Improving literacy outcomes for students in disadvantaged schools: The importance of teacher theory

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Research consistently shows that teachers are a crucial factor in making the difference to student outcomes in literacy (e.g. Chall, Jacob & Baldwin, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2003). Kamler and Comber aptly summarise thus:

It is teachers’ expectations, their enacted curriculum, their classroom talk, their relations to young people and their actual ways of inducting them into specific textual practices that most affect literacy outcomes. (Kamler & Comber, 2003, p. 327)

This article discusses the key role that theory played for teachers who improved the literacy outcomes of students in eight disadvantaged South Australian schools. It illuminates the nexus between practical and theoretical knowledge and ways in which these ‘spoke’ to one another as teachers worked to improve literacy outcomes for their students. Teachers constructing and using theory to enhance their agency emerged as one of the key factors that made a difference to student outcomes. That is, the underpinning of action with theory was a significant factor in teachers’ efficacy and the achievement of improved literacy outcomes for students. In acknowledging the work that these teachers did with students from poor and diverse communities I position them as theory builders and theory users, arguing that it is not mere technical pedagogic practice that makes a difference to student outcomes in literacy. That is, teacher quality is predicated on teacher knowledge, particularly theoretical knowledge.

About the Project

The brief for the research project, jointly commissioned by the Department of Education and Children’s Services and the South Australian Primary Principals Association, and funded by the Commonwealth Government’s ‘Strategic assistance for improving student outcomes project’, was to conduct research in eight disadvantaged primary schools that had achieved much improved student outcomes in literacy and numeracy, and to use the findings to construct a ‘profile’ that could be used by other schools wanting to improve their own practices around literacy and/or numeracy (see Grant, Badger,
Wilkinson, Rogers & Munt, 2002). There was also a requirement to use a survey tool.

Four university researchers, all of whom had prior teaching experience in schools, undertook the ‘Literacy and Numeracy Outcomes Project’, supported by a research assistant. As well as administering an on-line survey, the team conducted interviews with each school’s principal, key teachers/coordinators in literacy and numeracy, and classroom teachers. The survey and interview data were complemented by classroom observation. In order to manage the research, each team member took responsibility for the investigation in two sites. The development of research tools and techniques by the team, and frequent meetings to discuss progress, were important in ensuring consistency in the way the research was conducted across the eight sites.

In this article I focus on one of the schools where I carried out the research, highlighting the contribution of the coordinator, as a way of illuminating what the research team found to be the case across all eight sites.

First impressions

I arrived for my first visit to one of the Project schools by arrangement, about 15 minutes after the first bell of the day, and was very warmly welcomed at the front office. There were comfy chairs, displays of students’ work, a notice board for parents, pots of well tended plants, and the immediate offer of a cup of tea. I sensed a very positive ‘tone’ about the school: that illusive, ephemeral quality that results in a ‘gut feeling’ that this is a good space to work in. But as the morning progressed I became somewhat uneasy.

Firstly, I saw students using and heard a lot about ‘Accelerated Reader’, a computer based program developed in America. Students were assigned a reading level, and could not move up to the next level until they’d read a certain number of books, completed on-line tests on each of them, and obtained the computer’s approval to proceed. The school used this scheme in conjunction with ‘Rainbow Reading’, a levelled scheme for failing readers, which matched them with a book then gave them repetitive practice on that book until it was mastered, and further practice on books deemed to be at the same level. I was taken to a resource room to see packages of what looked like basal readers, colour coded for difficulty. I saw a literacy block, where students were working on spelling sheets, apparently doing drill and practice with words out of context.

I was uneasy, for these practices appeared to be the ones that had been criticised so roundly in the 1980s when the first wave of ‘whole language’ swept through schools. But in terms of improving student literacy outcomes, this school had been identified as being highly successful. It was a lighthouse school, a school whose practices were deemed exem-
plary and were on show to teachers from other regions in the State.

