

Teacher researchers – sustaining professional learning

LYN KERKHAM

University of South Australia, Adelaide

KIRSTEN HUTCHISON

Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria

*ABSTRACT: In this paper we argue for an approach to professional development which supports teachers to engage in sustained intellectual inquiry and to investigate the conditions in their classrooms that might make a difference for students at risk of not succeeding at school. We focus on the work of one primary school teacher involved in the research project *Teachers investigate unequal outcomes in literacy: Cross generational perspectives* and explore the effects that redesigning her literacy curriculum had on her professional identity and the literacy outcomes for one of the children in her class. We suggest that the principles of building theory and practice, positioning teachers as agentive, and making a space for teachers to bring new – and renewed – professional knowledge to their work are principles of practice that energise and sustain teachers and their day-to-day classroom work. Such principles deserve attention, particularly at a time when teacher quality and professional standards are in the minds of policy makers.*

KEY WORDS: Professional learning, professional development, teacher research, literacy pedagogy, teacher knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we argue for an approach to professional development, which supports teachers to engage in sustained intellectual inquiry and to investigate the conditions in their classrooms that might make a difference for students at risk. We focus on the work one teacher involved in the research project *Teachers investigate unequal outcomes in literacy: Cross generational perspectives*, now in its third year. As a result of their participation in an intellectual community of inquiry (Comber, 1999), supported at school level by a research partner and by a wider research community of teachers and university researchers, these project teachers developed ways of enabling the young students to take up and practice new identities within the textual and social practices in the classroom which had a profound effect on literacy outcomes. The teachers redesigned their literacy pedagogies in order to reconnect students with learning. In the process they repositioned themselves as teacher researchers, analysing their own classrooms, framing their own research questions and developing new literacy practices informed by their analyses. We suggest that the principles of building theory and practice, positioning teachers as agentive, and making a space for teachers to bring new – and renewed – professional knowledge to their work are principles that deserve attention, particularly at a time when teacher quality and professional standards are in the minds of policy makers.

The rhetoric of teacher quality, accountability, quality assurance, best practice, performance and competencies currently in circulation in debates about how the

teaching profession might be revitalized (Sachs, 2003; Bates, 2004) is produced in the blurring of boundaries between enterprise and education, and produces a climate in which curriculum and pedagogy are defined in increasingly narrow and prescriptive terms. As governments pursue policies of close regulation of curriculum, of intense scrutiny of performance of schools on standardized, norm-referenced achievement testing and a business model of devolved school management (Luke, 2004), teaching and learning are reduced to a list of competencies, standards, basic skills, benchmarks and assessments. Top-down, system-required training in school-level administrative, management and welfare initiatives pervades schools' professional development plans and adds to teachers' infinitely expanding workloads. Teachers feel the effects of an insistence on accountability-in-minutiae for their own performance, as well as that of their students; it saps the enthusiasm of early career teachers and dissipates the commitment of the most resilient. The pressure to perform is everywhere. In such a climate of compliance with standards, professional learning is, not unsurprisingly, a focus of conflicted interest in the teaching profession.

While such enervating influences are dominant in state, national and international spheres of education, there are nevertheless competing discourses at work; discourses that complicate the simplistic, technicist view of teaching that managerialism produces. In South Australia the Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSAF) is underpinned by constructivist theory; it invites teachers to be creative and innovative in their approach, and conceptualizes learning as far more complex than is suggested by reductive assessment and accountability measures. The provision of professional development to support curriculum initiatives is equally contradictory – reduced on the one hand to compulsory attendance at 37 hours of any sort of professional development over the school year, and on the other hand involving school-based projects, focused on developing a culture of inquiry and long term commitment from schools and teachers. The Learning to Learn project (Foster, Jones, Kuhr, Phillipson, Ryan & Womersley, 2002) is one such example in South Australia.

However, professional learning is more frequently facilitated through discrete, one-size-fits-all, professional development packages. Sometimes mandated, such professional development often entails an introduction to new teaching techniques and strategies to improve learning and outcomes, yet is disconnected from classroom contexts and disavows teaching as “a complex array of values, knowledges, and experiences” (Lieberman & Miller, 1999). Teachers are positioned primarily as users and not producers of knowledge, and dependent on the expertise of knowledgeable others to improve what they do as teachers.

Reading against the kind of professional development outlined above, we suggest that when teachers are positioned at the centre of educational innovation and offered resources, research training and support, time to reflect and to discuss their concerns and, crucially, the opportunity to document their experiences for public dissemination, they not only claim an authoritative stance as professional educators but are enabled to “author their identities” (Marsh, 2002).

