

Literacy (ies) and community (ies)

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Let me start by pointing out that my starting point has been shaped by what writers in the 'New Literacy Studies' tradition, myself included, are doing with the idea of community in our work on the study of literacy as social practice. This concern has influenced my selection for discussion from the Children's Early Literacy Learning Research Project (CELL) research data as well as the choice of readings I have gone to. The arguments here are exploratory in nature, and by no means conclusive.

In the South African context, 'community' is such a saturated signifier – much that is both good and bad has been referenced to the call of 'community' in the last century and the term does not resonate with innocence and good intention as it might for others. Apartheid discourse had community identity as one of its foundational concepts, and community was an ethno-lingual unit. This was a legitimated linguistic perspective within what Blommaert, following Fabian, calls 'colonial linguistics' which argued that

linguistic differences are ethnic differences; language marks ethnicity; language always indexes emotions attached to one's ethnicity; multi-ethnolingualism is therefore an obstacle to nation-building.. (Blommaert, 1996, 5)

Community/ethnic distinctiveness was the justification for the 'Bantustan' policy¹ and for separated educational systems (fourteen of them) as well as the 'separate but equal' claims of apartheid apologists. At the same time the term 'community' as in 'black community' was appropriated by anti-apartheid activists, and much that was good and bad happened under its auspices, including effective mass mobilisation against a powerful and vicious state, and bloody acts of vengeance against 'enemies of the people', real, imagined and invented. Moving forward, the social flux that characterises the present political moment in the present South African context again makes the notion of community problematic. The linguistic, domestic and social fluidity that characterises the 'home contexts' of the children being studied in the project I am working on, the Children's Early Literacy Learning Research Project (CELL), and the extent to which major influences on their emerging senses of self together with their understandings of literacy and other forms of meaning-making come from outside the local context, requires something else than 'community' as a key focusing concept for understanding these processes. 'Transitional communities' was a concept I thought first of using to apply to this fluidity, but then abandoned.

Community in the New Literacy Studies

Firstly, it seems to me clear that the socio-cultural approach to literacy studies does not stand or fall around the concept of 'community', unless the term is understood as synonymous with 'culture', itself a debated concept. As Peter Freebody briefly put it in Tokyo, we insist that

- The unit of our analysis is the social event;
- Cognitive processes attendant on literacy are themselves culturally shaped resources* (Freebody, 1999)

There is nothing there that says that the unit of analysis should be distinct social groupings, either separate or in interaction with other groups. But in practice much of the work that has studied

¹ Under the apartheid system of 'separate development' in South Africa, nine African groups were assigned their own homelands or *bantustan*. Movement outside of these homelands was strictly regulated. In the late 1980s several of the *bantustans* were given 'independence'. At the end of apartheid the *bantustans* were reincorporated into South Africa.

literacy as socio-cultural practice in the past has taken distinctive social groups or communities as its focus of study. Usually these groups have been studied because of their particularity, marginality or difference. The thrust of the research has been to redeem them from their position as modernity's others, and to show their complexity, reasonableness and the depth of their non-standardised reworkings or invention of social resources, such as writing and texts. Often the social that Freebody refers to above splits in such work into the binaries of 'community' and 'official' contexts, or of 'mainstream' and 'marginal'.

Thus Allan Luke defines the take on literacy of the socio-cultural approach as follows:

literacy as a social practice that is shaped, distributed and acquired in relation to community contexts and larger social institutions, discourse formations and ideological interests. (Luke, 1997,1)

Is there an accompanying assumption that community contexts are sites of authentic practice whereas official sites (including schooling) are sites of distorted practice where ideology and power operate?

At the Tokyo meeting Peter Freebody put it:

We are working, as literacy researchers in a context, nationally and internationally, where literacy has been "recruited" as a uni-dimensional 'standard' available for the surveillance of both the teaching profession and the inadequately schooled... we are especially vulnerable to a curricularized notion of literacy and an unmooring of Literacy from purposeful socio-cultural practice. (Freebody, 1999)

Re-reading this I started to wonder: When did this recruiting of a restricted understanding of literacy happen? Do we recall a time and place where literacy as 'purposeful socio-cultural practice' was presented in policy documents and taught in schools before it was overthrown by this distorted understanding of Literacy? If not, is that why we want to study local community contexts, so that we can reconstruct what such authentic practices are like outside of the effects of centralised power? Are literacy practices outside official domains free of the distortions produced by the effects of power, surveillance and control? It is possible that our search for 'local literacies' shares a similar contradiction that scholarly seekers of 'oral culture' faced? There just wasn't any, in its pristine form.

