



8-4-2013

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Recommended Citation

Velluto, Rachel and Barbousas, Joanna (2014) "Silencing Reading, Silencing the boys: Using action research to investigate silent reading programs and its effects on boys' literacy skills," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1069>

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An On-line Journal
for Teacher Research

Silencing Reading, Silencing the boys: Using action research to investigate silent reading programs and its effects on boys' literacy skills.

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Abstract

Despite the vast amount of literature regarding boys and their underperformance in the literacy realm, only some research indicates that boys' low literacy levels may be attributed to unchallenged literacy classroom practices. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a free voluntary reading program in which students are expected to read (usually books) for a period of time. Observing an SSR period during the teaching practicum as a pre-service teacher, the unstructured nature of the lesson disengaged many of the boys. In the lesson, the students are expected to select a book from the library and read in silence for the duration of forty minutes. How is one to know if our students are engaging in reading practices without some form of dialogue between their peers and the teacher that enables them to share their individual understanding? In the action research, the aim was to explore whether such a program is a vehicle for the production of *critical* literacy skills for male adolescents or if an accepted pedagogical practice, such as SSR is prohibiting our boys from attaining literacy in our schools. This paper refers to Kemmis (2009; 2006) to examine the guiding principles of action research.

Introduction

As a pre-service teacher an action research project is designed as part of an undergraduate degree at the Australian Catholic University, Victoria. The University provides pre-service teachers with an action research unit within the four-year undergraduate degree to bring to the foreground the importance of this methodology in the development of reflective practice. Action research enables participants to deconstruct the practices that are embedded and often unquestioned in social organisations, such as schools (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 2009, 2006). Action research is a tool for inspecting practice, which enables an educator to become more conscious about the strengths and weaknesses of classroom discourses, while also becoming aware of the patterns that

exist within a classroom (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 2009, 2006). This paper will report on an action research pilot project designed and implemented during a Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts Secondary Program. Additionally, the paper will address the importance of action research in pre-service teacher education in developing sustainable reflective practice

Commencing the Action Research Project

During the scheduled lectures in the allocated action research unit, the significance of action research as methodology was examined. As a pre-service teacher about to complete the final professional placement, it became apparent that the relationship between

research and teaching is closely related to an understanding and development of professional practice (Armstrong & Moore, 2004; Kemmis, 2006; McNiff, 1999; Perret, 2003). The final professional experience was scheduled at a prestigious Catholic Secondary Boys School in Melbourne, Australia. As I began to investigate a research inquiry, to be conducted during the professional experience in the school, the intention was to explore whether a Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program is an effective way to develop *critical* literacy skills for male adolescents. During SSR, boys were asked to read, (usually a novel) independently and quietly, without literacy instruction from their teacher. This lesson would be taken place fortnightly as part of their English curriculum studies. The practice of SSR had become situated and fixed in school curriculum and it was our research intention to examine this practice further. During the curriculum and methods units in the education degree, we were exposed to literature and research addressing claims about effective reading strategies and at the same time the importance of critical literacy was also taking shape. There is a vast difference between immersed reading processes and the development of critical literacy skills. There is merit in reading programs, such as Strategy Instruction Programs that involve the overt practice of reading skills. In these programs, teachers provide explicit teaching of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies (Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008). The development of these skills is then practised within small student groups. Rather than internalising critical literacy skills (which often occurs in SSR), students have the opportunities to externalise and develop their reading in an environment, where all readers can achieve.

In the preliminary visits to the school where the completion of the final professional experience placement was to take place, it was recognized that many boys found it difficult to concentrate on their reading for a long period of time. They became quite restless during the SSR program. Other reluctant readers changed their book constantly. For

those reading silently, we questioned whether they understood what was being read and to what degree were they challenged by the vocabulary in the text. The aim was to investigate the significance of SSR in increasing and/or prohibiting adolescent male students from developing critical literacy skills. The following research question guides the action research investigation; is the potential for critical literacy for boy readers being *silenced* by sustained silent reading programs?

Literature Review

In the early 20th Century J.M. Barrie created the fantastical island *Neverland*, in which boys were free from participating and performing in discourses of reality. He identified these boys as *lost*. Crisis rhetoric has emerged over the last decade about boys' underperformance in literacy and girls' academic advancements (Alloway, 2000). In an attempt to ameliorate boys' underachievement, the incorporation of *boy-friendly* curriculum has been endorsed as a basis for gender reform (Watson, Martino, & Kehler, 2010). Such shifts in pedagogical practices have not equipped boys with the self-technologies to critique their social construction as gendered subjects (Gilbert, 1998). Rather, the classroom has become the new *Neverland*, a site where boys can perform their masculinities, emancipated from being critical of their own performances. As literacy instruction becomes fixed on catering for the homogenous experiences of the *boy*, rather than the individual, the potential for valuing literacy development as reflections of students' diverse social practices diminishes (Watson et al., 2010). The partnership between boys and literacy is somewhat contextually complex. For male students the avoidance of academic work is compliant with the hegemonic realm of masculinity (Maynard, 2002). The participation of the male is undesirable in the literacy classroom. Although it appears some boys reject school reading to assert their male identity, these same *lost boys* are confident readers in their home literacy practices, finding and exploring multiple texts in their

out-of-school contexts. The mismatch between home, school language, and cultural patterns has denied boys the active engagement of literacy at school (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997). Although there is merit in immersion reading programs such as Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), the need to make more explicit links to literacy activities by focusing on the importance of social interactions and discourse will develop the independent skills of boy readers in the literate process.