TEACHERS INVESTIGATE UNEQUAL OUTCOMES IN LITERACY

The work which informs this paper comes from the project *Teachers Investigate Unequal Outcomes in Literacy: Cross-generational Perspectives*. Twenty teachers, ten in Victoria and ten in South Australia, participated in the project. Early career teachers in the first five years of their teaching were asked to choose a late-career teacher who had been teaching for 25 years or more, with whom they wanted to work over the three years of the project. Early and late career pairs came together with other teachers in their state for four workshops each year at our respective universities, Deakin University, Victoria and University of South Australia, South Australia.

Unlike much conventional professional development this project was designed to position teachers “inside” research as tellers and knowers, both producers and builders of professional knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Comber & Kamler, forthcoming 2004). The teachers were not simply research informants or data collectors, but full participants in the research. In collaboration with university researchers, they assembled analytical resources to conduct systematic and research-informed inquiry in their classrooms. First, they conducted an audit of their current literacy practices, observing how different children responded to the literacy curriculum on offer. The teachers then selected a particular child about whom they were concerned and wrote a case-study report in which they reflected on their observations; they began to theorize about what they might change pedagogically to make a difference to the literacy learning of their case study child. Secondly, on the basis of their observations and analysis they redesigned an aspect of their classroom literacy practice. They kept journals, work samples and anecdotal records, supplemented by video of classroom events recorded by the research team, to document the effects of their redesign.

One of the aims of the project was to encourage teachers to interrogate commonly accepted framings of “the literacy problem” and to disrupt deficit discourses around disadvantaged children and low literacy attainment. Moll’s concept, “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), had a particularly significant impact on the ways in which the project teachers reconnected with their students and redesigned their literacy curriculum. “Funds of knowledge” are described as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Moll and his colleagues studied households in working-class Mexican communities in Arizona. An important aspect of this research was the collaboration between teachers (trained as ethnographers as part of the project), and the researchers working together to understand household knowledges around urban occupations, agriculture, religion and household management amongst others. These funds of knowledge were shared and exchanged in local communities and available to children through families and neighbourhood networks.

What is important here is the active participation of children as learners in these social contexts. Observing, questioning and assisting in ways appropriate to their skill and capacity, young children engaged in tasks alongside more expert adults or peers, who mediated and scaffolded their learning. Funds of knowledge, then, are not merely bits of cultural information or interesting practical skills, but represent the human activity

of assistance and sharing in a meaningful context (Gregory, Long & Volk, 2004, p. 11) that sustains families and households, particularly through difficult times. This conceptual framework strongly influenced the teachers as they theorized about what might help their case study child better connect with the literacy curriculum, as will be evident in the narrative of Nola, one early career teacher, and her work with Ewan, her case-study child. Taking a researcher stance to the child she was most worried about, Nola mobilized Ewan's "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) to deepen his connection with literacy learning. Nola came to understand that literacies are produced through both pedagogical and social practices, and changed the social rules around the production of written texts; she expanded her students' experience of audience and purpose for writing as she began to develop a classroom community of learners.

In what follows, we trace the shifts Nola made as she engaged with new conceptual frameworks that informed the redesign of her literacy curriculum. These shifts are recounted in three moments: Nola's acquiescence to dominant school discourses around early years literacy and assessment, the disruption of those discourses through her access to new interpretive frames, and lastly, her curriculum redesign.

WORKING WITHIN DOMINANT SCHOOL DISCOURSES

Nola is an early-career teacher in her mid-thirties who brings parenting and a career in promotions and theatre to her work in the classroom. In the first year of the project she was a Reception/Year 1 teacher in her second year of teaching at a small Catholic parish school in the south-western suburbs of Adelaide. She felt her university studies had not prepared her well for teaching, a theme she came back to several times in workshop and teleconference discussions. However, she did draw on her life experiences as she worked at establishing a place for herself as an early-years teacher. Thinking about her first weeks as a teacher she described herself as an actor, "an imposter", not wanting to be found out by her more experienced colleagues: "Maybe my years of working in the theatre (although in the marketing department) had rubbed off on me and I felt quite comfortable 'acting' knowledgeable, even though underneath I was scared ... If I ask[ed] too many questions [of my colleagues] they would think less of me and that maybe I was not really cut out for the job. I was really an imposter after all!" (Draft writing, July 3, 2004).

