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The discursive construction of literacy in a disadvantaged school

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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This study documents the teaching of literacy in a small parochial school in Adelaide. I am indebted to the principal, teachers, school secretary, parents and children for welcoming me so warmly into their community. Having me participate in their school day probably made their demanding work that much harder, yet they displayed unfailing energy, humour and patience.

Next I want to thank my supervisor Professor Allan Luke, who has supported me throughout this project, helping me to confront the limits and the possibilities of my own work, in ways which exemplify the critical literacies I continue to explore. He has been extraordinarily generous in the time, resources and intellectual capital he made available to me as a student and is an inspiring and collegial scholar and teacher. I began this study with an intense curiosity and an ongoing commitment to exploring how literacy education might work for social justice. As I finish this document I realise it is but a small beginning. But I finish with my curiosity and commitment enhanced and for this I owe much to Allan's supervision.

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Abstract

This study explores the discursive construction of literacy in a disadvantaged primary school. The researcher acted as a participant observer during literacy lessons over a two year period, 1992-1993, in four different classrooms. School archival records such as policy statements, newsletters and student report cards were also collected. Data, including transcripts of lessons and interviews and a large corpus of school and classroom artefacts, was treated as text and a poststructuralist discourse analytic approach, following Foucault, was employed in theorising and interpreting the problem. In addition an analysis was made of the constructs - 'literacy', 'pedagogy' and 'disadvantage' - in media, policy and academic sites. The researcher took a feminist standpoint in foregrounding literacy pedagogy both as contested terrain and as a part of teachers' work. The study aimed to consider how competing discourses constitute literacy and the literate subject in a disadvantaged school context.

Discourse analysis of the public texts and the school generated texts indicated a multiplicity of formations of the literate subject at this time. Consistent across all sites was the belief that literacy could be empowering for disadvantaged groups in the community. In government policy, literacy was constructed as an essential functional skill which would contribute to a 'clever country' and to a globally competitive economy. In the popular press, literacy was portrayed as a problem. Poor children were also typically constructed as a problem, either as threats to normal society or as victims of abusive parents. At the same time headlines regularly attested to evidence of declining standards of literacy and public schooling generally.

A review of contemporary educational research indicated that children from socio-economically disadvantaged communities are likely to perform below the norms on mainstream measures of assessment of literacy. Historically, educational theorists have understood the problems experienced by disadvantaged children as being related to 'deficit', 'difference', 'resistance' and 'structural inequalities'. Each of these explanations is still evident in contemporary educational discourses. Literacy pedagogies often make claims for their efficacy and particular appropriateness for disadvantaged students. In the period of the present study the major debate was constituted as a binary opposition between whole and genre pedagogies, although the emergence of critical literacy in primary school education was also in evidence. Analysis of these public discourses provides a macro context in which to consider the construction of literacy in the school site.

In the school site teachers drew on a multiplicity of discourses in order to assemble a pedagogy for literacy. They deployed a number of normalising techniques to discipline the students to be made literate, including frequent 'pep talks', individualised student monitoring or 'patrols' and continual running commentaries or 'voice-over'. The ideal literate student was constituted as an ethical subject: as a self-regulating, productive and socially responsible worker. The literacy curriculum emphasised the quality of students' work and literacy as information production, and there was a notable absence of story writing and student generated projects. Teachers stressed the productive use of time and were highly concerned about raising the standards of students' work. To these ends students were trained in technologies of the self, 'self-assessments' where they regularly accounted for themselves in writing across a number of pre-specified domains. There was also evidence, however, that both teachers and students contested the regime of discipline to which they were subjected, by interrupting the literacy lessons through the use of humour and overt resistance. In addition students' responsiveness to one teacher's 'critical literacy' suggested the potential for literacy lessons to become sites of talk, reading and writing about social justice.

It is argued that the discourses available in the public sphere are recontextualised in this local site as teachers deal with institutional priorities. The study suggests that theories of literacy curriculum and pedagogy need to be reconsidered from a broader sociological perspective which takes into account postmodern conditions, diverse student populations and teaching as an institutionalised labour process. The researcher takes the position that university based literacy educators, researchers and theoreticians need to examine our own discursive practices and their effects in local sites. Finally it is suggested that a positive and productive way forward is for school and university based educators to work together theorising and taking action in local communities.

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STATEMENT ON SOURCES

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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