the danger that resources will be diverted from those in most need to those whose need is not so great (Thomas & Davis, 1997). This revelation has since been confounded by the publication of league tables that confirm the long held suspicion that social class in Britain is equated with early school success or failure in literacy and numeracy (Gregory et al., 2004). In the USA, children in urban schools are at risk of being under prepared for the new literacies required in a global economy because of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) dictum to standardize and normalize the teaching of reading through mandating the use of published reading programs. And in Canada, there are suggestions that community based approaches to literacy do not count in classroom literacy experiences (Kendrick & McKay, 2004).

Learning to read properly then, occurs in accordance with specific sociocultural positions and class interests, which most recently have focused on a return to basic skills. In the USA, this is exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001); in England by The standards site: Rose review of reading: The interim report (DfES, 2005; Rose, 2005), and in Australia by the document Teaching Reading: Report and recommendations. National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

Currently in Australia, learning to read properly amounts to teachers being required to “provide systematic, direct, and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency” (DEST, 2005, p. 38). In England it means scripted approaches to phonics and “robust monitoring systems” (DfES, 2005, p. 2), while in the USA there is pressure to conform to district mandated literacy instruction (Gatto, 2001). In each country the emphasis is similar: standards, teacher accountability, surveillance of teachers, and technical approaches to assessment that test and drill down in minute detail to identify and classify children’s failings, deficits, and lacks.
National inquiries, systemic approaches, schools and classrooms are framed by discourses that mark difference from proper ways of learning to read. For instance, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005) stated that a whole language approach to teaching reading is “...not in the best interests of children, particularly those experiencing reading difficulties” (p. 12). With whole language approaches denied to those experiencing difficulties, together with the strong emphasis on phonics and the teaching of phonics in pre-service teacher education courses (DEST, 2005), proper ways of learning to read for those experiencing difficulty feature a return to basic skills and mark a triumph for technical solutions to teaching reading. Technical approaches focus on means rather than ends. They result in the delivery of a particular kind of knowledge (Thomas & Loxley, 2005) for particular kinds of children and go hand in hand with definitions of literacy as a “set of specified skills” as opposed to “repertoires of social and cultural practices” (Comber & Nichols, 2004, p. 45).

For those experiencing difficulty in learning to read, reducing literacy to a set of government imposed specified skills is as good as constructing a classificatory grid that preys on those who are deficient in the relationship between letters and sounds (phonics), who lack phonemic awareness, who have difficulty reading with fluency, have limited vocabulary knowledge and have difficulty in comprehending texts. It devalues home and community contexts that fail to provide children with rich oral language and print environments and hence the skills they need to operate phonetically in the process of learning to read. We know that children who struggle initially in the process of learning to read are unlikely to catch up with their peers because the gap widens as they grow older (Comber et al., 2002; Hill et al., 2002). We also know that children who are struggling with school literacy can become invisible in the classroom (Comber & Nichols, 2004) or it can be common classroom knowledge that they are experiencing difficulties because in everyday classroom talk they are marked as such (see Grieshaber, in press). The case of Rose, a pupil in first grade depicts misrecognition by the teacher of her abilities, which led to her invisibility in the class (Comber & Nichols, 2004). Rose, her mother and brother lived below the poverty line in rental accommodation in an Adelaide suburb. They would have qualified for much cheaper public housing in another suburb but Rose’s mother wanted her children to attend the local school because of the program (Students of High Intellectual Potential) offered to all students. Despite living in poverty, Comber and Nichols described the family’s cultural capital as “relatively high” (p. 48), partly because they took advantage of free or low cost community resources such a libraries, galleries and museums. At preschool, Rose was popular and considered by her teachers to be

...a bright child and even unusually mature for her age. This perceived maturity was not, however, viewed in an entirely positive light for it was attributed to the demands of living with a completely disorganised’ mother in ‘chaotic’ conditions. Characterizing poor families (particularly those headed by single mothers) as disorderly is not uncommon for teachers (p. 49).