Aware that researchers can use our own lenses and ideologies to ‘do violence’ to research subjects and sites, I attempted to account for my unease. Perhaps my ‘problem’ was that the school’s achievement had been determined largely on the results of the Basic Skills Tests, which do not sit easily with my notions of literacy, or literacies, as sets of culturally determined social practices (Freebody & Luke, 2003; Anstey & Bull, 1996; Luke, 1993; Gee, 1990). Perhaps the emphasis on skills and drills was helping students to pass the tests. But those tests should have disadvantaged students from schools like this one because their items are largely predicated on white, middle class values and cultural practices. I was at a loss: my own theoretical paradigms suggested that these practices should not have been working. But they were. And they were according to statistical data, the staff in the school, and the committee which had given this school an award for literacy achievement. I needed to suspend judgement until I had a fuller picture of the complexity of the school’s literacy practices.

A more complex picture emerges

The coordinator who had been the powerhouse behind this school’s literacy program had transferred to another school. When I interviewed her the following day the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. She was able to eloquently and coherently present the educational reasons for the decisions that had been taken by the school. She explained the why behind what had been done. That is, she expounded the theory. For example, she told me that the schemes, the sets of levelled books, were not, as had been inferred, the reading program. The reading program was in fact

... a balanced program. It’s a program that’s got independent reading. It’s got shared reading. It’s got guided reading. It uses a variety of texts. Different types of texts. And a balance of strategies. We are not just teaching one single strategy...

There was a rich interrelationship between immersing students in high quality literature by reading aloud to them; of guided reading; of using different genres; of explicit teaching of strategies; and of successful independent practice. This had not been made clear to me on the previous day. Rather I had been shown the elements which had been introduced fairly recently to the school’s program that the teachers therefore considered special or unique to their school, and to which success was therefore being attributed. Perhaps they had assumed that ‘the researcher’ wanted to see the ‘new’ elements of the school’s literacy program and that the other, more established practices could be taken for granted.

In the 1960s and 70s levelled books often were the reading program:
students were assigned to a reading level, then progressed as their ‘reading improved by reading’, rather than because of action on the part of the teacher. What was different here, and in the other Project schools we researched, was that levelled books were a resource for the reading program. Accelerated Reader, in particular, was used as a strategy by teachers to manage frequent independent reading practice, so that students were successfully integrating the reading cues (Weaver, 1998), building their ‘reading muscles’. It helped teachers to determine whether decoding and comprehension were both seamless and effortless. In concentrated bursts of time on task students were practicing as effective readers, achieving the accuracy and comprehension necessary for successful independent reading (Johnson, Kress & Pikulski, 1987, p. 21). As the Coordinator said,

We saw Accelerated Reader as the way of making sure that when the children were reading independently they were reading successfully. So that was one way of checking that. But we recognise that other parts of our reading program were asking the other sorts of questions. The high level thinking questions.

This illustrates the critical importance of theoretical knowledge underpinning decision making in this school. It was theory about the need for successful independent reading practice, and what constituted this, that led to the levelling of books and determined the role of the computer programs as ‘monitors’ of adequate practice. It was theory about what reading ‘was’ and should ‘be for’ that determined the elements of the overall reading program: the immersion in literature (Cambourne, 1988); reading for enjoyment as well as information; providing a balanced program (Freppon & Dahl, 1998); the role of the teacher in providing explicit instruction (Hancock, 1999).

Teacher as theory maker and theory user

Every decision teachers make comes out of some kind of theory, either the kind of theory that is implicit in everyday life, or the kind that comes out of the academy (Schratz & Walker, in Sachs, 2003, p. 82). Garth Boomer wrote:

There is a pervasive myth about teachers who are not interested in theory … I suggest strongly that teachers … need to re-value theory, not as something ‘out there’ which experts have, but as their own present understanding of why they do what they do (Boomer, 1988, p. 227).