Mary Hamilton in her Tokyo paper drew attention to the fact that despite sustained efforts on the part of NLS researchers, the impact of our work on educational practices has been very limited. Notably, the first thing she calls for, to address these limits is that we should develop a more extensive research base on the detail of literacy learning and use in local communities.

By way of example she refers to 'areas of vernacular knowledge' in Lancaster, which include home economics and budgeting, repair and maintenance, child care, sports, gardening, cooking, pets and animal care, and family and local history.* And she quotes Moll (1994) with reference to funds of knowledge in communities, resources shared across families, funds of knowledge in areas such as agriculture, economics, construction, religion, arts and repair. (Hamilton, 1999)

Does the New Literacy Studies romanticise the idea of community? At its best I don't think it does, it does not exclude from its focus the ways that power operates both from outside and within local communities. I do think, though, that such an orientation might not take us close enough to developing the resources for studying literacy, learning and local life in the rapidly predominating contexts where such a notion of community does not apply.

Part of the reason for my concern about how 'community' works in literacy studies has emerged in response to the research data from the CELL work. This research has happened in and around Cape Town and Gauteng, and community coherence and local relationships of solidarity have appeared to be very uneven and deeply intertwined with non-local concerns, values and 'ways of knowing'; in addition domestic and inter-generational relationships have been marked by fluidity, and unpredictability; and, finally, linguistic uniformity is the exception. The evidence, as I discuss later, is that people criss-cross 'institutional' and 'local' constructions of literacy, language, identity and community in ways that can best be described as disorderly hybridity rather than in terms of the more orderly dialectic that Freebody and Kell suggested in their Tokyo papers, where such mixing implicitly has system and rationality beneath the surface.

That this might not be just a South African peculiarity is partly captured in this quote from Hall:

everywhere, cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed, but poised, *in transition* between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and which are the product of those complicated cross-overs and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalised world.." (Hall, 1992, 310)

In further exploration of these issues I look sketchily at discussions on community, speech communities, imagined communities, communities of practice, I then look at the idea of subjectivity in relation to assumptions about group identity and try to use what I've covered to make sense of some research work coming out of CELL. The CELL work is a collective project and in its early stages, so my discussion of this research is necessarily very limited, tentative and personal.

'Speech community'

It is apparent that socio-linguistic developments in the study of language within 'speech communities' have been one strong influence within the NLS, and that there is a strong affinity between the NLS and studies of 'speech community'. Self-criticism from within socio-linguistics of emerging problems with that approach are therefore of interest to those of us working on the study of literacy as social practice.

Following Rampton's argument, the idea of 'speech community' operates as "a necessary primary term in that it postulates the basis of description as a social rather than a linguistic entity" (Rampton, 1998, 4).

"the essential thing is that the object of description be an integral social unit" (Hymes, 1972, 55, quoted in Rampton, 1998, 5); "Any description of language must take the speech community as its object if it is to do justice to the elegance and regularity of linguistic structure (Labov 1989:52, quoted in Rampton, 1998, 5)

Rampton suggests that the focus on community as the core social unit is a result of the context within which socio-linguists operated where the preoccupation with the encounter between 'tradition' and 'modernity' predominated.

A parallel and interacting tradition informed the development of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), I suggest. Heath's identification in *Ways With Words* of Trackton and Roadville as distinctive communities drew explicitly on Hymes, as does her identification of "literacy events" draw directly on Hymes' focus on "communicative events". Heath's focus on distinctive local communities signaled the intention to show that literacy and language use are profoundly interwoven with social organisation. Through this wider frame she was able to show the divergent orientations to literacy and learning that differing cultural and communicative traditions produce, particularly by way of initiating children into "ways of knowing", that include the incorporation of literacy in culturally specific ways. (Heath, 1983) Her work and a lot of other work in the NLS can be seen as efforts to recover our sense of groups of people as not being simply 'modernity's others'. This can be seen most strongly in Street's ethnographic work in Iran where he saw that the *already existing* literacies in the peasant villages of Iran were invisible to the modernising literacy campaigners. It can also be seen in Street's engagements with Goody and Ong, in particular, over their presentation of literacy as a context-free social technology (Street, 1984). For the modernisers, literacy had uniform determining effects, cognitively re-orientated, individuated, undermined tribal cohesion, and effectively laid the seeds of modernity when it reached non-Westerners. Street's (1993) collecting of ethnographies of literacy practices in divergent cultural contexts convincingly undermined this model of literacy as a determining social technology. Gee's (1996) influential summary of this and related work develops explicitly as an account of the battle against the evolutionist and culturally biased binary theorists of modernisation². A similar point, arguing against such dichotomous and evolutionist ways of thinking about social development, was made by anthropologists studying in South Africa, as is shown in the following quotation:

Our evidence shows that the incorporation of black South Africans into a world economy did not simply erode difference or spawn rationalised, homogenised worlds. Money and commodities, literacy and Christendom challenged local symbols, threatening to convert them into a universal currency. But precisely because the

² Gee argues that literacy theorists such as Jack Goody, Eric Havelock and Walter Ong construct a 'great divide' between 'oral' and 'literate' cultures, which reproduces earlier conceptual divides between so-called 'primitive' and 'modern' cultures. (Gee, 1996, 46-53)

cross, the book, and the coin were such saturated signs, they were variously and ingeniously redeployed to bear a host of new meanings as non-Western people fashioned their own versions of modernity.. Neither was (or is) this merely a feature of “transitional” communities or those marginal to bourgeois reason and the commodity economy.

(J & J Comaroff, 1992, 5)

The focus of work in the NLS often turns to people and groups who don't conform to the expectations of modern institutions (Street, 1993, Besnier, 1993, Prinsloo and Breier, 1996, Kapitzke, 1995 amongst others), and there is a drive to conceptualise their performance in terms of difference rather than deficit, e.g. not just as ‘dim pupils’, untrained or untrainable workers, or as being backward, primitive or superstitious. This work is enabled by a focus on literacy as variable social practice, rather than free-floating social technology.

In his review, Rampton recognises the same shift from ‘speech’ to ‘practice’³ in the study of ‘speech communities’ as being a critical move,

speech being de-privileged by an intensified empirical gaze which treats situated activity as a multi-modal semiotic process involving visual, gestural, and proxemic channels as well as the physical environment, material artefacts and other objects. (Rampton, 1998,12)

However, he sees membership of a particular speech community as being postulated *in the background* as the origin of the social norms that determine the appropriacy of speech, producing social meaning above and beyond referential intelligibility. In that sense community was assumed as a given.

The focus on ‘speech community’ encouraged linguists, he argues, to find bounded identities, but not to look at lines of social differentiation across such boundaries, and to find sovereignty, fraternity and authenticity within.

In the New Literacy Studies, the key understanding of literacy as ‘socio-cultural practice’ provides a superordinate concept, embracing all types of society, and enabling the aim of preventing literacy practices becoming those of the ‘modern’ side of the tradition-modernity’ dichotomy. But concepts of ‘mainstream’ as against ‘local’ literacies still emerge, and the locals continue to be viewed as modernity’s others, despite “efforts to complicate, uncouple and refute these associations, and/or to negate or reverse their valuation as better vs worse. (Rampton quotes the work of Heath and Street in this regard. (Rampton, 1998, 7)

Studies of ‘speech communities’ have tended to work with a relatively small number of informants, he points out, and the outcome is likely to be “the detailed portrait of an internally differentiated but fairly coherent group, outlining the cultural integrity of distinctive speech practices, as well, sometimes, as the ways they are transmitted intergenerationally”. But Rampton argues that because of the focus on group processes as distinctive, conflict and misunderstanding are seen as occurring “in the gap between integrated cultural and linguistic systems” and this gap has come to be seen as the place for practical interventions that could try to help the proponents of different systems to understand each other and to adjust.

.the central interest was in systematic patterns attributed to participation *within* relatively stable in-groups. (Rampton, 1998, 9)

He argues that

disputes about deficit, difference and domination - the intergroup politics nourished by a view of communities as separate socio-cultural blocs - lose much of their purchase when the clarity, permanence and omni-relevance of specific community memberships are questioned, and when community belonging is treated as a product created in the here-and-now, not just as an inherited condition. (Rampton, 1998, 9)

Analysis then moves into the gap *between* relatively stable groupings, where regularities and conventions are much less certain. Rather than our actions being seen as a mere reflection of our

³Rampton’s notion of ‘practice’ draws on a social constructionist view that “instead of being the product of forces that actors neither control nor comprehend, human reality is extensively reproduced and *created anew* in the socially and historically specific activities of everyday life” (Rampton, 1998, 9)

belonging to 'big' communities that pre-exist us, he says, there is now more emphasis on the part that

here-and-now social action plays in the production of 'small' but new communities, and rather than just concentrating on behaviour at the core, there is a burst of interest in interaction with 'strangers' inside, outside and at the boundaries. Comparably, scholarship itself doesn't simply report on communities - it also helps to create them, destroy and prevent their inception. (Rampton, 1998, 2)

It seems to me, based on the above discussion, that the concept of community has less purchase now than before, and we could well look at it more closely.

