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Transnational Research in critical Literacy: Implications for Uganda

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Introduction

The dominant conception of literacy among governments, policy-makers, and many members of the general public is that literacy refers to the ability, on the part of individuals, to read and write. While this conception of literacy is useful and important, there are some educators who conceive of literacy in broader, sociocultural and political terms, sometimes referring to it as 'critical literacy' (Luke, 1997). Educators who are interested in critical literacy are interested in written text, or, indeed, any other kind of representation of meaning, as a site of struggle, negotiation, and change. As Luke (1997) notes, while earlier psychological perspectives conceived of literacy as the acquisition of particular behaviors, cognitive strategies, and linguistic processing skills, more recent insights from ethnography, cultural studies, and feminist theory have led to increasing recognition that literacy is not only a skill to be learned, but a practice that is socially constructed and locally negotiated. In this view, literacy is best understood in the context of larger institutional practices, whether in the home, the school, the community, or the larger society (Fairclough, 1992; Heath, 1983; Kendrick, 2003; New London Group, 1996).These institutional practices, in turn, must be understood with reference to what is called the 'literacy ecology' of communities, in which there is frequently inequitable access to social, economic, and political power (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hornberger, 2003, Kramsch,2002). The complex ways in which families, communities and schools interact and differ in their literacy practices provide significant insights about the ways in which people learn, teach, negotiate,

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and access literacy both inside and outside school settings (Auerbach, 1989; Delpit, 1995; Hull & Schultz, 2001).

This chapter addresses three contexts in which I have conducted research within a critical literacy framework in order to explore the subtle connections between literacy, power, and educational change. The research projects, which were all collaborative, took place in schools in Pakistan, Canada, and South Africa. In Pakistan, we investigated perceptions of literacy amongst middle-school students involved in a global education project with Afghan refugee children in Karachi (Norton & Kamal, 2003); in Johannesburg, South Africa, we examined the way in which black secondary school students responded to a reading comprehension passage under two different social conditions (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995); in Vancouver, Canada, we studied the appeal of Archie comics for young people (Norton, 2003; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004). In this chapter, I will present the central findings from each of these three research projects, focusing on those insights that are informing work that I am at present undertaking with colleagues and students in Uganda on the relationship between literacy and development.

The Youth Millennium project in Pakistan

In this 2001-2002 research study, students in Karachi, Pakistan, took part in a global social action project called the Youth Millennium Project, which is an initiative of the University of British Columbia (www.ympworld.org). In a project which they called 'One person, one pencil', 80 middle school students, calling themselves 'The Reformers', collected stationery, books, and supplies for a local orphanage serving Afghan refugee children. Part of the project was also to teach the Afghan children 'some simple English phrases'. We were intrigued by the students' interest in literacy, and by their promotion of the English language. We were also curious about the vision of the future held by these students at a time of great social and political instability. We collected data on these issues through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and e-mail exchanges, and our present work in Uganda is informed by the following insights gained.

We were interested to find that the students' conceptions of literacy were consistent with many current theories of literacy in the scholarly literature. The students held the view that literacy is not only about reading and writing, but about education more broadly. 'Literacy plays a vital role in the progress of a country,' said one, while another noted passionately that 'without education our beloved country Pakistan cannot develop.' Other students extended this view to include the notion that a literate person has greater ability to reason than one who is illiterate. One student, for example, noted that a literate person 'can make better decisions' than an illiterate person, while another said that 'if we are not literate we cannot do any work with thinking.' The comment by Fariha perhaps summarises best the views of many of the students:

Literacy is very important because education gives understanding to people. The thinking of an educated person is different and he thinks properly about his country and people. An uneducated person thinks differently. He thinks of taking revenge and fighting with their enemies, but an educated person wants to solve big problems and settle their dispute of territories by arranging dialogues. They realise and analyse the situation and an illiterate person does not have this ability

These same students noted, in addition, that material resources are needed to promote both literacy and development. They pointed out, for example, that what they called the Afghan 'childlabours' in their community could not access literacy classes because they were supporting their otherwise destitute families. Conversely, these Pakistani students were well aware of the resources of wealthier countries, noting somewhat optimistically that 'we know that in developed countries everyone is educated and goes to school; that is why they are rich and have no problems.' For students in Pakistan, literacy must be understood with reference to social, economic, and political power.

