Children's literary engagements with texts

Preliminary findings from the Lifelong Literacy research project

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Introduction

The Lifelong Literacy project, funded by the Cognition Trust, asked a deceptively simple 'blue skies' question: might the teaching of reading be changed by the integration of key competencies into the reading programmes of primary schools, and if so, how and to what effect? This paper begins by briefly outlining the context in which this question was framed. It then outlines how a New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) team investigated the potential of the key competencies to change the ways reading is taught. The third and longest section describes one thread of the multiply-stranded findings that emerged. The final section discusses the implications of these findings, both for classroom practice and for further research.

Reading key competencies in a complex frame

The recently released *New Zealand Curriculum* framework (*NZC*) includes a set of five *key competencies* that could potentially stimulate innovation and change in teaching and learning. They are: thinking; using language, symbols and texts; managing self; relating to others; and participating and contributing (Ministry of Education, 2007:12-13). The idea of key competencies originated in an OECD project which had its roots in 1990s advocacy for a focus on outcomes related to employment skills (Reid, 2006). In New Zealand, key competencies were initially described as a replacement for the 'essential skills' of the 1990s curriculum documents, with the following important proviso:

More complex than skills, the competencies draw also on knowledge, attitudes and values in ways that lead to action. They are not separate and stand-alone. They are key to learning in every learning area. (Ministry of Education, 2007:12, emphasis added).

This more complex reading is apparent both in the OECD work (e.g. Rychen, 2004), and in the commissioned research that shaped the adaptation of the OECD competencies for the New Zealand context. For example, initial scoping explicitly linked the competencies to the imperative for fostering lifelong learning in increasingly diverse societies, where the rapid spread of new technologies leads to constant change (Brewerton, 2004). In such contexts, elementary reading skills can be seen as 'old basics', a necessary but not sufficient foundation for participation in community life (Education Queensland, 2000).

Despite these clear signals, early indications were that a skills-based reading of key competencies was likely to be perpetuated unless new possibilities were made explicit to teachers. For example, after the draft curriculum document was released for consultation, *using language, symbols and texts* appeared to be the least easily understood key competency; it was often initially interpreted as the 'literacy and numeracy' competency with an old-basics framing (Boyd and Watson, 2006). By contrast, our early explorations began to point to a much broader and deeper potential, such as knowing when and how to use all the communication tools and conventions of any one discipline area, or any other culturally constructed 'way of knowing', and understanding how aspects of the ways people see and interpret the world are shaped by the tools and ideas they know how to access and use (Hipkins, 2006).

Recent research suggests that the transformative potential intended for new curriculum components such as key competencies is more likely to be achieved if they are read as just one element in a complex curriculum, where the interactions between all the parts determine the learning opportunities that emerge (Cowie, Hipkins et. al., in press). In the context of learning literacy skills, relevant elements of NZC could include: the English learning area, where literary success is seen as 'fundamental to success across the curriculum' (p.18); all five key competencies,

separately and in combination (pp.12-13); the vision statement, where lifelong learners are described as 'literate and numerate' as well as 'active seekers, users and creators of knowledge' (p.8); 'learning to learn' as one of eight principles that are foundational to all curriculum decisions (p.9); and the value of 'excellence, by aiming high and by persevering in the face of difficulties' (p.10).

Finding ways to bring these many elements into alignment could be seen as a daunting and *complicated* planning exercise. We think it is more helpfully interpreted by thinking about classrooms as *complex* systems in which learning can emerge, given favourable conditions. Complex systems are more than the sum of their parts, and the interactions between the various parts are the drivers that allow the whole system to learn and adapt to change. (For an extended discussion of learning and emergence in both physical and social systems contexts, see Capra, 2002.) We wanted to see what learning could emerge from a dynamic integration of key competencies into the classroom interactions that take place during reading instruction in primary classrooms.

Establishing researcher-teacher partnerships

The researchers worked with Year 3-6 teachers from four different schools in the Wellington area. These teachers had been nominated by their schools as practitioners who could bring new understandings back to the other staff, and lead ongoing professional learning during and after the project completion. All four school principals attended the initial workshop. Our aim was to build collective project ownership, working in a learning partnership with different but complementary roles. In some action research projects, the external researchers are positioned as resource people who act as facilitators and critical friends, supporting practitioner-researchers to carry out fieldwork and analysis (Community Economic Development Action Research Project, 2004). In this project, NZCER researchers were positioned as critical friends who would *also* conduct most of the fieldwork, minimising the burden of the research on the teachers involved, and maximising their time for reflection, analysis, and development.

