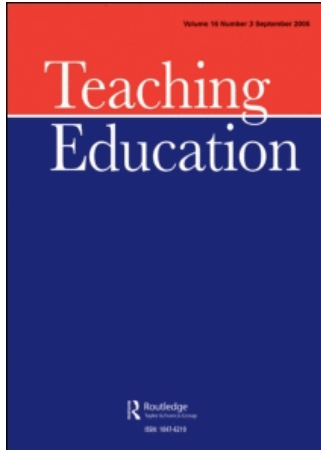


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Getting Out of Deficit: Pedagogies of reconnection

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The fact that children growing up in poverty are likely to be in the lower ranges of achievement on standardised literacy tests is not a new phenomenon. Internationally there are a myriad of intervention and remedial programmes designed to address this problem with a range of effects. Frequently, sustainable reforms are curtailed by deficit views of families and children growing up in poverty. This article describes an ongoing research study entitled “Teachers Investigate Unequal Literacy Outcomes: Cross-Generational Perspectives”, which made teacher researchers central in examining this long-standing dilemma. It outlines the research design and rationale, and analyses how two early career teachers worked their ways out of deficit analyses of two children they were most worried about. It argues that disrupting deficit discourses and re-designing new pedagogical repertoires to reconnect with children’s lifeworlds is a long-term project that can best be achieved in reciprocal research relationships with teachers.

Introduction

Generations of teachers have been inducted into counter-productive discourses that constitute certain students as “deficit”—the poor, the wilful, the disabled, the non-English speaking, the slow, the bottom 10%. One of the most damning failures of teacher education (both pre-service and in-service), and of educational research more broadly, is that pervasive deficit discourses are still so dominant in classrooms and staffrooms; that they are reproduced in student files, educational journals and conferences, and reported as fact in media coverage of young people and schooling. Panics, crises and “failures” of individuals, groups, schools and states are produced by the very same discourses that constitute and blame certain groups in society as lacking and responsible for their lack.

This article reports on research where we are tackling head-on the problem of the circularity and persistence of deficit discourses. We seriously question how, as a teaching profession, we can move out of this dead-end, while also addressing wider challenges of ageing teacher populations, increasingly culturally

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diverse student populations and more overt divisions between the affluent, working class and poor. The teaching profession, at present, lacks serious mechanisms for change and for the ongoing induction of new teachers, a problem made more acute given the mass retirements forecast within the decade. Reporting on anticipated shortages of teachers, one US estimate predicts that there will be 2.2 million vacancies by 2010 and that these will be intensively felt in high-poverty schools (Johnson, Birkeland, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Peske, 2001).

Luke (2003) has recently argued that contemporary socio-economic conditions, global change and an ageing teaching workforce mean that as a profession we now need “theory-busting, theory building and paradigm shift” (p. 61). The cross-generational research reported on here represents a modest attempt to do just this within our local constraints and limited resources. The project is located within a tradition of literacy research that, over an extended period, has sought to document the complexity of children, family and community knowledges and language practices (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Heath, 1983; Heath & Mangiola, 1991; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) and interrogate how unequal outcomes are produced in schooling (Sharp & Green, with Lewis, 1975).

Our particular concern is to address the continuing problem of unequal educational outcomes in literacy. Internationally, study after study has documented the comparatively low performance of low-socio-economic and marginal groups of children on standardised measures of literacy. For at least three decades researchers have tried to explain the differential effects of schooling on different groups of children (Bernstein, 1996; Bourdieu, 1991; Connell, Johnston, & White, 1991; Freebody, 1992; Luke, 1993a), yet the actual outcome patterns of these groups have remained relatively predictable (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). Despite the insights of years of research, poor children are still more likely than their more affluent peers to fall into the lower levels of literacy performance.

A review of a century of investigations into literacy teaching (Chall, Jacob, & Baldwin, 1990) makes it clear that the most important variable at school in making a difference for students is the teacher. It is teachers’ expectations, their enacted curriculum, their classroom talk, their relations to young people and their actual ways of inducting students into specific textual practices that most effect outcomes. Yet, teachers are rarely partners in research that investigates the connections between literacy pedagogy and unequal outcomes, or that directly contests literacy myths (Gregory & Williams, 2000) or the reproduction of deficit storylines about selected young people and their families. Even studies of high-performing and reforming schools rarely position teachers as knowledge producers (Ladson-Billings, 1991; Lipman, 1998). Indeed, teachers as a profession are more likely to be the targets of criticism of academics, politicians, researchers, parents and the media. They are most often absent from debates on literacy curricular reform (Kamler, 1998) and constituted as cumulative and contingent—as subject to change and remoulding as new knowledge and policy are

produced (Cormack & Comber, 1996). While teachers are clearly central to the quality of children's learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000), they have been effectively silenced when it comes to building theories of better literacy practice.