Like notions of literacy, the students' responses to the importance of English were complex and best understood in the context of Pakistan's ambivalent status in the international community. In seeking to teach the

Afghan children 'some simple English phrases', students were motivated by the belief that English is an international language and the language of science, technology, and the media. As one said:

The English language is an international language spoken all over the world and it is the language of science. Therefore to promote their education and awareness with modern technologies, it is important to teach them English.

Students noted that English serves as a common language not only across nations, but within nations, and expressed the hope that knowledge of English would redress imbalances between developed and developing nations. With only a few exceptions, the students demonstrated little ambivalence towards the English language, and perceived it as an important tool for social, economic, and political advancement, both within Pakistan, as well as the international community. When students were pressed to consider whether the spread of English had any negative consequences, only two noted that a country's native languages could be compromised, and only one noted that the spread of English would be accompanied by the spread of western culture, which he called 'a bad sign'. In sum, students expressed the hope that a future Pakistan would be one in which all inhabitants were literate, knowledgeable about English, and technologically advanced. They desired a peaceful society, true to the principles of Islam, and respected in the international community.

Insights from these students are best understood in the context of their complex identities in a time of social and political instability, both nationally and internationally. The students value being literate, but recognise that literacy is a privilege. They see themselves as part of a larger community of English speakers, but not as second-class citizens of the USA or UK. They regard themselves as members of the larger Islamic Pakistan nation, but they recognise Pakistan's marginal status in the international community. They desire technological progress, but not at the expense of peace. The research suggests that the struggle for literacy, access to English, and technological progress are interdependent and reflect the desire of a country in a post-colonial world to engage with the international community from a

position of strength rather than weakness. The findings suggest further that English and the vernacular can co-exist in mutually productive ways and that the appropriation of English does not necessarily compromise identities structured on the grounds of linguistic or religious affiliation.

The research raises two central concerns that have particular relevance to the research I am conducting in Uganda. First, like Canagarajah (1999) and Luke (2004), I learnt from the Pakistan study that if we wish to understand the meaning of literacy in students' lives, we cannot ignore the imperatives of the material world and the ways in which resources are distributed — not only nationally, but internationally. Canagarajah (1999) makes a compelling case that in developing countries in which there is a daily struggle for food, clothing, shelter, and safety, researchers cannot indulge in theoretical debates and abstract policies, but need to address the material realities of the communities in which we conduct research. Similarly, Luke (2004) argues that while we as educators might debate the meaning of critical literacy, we may not do justice to the lived experiences of physical and material deprivation in diverse communities throughout the globe. The students in the Pakistani study made frequent reference to the relationship between literacy, the distribution of resources, and international inequities. For these students, and many students in Africa, a community that is literate, skilled in English, and technologically advanced, is also a community that has food, shelter, and peace.

A second concern raised by the Pakistan study was that students might in fact overestimate the benefits that can accrue from the development of literacy and the spread of English. Ahmed's assessment, for example, that people who are educated 'are rich and have no problems' may lead to a crisis of expectations. May (2001) makes a convincing argument that there is no necessary correlation between the adoption of English by developing countries and greater economic well-being. Of even greater concern are the ways in which pedagogical and social practices may be serving, perhaps inadvertently, to reinforce the view held by the students that people who are literate are more rational and intellectually able than those who are not. If students in Pakistan, and perhaps in other parts of the world, equate literacy with rationality and intellectual ability, while at the same time embracing

English as *the* international language of science, media, and technology, is there a danger that they may consider people literate in English as more rational and intellectually able than those who are not? This is an important consideration for my research in Uganda and for research in other countries with many different languages.

Archie comics and the power of popular culture

In a very different context, young readers of Archie comics in Canada had equally interesting insights about reading, writing, and literacy. Archie comics, which address the lives of a group of adolescents in the United States, are popular in Canada, and indeed, many parts of the world, and are widely read by pre-adolescent children, 60 per cent of whom are girls. In embarking on this research, our aim was not to promote or denounce Archie comics, but to better understand the ubiquitous Archie reader, and to determine if insights from Archie readers might have significance for literacy education. The research was conducted in a Vancouver, Canada, elementary school from 1998-1999, and involved 55 elementary students, aged 10 to 12.