Is silence golden?

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a free voluntary reading program, which is regularly implemented in high schools in Melbourne Australia. The program is designed to provide scheduled time for students to read (usually books), of their choice. In a lesson, students are expected to select a book from the library and read in silence for the duration of forty minutes. While research on the benefits of SSR is limited, many schools have experienced success with the program when it is facilitated accordingly. In a case study conducted by Barry, Huebsch & Burhop (2008), student motivation to read increased due to daily sustained silent reading sessions. Rather than imposing upon students to read books, the teacher allowed students to select “anything: novels, informational books, technical manuals, newspapers, magazines, articles from the Internet, and even books for homework” (Barry et al., 2008, p. 60). Students commented that this time was valuable as often they do not get time to practise reading at home. While the opportunity to read a variety of texts may have ‘opened the floodgates to reading’ for these students; the efficacy of the program was due to the ‘permission’ of students asking questions about their chosen texts (Barry et al., 2008, p. 63). Students felt accountable for their learning, as conversations about reading strategies emerged from the SSR context, rather than through direct instruction (Barry et al., 2008).

Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzel (2003) investigate whether allowing time for students, “unfettered, self-selected silent

reading” increases student engagement in reading (p. 48). Their research examines that silent reading without any explanation, scaffolding or exchange of ideas does not substantially improve reading literacy skills. Vygotsky (as cited by Bryan et al., 2003) emphasised that it is when language is *externalised* to an audience that it becomes attained by the individual. Literacy work should therefore serve a purpose in creating social connectivity in the classroom. SSR programs need to be revised to allow students to share what they read with their peers, in order for them to project and reflect upon their literary personas (Bryan et al., 2003).

In *Boys, Masculinities and Literacy: Addressing the issues*, Martino (2003) explores gendered literacy practices by further critiquing post-feminist paradigms which argue that the needs of boys are not being met in the literacy classroom due the feminization of schooling. A classroom which involves reading and writing acts as a stage, where the boys’ masculinities are self-regulated and played out, and their performances are surveyed and policed by their peers. In SSR, students are expected to remain introspective and passive, qualities commonly attributed to those of the female. Martino (2003) indicates that literacy programs such as SSR encourage boys to assert hegemonic or normative masculinities and thus appear disengaged in reading, as partaking in such lessons will undesirably lead to emasculation. Rather than labeling boys as incompetent readers, teachers need to become more critical of the gendered practices embedded within such forms of literacy learning.

Research conducted by Woolcott Pty. Ltd (2001) indicates that successful secondary school reading programs often emulate programs already adopted in many elementary schools: “Reading to the whole class, by the teacher or student volunteers, from books the young people will enjoy...would be more fruitful than simply leaving them with a box of books to choose from – some of which look old and dated” (p. 9). Through activities such as these, peer

dialogue and a common and acceptable language for talking about texts are activated in the classroom. As students begin to appreciate and value literary discussion as being engrained within the culture of the school, they too will more readily seek out texts of a particular genre addressed in class and immerse themselves in the metalanguage of those texts.

As the Australian Curriculum is taking shape – the first National curriculum framework in Australia - the focus on how literacy is defined, is a key consideration for curriculum policy makers. Education practitioners need to become more sceptical of literacy practices that render the personalised voices of students as unintelligible (Watson et al, 2010). Teachers must provide students with access to differences of “knowing about the world” associated with *both* masculinity and femininity if they are to become interactive citizens of their realities and self-reflective of their prescribed gender identities (Alloway et al., 2002). Therefore the act of reading should be framed around developing robust ideas about the world and formulating literacy skills that support the construction of meaning making.

The Purpose of Action Research as a Methodology

Through a process of planning, taking action, observing that action, and then reflecting on all the steps in the action process, the design of this project is framed around action research methods (Henning, Stone, & Kelly, 2009). It was essential to map the elements of the SSR program and the expectations on students during SSR. As a pre-service teacher this methodology directly informs my practice and allows me to examine a common-sense structure within a school – in this case, the Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program.