Often the simplistic equation "poverty=illiteracy" impacts on teachers' expectations and practices in disadvantaged schools working to limit what is accomplished (Comber, 1997, 1998; Freebody et al., 1995; Gregory & Williams, 2000). Of course, some teachers have "beaten the odds" (Knapp et al., 1995) and produced high levels of achievement for disadvantaged young people. These educators, it seemed to us, had ways of contesting deficit, making available substantial curriculum and connective pedagogies that enabled them to reposition "these kids" (Thomson, 2002) as learners with high potential. Something was going on that led to significant discursive shifts and that translated into everyday pedagogical practice.

We believed that a sustainable commitment to social justice, through literacy education, and inventing the associated pedagogical repertoires was a long-term project that could only be achieved in reciprocal research relationships *with* teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999). Moreover, we strongly believed that we needed to research across generations of teachers—with those in the early stages of their careers and those who had been teaching for a long time. This would allow us to critically analyse what could be learnt from years of practice wisdom, what could be learnt from the new generation of teachers, and what could be learnt from both generations of teachers working together and alongside university researchers to investigate the ongoing problem of differential literacy outcomes for some children growing up in poverty.

By locating the project in two states of Australia (namely, Victoria and South Australia), we could see the ways in which different policy and curriculum imperatives played out in practice. While both states provide test results for national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy, each has a different approach to literacy curriculum. Victoria has a state-wide programme called *The Early Years Literacy Program* (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 1999) (previously known as *Keys to Life*), which is based on the literacy block model developed by Hill and Crévola (1998, 1999). South Australia has the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability framework and, at the time of this research, no common state-wide approach to early literacy instruction.

This article describes the ways in which adopting a researcher stance toward the children they were most worried about led two early career teachers from each state to re-examine their deficit assumptions about those children and their families. We first outline the design of our study, as this was fundamental to the discursive shifts and pedagogic changes teachers made. We then illustrate and discuss the "turn around pedagogies" developed by the teachers and draw out implications for quality teacher induction and renewal. We argue that disrupting deficit discourses requires serious intellectual engagement by teachers over an extended period of time in ways that foster teacher agency and respect, without celebrating the status quo.

Cross-generational Research Design

Our three-year research project, “Teachers Investigate Unequal Literacy Outcomes: Cross Generational Perspective”, sought to maximise teacher agency by adopting a critical practitioner research paradigm (Carr & Kemmis, 1985). The research was conducted across two states and two sites: in teachers’ school communities and in teacher practitioner workshops at the university. There were 20 teacher participants in all, 10 in each state, who worked in cross-generational pairs. Early career teachers, in the first five years of their teaching career, were asked to select a late career teacher who had been teaching for 25 years or longer, with whom they wished to work for the duration of the project. Early and late career pairs, in turn, came together with the other teachers in their state at least four times a year at our respective universities (Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria and University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia)

While some forms of teacher research de-emphasise the intellectual, analytic and theoretical resources needed to engage in research, stressing the adequacy of the practice wisdom teachers already have, we sought to build an intellectual community of inquiry (Comber, 1999). Our university-based workshops educated teachers about undertaking research and sustained them throughout the process. These were called “research training” workshops to highlight the methodological importance of institutionalising research spaces outside of school for interrogating literacy practice.

We invited teachers in the workshops to read theory and related research with us, to historicise their professional practices in literacy curriculum and pedagogy, to conduct interviews and analyse classroom interactions, and to write and publish analytic narratives. Our approach foregrounded historical investigations and theoretical work as key elements in the research process that greatly enhance field work, analysis and potential insights. One of the most salient aspects of this approach was to structure the workshops as a dialogic space for disrupting discourses of blame that attend literacy failure.

We seriously listened to teachers—to their explanations about the kids that worried them most—but did not allow them to unproblematically reproduce staffroom discourses about “these kids” and “their families”. Habitual, deficit ways of speaking about culturally diverse, poor, working-class families were questioned and other metaphors (other ways of viewing) were put on the table that stress teacher responsibility for reconnection with students. We highlighted, for example, the work of Luis Moll (2000; Moll et al., 1992) with teachers as community ethnographers who visited families in order to learn about their “funds of knowledge”, and Pat Thomson’s (2002) idea that all children have “virtual schoolbags” that are full but only some children get the opportunity to make use of what’s inside during their school lives. Such metaphors encouraged teachers to think in new ways about the knowledge their students brought to school and were taken up by many teachers later, in their own case studies and in redesigning their pedagogies.

The teachers’ school-based research was designed into three distinct phases, each coinciding with one year of the project.