We designed the research to proceed in a manner that we hoped would be 'psychologically spacious' for *all* participants (Garvey Berger, 2004). In an initial workshop, researchers and teachers shared their respective understandings of key competencies and literacy practices, and raised questions for further probing. With the support of the NZCER team, the teachers designed and implemented a programme/approach that they had co-constructed during and after the workshop. Each school's research question was refined after the first workshop, as might be expected once specific contexts were examined further. A pair of researchers worked with a pair of teachers in each school. They visited several times in the first year of the project to: plan together; observe in each teacher's classroom as ideas were enacted; discuss the events that unfolded with the teachers; informally evaluate progress; and plan next steps in the light of the questions raised. The whole group came back together at the end of the first year to share what had been learned. Where possible, the process was repeated in the second year. (As can happen in longer running projects, some teachers moved on from their schools at the end of the first year.) The next section illustrates the process in action, and discusses one thread of the learning that emerged.

Opening up interpretive spaces as children learn to read

> [L]iterary engagements, and the practices of interpretation that are conditioned by those engagements, can become useful ways for people not only to maintain a sense of personal coherence but, as well, to expand their imagined world of possibilities. (Sumara, 2002: xiii)

At first, most of the teachers did not think that key competencies would impact on ways they taught reading; but this view gradually changed, as the transformative potential of the key competencies became more apparent to them. The overarching finding of the project is that literary engagements which foreground key competencies have the potential to open up interpretive space, and so enable readers to expand their imagined world of possibilities.

Interpretation occurs when the world announced by the text connects with the world of the reader. Text details that do not have an explicitly stated meaning open up a space where the reader's unique history of experiences within the world can be brought to the text, and a site for interpretation can be created. For example, the text 'when house prices went up, the area became colonized by arty types' might be interpreted differently according to whether the reader has had a mortgage application turned down by the bank, or works in the film industry, or is concerned about the possibility of the area they live in becoming increasingly affluent. Making personal connections to a text is an important enabler of engagement in reading; this in turn could be key to helping beginning readers 'persevere in face of difficulties' (which is, as outlined above, part of the NZC definition of excellence as value to be fostered).

Not every form of literary engagement opens up interpretive space – some forms close it down. Our baseline data suggested that classroom literary engagement was not necessarily conducive to students making use of their unique history of experiences within the world in order to interpret what they were reading. Instead, in general both students and teachers adopted passive roles as discoverers of the *author's* prescribed meaning. Indeed, the term 'background knowledge' did not usually refer to what readers bring to a text – their remembered, current, and imagined experiences – but rather to information provided by the teacher prior to reading, where the text about to be read included an unfamiliar context and/or vocabulary. However, when teachers began to use key competencies to explore the idea that readers should use *their* experiences to interpret text, a gradual opening up of interpretive space occurred.

In one school, the key competency *participating and contributing* was foregrounded as the means of exploration. Over a period of weeks, our conversations with the teachers had led to a focus on what reading group conversations might look like when students made use of their background knowledge to interpret text – that is, what participating and contributing as a member of a reading group looks like. Our initial observations in this school revealed classes where student background was valued; we had no doubt this was a school where diversity was encouraged, and concluded that it was an environment where students could safely express diverse

views. So the general classroom environment was conducive to using background knowledge. Yet during group reading conversations, students did not bring their background to their work – at least, not explicitly.

There was one notable example, very early on in the research, of a student using her background knowledge to interpret text, but not verbalising her interpretation. During the reading of a text about dogs working in airports to detect quarantine goods, a girl sat throughout the session with her hands over the lower part of her face in what appeared to be disbelief. Although she occasionally contributed to the conversation, nothing she said related to her apparent disbelief. It was only after the session that the teacher explained that the girl's culture considers dogs unclean – they are scavengers and would certainly never work with people in a role considered as important as that implied by the text. Here we had an instance where the student was most definitely using her background to interpret, and her teacher was well aware of her particular interpretation; but neither seemed to appreciate that *participating and contributing* as part of a reading group necessarily involves expressing diverse interpretations, and that without that diversity, students' 'imagined worlds of possibilities' are constrained.

As a result of our analysis of instances such as this, we began to explore the idea of the classroom as a literary environment. We wanted to know what kind of environment helped students to appreciate that using background knowledge to interpret is precisely what *participating and contributing* as a member of a reading group is all about. We decided that work needed to be done on *how the students perceived themselves as readers*.

In general, their conversations around texts were characterised by their uncovering of the author's meaning. We worked with the teachers to change this, so that the students could come to see themselves as having agency and authority as readers. One teacher saw it in terms of the students needing to think of themselves as 'the boss of the text'.

We then experimented with the setting up of classroom environments where the students saw themselves as part of a literary community, mirroring literary

communities outside the classroom. We wondered if, through immersion in this environment, students would come to see themselves as part of an authentic and credible community, and would begin to take on more active reading roles as a result. The teachers began immersing their students in the discourse of literature, with the students speaking, interacting, behaving, valuing, believing, reading, and writing as a literary critics do.