While these children had many of the resources that the Pakistani children lacked, we found that they were subject to an equally interesting set of power relationships in their home and school contexts. Students noted that their parents and teachers were frequently dismissive of their love of comic books, describing them as 'garbage' and 'a waste of time'. Archie readers had incorporated such views in their own understandings of literacy, drawing a distinction between what they called 'real reading' and 'fun reading'. 'Real reading,' in their view, was reading that the teacher prescribed; it was 'educational'; it was 'challenging'; but it was seldom 'fun.' The reading of Archie comics was 'fun' because readers could construct meaning, make hypotheses, and predict future developments without trying to second-guess the teacher. The findings suggest that the inequitable relationships of power between teachers and parents, on the one hand, and children, on the other, may limit a child's engagement with text, sometimes rendering it a meaningless ritual. Three related observations from the research are relevant to my research in Uganda.

First, the Archie study suggests that the pleasure children derive from comics, in general, and Archie comics, in particular, is associated with a sense of ownership of the text they are reading. It is this sense of ownership that gives children the confidence to engage with comic books both energetically and critically. For Archie comic readers, their goal in debating the merits of characters, events, and stories is not to anticipate other interpretations and critiques, but to draw on their own knowledge and experience to reflect, engage, and defend. However, although the study provides much evidence to suggest that the Archie reading community was vibrant and social, the children's reading preferences received little recognition or validation from teachers or parents. The study suggests that literacy educators need to understand better rather than dismiss those practices that students find engaging and meaningful, whether inside or outside classrooms.

Second, the Archie research suggests we need a better understanding of why it is that educators are frequently dismissive of popular culture in general and comics in particular. Why did the teachers, many of whom loved to read Archie comics as children, dismiss them as 'garbage' once they reached adulthood? By what process did this transformation occur? How did they, like the children in the study, gradually learn that a 'good' reader is one who reads difficult chapter books, consults the dictionary, avoids comics — but seldom has 'fun'? A number of tentative explanations can be offered. Reading assessments, for one, encourage the use of particular kinds of texts, and teaching performance is frequently assessed with reference to student performance on these tests. Educational publishers, for another, may reap greater rewards when longer books are ordered by the dozen, particularly when accompanied by teacher guides and homework sets. It may also be the case, however, that as we grow from childhood to adulthood, we lose touch with the central interests of young children, and as we become distant from childhood pleasures, particularly of the popular cultural kind, our ignorance turns to fear. In order to re-establish control, we retreat to the rituals and practices that are familiar in schooling, sometimes sacrificing a focus on learning and meaning making.

Third, Luke & Elkins (1998), have raised the question of what it will mean to be a reader and writer in the twenty-first century. They suggest that

what is central is not a 'tool kit' of methods, but an enhanced vision of the future of literacy. Indeed, as scholars such as Kress (1993), Stein (2004), and Kendrick, McKay, and Moffatt (in press), have noted, we need to rethink the very notions of reading, literacy, and learning. The written word, while still important, is only one of the many semiotic modes that children encounter in the different domains of their lives. From drama and oral storytelling to television and the Internet, children in different parts of the world are engaging in diverse ways with multiple 'texts'. The challenge for literacy educators is to reconceptualise classrooms as semiotic spaces in which children have the opportunity to construct meaning with a wide variety of multimodal texts, including visual, written, spoken and performative texts. Scaffolding such a curriculum is a theory of meaning making in which children are not only the users but the makers of systems of communication.

Resistant readings in South Africa

Struggles over conceptions of literacy, and the effects of power on the construction of meaning, are also the subject of my research in South Africa. One particular research project, conducted in 1991, focussed on the pre-testing of a reading text that was being considered for inclusion in a pre-admissions test to the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. The passage in question, drawn from a local newspaper, described police action against a group of monkeys that had eaten fruit from the trees in a white suburban neighbourhood of Durban. The piloting of the text, which we called 'The Monkeys Passage', was undertaken by my Wits colleague, Pippa Stein, with a group of black students in an inner-city Johannesburg school. We found that the students had very different interpretations of the text when the conditions under which they read it changed. Under test conditions, the students read the passage as a simple story about monkeys stealing fruit, but in the communal discussion following the test, the students read the text as symbolic of apartheid injustice. The two questions we sought to address in the research were as follows: Why did the students fare well on the reading test, even though they objected to the content of the reading passage? Why did the meaning of the passage shift so radically from one social occasion

to the next? Such questions are highly relevant for research on reading and assessment practices in Uganda.