- *Phase 1: Cross-generational interviews.* We supported teachers to design and conduct an interview with each other about inequitable educational outcomes—their own experiences of this at school, as student-teachers, as teachers across their career and the kinds of interventions they believed made a difference. Crucially, the cross-generational pairs interviewed one another, rather than being interviewed by the university researchers. The aim was to make overt links between the knowledge of one generation and the next, and consider both contributions equally. Teachers operationalised knowledge and experiences they already had, but also engaged in the kind of critical, historicised reflection that produces new questions and understanding.
- *Phase 2: Cross-generational school-based practitioner research.* In the second year of the study, early career/late career pairs researched the same problem—unequal outcomes in literacy—and conducted two inquiries in their own classrooms:
 1. *Literacy audit and case study of one child:* Teachers first carried out a classroom audit of their current literacy practice and its effects on different children; in particular, examining the match between what they made available and what students actually took up (Dyson, 1993). They then selected one child identified as “at risk” and closely examined how the child responded to the curriculum and pedagogy on offer. We asked teachers to write a case study report, where they analysed their observations and theorised about what might help their case study child better connect with the literacy curriculum.
 2. *Redesigning literacy practice:* Using understandings gained from the case study, teachers redesigned an aspect of their literacy curriculum or pedagogical delivery. They documented the effects of their redesign on students through teacher journals, student work samples, classroom observations and by analysing key classroom episodes captured on videotape by the research team.
- *Phase 3: Cross-generational meta-analysis and production of research stories.* The overall aim of the meta-analysis was to draw out lessons for other teachers and the wider educational profession about literacy teaching that made a positive difference to “at risk” children. The first stage of analysis and writing occurred when the teacher researcher communities in Victoria and South Australia met together for the first time at a two-day conference in Melbourne. Teachers presented in early career/late career pairs an analysis of the key elements of their literacy redesign and its effects on different children. They engaged in rich conversations across the two states about common problems and local differences in policy and programmes. We then held writing workshops in our respective states to help teachers engage in micro analyses of their redesign and prepare journal articles, chapters for books and website publications. This work is currently in process, but a wide variety of publications are planned—not only on literacy pedagogy and issues of inequitable outcomes, but on the effects of cross-generational mentoring on teachers’ personal and professional practice.

In what follows, we give some sense of the dedicated way these teacher researchers worked to “get out of deficit” by designing pedagogies of reconnection. In particular,

we analyse how two early career teachers, Marc and Nola, confronted deficit discourses and made significant changes to their teaching, in a remarkably short period of time. The kinds of shifts they made are conceptualised as “turn around pedagogies”—practices that reconnect at-risk young people with literacy, schooling and education, and that foster significant professional identity work for teachers.

Marc Turns Around to Willem

Marc taught at a primary school on the northern outer fringes of Melbourne. The school was large, with a population of almost 800 students. Five large primary schools serviced the burgeoning area where new housing estates rapidly replaced dairy farms. Marc’s school was established in 1998 to meet the demands of the young, predominantly migrant families moving into an area where housing was affordable. The school had students from a wide range of countries, predominantly from Middle Europe, Central Asia and South America, and most children spoke a language other than English at home. The school had grown rapidly; beginning with 12 staff and enrolments of 150, and increasing its teacher population by approximately 10–12 staff each year. The school was unique across the project, in that 90% of the 67 teachers were under 35 years old, with the majority of these under the age of 30 years.

When Marc was interviewed by his late career mentor, Ethan, during the first year of the project, he talked about his frustration with parents and took up some of the “blame the family” discourses not uncommon in schools—blaming the low aspirations of parents for the poor literacy performance of some his students.

Well, as I said before, it has a lot to do with work ethic of the parents, and although the Early Years program is very structured and doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for teacher error, you’re always going to need the support of parents, and if the parents aren’t giving as much support, the students won’t show it in their work. You know it from class to class. You see groups of children in my class that are doing the best. I’ve met their parents, they’ve all come and made themselves very known to me, and just through speaking to them you know what goes on at home and you know that they do have a stronger work ethic and help their kids at home as well. I think that’s huge. The parents do need to help. We’ve got structures in place to teach at school, but then it needs to be backed up at home.

In this account Marc frames the problem of low student achievement in terms of parental work ethic. He seems very sure that “just through speaking” to parents he can “know what goes on at home”, and that without the requisite parental labour he cannot do his job. His language use constructs a “we–them” dichotomy—*we* (the school) set-up the requisite learning structures, but *they* (the parents, especially those with a low work ethic) need to do more. When his mentor Ethan queried whether home visits might help Marc engage parents more effectively, he rejected the idea because of the huge time commitment involved; he just could not imagine how to fit home visits into his already busy schedule, although he thought they were a worthwhile practice.