Imagined communities

The argument that the nation is an 'imagined community', developed by Benedict Anderson is well known and speaks directly to my concern with exploring the contours of community and its part in literacy studies. I am concerned here with how this perspective on community destabilises the autonomy of the local, which itself is always also part of the national, The nation is an *imagined* community, he says, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each "lives the image of the communion". He refers to its sustainability as a communality figured as a narrative of nationhood (Anderson, 1983, 50). The nation is imagined as a *community*, because regardless of the social inequalities that may operate in each, the nation is always conceived as "a deep, horizontal comradeship". Here is an account of an event taken from the the CELL research notes which echoes this last point:

A seven-year old Xhosa-speaking⁴ youth in Cape Town is resisting efforts by his family-members to get him to read aloud from his (English-language) schoolbook, and his attention swings to the ubiquitous TV. It's the News. He sees an image of Hansie Cronje -the recently-fallen hero of South African cricket - and shouts "Hansie" enthusiastically.)

Despite the divisions of race, class and language that have torn apart South Africa in the recent past, this youth is shown as responding with adulation to the image of a white, Afrikaans professional sportsman, playing a sport that is still very much the preserve of the elite in South Africa. One of the effects of such celebrity icons and their representation in the media as folk heroes and national symbols, is the suppression in popular imagination of the very real inequalities that apply between them and their admirers, who claim an imaginary comradeship with them, as this boy does. But then, given that the nation is something of a fiction, what is the optimal size for a real as opposed to an imagined community?

In fact all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. (Anderson, 1983, 6)

That integrity can only constitute an imagined unity because of the differentiation on the inside. Communities are to be distinguished, Anderson argues, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. He gives considerable attention to the role that mass-produced print genres played in the 'imagining' and production of nation-states as communities. How a spread of people gets constituted as a 'community' in the first place, and how "linguistic units come to be linked with social units", is a question that he attempts to answer through historical analysis. Blommaert's work on colonial linguistics in Africa is again helpful here. He shows how language planners

assumed that every individual has one and only one ethnolinguistic identity: s/he speaks one language (the mother tongue), and has therefore only one ethnic identity. Even when (e.g. because of mixed marriages) one's 'pure' ethnicity is doubtful, one's language will determine or at least suggest one's ethnolinguistic identity. The basic premise .. is that people are intrinsically monolingual and mono-ethnic; all 'multi's' come afterwards, as a product of an abnormal or distorted development. The so powerful one language-one culture view emerges here, despite the evidence to the contrary offered by anthropologists since the days of Sapir. (Blommaert, 1996, 5,6)

⁴ Xhosa is the predominant African language spoken in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape in South Africa.

For as far as central Africa goes:

"Any enumeration of distinct languages will be an artefact of linguistic classification rather than an accurate indication of communicative praxis". (Fabian, 1986, 82, quoted in Blommaert, 1996, 6)

He demonstrates that the mythical number of 200 languages, presumedly spoken on the territory of the former Belgian Congo, was unattested by linguistic research. It was 'invented', both as a fact and as a problem:

"[...] without any empirical research to speak of on mutual intelligibility, multilingualism and spheres of wider communication, and sometimes against better knowledge, this classificatory diversity of African languages was declared a problem for the African and an obstacle to civilization. (Fabian, 1986, 82, quoted in Blommaert, 1996, 6)

To follow the line started by Anderson is to start an investigation of 'community' as itself a semiotic sign and ideological product, rather than a core social unit from which cultural meaning emanates. Commonalities can be said to be figured by narratives, and like all such narratives these are constructed around blind spots and silences. "My memory is what I use to forget with" says a child, quoted by Andre Brink (Brink, 1998, 36). Likewise, the narratives that construct group identities are both resources for remembering and forgetting, for including and excluding aspect of individual and collective experience.