When Rose started school, she “did not shine” (p. 49). She “had difficulty in gaining acceptance from the ‘successful girls’ group. Her ‘maturity’ and broad scope of interests, as well as her gender neutral clothing [she often wore her brother’s cast off clothes], did not help
her” (p. 49). Her teacher described Rose as “shy and quiet” (p. 49), which was vastly different from the preschool child who showed a distinct aptitude for dramatic play by creating stories and imaginary characters from her museum experiences. Rose’s experiences in year one also involved assessment of literacy and the inevitable comparisons with others. The tests used to identify literacy levels,

focused on decontextualized coding…alphabet and sight word recognition. Rose’s performance suggested gaps in her alphabetic knowledge. She also stumbled over simple words when reading aloud and her writing in comparison to other female peers was untidy. (p. 49)

Comber and Nichols concluded that Rose was ‘doing time’, explaining that in one lesson even though Rose’s output “matched the teacher’s expected outcomes, her original thinking and her ability to represent it went largely unremarked” (p. 56). As a result, Rose’s “cultural capital and representational resources, though significant, appear invisible at school” (Comber & Nichols, 2004, p. 59). Invisibility had the effect of positioning Rose as un-able. The break between Rose’s knowledge and abilities and what is approved and rewarded in the world of school became apparent in her first year when she was aged six. It left Rose “struggling for a place to be among her peers and searching for recognition as a learner from her teachers” (p. 60).

Tests of reading are neither culturally nor politically neutral. That is, they tend to privilege certain approaches to learning and particular responses to questions. In this way, the measurement of intelligence as a discrete commodity helps to ‘reinforce the deficit perception of learners… who are considered as not responding ‘appropriately’ to the set curricula’ (Carrington, 2006, p. 22). The problem is that these tests, informed by particular paradigms and assumptions about the proper ways to approach the decoding of texts in the pursuit we call “reading”, neglect the ingenuity and strengths of children who come to read in novel ways.

Learning from 6 year old “Georgia”

Chatty little Georgia was not learning to read as quickly as her grade-peers, although many in her grade were nearly a year older. In her first year of school, Georgia’s class did both Jolly Phonics followed by Thrass. Upon her move into Grade 2, her teacher noticed that she demonstrated “poor phonemic awareness” and this was confirmed through running records and observation. The girl was identified for learning support in the form of Reading Recovery and spent half an hour every day receiving explicit instruction from a trained Reading Recovery teacher through a withdrawal mode. From there, discussions about her progress revolved around an apparent deficit in her graphophonemic decoding skills. Towards the end of Term 2, even after six weeks of Reading Recovery and having jumped several reader levels, Georgia was still caught in the Year 2 Diagnostic Net. In consultation with her mother, the school made the decision to delay Support-a-Reader intervention until after Georgia graduated from Reading Recovery." After two terms of intensive support through Reading Recovery, Georgia graduated at a reader level of 20. The very interesting twist that the RR
specialist notes at this time is that Georgia demonstrates fluency in reading but still exhibits similar difficulty with graphophonemic decoding. During her time in Reading Recovery, Georgia a bright, visually-oriented child had been busily adding to her sight word vocabulary without deep internalisation of the graphophonemic strategies practiced during RR. Instead, as her RR teacher remarked with surprise, when Georgia experienced real difficulty with a word she backtracked through the story and drew on her comprehension to work out what the word should be. Nevertheless in the final term of Year 2, Georgia was still withdrawn from her regular class twice a week to participate in the rescheduled Support-a-Reader sessions. Georgia then begins to experience difficulty in maths. Eventually the ST:LD\textsuperscript{ii} begins the Appraisment Process and Georgia is inscribed with a status of ‘learning difficulty/disability’. She may well have difficulty with phonemic decoding but with the attribution of a label, this ‘difficulty’ comes to live a life of its own through its incarnation as a disability. Georgia begins to believe that she has a “stupid brain”.

In the case study above, Georgia comes to attention via several identification methods and is provided with short-term learning support via withdrawal mode. However, the problems associated with such intervention formats is evident: Georgia is withdrawn from class half an hour every day for Reading Recovery and for a significant part of Term 2 is withdrawn for an Oral Language program as well, for an additional half an hour per week. This amounts to Georgia being away from class for three hours per week and this eventually contributes to her experiencing difficulty accessing other areas of the curriculum and finally, the development of a deficit identity – the belief that she is stupid and has a “stupid brain”. This occurs despite the fact that Georgia is a highly intelligent girl who can complete higher order cognitive tasks, and exhibits logical reasoning considered sophisticated for her age.