Only six months later, at the beginning of the second year of the project, Marc

apparently changed his mind. Influenced by the work of Luis Moll (2000; Moll et al., 1992), he burst onto our teleconference meeting in March excitedly recounting the details of his home visit to Willem, his nominated case study child. First, he described new, flexible procedures he had instituted to encourage parents to meet with him during the first three weeks of school: during his time release, before school at 8:00 a.m., after school until 6:00 p.m. or, alternatively, in parents' own homes after school. Marc was delighted by the response, with three time-release meetings, 11 after-hour school meetings and eight home visits—a total of 22 out of 27 possible meetings.

Willem's family opted for the home visit, an invitation that would have a dramatic effect on Marc's deficit thinking about Willem. Willem was new to the school and came without any records or files. Marc observed him during the first two weeks as "struggling to settle in and complete any classroom work", "never completing writing tasks", "having little motivation toward reading books from the provided book boxes" and as "simply disinterested in the set work".

During the home visit, however, he met an energetic child who lived in a lively extended community of family and friends. In the driveway Marc noted a number of boys kicking soccer balls; on the verandah he saw other boys lounging, while four or five others seemed to move freely in and out of the house. When no one answered Marc's knock at the door, the boys told him to just go in. Somewhat hesitant and uncomfortable, he was soon greeted by Willem and his mother Gwen, who came rushing to welcome him. Marc was amazed to see that most of the rooms in the house were festooned with black and yellow ornaments—the unmistakable team colours of Melbourne's Richmond Tigers football team.

In the kitchen he was given a cold drink while Gwen explained that Willem was the youngest of four boys and that his eldest brother played for the Richmond Tigers Reserve team. The whole family thrived on the game of AFL and the boys constantly had a few of their local footy team mates over, so that at any given time there might be between 10 and 15 people in the house. The day Marc visited, Gwen had prepared for 14 people to stay that night, and this was not unusual.

The walls of Willem's room were covered in black and yellow posters, but Marc was astounded to see a "very thick" autobiography by one of Richmond's player/coaches sitting on Willem's bedside table. Willem, "the non-reader", informed Marc that he was reading this book and demonstrated how he could decipher elements of the text. He was able to recite important dates of games and scores and tell Marc who Richmond played against, by piecing the text together. For Marc, this was "an eye opener" that led him to change his school-based practices. As he wrote:

Before the start of week four, I took Willem to the library and together we selected books that he might be interested in reading during "book box" time. We were in the sports section, but for every three books about cricket, AFL and soccer, I chose one book that I wanted Willem to read—it was a deal! Willem still requires much assistance in the literacy block but I truly believe that the half hour spent at a home visit, facilitated one leap forward in Willem's confidence and two in his enthusiasm toward reading.

From our perspective, the home visit also provided a site for Marc to "turn around" and see Willem and his family outside deficit discourses. He was able to see Gwen,

Willem's mother, as a more complex person with her own passions and interests, some of which matched his own interest in AFL football. He saw that she provided not only a welcoming place where young people wanted to hang out, but also encouragement for Willem to read at home. Marc did not expect to see what he saw, and when he did it shifted his frame of reference dramatically. This, in turn, allowed him to take up his own responsibility at school for connecting with Willem's lifeworld in the classroom more fully.

Marc's Case Study of Willem

The home visit was a crucial first step in Marc's case study of Willem. He spent several weeks during term one doing a thorough analysis of Willem's reading and writing behaviours—conducting running records, analysing his word recognition skills and writing samples, observing him closely in school and playground contexts. The case study was structured to disrupt teachers' normal ways of viewing and encourage them to seek new information about how to reconnect students with literacy, rather than blame others for the disconnection. Marc took up this challenge and in an incredibly short period of time began to “turn around” his way of viewing Willem.

The impact on Willem can be illustrated by examining changes in his writing over a brief three months. This is an early example of Willem's diary writing in February, before Marc's home visit:

I liked fineing the snake sing and it saw yag. (February)

Marc had learned from his case study observations that Willem was happy to write in his diary, as long as his errors were not corrected. Not surprisingly, when Marc stopped making corrections, the length of Willem's writing increased, as in these two texts written in March, a month after the home visit.

Dery Diary

I am going to the football to nit and I going to see Richmnd and Mlbne and I hop it is fun and I am going to set rit up the top or the stad and it is fun. (21 March)

Luke got a Playstation 2 and Kieren played soccer. Shantell changed her room around and Andrew played football. Kirsty stayed up late and Kadijeh had visitors. (31 March)

Not only has the length of Willem's writing increased, but traces of Marc's home visit are visible in that Willem now sees going to the football and events with his extended family as legitimate writing material—in part, because his teacher valued his lifeworld outside school. Marc also used Willem's football passion to extend his writing into other genres, as in this football commentary that Willem completed writing toward the end of May:

At the third quarter bounce the Tigers are ahead, 10.3.63 and Collingwood are only 2.2.14. Trailing by 49 points the Magpies do not have a chance against the Richmond. Darren Gaspar taps the ball down to Campbell. Wayne Campbell, 4 time best and fairest, handballs to Rodan. David Rodan runs on as Brad Ottens shepherds Nathan Buckley. The 2002 AFL rising star, Rodan boots one long from 60 metres out. The pack comes together right in front of goals. Richardson sticks his boot into Cloak's back. He launches

in the air and takes a mark! The crowd goes wild as superstar Mark Richardson lines up for his sixth goal. The scoreboard will now be 11.3.69. Richmond is killing Collingwood!