There are no local processes of identity construction or community that are not themselves enmeshed in such larger dynamics in critical ways. Giddens has described the local as 'phantasmagoric' under the conditions of late-modernity, so permeated is it by political and cultural processes from the outside. (Giddens, 1990)

Social anthropologists such as Appadurai have made similar arguments:

Where popular culture is often the product of urban, commercial, land or state interests, where folk culture is often a response to the competitive cultural politics of today's nation-states, and where traditional culture is often the result of conscious deliberation or elaboration, these terms clearly need rethinking (Appadurai & Beckenridge 1988 18.)

To conclude this section, it is helpful to see the notion of 'community' is being itself a social construct, shaped by local and global struggles over knowledge and power. I now go on to present an example of how these dynamics of difference, hybridity and heterogeneity present themselves in relation to data on literacy and community. I am concerned to show how flexible and variable notions of community and identity show themselves in the context of the complicated configurations of social groupings, language and space in these local examples.

Language, identity and shifting contexts

A young child, part of the CELL research, lives with her family in the suburbs, having moved there from the 'township' where they had lived before ('townships' were built as dormitory suburbs for Black workers, adjoining but some distance from the towns). Her father runs a store back in the township to which he commutes every day. Buhle, in turn commutes to a suburban school where her Class1 white teacher does not speak isiXhosa and the majority of her class is (white) first-language English speakers. When she and her friend, also part of the study, first met the CELL researcher at her school she insisted that her home language was English.

When asked what other languages they speak at home, both remain quiet. Buhle has requested I call her 'Bushley', like Mrs. M (her teacher) and the rest of the class and not Buhle (the isi-Xhosa pronunciation of her name with an aspirated h). (Weyl, 2000, 3)

Buhle and her friend's wish-identification of themselves as first-language English speakers shows them relating to the hierarchies of status, language and identity that surround them. There is a likelihood that they will grow up into a dual society, in which an elite has access to English and particular written language practices in English, and uses these as part of its symbolic status-marking repertoire, while the masses have no access to these exclusive (and excluding) resource.

Despite this, the children are openly Xhosa-speakers back home, and their playful interaction/performing around an image in a school book shows them reworking a common theme in recent cultural exchanges, a construction of Africans in South Africa who are non-South Africans as ludicrous or threatening others. The derogatory term “ikwiri-kwiri” has been coined to label all African foreigners, whose presence in South African towns has become noticeable over the last decade. Many such people are refugees or ‘illegal immigrants’. They are sometimes embraced, but more often seen as competitors for scarce resources, and often vilified in popular culture. They are sometimes attacked while hawking in the streets, and are a popular topic of conversation and of newspaper discussions on xenophobia. These exchanges, I suggest, only loosely initiated by the practice of reading/ interpreting a school reader show some of the complexities around rehearsing the children’s emerging and complex sense of group identity. The data provide evidence of that processual, relativist construction of community that I discussed above, where shifting notions of group identities, of insiders and outsiders, are shown to be available to children in their environment and are actively responded to, appropriated and shaped by them.

SUNDAY

..reading Buhle’s reading books from school.

Tina : Likwiri-kwiri lomntwana. *This child is a foreigner. (referring to an image of a Black child in the book)*

Buhle : Hayi ayilokwiri-kwiri. *No she is not. (“kwiri-kwiri” - a term for foreign Africans in South Africa)*

Mbathu : Ayilokwiri-kwiri ngum-Xhosa lowa. *She is not a foreigner she is a “Xhosa speaker.”*

Buhle : Uthetha funny... *She speaks funny..*

Mbathu : Ndisiskwiri-kwiri mna xa ndisithi, “tutubele komstat fizmabene”. *Am I a foreigner if I say - (pretending to speak an (nonsense) African language)?*

They all laugh at him.

Tina *tries to speak an exotic language as well* : Kwatla kwana.

They laugh.

Buhle : Yintoni maan isi-kwirikwiri? *What is this ikwiri-kwiri language?*

Mbathu : Andiyazi mna. *I don’t know*

They all laugh at him.

Tina (pretending to speak the language again) : “Tutubene”, nyhani xa bebulisa, tutubene, “komstash fizmabele.”

Really, when they greet, “made-up nonsense words again.”

They laugh.

Buhle : Batle hu (*nonsense language*)

Mbathu is trying to speak the language : “Batle hu ntoni, ndiyababulisa babaleke mna, bathi hello khungwani.” *I greet them and they run away, they say (imitating how they speak..)*

Buhle and Tina laugh loudly.