Georgia appears to be the (im)perfect student paradox, demonstrating that ‘phenomena as we “discover” them are shaped by our methods of discovery’ (Thomas & Loxley, 2005, p. 176). In other assessments conducted by professionals outside the school, Georgia was considered in the gifted range however elsewhere again, her mother was told that it was amazing that Georgia could even function at the level that she was (Year 2 maths, Year 3 reading) because she was apparently missing all the foundational knowledges required to do so. The example given was that Georgia had no concept of sequencing and did not even know what “before” and “after” meant. Another suspicion was that Georgia was dyslexic, as she often wrote mirror reversals and mixed up sentence structure. Specifically during the assessment, when asked which number came before the number 8, Georgia would say 9. Before 7, she said 8. Her mother was informed of this but proved knowledgable in ‘other ways of knowing’ (Reid and Weatherly Valle, 2004, p. 476). Georgia’s mother, Nicole knew that Georgia understood before and after, arguing that Georgia followed instructions all the time at home which depended on her knowing the difference. The example she gave was ‘You can watch the Simpson’s after you’ve eaten dinner and brushed your teeth’. The value of intuitive knowledge was made apparent when Georgia’s mother asked the question differently and received the correct answer. Knowing how visual Georgia was, she asked: “In a line from 1 to 10, which number comes before 8?”. Georgia replied, “Oh! 7.”
Reading Dis/ability

Another approach to the problem of learning to read and a second question to ask, which is rarely asked, is: Is the pedagogy being used to teach the class “how to read” not speaking to this particular child? Is this because there is more than one way to approach learning to read?

Let us reframe the problem and look at it differently.

It is 2020. Georgia’s own daughter is now in school. It happens to be underground because the polar ice-caps have melted but at least no one gets skin cancer anymore. This little girl is doing extremely well in school. She brings home merit certificates weekly and is an avid reader. Some of her classmates are not doing so well. These students have been identified as ‘phonemically dependent’ learners and spend half an hour every day with a Reading Recovery teacher called R2D2. By 2015 it was recognised that sight reading and learning to read through word/shape recognition was a viable way of teaching children to read because it helped develop spatial intelligence important for higher order thinking skills and mathematical reasoning. This kind of intelligence is considered very important in the nano-technological/bio-hazardous economic domain of the third age.

We can now ask the question; is Georgia really “learning disabled” - meaning that she has a neurobiological deficit that somehow makes it difficult for her to learn? The argument we would pose here would be: can she walk? If yes, then she must have learned to walk. Can she talk? Can she do most of the things that we all learn to do? If so, then her ‘learning’ disability must be content and context specific in some way. What if early-literacy pedagogy could be more flexible? What if the teacher was to recognise where the young girl’s strengths lay and incorporate pedagogical techniques that spoke to those strengths? It appears that some teachers at the coalface do recognise this:

Children learn in different ways, so different methods may need to be used simultaneously and not just through the teacher’s use of a single literacy package. Secondary Teacher, Nambour open meeting. (Luke et al., 2001, p. 45)

This teacher’s insight leads us to ask the question: Are there other ways of approaching the problem than attributing a deficit label to a young child which has constitutive effects? It would be useful to unpack this further.

The constitutive effects of discourse

When we say that discourse has constitutive effects, we are referring to the poststructural assertion that ‘discourse forms the objects of which it speaks’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 46). Through the subjectivitating processes of discourse, the young girl with a ‘reading disability’ comes to know herself as ‘learning disabled’; she begins to believe that she is not just not good at reading but that she has a fundamental neurobiological obstacle preventing her from learning to read or do maths or participate “successfully” in school. This is problematic not only for the disabling
effect it has upon the girl’s own self-esteem and self-efficacy but for the debilitating effect upon academic expectations of her by others.

The label ‘reading disabled’ or ‘learning disabled’ comes to speak for the girl in two different ways. First, it constitutes a ‘learning disabled’ subject (that is the subjectivity through which the girl comes to understand her own self) but second, it constitutes a ‘learning disabled’ object; in other words, an identity forms around the girl by and through which others come to know her (Butler, 1997). This occurs because we come to ‘know’ the child through what we think they know or can do but this is in itself determined by what the label ‘learning disabled’ means to us and how we interpret through what that label signifies is possible for the child to know or be able to do. This contributes to another problem. The ‘sign as label’ or ‘label as sign’ has obfuscatory effects. The sign ‘learning disabled’ comes to speak for the child, obfuscating the child and privileging a culturally-loaded label in their place. The political effects of this are interesting.