This piece of writing started with Willem commentating a football match between Richmond and Collingwood into a microphone. Using a computer program called TEXTEASE, Marc encouraged Willem to play back his voice and type his commentary onto the computer. As Willem typed each word, the program spoke it back to him, allowing him to hear spelling mistakes and correct them until they sounded right. Marc also worked with him to further detail the text, calling on Willem's considerable knowledge of Richmond football players and asking him to add this material to his text.

Willem was thrilled with his achievement—so was Marc. This was extraordinary progress in a very short period of time, and from our point of view a clear instance of “turning around”, reconnecting and overcoming some of the fear and anxiety that often builds up around years of failure, even in the second year of school.

Marc's Redesign

Marc's work with Willem informed his curriculum redesign, his desire to keep Willem motivated and moving ahead, but also to engage all of his students differently. Starting from students' individual interests and passions, Marc used his own expertise and enthusiasm for multi-media and multi-modal inclusive literacies to produce a radio programme with his grade two class.

He planned an integrated unit, which combined the study of electronics, sound-recording technologies, oracy, radio genres and script-writing. Students built radio resistors and microphones and researched what is involved in producing a radio programme. They listened to radio programmes and analysed the language, they wrote scripts for advertisements, sports programmes, radio station promos and competitions, and they rehearsed the presentation of their various segments; moving from the written to the oral and back again. With the assistance of a special education teacher, students rehearsed and individually recorded their segments onto a laptop and broadcast their programme to the whole school. Using Adobe software they also produced a CD of the programme, which each student took home with them at the end of the unit.

There are a number of key elements in Marc's case study and redesign that we believe were crucial to re-connecting Willem as a literate subject. Marc was informed by his growing knowledge of the way Willem lived his life and the family's investments in football.

1. With this knowledge came respect rather than judgement.
2. He used this knowledge as a springboard to think differently about literacy curriculum.
3. Willem's negotiated task—writing the football commentary for radio—elicited a powerful idea for a whole class pedagogy.

4. The dynamic everyday language practices of radio became the object of study for the whole class.
5. The students investigated the medium itself and began to learn new literacies/textual practices (making a radio segment) with reference to familiar and preferred knowledges and practices (e.g., football).
6. They worked as individuals towards a collective orchestrated performance and learned to use new computer-mediated technologies to record and produce a CD-rom of that performance.
7. The project had coherence as students were investigating and producing a working language site, but also allowed a variety of symbolic, representational and linguistic resources to be used and pooled.

Marc's redesign incorporated key aspects of "multiliteracies" (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2003) or "new literacies" approaches in working across media (e.g., CD-rom, radio), modes (aural, written, performative), dialects and genres (Australian working class, sporting commentary). Ironically, he had to work hard to make space for these "new literacies" within the authorised *Early Years Literacy Program* (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 1999) in his state. But as a young, technologically competent teacher, Marc found a way and his students were clearly "turned around" by this re-design.

Marc's pedagogical vision, in particular, was altered. Once he "turned around" to Willem and his family, he saw him as a very different pedagogical subject than previously. In Heath and Mangiola's (1991, p. 11) words, Willem was seen as a "child of promise" and his family as "resourceful" (McNaughton, 1995, p. 18), rather than as in deficit or neglectful. All teachers in the project experienced similar shifts in their understanding of the students they were most worried about. However, their redesigns were also contingent on other imperatives at school and systems levels, as well as their own priorities and capacities. We turn now to consider how another early career teacher, Nola, "got out of deficit" through her case study research with Ewan.

Nola Turns Around to Ewan

Nola taught at a small Catholic parish school in the western suburbs of Adelaide, established in 1954 and administered by the Salesian Sisters until 1996. It was a small school that serviced a quiet, out-of-the-way suburb, characterised by 1950s housing, some of which reflects the embellishments of waves of immigrants, and some more recent townhouse development for young professional couples. The 285 student population reflected the cultural diversity in the area: Australian, Greek Orthodox, Italian, Vietnamese and, increasingly, refugee families. English as a Second Language was a much needed and well-supported programme in the school. The 15 teachers at the school ranged from newly qualified teachers, such as Nola, to teachers who had been at the school for 20 years.