Nevertheless, as she described her repertoire of teaching practices the discourses and practices associated with traditional, whole language and genre approaches are clearly evident. In an animated description of a big book sequence, for example, she alluded to whole language and using big books as an approach to teaching spelling and grammar in context:

The children who know the stories, join in with the familiar text, and predicting what new stories what might be, and ... sentence sequencing, scrambling up the sentences and physically getting the children to stand up the front, and I've found that very powerful, and the children just enjoy it, and with the rest of the class manipulating the children saying where you stand and why, and just listening to the children's reasoning. Even the ones that perhaps aren't as developed in their knowledge, even those children now will say "That word will go there because it's got a full stop at the

end and it has to go at the end.” (Phase 1 interview with late career partner, September, 2002)

Nola’s efforts to contextualize decoding and encoding within meaningful, shared reading experiences is indicative of the way in which she was working with the complexity of what constitutes literacy in early-years classrooms. She talked about “the major thing I have learned [at university] is to have a balance ... To take the traditional approach, whole language and genre approaches - there are some things that are worthwhile doing, but not just one approach ... It’s important to come up with your own balanced approach.” (Phase 1 interview with late career partner, September 2002) She also talked about writing as an opportunity for students to engage in individual and independent work, where they might display their knowledge of grammar, spelling and the structure of particular kinds of texts. However, the tensions between the collaborative venture of shared reading, which engages children with each other and with texts, and Nola’s attempts to establish writing as an independent activity became significant as she tried to engage Ewan as a writer.

When Nola carried out a literacy audit of her current literacy practices in February (Phase 2 of the project) she identified Ewan as a child “at risk”. Ewan, a second generation Greek-Australian, was an energetic, restless, slightly overweight 6-year-old. He was “repeating Reception”, the first year of school in South Australia, and had had some difficulties in learning to read and write, learning how to “do school”. Nola’s early accounts of him focused on what he did not know and what he could not do:

... he doesn’t recognize all his letters, and the ones that he does recognize he won’t be able to tell me another word that starts with it, or has trouble linking the letter, what it looks like to the sound ...

The results of his early literacy assessments (including a system-required, early-years assessment for all students in their fifth term at school) seemed to reinforce the idea that Ewan had retained very little from his first year of schooling. While this set of reading and writing assessments did provide some insights into Ewan’s coding strategies, the emphasis on the “cracking the code” dimension of literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1990) had consequences for the kinds of literacy tasks Nola made available to him and the scaffolding she provided.

Two of the observations she recorded indicated her strategies for scaffolding Ewan as a beginning writer, as well as Ewan’s struggle to become a writer:

... he won’t want me to write it in his book, and when I do he will turn the page. He will copy it and turn the page, so he’s writing it like he’s writing it himself.

Nola scribed his words and reinforced connections between spoken and written language. Ewan had difficulty making sense of, and remembering, the written code, and hid (behind) the teacher’s writing. He both resisted and desired facility with the written word.

Nola’s second observation of Ewan revealed to her another pattern of dependence, this time with sentence starter cards in free writing:

... every time we do writing he gets the "On the weekend" card. There's a whole heap. Monday mornings we do "On the weekend", but he's latched onto this and every time we do writing he wants to do "On the weekend".

Ewan's sense of himself as a writer is bound up with his sense of routine, and, as with many beginning writers, he copies or repeats what he knows is "successful". Nola's comments about these observations indicated her frustration with Ewan's limited take-up of classroom resources (such as word banks, alphabet charts, a box of sentence starters, a box of noun groups) and the opportunities for independent work she felt she offered. Although, in this instance, Ewan seemed to have internalized the message that independent work is valued, his lack of confidence meant that he continued to repeat patterns of dependence. He did not engage readily with school literacy tasks and often sat, hands across his chest, refusing to engage. Nola also observed his persistence in actively seeking out peers in writing sessions, and reports that he "craves social interaction".

Nola's framing of Ewan as a child with limited coding practices and an "attitude" was informed by her observations of him in the classroom, and what she saw was influenced by dominant (school) discourses about the skills, knowledge and disposition young children should display as independent readers and writers. Nola saw Ewan as a child "in trouble", a child who "is not interested in doing anything by himself, not a risk-taker". Her initial analysis of Ewan in terms of what he lacked resonates strongly with commonly-held deficit views of children who do not seem to have the skills and experiences that prepare them for school. In workshops and teleconferences over the ensuing weeks this negative framing was situated as part of the complex and complicated problem of unequal outcomes in literacy, and thus open to interrogation and re-theorizing.