Theory of this kind, the ‘why we do what we do’, was constructed by teachers in these schools out of their experience as classroom practitioners. However, teachers who had been key to change in the eight Project schools did not just construct theory from experience. Whilst this was important, they also demonstrated strong engagement with research from the academy.
In ‘speaking her theory’, the coordinator was drawing on four things. Firstly, as would be expected, she relied on approximately 14 years experience as a teacher in this disadvantaged school. Secondly, she drew on her knowledge of research methodology to collect data about the students, finding, amongst other things, that they had ‘stalled’ as readers. A survey she conducted across the primary classrooms showed that we just didn’t have children that were reading. They were reading in junior primary, because books were levelled, and there was lots of monitoring going on. [But] there was very little checking on them after [year 3]. [We wanted them to understand] that reading wasn’t something that was done to them, it was something that they were part of and doing … they didn’t believe in themselves as learners.

Additionally, she used focused observation by a number of staff members which showed that students were spending what was deemed excessive amounts of time in choosing books:

we got into a program called Accelerated Reader … and the librarian couldn’t believe the difference. She had children before that coming into the library who would spend 20 minutes wandering around looking and saying there is nothing in here that I can read. Once they were levelled and they knew that they were reading 3.6 or 4.6 books they came in, and because they can only choose from 10 [books] they would choose really quickly and then go off and read and be successful.

Thirdly, she collected data about teachers’ programs:

when we looked at the type of things that people used in their classroom, they tended to be really narrow. So we needed to broaden their understanding of different types of genre so that students were exposed to that. Some kids had never encountered poetry. Or they had only encountered poetry by copying off the board. They hadn’t actually analysed what a poem was in a guided reading session. I remember being in a class last year and the teacher was doing ballads with them. And they were absolutely fascinated about ballads and the structure of the ballad and how that worked.

And lastly, this coordinator’s clearly articulated approach to whole school change was informed by her professional reading: from ‘the academy’ as part of a Special Education degree, from articles provided at formal professional development sessions and exchanged through area networking, and accessed because of her own interest in and passion for literacy.

What can be said about the personal theory she constructed from these four sources? She knew that theory can be developed out of practice, from experience, as well as from research. She knew certain things from working in classrooms; she gathered other data by conducting research – surveying students, observing them as they chose books, analysing teachers’ programs. And then she ensured that these ‘spoke’ to one another, using them in mutually informing ways. Her theory was
contextualised. She knew about this school, these kinds of students and their families (see Thomson on ‘thisness’, 2002), not in a pejorative or judgmental way, but in ways that allowed her to see where they were ‘at’, and to explain where the school was ‘at’ (see McNaughton on the ‘at’ principle, 2002), as she worked with her colleagues to implement an appropriate school wide literacy curriculum.

She was tapping into theory about student interest and choice. She knew that when students feel they have some say over their learning they are more likely to be engaged with it. Students did have some choice: there were ten or more books at each reading level and they only had to read four before proceeding to the next level. Rather than spending most of their time on choosing a book, they were using the time to read. The coordinator’s reading of research as part of a higher degree had emphasised the importance of successful time on task, and her experience supported the research studies.

Because of her extensive knowledge and professional reading she was very aware of the need for successful independent reading practice, in particular the levels of reading proposed by Johnson, Kress and Pikulski (1987, p. 21–24) which her years of experience as a Special Education teacher had confirmed were pedagogically sound. She told me several times that ‘Accelerated Reader’ and ‘Rainbow Reading’ were purchased because they supported successful independent reading practice and simplified monitoring for busy classroom teachers.

Building and using theory in ‘these’ schools
Marie Clay writes about the dangers of pushing students too quickly, of making the ‘gradient of difficulty’ (Clay, 1998, p. 243) too steep. She warns of pushing children into a ‘race through reading’; of upping the level of difficulty before they have successfully coordinated the reading cueing systems sufficiently for reading to become automatic at progressive levels of difficulty. When readers of any age confront really unfamiliar material reading slows down, readers ‘change gears’, re-read sections as they try to make sense of what is being read, and their comprehension plummets. This is what reading can be like for children who are given insufficient practice at the ‘independent level’, and it was this that the Project schools, each in their own way, were specifically and consciously addressing.