Ewan, a six-year old boy who was "repeating Reception"¹ was identified by Nola during her classroom literacy audit as a student "at risk". Nola's early assessments of

Ewan's literacy suggested to her that "he knew nothing" from his first year of schooling: "he was not making the links" between letters and sounds, he did not recognise all the letters and would "sometimes resist having to read by saying 'Nuh' to the words on the page, sitting with his arms folded across his chest". In the first workshop in February, Nola described Ewan's family as follows:

He's got an interesting background. I mean his mum and dad are together and there's a younger daughter. Not to be rude, but I don't think mum is terribly bright, and I think dad is quite an aggressive character, and I don't think there's certainly been much role modelling in terms of literacy at home.

This initial account places blame on Ewan's parents for their lack of appropriate modelling in the home. The child's "interesting background" is invoked to explain what Ewan cannot yet do. The image of the uncooperative boy with his arms folded is reiterated in the second image of the aggressive father. This kind of account is not unusual and produced, we would argue, as part of wider deficit discourses that attribute responsibility for the lack of normal literacy development to the deviant child and their family (Carrington & Luke, 2002; Comber, 1998; Freebody et al., 1995; Gregory & Williams, 2000).

Nola's late career mentor, Sam, who had taught Ewan the previous year, provided a somewhat different interpretation that contradicted and complicated Nola's assessment.

Actually, it's a shame with him ... when he came into school he was probably at the level of a three-year old. He hadn't even worked out which hand to hold the pencil in, and it would depend on which side of the page he was writing on ... From where he actually started he's probably moved a lot further than a lot of children in his first year of school ... but it's not that he didn't learn anything at all ... I mean he looked to me like a child that basically hadn't picked up a pen or a pencil in the five years prior to coming to school, and basically he really enjoyed it.

Sam's sympathetic account provides her early career colleague with an historical lens that contests the notion that Ewan is a total refuser of what school has to offer. Her detailed pedagogic knowledge allows her to point out that Ewan engaged in significant learning in his first year of school, even if it is not yet evident to Nola, and "enjoyed it". She does, however, reinforce Nola's anxiety about the father.

He has an unfortunate family background in that his parents have not been good about the type of viewing that he's had. He's seen a lot of inappropriate video material for a child of his age, a lot of sexual and a lot of violent videos he's been exposed to, and you talk to him about ratings. He knows nothing about G or PG, but he knows all about R-rated things and sometimes he will draw a picture and he will say "This one needs an R-rating" or whatever and that's his actual knowledge.

Like Nola, Sam finds it difficult to get out of deficit discourses that circulate in the wider educational community about family "background" (Comber, 1998). Her anxiety about children's inappropriate access to popular culture of a violent and sexual nature is understandable. As other researchers (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002) have pointed out, this potentially dangerous terrain leaves teachers such as Nola and Sam in a quandary. On the one hand, they want to recognise

children's knowledge and experience, and allow it into the classroom, but on the other hand, they do not want to condone pornographic and misogynist discourses and practices.

We detail this initial negative framing of Ewan as a refuser and potentially dangerous child to highlight just how difficult it is to put deficit explanations aside. As Nola moved into her case study and adopted a researcher stance, however, small discursive shifts in her understanding of Ewan became apparent. In what follows we highlight three significant research events that shaped the way Nola came to understand and teach Ewan as she assembled the resources for "getting out of deficit".

Interview with Ewan's Mother: Learning more about family "background"

The parent interview in March was a key turning point in changing how Nola saw Ewan—as a member of a functional family, as a child with particular kind of knowledge base and as a competent language user. She learned from Ewan's mum that he never showed any interest in books and writing at home; that he preferred being outside with his dad crabbing or fishing, and that he loved playing soccer and working in the shed. Like Marc's home visit, this parent conversation provided a site for Nola to consider how she might use Ewan's rich set of interests to engage him in the classroom. She also learned of the ongoing conflict between Ewan and his Dad over his learning difficulties at school.

Dad has great difficulty accepting his problems with reading and writing and calls him stupid constantly, that's what she told me, and he gets very frustrated with him, "Why's he so stupid? Why can't you write it? Why can't you write it?" He has no patience with him whatsoever, so he's getting really negative feedback from dad at home. Mum's trying really, really hard to step in between Dad and Ewan as well, so she's very stressed out because she knows he's got work to do but he's not interested in doing it.

What is going on at home is more complex than Nola had anticipated. Ewan's parents are not only interested, but extremely anxious about their child's performance at school—to the point where it causes conflict and blame within the home. In this account we see Nola begin to gain some empathy ("she's trying really, really hard", "she's very stressed") and become less judgemental as she becomes more aware of the tensions Ewan's mother is grappling with. Nola went on to suggest a range of low-anxiety activities to engage Ewan at home because, like Marc, she believed "you can't do everything in the classroom". She is of course right that to develop a literate disposition and repertoire of practices similar to his peers, Ewan will need to practise, but at this stage Nola's inclination is to remediate the family's literacy practices.