DISRUPTING DOMINANT DISCOURSES

In the research workshops the teachers worked collectively on questions and issues around their case study material and analysis of their teaching practice. They began to question taken-for-granted explanations of children's lack of progress at school, and re-imagine possibilities for the children they had identified as "at risk". Inspired by Moll's (1992) ethnographic work and the concept of "funds of knowledge", Nola decided to interview Ewan's mother to find out about his home life and experiences before coming to school. In the interview Nola heard about the reluctant reader and writer she recognized, but she also learned that he spent a lot of time with his father "with fishing rods and crabbing, and he goes fishing and crabbing with his dad most weekends, and his uncle, so he's extremely involved in it ... anything to do with that, and soccer, are some really big interests of his." At a workshop in April she spoke about Ewan as a knowledgeable and articulate child, able to "tell you every part of the fishing rod and the sort of fish and the beaches and lakes ... his oral language is very good."

Finding out about Ewan's "funds of knowledge" enabled Nola to produce different explanations of his literate practices and his patterns of dependence. She noticed the knowledge Ewan already had, his confidence with oral language, and saw them as

resources for connecting him with the literate practices of the classroom. At the same time, in a serendipitous conversation with one of the research team, her response to the question “What would happen if partner writing became a feature of writing sessions instead of a problem?” released a veritable torrent of ideas for incorporating oral language and shared writing into her literacy sessions. Shared ideas and planning with her late career partner were another source for building and working new theory and new practices together.

Nola was beginning to read against the discourses which privileged a particular pathway to literacy, and to take on the task of connecting what Ewan already knew with the new knowledges and practices he needed to become literate at school. In this reframing she located the problem not with Ewan but with her own pedagogy and classroom organization. In this moment we see a shift, a bringing into being of a new position sitting alongside the old (Kamler, 2001, p. 48) – a beginning teacher taking a contradictory position as a teacher researcher, not quite so ready to acquiesce to a dominating and narrow view of what counts as literacy.

REDESIGNING LITERACY PEDAGOGY

In her redesign Nola repositioned Ewan as a knowledgeable student, and at the same time repositioned herself as a teacher researcher, interested in what happens to literate identities when children’s writing becomes a social activity. She made two significant changes to her literacy pedagogy: Ewan’s funds of knowledge became central to developing his resources as a writer, and she legitimated his desire for social connection in the classroom and its literate practices by promoting shared writing.

Nola initiated a writing session with cross-age partners in Grade 7. Positive comments about the improved quality of his students’ writing from the Grade 7 teacher, and her observations of the interest and engagement of the children in her own class, gave Nola confidence to introduce daily partner writing in her Reception/Year 1 class. She structured writing sessions in the classroom around “younger” and “more capable” pairs who worked on planning, writing, editing and revising. Within a few sessions she commented on the different roles that children took up: taking turns to write sentences; asking questions about characters, plot, sequence; illustrating. For Ewan the experience was indeed positive. Nola reported at a teleconference in June that “whenever we talk about shared writing, he’s the first one there.” Nola’s attention to the effects of “not doing writing in isolation” suggests an observant teacher researcher with a new set of discursive resources that enabled her to talk positively about Ewan’s accomplishments as a writer as well as the social relations that supported them.

Publication of children’s writing in class big books became a stronger focus and gave an even more purposeful edge to the children’s writing. Writing for the teacher was replaced with writing and communicating for an audience – peers, other classes and parents. Motivation and energy for writing was high, and children were writing out of class as well as choosing to write in class.

Nola's analysis of the effects of the changes she had made encouraged her to broaden the repertoire of literate practice available in the classroom, and she added another dimension to the social and shared purpose of writing. Inspired by her late career partner and their reading of Anne Haas Dyson's (1993) work with young children as author-performers, she introduced the dramatic performance of children's stories later in the term. Earlier, whole class work on deconstructing children's own writing to introduce different and new elements to stories, and a focus on linguistic structures and features, became the point of departure for role playing – embodying and enacting the text. Nola read the stories and the authors performed, first for themselves and then for Nola's late career partner and her class, as well as their cross-age partners in grade 7.

Late in Term 3 Ewan's purposeful writing-for-performance and funds of knowledge came together in the thematic work in the classroom. Ewan wrote this piece with very little support from mediating others, using his personal word bank and referring back to previous writing on a similar theme.

My Fishing Story
by Ewan

Once upon a time, in the sea, there lived two sharks and they were really silly. They broke the window and their Mum got angry. She put them in the corner. They said sorry.