The first issue we needed to address was the fundamental paradox that the test-takers generally performed well on the test, despite the fact that many of them objected strongly to its content. In order to address this paradox, we found work on genre analysis particularly helpful. Drawing on Kress (1993), we made the case that a 'genre' is not the more conventional notion of oral or written 'text type' as, for example, a sonnet, term paper, interview, or prayer. Rather, like Kress, we made the case that a genre is constituted within and by a particular social occasion which has a conventionalised structure, and which functions within the context of larger institutional and social processes. In this formulation, the social occasions which constitute a genre may be formulaic and ritualised, such as a wedding or committee meeting, or less ritualised, such as a casual conversation. The important point is that the conventionalised forms of these occasions and the organisation, purpose, and intention of participants within the occasion give rise to the meanings associated with the specific genre. Furthermore, as Kress has demonstrated, the increasing difference in power relations between participants in an interaction has a particular effect on the social meaning of the texts within a particular genre. In essence, in genres where there is great power difference between the participants, the mechanism of interaction, the conventionalised form of the genre, is most foregrounded, while the substance of the interaction, the content, is more in the background.

The standardised test is a particularly powerful genre in that the test event is characterised by strict time limits in which test takers have little control over the rate of flow of information in the activity. The test takers are expected to be silent at all times and to observe rigorous proctoring procedures. Both test makers and test takers recognise that the purpose of the test is to discriminate between readers of varying levels of proficiency with reference to a criterion established *a priori* by the test makers. The expectations are that the background knowledge of the test takers has little relevance to the items being tested, and that the test makers decide what an acceptable reading of the test should be. Thus the relationship between test makers and test takers, a manifestly unequal one, has a direct bearing on the

social meaning ascribed to texts in the standardised reading test (cf. Hill & Parry, 1992, 1994).

In the test situation in our study, when Pippa Stein was introducing and administering the test, there was a great power difference between her and the students: She was the 'test maker', an English speaking professional from prestigious Wits University, while the students were the 'test takers', non-English speakers from a marginalised inner-city secondary school. In this context, the mechanism of the interaction — the conventionalised form of the test event — determined to a great extent how the students 'read' the text. They understood that they were expected to comply with the dictates of the genre, and reproduce the test maker's reading of the text. 'It was just about monkeys'; 'It was easy'; 'I hope we get a passage like this in the matric exam,' the students said. The students were less concerned with a critical analysis of the text than with how 'easy' it was to ascertain a 'legitimate' reading — one that would give them the kind of marks needed for university entrance. Thus, although the students were critical of the text, their identities as test takers helped them perform well in response to it.

The answer to our first question helps us to address our second question: 'Why did the meaning of the passage shift so radically from one social occasion to the next?' The answer to this question, we argue, is a function of the changing identities of the students. During the test event, the students were powerless test takers; during the communal discussion, however, the students were informed, powerful, community members. After the scripts had been duly collected and handed in, the power relations between Stein and the students altered dramatically. Stein sat informally on a desk, inviting comment and criticism. She was no longer the test maker and the students test takers; she was no longer the expert and they the novices. In this context, it was Stein who was the novice and the students the experts. Further, students were no longer isolated and silent: they interacted with one another animatedly; they debated, argued, and laughed together. They had the time to reflect and critique. On this more egalitarian social occasion, the substance of the interaction — the content of the text — became more foregrounded than the mechanism of the interaction, and there was no longer a single, legitimate reading of the text. Students could draw on their background knowledge and

experience to analyse the social meaning of the text, and there was place for multiple readings.