This approach makes sense in light of the popular model of early literacy development, where parents are held responsible and the overriding hypothesis is that if only parents would read to their children every day, there would be no literacy problem in Australia (Comber, 2004; Luke, 2003). Indeed, politicians, well-known educators and children's authors regularly promote such a view. As we will see, Nola began to accept greater responsibility for Ewan's literacy learning outcomes at school as she moved into the next phase of her research.

Beginning to Turn Around to Ewan: Conducting a case study

Like Marc, Nola followed up on Ewan's out-of-school interests in the classroom and documented the effects in her case study. During free writing time she encouraged him to write about his interests in crabbing and fishing and was amazed at how knowledgeable he was. We were particularly struck with her description of Ewan in the workshop in April, and how quickly her ways of speaking of him began to produce Ewan as a "very knowledgeable" student and competent "oral language" user.

He goes fishing and crabbing with his dad most weekends, and his uncle, so he's extremely involved in it and very knowledgeable as well. He can tell you every part of the fishing rod and the sort of fish and the beaches and lakes, and ... his oral language is very, very good.

Nola's written case study report, however, focused on Ewan's lack of independence as a writer and his "obsessive" use of the sentence starter "on the weekend" every time he wrote. The individualised assessment framework Nola used to document Ewan's approach to writing also revealed to her the ways in which his performance was lacking. The following phrases have been excerpted from Nola's longer analysis to highlight how her language is still framed in deficit terms, highlighting what Ewan lacks or will not do.

He's not risk taker.

He won't even attempt to do anything.

He doesn't want to do any of that.

He can't tell me.

He blanks out.

He doesn't recognise all his letters.

He's not understanding the link between letters and the sounds.

He's not interested in doing anything for himself.

He's not wanting to be independent at all.

Here Ewan is again construed as the wilful and refusing child with his arms folded. He is resisting free writing and will not make varied choices, preferring to stick with his safe "obsession". Nevertheless, Nola's frame of reference has begun to shift. She can see Ewan as knowledgeable and competent with oral language, even while being critical of his written competence. Only one month later, however, Nola announced on the teleconference that "yesterday he actually attempted to do his own writing for the first time ever". This apparent shift in Ewan's behaviour reflects, we argue, a further shift in Nola's interpretive frame of reference.

Redesigning Writing Lessons as Social Practice

In her curriculum redesign, Nola moved from viewing writing as individualised performative tasks to understanding writing as a social practice, a stance encouraged

both by her late career mentor and explicitly by the researchers in the workshop discussions. She changed the participative structures around writing to encourage Ewan and his peers to compose in partnership, rather than isolation. She asked children to write with peer age partners, with cross-age partners in grade seven and perform their writing for other classes. She developed shared reading and publication practices that maximised the social impact and enjoyment of writing. Within this community-based approach, Nola observed Ewan as though he was a different child.

I was just observing that Ewan went from his table to the floor with his paper and pencil, right next to this child lying down on the floor. He was copying what the other child had written, but he was so intense and enjoyed it so much, and I was listening actually to their conversation, and they were talking about the things that their mums do for them. Then the other child would write something that Ewan had said, just in his own writing, and then Ewan was copying, and then they both exchanged these ideas, and so even though the other child was writing Ewan's ideas, there was a whole lot of interaction going on, and that social aspect of literacy and language, which was just beautiful to see ... it's already just starting to make an impact on him, actually the fact that writing we're not doing is not done in isolation, that it's not something he has to do by himself ... And he was so proud of it as well, and he said "Can I read this to you?"

While Ewan is described as still reliant on oral language and highly dependent on another writer, Nola sees something different. She sees the social interaction, the engagement, the sense of accomplishment and the pride in producing text—the promise of what is to come. Her excitement is evident in the positive shift in her vocabulary—"just beautiful", "so proud". Her desire to re-engage Ewan was fundamental to her curriculum redesign, but so was her commitment to engage all her students in a socially motivated and meaningful writing pedagogy.

The effects on Ewan and his peers were remarkable. Ewan moved from a child who refused to write to one who elected to write. Even by traditional outcome measures he made great progress—from 12 unknown capital letters and 14 lower case letters in March, to only one unknown capital letter and seven lower case letters by August—and the amount of text he produced increased considerably. Nola's description of Ewan's reconnection with the school literacy curriculum—"I mean he wanted to continue with his writing at lunchtime and he didn't want to stop, so he's a very enthusiastic learner"—provides a sharp contrast to her earlier deficit assessment.