Our aim was to make each classroom literary environment a place where students not only believe in the beauty of literature, but also believe in its potential to illuminate their understanding of what goes on in the social sphere, and to change lives and even societies. Such a classroom would be a place where students believe in the capacity of literature to develop intellectual rigor, while also seeing it as a place to read for pleasure and to relax. This classroom would have space for group discussion and more private spaces for individuals, and the timetable would reflect a belief in the value of literature. We wanted the literary classroom to be a place where students understand that their interpretations are the result of their experiences within the world, and a place where they relate what they read to their lives, to the lives of others, and to other texts. Such a classroom would also be a place where students expect to have informed debates with other readers about the merits of works of literature, and to modify their interpretations in response to the interpretations of others.

In essence, we had constructed a definition of what it means to participate and contribute as a member of a reading group. Teachers began to establish environments which experienced literary critics would recognise – literary classrooms that had an authentic 'feel' to them. However, our assertion that a literary environment would be a place where students expect to have informed debates with other readers about the merits of works of literature highlighted a gap in classroom practice. Students were not yet able to have particularly well informed debates about the merits of a work of literature, because they were not well informed about text construction. The right environment might increase a sense of agency, and so make students more disposed towards using background knowledge to interpret; but students who do not

understand how texts are constructed do not actually have anything to interpret. Accordingly, teachers began to explicitly instruct students in text construction.

To assist the teachers in the explicit instruction of text construction, resources from the Assessment Resources Bank (ARBs) were used, not to assess, but as guides for the teachers on teaching the construction of character. The teachers were also given a resource developed especially for them, called *How much is Cinderella's father to blame for her situation?[1]* In this resource teachers are given an analysis of all the evidence from a version of the Cinderella story which has been written in a way that could lead to multiple readings of the father's blame. Evidence relates to the father's appearance, what he says, what he does, what he thinks. The written text explicitly tells readers some things that are contradicted by the visual text, thereby inviting active interpretation of possible meanings, and creating a space for readers to bring their life experiences to the text. Illustrating the productivity of the collaboration, one teacher, for example, whose first observed lesson had been an exploration of the *author's* meaning, could see exactly what to do with the Cinderella resource once it had been developed, and she proceeded to use it in the manner intended.

Literacy as a participatory competency: what emerges at the intersection of knowledge, skills, and life experiences

The discussion above focuses on *participating and contributing* as the key competency that comes to the fore when teachers work with students to open up engaging spaces for literary interpretation of texts. This does not mean that the other key competencies are not in play, but simply reflects that within the linear constraints of a written text, only one element of a complex whole can be addressed at a time. As the following quotes from some of the children engaged in a literary reading of the Cinderella story show, they actively brought their own life experiences (relating to

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[1] This resource, and two others using the same text, are referred to as 'Thinking Objects' and can be found on NZCER's *Shifting to 21st Century Thinking* website: http://www.shiftingthinking.org

others) to the act of interpretation (thinking), stimulated by the mismatch between the verbal and visual clues (using language, symbols and texts). As the examples of the children's comments below show, what emerges is a sense of active engagement in reading that is likely to be key to persevering with further, increasingly demanding, encounters with written text (managing self), and hence to fostering the lifelong learning dispositions that NZC signals as being central to the vision of who we want our young people to be and become.

> He's an in-between parent. He's flawed – he's an adult. [laughs]

> I think he's forgetful and he lives in a bubble, but there's goodness in him. [At the end] I think he sort of popped out of his bubble and realised what had happened…because, look, on this page he's making sure Cinderella tries on the slipper.

> His decision to marry the stepmother was hasty. He had only known her for *two weeks*!

> He was probably lonely and wanted a new wife. It's like [name]'s mum, she took her boyfriend back because she was lonely – he'd had an affair.

> Maybe he thought marrying someone with two daughters would make life better for Cinderella?

We began this paper by describing the complex construction of key competencies as drawing on 'knowledge, attitudes and values in ways that lead to action' (*NZC*, 2007: 12). This paper illustrates that complexity by highlighting: the understandings of text features that need to be developed (an academic knowledge component); the importance of drawing on children's life experiences (a contextual knowledge component, with associated dimensions of attitudes and values brought from home life to school); and the action involved, as entailing both individual and collaborative interpretation of the text.

The skills of reading as text decoding, while necessary, are by no means sufficient here. This paper gives one small snapshot of what can emerge at the intersection of multiple dimensions of competency, as children learn to become

literate. Many more such examples, robustly underpinned by relevant research, will be needed if teachers are to understand, value, and actively foster the key competencies as 'key to learning in every learning area'.

Acknowledgements

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