For example, a child described as ‘reading disabled’ is perhaps no longer expected to read at a Level 10 reader, like many of his classmates. This is where things start to get tricky because to expect him to read at the same level at this stage in his learning might be a tad unrealistic and indeed harmful to the child’s self esteem and motivation. This is why inclusive educators advocate for a differentiated curriculum and for ‘teachers to make adjustments to their teaching program’ (Education Queensland, Appraisal Intervention, 2001, p.3). This is not a euphemism for ‘dumbing down’ but instead is a call for teachers to be pedagogically creative, responsive, reflexive and observant. It is about scaffolding a child’s pathway to learning by helping them build the little bridges needed to make vital connections and capitalising on their strengths to do so. So whilst Georgia is not made to read a Level 10 reader just yet (and experience the pain, frustration and stigmatising effects of failure), she works on another level but with key exercises that aim to enhance his skills in areas that haven’t clicked as yet – all the while drawing on her strengths to allow her to feel the mastery and competence that brings.

The danger in supporting difference through differentiation is that we can stigmatised (and bring into play all the negative identity formation problems discussed earlier) but also, that the differentiation may come to be used against the child themselves (Graham, 2006b). This is where the obfuscating effects of labelling really comes into play.

‘Label as Sign’ or ‘Sign as Label’

A label or sign that we attribute to a child may compete with the signifier “child”, with the effect that the child comes to be understood second to the label they have been granted; i.e. not only are “they” less important but who they could be may never come to light at all. However, labels can serve a political role as well. By describing Georgia or Rose as ‘learning disabled’ we suddenly have a cause for their apparent schooling failure. Thanks to the label (or diagnosis of “the problem”) the school is not to blame. Nor is the teacher. Any inquiry, therefore, into their performance/s will be framed by or interpreted through the deficit conceptualisation of reading/learning disability. The teacher can breath a sigh of relief and the school can get on with business as usual, organising compensatory programs for all the ‘learning disabled’
children who just don't seem to “get it” in normal, ordinary or mainstream classrooms. If we go back to our story about Georgia’s daughter however, we can see that a reversal has taken place there. What would constitute ‘reading disabled’ now is (albeit fictitiously) reconstructed in 2020 as avid or “good” reading.

In this vignette, we aimed to illustrate the privileging of certain bodies of knowledge over others (such as that played out in the literacy wars) and the effects of power that result. The battle over whether “phonics” is a better way of teaching children to learn to read than “whole language” approaches (and vice versa) is pointless. We agree with Luke (1998, p. 306) when he says: ‘the question for teachers should not be: What is the best way of teaching reading and writing? All literacy-based programs ‘work’ to some degree or another’. To this we would add that every child is different. Most children are orientated towards one or the other approach or are fortunate enough to be able to draw on a combination of both. Some very lucky kids get along just fine with whatever is served up. Some like Georgia come up with their own strategies. However, if we end up with a situation where one method is privileged over another (like for example, in the current political push to have phonics (re)instituted in schools as the “only” way of learning to read) then we can have real problems. Those children who are more spatially oriented like Georgia have a good chance of being regarded as ‘reading disabled’ and may come to believe that there is indeed something “wrong” with their brain. Those of us looking so carefully for lack need to recognise that there are children who come to attention purely because their idiosyncrasies fall outside the box we have constructed around a normative ideal.

Conclusion

The dichotomisation of literacy instruction into systematic phonics versus blanket immersion fails to realise a fundamental tenet of providing equitable educational opportunities to diverse groups of children through inclusive practices and differentiated instruction. Diversity becomes a problem to solve through “inoculation programs” and individual strengths can fail to realise because they do not fit well with the program of the day. These strengths, instead of being appreciated for the value that they may bring in higher-order conceptual and intellectual tasks, may be neglected at great cost to the individual child because they offer cheap reward in the shape of aggregate test scores. This paper is a philosophical piece, which in refusing to prescribe what one should do on Monday morning, joins other strident voices in disability studies in education to question what it is that we are doing today (Baker, in press; Reid & Weatherly Valle, 2004). Whilst not scientific, this is important work – it emphasises the a priori importance of philosophical, moral and ethical questions – reminding science that children are dynamic social beings who cannot be manipulated like genes to “express” themselves in ways more conducive to quick and cheap educational programs.
References:


Graham, L. (2006b) Done in by discourse... or the problem/s with labelling, in: M. Keeffe & S. Carrington (Eds.), *Schools and Diversity*. (Sydney, Pearsons Education).


Support-a-Reader is a program where a student who has been ‘caught in the Net’ is withdrawn from class for half an hour of supported reading practice once or twice a week with a teacher or parent aide.

During second term, Georgia was also identified by the visiting speech pathologist as lacking oral language skills and enrolled in a withdrawal-mode Oral Language Skills Support program involving weekly half hour sessions for 8 weeks.

ST:LD is ‘support teacher learning difficulties’.