There are a number of key elements in Nola's re-design, just as there were for Marc, that we believe are important to note:

1. Nola was informed by her actual knowledge of Ewan's family life and cultural pursuits.
2. With this came a more accurate and complex understanding of his family "background".
3. She used this knowledge to think differently about students' resources for writing.
4. As she moved to an understanding that writing was a social practice, she allowed children to use their collective resources.
5. Guided by their teacher, students began to generate more text as well as deconstruct their own writing and its effects on readers and audiences.

6. Students' motivations for writing were sustained by anticipating and enjoying its social effects in the classroom.

Both Nola and her students were “turned around” by Nola developing a researcher disposition to the student she was most concerned about. She developed ways of communicating with parents, even those she had previously feared; she learned from her late career mentor, systems consultants and the researchers to re-theorise writing pedagogy as a sociocultural practice rather than a psychological state (Luke, 1993b). Within this framework, Ewan became an enthusiastic learner—a very different persona than the initial refuser Nola initially described. He and his classmates were hooked on writing and did not want to stop. These discursive shifts, we argue, have sustained effects, in that students and teachers are repositioned as they demonstrate to themselves (and to each other) that they can disrupt a cycle of failure; they can “turn around” and reconnect with the educative goals of schooling.

Conclusion

In this project we have interrogated what we understood as deficit discourses by disrupting three stubborn guilt trips of the profession: blame the teacher, blame the child, blame the family. In every case, teachers needed to move outside of deficit discourses to move ahead—to be able to engineer pedagogic redesigns that made a difference. Often changes came quickly and with powerful effects once initiated. Surprisingly so.

The intention of the research, however, is not simply to celebrate what children can do and ignore what they cannot. Rather, our ongoing aim is to produce demonstrable learning outcomes that can be sustained and transferred into new curriculum challenges. Marc realised that really creating reconnection was about more than a dramatically successful curriculum unit, such as the radio programme. He explained that he needed to go beyond “the wow factor” (a bonus of incorporating media into literacy lessons) in order to sustain children’s connectedness with the curriculum. Similarly, Nola needed to think further how she could sustain the social aspects of her writing programme without fostering new dependencies or simply repeating popular routines. This required both teachers to deeply understand their changed pedagogies at multiple levels; not just to focus on relevant topics or new technologies or writing buddies from year seven, but on the significant repositioning of children with respect to the production and comprehension of texts. These changes allowed children to do significant identity work at the same time that it allowed them to acquire new repertoires of literate practice.

Of critical importance to fostering such change was the fact that the project created safe spaces for teachers to examine the effects of their teaching on different children—spaces that are not always available in schools or teacher education programmes. The research workshops, in particular, became sites for collective, cross-generational problem-solving. Teachers were never isolated or blamed for not connecting with “at risk” students. They were part of a cross-generational pair, and their pair worked

within a larger state-based, cross-generational teacher research community—and that community was connected to another community across two states and two universities. We framed the problem of inequitable literacy outcomes as persistent, complex and in need of new energy and new intellectual work by teachers. Teachers then framed their own research within this larger collective goal and came to understand that their research interventions could make a significant contribution to a larger community of scholars, researchers and teachers.

The cross-generational nature of this study sets it apart from other practitioner research studies that attempt to impact on literacy achievement and engagement. The research design was powerful in creating new discursive resources for teachers to understand cultural difference, literacy, poverty and education differently. Engaging in professional reading, data generation, analysis and classroom redesign with their early/late career mentors enabled teachers to move outside deficit assumptions about children and their families, and to engineer pedagogic designs that made a difference—not only to student attitude and self-esteem (although these in themselves are important), but also to the quality and quantity of children’s writing and reading.

There is, however, no simple “happily ever after”. Such is the relentless nature of disadvantage that we were only a little surprised when both Ewan and Willem changed schools. We do not know if they will be seen in deficit in their new schools or, more optimistically, if their more recently acquired and perhaps fragile literate dispositions will go with them into their new classrooms. While these students were reconnected with the literacy curriculum at this time, the success of their ongoing educational trajectories is not guaranteed. Children like Willem and Ewan are going to have continuing issues in their school lives that relate to poverty, transience and ethnicity. We know that lack of continuity does make a difference for learning outcomes.

But one thing is clear. These teachers, Marc and Nola, and their colleagues will never again take educational failure as inevitable. It is not that Marc and Nola have some riddle solved once and for all, but they have assembled a sociological and analytical perspective on their teaching that allows them to address new challenges differently. And the cross-generational research project in which they have participated signals the kind of theory-busting paradigm-building necessary for sustained and principled educational change.

Note

- 1 Reception in South Australia is the first year of formal schooling. Children in Reception are five years of age. Note also that the school year in Australia commences in February and ends in December.

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