Of relevance to our research in Uganda is the central finding that the meaning of a reading passage can shift in the context of different social occasions, shifting identities, and changing relations of power. The research supports the view that literacy cannot be understood apart from relationships between people, in a given time and place, with differential access to resources. During the second social occasion, the value ascribed to the Monkeys Passage was complex and contested. For some students — most students — the Monkeys Passage was positioned as a text reflecting race and class interests at the expense of less powerful interests. 'It's about black people, who are the monkeys "on the rampage" in white people's homes'; 'It's about who owns the land'; 'It's about violence in our society', said these students. For others, the text remained a simple story about monkeys.

Towards the future: Focus on Uganda

In his recent work on literacy and development, Street (2001) argues persuasively that if literacy projects and programmes are to be effective in diverse regions of the world, researchers need to understand the uses and meanings of literacy practices to local people themselves. In a similar spirit, Canagarajah (1999), drawing on his research in Sri Lanka, argues that understanding the 'politics of location' is central to understanding the literacy practices of a given community. The work of Street and Canagarajah is indicative of the increasing interest in development amongst educators in the broader field of literacy, in which there is also an emerging but vigorous scholarship on linguistic and educational developments in Africa (Kwesiga, 1994; Makoni & Meinhof, 2003, Openjuru, 2003; Parry, 2003). While there is recognition that 'development' is a contested category (Rogers, 2001, p. 204), there is general agreement that improvements in education, health, agriculture, transportation, and economic and political life are important indicators of development. Further, there is general agreement that the participation of women and girls is central for development to advance (Duflo, 2003; Papen, 2001; Parry, 2004; Robinson-Pant, 2001). What

is lacking in the research literature, however, is a more comprehensive understanding of how literacy is related to development, and how women and girls can become more active participants in development initiatives.

The research that I am conducting in Uganda is a response to the need for greater research on the relationship between literacy and development, and in many ways serves as an extension of my literacy research in Pakistan, Canada, and South Africa, in which I have sought to locate literacy within a wider sociocultural context. Together with an exceptional team, I wish to investigate a range of literacy practices in three rural communities in Nebbi, Masaka, and Mbale, focusing in particular on the contribution of women and girls to literacy and development. The members of our team include collaborators Emmanuel Mawanda of Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School in Masaka District, Hissaya Hissani of Uplift Uganda in Nebbi, Kate Parry of Hunter College, New York, and George Openjuru of Makerere University, Kampala. Graduate students Harriet Mutonyi and Shelley Jones of the University of British Columbia are also conducting graduate research on the project. Harriet Mutonyi, a graduate of the Islamic University in Uganda, will bring an important health literacy focus to the study.

Each of the sites in which we are working offers different possibilities for investigating the literacy practices of the community and for drawing on insights from our critical literacy research in other parts of the world. We are working with diverse educational programmes that range from non-government school and family literacy programmes to state-supported secondary schools. The broad research questions, relevant to all three sites, are as follows: (i) What are the range of literacy practices associated with development in each of the three communities? (ii) How, and to what extent, are women and girls engaged with the literacy practices of these communities? (iii) To what extent do the diverse educational programmes provide women and girls with greater access to the literacy practices of their communities?

In addition, as we progress with our research, other questions are emerging. For example, in Masaka District, we are investigating how English textbooks are being incorporated in a Masaka secondary school; in Mbale, we are investigating how schools and communities can work together to develop

effective health literacy programmes. One of our challenges, as a team, is not only to observe, document, and analyse, but to work innovatively with each community in ways that support not only our research agenda, but the community's development goals.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have drawn on my critical literacy research in Pakistan, Canada, and South Africa to make the case that literacy is not only about reading and writing, but about relationships between text and reader, student and teacher, classroom and community. Archie comic readers in Canada and test takers in South Africa have suggested that in contexts in which relationships are equitable, learners have greater access to literacy and are more able to engage actively with text; where relationships are inequitable, access to literacy is limited and engagement with text ritualised. They have also suggested that parents and teachers should not be dismissive of the range of texts, including oral, written, drawn, or performed, that learners find appealing. Further, literacy learners from Pakistan and South Africa have reminded us that material resources are central to literacy development and that power relationships structure engagement with text. The appropriation of the English language represents a particular challenge in this regard. The central finding from our transnational critical literacy research is that 'Reading for All' is about equity for all. We are drawing on these important insights to inform our research in Uganda.

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