Tina (imitating the ikwiri-kwiri) : Toy, toy, toy, ndathi hayi hayi san’ukundithethela isima-kwiri-kwiri mna.

No, no, no don’t talk ikwiri-kwiri language to me. (Buhle laughs at her).

Tina : Bathi toy, toy, toy, bathi heyi, heyi, heyi buyapha.

Tina sings and Buhle joins her.

I read here a creative and exploratory playfulness and interest in language on the part of the children, themselves emerging ‘bi-linguals’ or ‘multi-linguals’, but set within the context of an

available social narrative about outsiders and insiders. This echoes ironically their sense of marginality in the school context and their apparent wish to be insiders there. One might suggest that their discussion of 'ikwiri-ikwiri' is symptomatic of their own anxieties about marginality. This complexity and cultural diversity is apparent in the lives and narratives of other children in the CELL study as well. By way of example, this is a pen-sketch of a child in Gauteng:

T (3 years old) was born in a village in the Northern Province and when he was eight months old, his parents left the Northern Province to seek work in Johannesburg. The family live in a block of flats in Yeoville. His father is a taxi driver who has his own car, which he uses as a maxi taxi. His mother has completed some secretarial courses at a computer school. She has recently had a second child. T attends Mrs De Klerk's crèche, known as 'Christian Day Care' in Yeoville. T's mother is religious and attends church on Sundays. T speaks four languages: Northern Sotho, Tswana, IsiZulu and a little bit of English which he is acquiring at the crèche. At his crèche, there are children from other parts of Africa, such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Zambia. T's mother spends time with him, teaching him English and reading from picture books which she has bought specially for him. T's grandfather lives nearby - he is a flat cleaner in Yeoville and collects books for his grandson, which have been thrown out into dustbins around the flats. He pays a lot of attention to T's literacy education.

It seems to me to be unhelpful to identify each of these multiple contexts as distinctive community settings. Rather than focusing on bounded interaction we should be looking at intersections and interactions across these settings.

The dynamics of subjectivity

Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' has been used as an important source for attempting to give an account of the dynamics whereby the local is shaped from without, whilst still appearing essentially localised. In Donald's paraphrase

the subject is not only *subject to* the play of forces in the apparatus of the social, but must also act as author and *subject of* its own conduct. This ambivalent freedom is necessary because the machinery of government can only work on agency. (Donald, 1992, 14)

For Foucault power does not work from the outside and restrain, it works from the inside and produces. "To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others." Donald argues that the staging of political dialogue produces the categories of parents, children, employers, parties, classes, government as collective actors with common interests. The target of the apparatuses of knowledge is the individual, and it is through the inculcation of social norms as personal attributes that the individual performs in self-policing, or the production of "docile bodies". Such knowledge processes include theories of child development as well as changing pedagogic procedures. Through these 'community resources' parents and teachers are encouraged to internalise the function of moral surveillance itself; to monitor their own behaviour and shape that of their children. Donald argues that "the dynamics of the symbolic are essential to the ascription of ethical dispositions as personal desires" (19)

His review of Walkerdine's study of girls and school summarises how girls negotiate the symbolic categories and connotations of (mathematics) in schools:

(Walkerdine) insists that the perceived failure of girls in secondary school mathematics cannot be explained either by psychological notions of development or by a more sociological emphasis on teacher expectations or pedagogic styles. The process involves a much more complex dynamic between the pedagogic and the performative. In the practices of the school and the family – and especially through the mother-daughter relationship – the authoritative categories of rationality and irrationality, masculinity and femininity, cleverness and stupidity, mastery and subservience, compliance and resistance are instituted in relation to each other. These are remixed by the girls as fantasmatic scenarios of desire, denial and transgression which return not only as a self-identification, but as agency. (Donald, 1992, 96)

It is in the formation and exercise of the girls' mandated autonomy that, according to this evidence, the effects of sexual differentiation are systematically reproduced. (Their partial freedom helps to produce their failures.)