Later, their Mum said they could go fishing. They went with their Dad on a boat. They caught ten whiting.

They made a fire on the boat to cook the fish. They cooked all the fish and they were yummy. Then they went fishing again.

The End.

Compared with Ewan's earlier work, this sample shows considerable detail and complexity in the narrative structure. However, as with many pieces of Ewan's writing over the term, what is of particular interest is the content. Clearly Ewan's funds of knowledge are strongly present. In the shark character, he represents himself as a boy who is silly, naughty, punished and then apologetic for the "broken window". But he also has an important role to play in the cooperative venture of fishing and cooking the catch. His social world is represented in his writing just as strongly as his knowledge of fish and fishing.

Ewan was justifiably proud of his efforts and was keen to read his piece at school assembly. He rehearsed at home and at school, with and without an audience. Nola observed not the truculent child she had previously tried to manage, but a child deeply engaged; a child whose social identity in the classroom had become more secure as he took up a wider range of literate practices and as well as the resources that supported him to become an independent writer.

In September of the second year (Phase two) of the project, Nola outlined her research question, analysis and redesign at a two-day conference attended by the research team and project teachers from both states. In her analysis of the effects of her redesign,

Nola used the assessments that had earlier held such sway over her decisions about appropriate literacy tasks for Ewan to demonstrate the progress he achieved. She noted that in a matter of months Ewan's measurable literacy skills had improved considerably, from 12 unknown capital and 14 lower case letters in March to only 1 unknown capital and 7 unknown lower case letters by August. At the same time his reading had improved dramatically, from Level 1 to Level 7. She articulated the principles of her curriculum redesign: connecting with students' life experiences in substantive ways; acknowledging paired writing as a legitimate social space for writing; extending children's opportunities for purposeful writing and performance. Reflecting on her pedagogical shifts she commented on the "huge benefits" for all the children in the classroom. The changes benefited not just Ewan, at risk of under-achieving, not participating and not being successful at school, but all the students in the class.

Ewan's achievements were not a result of Nola's insistence on his knowing "sounds and letters", nor just a result of her working towards a "balance" of approaches to literacy teaching. Nola took a teacher researcher stance towards a difficult problem, worked at theorizing and re-theorizing what was happening in classroom literacy events, and tried new strategies and practices. She re-conceptualized literacy as a social practice and the classroom as a community of learners.

Nola read about and seriously engaged with new interpretive resources that enabled her to change the social rules and interactive spaces around producing and responding to writing. She not only made classroom writing a different activity, but generated different ways of speaking about Ewan as a literacy learner. In this process she set aside her self-as-"imposter" and no longer acquiesced to limited notions of literacy that seemed to work hand in hand with deficit framings of children. She authored a new identity as a knowledgeable teacher with an expanded repertoire of practices and new understandings about what counts as literacy in the early years.

SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

When teachers are given the space and the resources to research, theorise, observe, discuss and problem-solve they can make a significant difference to students at risk. However, this takes time and energy and enormous commitment in educational environments increasingly driven by concerns about accountability, measurable outcomes, benchmarks and declining standards in literacy. The professional learning paradigm emerging from this snapshot is characterized by:

- Teachers as researchers/ethnographers in their own classrooms, focusing attention on issues of immediate and local concern
- Teachers as trained, skilled observers of literacy and learning behaviours
- Teachers' agency enhanced through their reconceptualisation of their pedagogical work as, in part, knowledge production
- Teachers drawing on children's "funds of knowledge" to develop and extend their range of literate practices; a focus on children's strengths rather than what they cannot do, without ignoring areas of concern
- Reconceptualizing literacy as social and performative
- Drawing on understandings of literacy as multi-modal.

The project offered possibilities for teachers to sustain and be sustained by professional learning in a research community of teachers and university researchers over a three-year period. Positioning teachers as producers of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Comber & Kamler, 2004), and making a space for teachers to bring renewed professional knowledge to their work, are important principles of practice that might inform the ways in which professional learning is framed. A culture of inquiry, particularly at a time when professional standards are strongly advocated in education circles, might enable teachers – individually and collectively – to think about the complex relations between professional knowledge, experience and identity in generative ways.

Researching children’s learning, especially children teachers are concerned about, is highly motivating and rewarding. Nola’s comments capture some of the energy and excitement that all the teachers shared and talked about as they reflected on their own learning as well as the achievements of their case-study children: “... the benefits for all the children in the classroom are huge, and for myself. I think I’m learning the most out of everybody!”

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