For teachers in the Project schools, theory acted as both a structure and a way of seeing or, to change metaphors for a moment, as both frame and lens. As a frame, theory structured the plethora of things teachers knew about teaching and learning so that they were intellectually manageable. As a lens, theory allowed the teachers to critique and interrogate their own ideas and practices as well as those of others. Ball postulates the important role of theory as a way of ‘thinking otherwise’, a platform for ‘outrageous hypothesis’ and for ‘unleashing criticism’.
Theory, he claims, is ‘destructive, disruptive, and violent. It offers a language for challenge and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others’ (Ball, 1995, in Sachs, 2003, p. 82). This is how theory, or more accurately theories, were used by teachers in the schools. They refused, for example, to accept discourses of deficit and blame (Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon & Pitt, 2001, p. 39) about students from communities that were poor and/or diverse and those students’ capabilities.

In each of the Project schools teachers had well articulated theory about the cultural construction of literacy (Luke, 1993) and were prepared to question what counts as culturally valued literacy practice in schools. They understood that many of the literacy practices valued and enacted in school are very different from those of their students’ homes and communities (Moll, 1992; Dyson, 1997, 1999). Knowing that the collection of specialised registers (and forms) of English needed for school success, sometimes described as ‘secret English’, are not usually learned through immersion or whole language teaching approaches (Martin, Wignell, Eggins & Rothery, in Walton, 1993), teachers ensured that they provided explicit teaching of these registers and forms so that students could gain control over them.

**Theory informs classroom practice**

Theoretical knowledge led directly to particular teaching strategies which were evaluated for their efficacy in improving the literacy outcomes of these particular cohorts of students. One of these explicit teaching strategies, called pre-formulation by the teachers in the Project school which used it, is based on the work of Brian Gray (Rose, Gray & Cowey, 1999). Initially, the teacher gives

> enough cultural information about what you are heading for [so] every kid in the class, not just the two top kids, can answer the question.

Rather than asking fake open ended questions, the teacher models the culturally valued aspects of the text.

What I modelled was, ‘Now this is orientation. Now remember that orientation is where the author introduces the characters and the setting. And look, the illustrator is introducing the characters in the setting too. Can you see who the three main characters are?’ Now every kid knows that this is the orientation and the valued answer is the three Billy Goats Gruff.

Gradually students internalise the questions and learn the valued responses, so the amount of pre-formulation the teacher does for that text type can be reduced. Three texts later, one teacher reported, she could say:

> This is the orientation. What has the illustrator put in the illustration to introduce the characters and the setting?
In talking about successful practice teachers again and again demonstrated familiarity with theory that gave insights into why some pedagogical practices were more successful than others in giving their students access to the valued cultural capital in school literacy. Sometimes they had come across research or theory which gave support for what they already knew from their own teaching, enhancing their sense of efficacy. At other times their engagement with theory pointed to new ways of doing things which they found were more successful and achieved better outcomes for students.

Importantly, rich theoretical conversations illuminated different aspects of literacy teaching and learning and built more complex understandings. Theory allowed teachers to challenge the taken-for-granted, the way things were, and think about different possibilities that might achieve different results. It allowed them to weigh up the likely advantages or disadvantages of proposed educational or curriculum changes. It allowed them to generate answers, rather than to depend on the answers provided by other people. It gave them agency as teachers. Because they were aware of the theory which informed their decision making and actions, they had well articulated understandings of why they were doing what they were doing. They very clearly understood their agency as teachers. Research in the Project schools provided clear evidence that well-thought-through theory is at the heart of well-thought-through practice.