The disciplinary and pastoral technologies present in schools, the mass media, homes, churches and other institutions embody the terms in which individuals experience and enact the social. For

Donald, though, the dynamics of subjectivity are more complicated and more painful than simply identifying with, or re-enacting, the attributes and behaviours prescribed by social and cultural technologies. (Donald, 1992, 90). He develops a notion of individualised resistance, starting from Foucault, again, from the concept of 'agonism': 'a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation' (Donald, 1992, 14). A similar perspective is drawn by studies in education that draw on Lacan's distinction between 'subjectivity' and 'subject position'. This is captured in Lacan's notion of the failure of representation, in that the subject is the excess which escapes signification and this excess is produced by the very attempt at signification. It follows that the subject is never a 'subject position', (the positioning of the subject is always 'imaginary'). If one says that 'subject position' is what one gets in terms of the 'primary Discourse' that Gee presents, then both that and the secondary Discourses of official contexts are only limited accounts of cultural processes. The 'community' that is productive of primary identity within the context of the 'primary Discourse' is cultural baggage. (Gee, 1996)

Communities of practice

Conceptions of literacy in technological terms see it as a medium which serves essentially as a conduit for the accessing of meaning, which in turn is carried in the form of coded language. Language and literacy, in this view are essentially codes for talking about the world. In the social practices conception of language and literacy they are social and cultural practices, ways of acting in the world, not second-order representations of practice. The learning of language and written language practices is situated in certain forms of co-participation, where meaning, understanding and learning are all defined "relative to actional contexts". (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 14).

Learning is distributed among co-participants in this view, and is not a one-person act. What the effective learner actually learns is how to do practices in relational contexts. Learning is about participation in communities of practice. The learner doesn't acquire a system of rules and representations, rather the ability to play various roles in various fields of participation.

The problem with this model of 'communities of learning' is that the social group remains a benevolent 'black box', and the concept of role-learning has something of the cyborg about it. The assumption of essentially benign relationships between masters and apprentices does not hold up to scrutiny, least of all in the case of formal apprenticeship learning*. If the notion of 'community' is seen to be problematic then so is the idea of 'communities of practice' in need of rethinking.

Policing the self, and emergent literacy

One child ('H') in the CELL study is a seven-year old youth who he lives with his mother and 18 year-old sister in a three-bedroom flat in an inner city Cape Town suburb. Born in Mdantsane Township next to East London, his larger family is still in Mdantasane, including his grandmother, aunts and cousins, of whom there are twenty-one. He spends longer school-holidays in Mdantsane, playing indoors, possibly for security reasons, and mostly playing computer games with his cousins.

He speaks Xhosa at home and English at school, where he is one of ten Xhosa-speaking children in a class of 38. His teacher, of immigrant-Greek origin, speaks English, and does not speak isiXhosa. His mother first trained as a typist in East London and then as a policewoman to keep her clerical job in the police force. She now works in the 'front-desk' of the local police station. According to her the work entails: being a receptionist' a clerk; a computer worker - updating information, taking statements, writing up reports and complaints; and keeping a time report.

Their flat is in a block reserved for members of the police force, and entry is by way of the police station.

Home and school cultures

It is probable that terms like 'community' or 'primary discourse' are not the best ways to think about H's home or school settings because of the multiple mixings across contexts. Unlike some other urbanised and professionalising children in the study, who are able to transfer these narrative resources to the schooling context, he does not have the resource of a history of being told stories by his grandmother (a cultural practice that pre-dates colonialism and is fast disappearing). The stories he gets are from computer games, television, peer interaction and the basal readers that he brings home from school and has to read with his mother.

His closest connections would seem to be to mass consumer popular culture through TV, computer games, movies and games with his friends in the homes, streets and playgrounds of Woodstock, an inner-city suburb in Cape Town. In his bedroom he has his own television set on which he also plays computer games.

In addition, he plays with other children and is sometimes left to his own devices until quite late in the evening because of his mother's demanding work routine. It is clear from his conversations that he is picking up narratives of masculinity and popular culture from mass media and from his peers that grab his attention.

What is the range of literacy practices in his life and how are they connected?

Play

He plays computer games, as he plays he talks a lot, when he has an audience, speaking both English and isiXhosa:

I'm in Stage 2.. This is the tricky point...

Let me show you how to play with G (his teenage sister) she's weak! weak! weak! He keeps shouting you must die.die.die! while his sister is playing. 'She's gonna die at Stage 3'. He bets 50c that his sister is going to die '50/50' he says.

He knows the letters on the keyboard and uses the mouse efficiently, in contrast to his school writing where he works slowly, makes mistakes and corrects himself by copying from his peers.

Reading at home

His mother understands his emergent literacy as something which is developed by the school, and her role is to ensure that he carries out the set tasks. She reads with him (from his schoolbooks) only irregularly, but displays anxiety over the school's surveillance of her reading with him. Sometimes when he doesn't want to read she hits him. At other times she calls him to read in the presence of the CELL researcher and he goes off to play on his computer instead, and is left to play. (She often returns from work late and tired and doesn't do homework with him.)

The school has sent her a detailed letter specifying what she should do with him for homework: (see appendix)

His mother signs a card sent home by the teacher to show that he has read to her from his reader. (25/1 pages 2-7; 26/1 pages 8-11; 27/1 pages 12-15; 31/1 pages 16-21; 1/2 pages 22-25; 2/2 pages 26-30.) She signs anyway even if she has been unable to read to him.

Here is a short example of a reading interaction:

19:49. H's mom arrives from work. H asks her what the new books say.

Mom: Hilton ngulona oyinkwenkwe (*Hilton is the one who is a boy*)

H: This book is difficult

Mom: Incinci lencwadi (*This book is small*), This is Wendy and this is Hilton.

Mom:

Hilton can play

Can you see me play?

He says look mummy, look at mummy

Can you see me play?

Hilton says, look here Wendy

The lion can run fast

The baby buck can run fast too

Run buck

The lion can catch you.

H: I want to read this book.

H&Mom: *Hilton says come here Wendy. Come and play with me. Run and jump like the buck, jump, jump*

Mom: What is his name?

H: Hilton

It is notable that this joint reading exercise is brief and focuses only on the surface features of text-decoding. The mother immediately moves on to questioning her child about his school day

Mom: *Nenze ntoni namhlanje eskoleni? (What did you do at school today?)*

H: Just look at there (points to the homework book)

T(researcher): *Bathini? (What is that?)*

Mom: *Bathi I appointment is on the 5th 6.15p.m. - 6.30 p.m. (They say the appointment is on the 5th at 18h00 - 18h30)*

T: Will you attend?

Mom: Yes I will because if I don't go they think we don't care

This last interaction is between the mother and the researcher. It is about a parent-teacher meeting. Again her sense of being scrutinised is apparent: Her response to the note calling her to a meeting at the school reflects the panopticon-like workings of power that I referred to above in the context of Foucault's discussion of 'governmentality'. Her response to the note reveals one who feels under scrutiny, rather than that of a mother who feels she is being aided in her child-raising work

Parental anxiety and (self-) monitoring

A domestic drama erupted during the research over H stealing R100 from his mother's purse while they were out together. Later, someone who knew the family saw H on Main Road being followed by some 'street kids' who wanted money from him. The people who knew H's mom told G (H's sister) who then went to investigate.

The responses to this are interesting: The CELL researchers were interested in this as a literacy/numeracy event. What did H think he was doing when he took the money? Was he role-rehearsing an adult practice? Did he have any sense of how much money he had taken? What was the connection between him and the 'street-children'?

For H's mother, it was a crisis that she struggled with. She discussed the incident anxiously and with some embarrassment with a selection of people, including the researcher: For a policewoman her anxiety about her child 'going bad' is not unexpected, but her reliance on school teachers and psychologists shows how her anxiety is linked to the social monitoring apparatus of the wider society.

...in a low tone she told me that she had contacted a psychologist about the boy's behaviour. She told me that she phoned a psychologist in Plumstead and spoke to the psychologist alone to express her worries about the boy's behaviour. She says the psychologist asked her many questions. The second time she went to the psychologist with H... (She) says the psychologist spoke to H in private, so that she does not know of how the conversation between them proceeded. She also told me that the psychologist promised that things would be better because the boy is still very young. The psychologist pointed out to H's mom that if the problem is identified earlier there are chances of resolving it...

H's mom also told me that she wanted H to know what is good from what is bad so that when the boy grows up he will remember what attempts she made towards shaping his behaviour and character. She said going to the psychologist will make a lot of sense in the life of the boy because it will show how she (his mother) tried to make him a better person....

She told me that she wants what is best for her children. She said she would punish H because of his bad behaviour until a certain limit. She says then she will stop, so that when H grows up, he won't blame her for not correcting him while he was young.

Conclusion

The learning of literacy practices is not either empowering or oppressing, the way Freire would have it. Rather, it always entails the institution of the structures of cultural authority, and their negotiation, whatever the setting and the values in which it is embedded. While we would want to address the problems related to early literacy teaching to children, we should not atavistically try to re-invent cultural traditions based on a notion of community which is only imagined.

What is at issue is less emancipation or liberation than styles of participation, styles in which subjection and autonomy inevitably co-exist. (Donald, 1992,142)

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