The Phase 1 schools in the Project, the eight schools in which the research was conducted, were all visited by teachers from other sites who were looking to adopt more effective literacy and numeracy practices in their own schools. There is a significant risk in this kind of model that visiting teachers might resort to ‘fragment grabbing’ behaviours (Boomer, 1988, p. 227); a danger that they might pick up resources like ‘Accelerated Reader’ and ‘Rainbow Reading’ without understanding their relationship to the whole reading program; without accessing the theory that underpinned their use in the Project school. This danger can be averted when teachers are encouraged to articulate their underpinning theories, and are given time to collaborate so this can happen. Teaching and learning are highly contextual: what works in one classroom in one school with one group of students does not necessarily transfer successfully to another class in another school, or even another class in the same school. ‘[T]here are no recipes, no best practices, no models of teaching that work across differences in schools …’ (Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 114). If teachers are to learn about effective practice that might be translated into other contexts, then it appears to be imperative that they understand not just the pragmatics of ‘how to do’ but the theory of ‘why we do’.
Producing theory that is generative

In producing a Profile of the eight Project schools, the researchers were faced with the same challenge: not just to describe practice, but to explicate theory. Theory is the significant factor in generating effective practice in new and different contexts. It is theory that is generative. It is theory that enables teachers to be reflective and critical professionals rather than mere technicians.

There were some areas of practice in the schools that seemed to be at odds with one another. There were apparently contradictory things going on, often in the same classroom. Theory and practice sometimes appeared to be uneasy bedfellows. For example, comments like ‘We have high expectations of our students and they achieve them’ or ‘They can be successful learners no matter where they come from’ occurred alongside statements like ‘These students need lots of repetitive practice,’ or ‘They need simple, routine tasks’. How were we, as researchers, to reconcile statements like these?

We turned to theory. A robust theoretical framework both informs and is developed through research, whether that research is teacher action research, collaborative work between academics and teachers, or carried out by academics ‘on’ schools and teachers. In this case, a theoretical explanation of apparently contradictory practices emerges from the collaborative research work in New Zealand between Stuart McNaughton and classroom teachers. McNaughton takes the stance that one should never discount teachers’ experiential knowledge about what works, what constitutes effective practice. His work demonstrates how theory can explain practice, and practice talk back to that theory. From contexts similar to those in the Project schools, he developed the concept of the wide/narrow curriculum (McNaughton, 2002, p. 101).

In all the Project schools a very rich curriculum was on offer, but various parts of it, at different times, became a narrow focus for teachers and students as they attempted to gain mastery of a new aspect. The curriculum was a changing but carefully controlled kaleidoscope of wide and narrow offerings as students were immersed in a variety of complex literacy tasks (a wide curriculum) then focused on and practised the component parts which are required for independence and success (a narrow curriculum). For example, in the wide curriculum students might be reading a narrative in a big book, then practising ‘text patterning’ (adapted from Rose (nd)) based on specific language structures within the book.

What appeared to be happening was that teachers were using the wide curriculum to allow for, in James Gee’s terms, acquisition and the narrow curriculum for learning (1990, p. 146). While only a handful of teachers in the Project appeared to be familiar with Gee’s work, based on their classroom experience many teachers had an intuitive grasp of his argument, and were prepared to engage with his ideas as a way of deep-
ening their understanding and better articulating their practice. There was also palpable excitement when they were introduced to McNaughton’s work. The concept of a wide/narrow curriculum, and the way it accommodates both acquisition and learning, was a powerful way for teachers to understand what was working in their classrooms; to justify the ways in which they switched, according to children’s needs, from complex to simple tasks, from problem solving to explicit instruction, from skills and drills to constructivist approaches. It also explained aspects of practice they knew were effective for their students, but had remained silenced because these practices are not in line with current system sanctioned approaches to learning.

Conclusion
Research for this project clearly demonstrated that teachers who had a high degree of agency in improving literacy outcomes for students were theory builders and theory users. They knew what worked in practice and were able to connect that with theory. They were highly articulate about why they were doing what they were doing. They were willing to explore theory as a way of informing and explaining practice, because that made them more effective as teachers. It helped them to articulate their practice. It helped them to evaluate their practice. It helped them to refine their practice. They are a powerful example of the crucial role informed and knowledgeable teachers have in making a difference for students, particularly those from disadvantaged groups in our community.

References