The aim of action research as a methodology is to “change three things: practitioners’ *practices*, their *understandings* of their practices, and the *conditions* in which they practice” (Kemmis, 2009, p. 463). Essentially, action research should disrupt existing configurations of knowledge and practice in

order to critically examine the practices that are accepted and normalised. The fundamental aspects of action research are to critically inspect a practice aimed at transforming that practice by enabling and implementing a process where self-critique can affect change (Kemmis, 2009, 2006). Therefore, the focus of this project was to interrogate the practices of SSR programs and to examine the viability of the claims being made for its inclusion in learning and teaching - it aptly suited an implementation of an action research model.

The Research Design

To inform the research project project, we collaborated with a class of 27 Grade 7 students, approximate ages ranging from 11-12 years. Through an action research methodology and an interpretive paradigm I designed the project to examine the SSR program that was being implemented in the school. Students took part in SSR during a period of time and incremental changes and shifts to the program were made, through an action research focus, to ensure a reflective process to an existing program was being moderated. Observations were designed to examine student actions or inactions during the implementation of SSR and teacher/researcher anecdotal records were also kept of two SSR 50-minute library lessons.

The school’s library is extensive, housing an impressive catalogue of print-based and digital texts, forty computers, an individual study area and two separate rooms for classes. During SSR, students read silently in one of the library rooms, which are furnished with lounges and cushions. The class also completed a “Reading for Reality” questionnaire prior to the study, in an attempt to ascertain the boys’ attitudes towards reading. The research questions included:

1. When you read the word “silent,” what are some of the first ideas that come to your head?
2. What do you think makes a ‘good’ or competent reader?

3. Do you enjoy silent reading? Why or why not?
4. What do you like to read at home? Please tick what you like to read (books, comics, magazines, newspapers, websites, blogs, recipes, other etc.) and indicate some examples of the texts.
5. Do members of your family enjoy reading in their spare time? Yes/No?
If yes, please state who.
6. What skills would you like to improve on in your reading?
7. Do you have any ideas about how teachers could improve their students' reading skills?

Findings

During the preliminary observations the situational analysis that was conducted of the school structures, resources, policies and staff attitude about the SSR program. The purpose of the preliminary observations was to ascertain some common-sense beliefs about the SSR program and the structures that inform the implementation. The following preliminary findings are constructed under thematic headings to link the results to the design of the action research project.

To lose oneself

Students spend the first couple of minutes of the silent reading block deciding where to sit. Many students wish to locate themselves away from the teacher's peripheral vision.

“Miss....what can we read?”

It was evident that many students had difficulty selecting texts that were suitable for them. Students were unsure whether they were able to read a newspaper or a comic book. They spent more time seeking approval of the appropriate text type rather than selecting something they were interested in. When asked if students needed assistance in selecting an appropriate book to read, five students indicated that they have specific recommendations.

Absolute silence

In these lessons, students are expected to remain silent for the duration of the reading period and are usually reprimanded for talking amongst each other. In one particular observation, about halfway through the lesson, the majority of the class was absorbed in their text. Some students engaged in sharing their texts with their neighbouring peers.

Changing the rules

In one lesson before students commenced silent reading, they were told that they would be expected to share what they were reading with the class. Many of the boys let out a groan: “*Miss...I thought silent reading was supposed to be silent.*” For these boys, reading silently made them feel as if they were not completing a school task or rather a learning outcome did not have to be met during SSR.

The last twenty minutes of the reading period was used so students could present their texts to the class. From these presentations, we explored the kind of genres boys enjoyed reading and why. This process worked well as it allowed students to present their individual reading of a text to the collective identity of the class. Students were able to externalize the literacy skills they had been ‘silencing’.

Discussion

While Sustained Silent Reading celebrates the skilled readers by allowing them time to explore their definitive reading practices, it poses risks for those who are disengaged, as the program does not reflect the dynamic ways in which literacy skills are developed and used within society.

For some boys a competent reader was somebody who demonstrated an understanding of the text with a capacity to demonstrate literacy skills: “Someone who can understand what they're reading and has a large vocabulary”. Some students commented on the importance of being “fluent.” One boy also indicated; “a good reader is someone who enjoys reading and reads often.” These student responses

indicate that a competent reader is one that values the practice of reading. Literacy learning in 'silence' rejects the social critical perspective of literacy, which is essential for our 21st century learners to be able to decide effectively, which skills they will need to combine, and refine, in order to engage in current and future Discourses (Luke & Freebody, 2000). The boys' diverse responses in defining what a good reader is and deciding which reading skills they would like to improve on, give a clear indication of the absence of a concrete definition of literacy and a reflection of the classroom being a space for the negotiation of competing literacies. 26 percent of boys do not read at home which also mirrored the percentage of adolescent males who reported to lack a reading role model at home. Many students specified that a variety of family members (including siblings and grandparents) modeled reading at home. During the mandatory silent reading time some students yearned for more support in their text selection. *"It's okay, it can be good if you are reading a good book"*. Therefore, the 'good book' became the discriminator for valuing reading. However, when the SSR program became more structured, i.e. students were expected to present ideas in their texts to their peers, student involvement increased. Students were reading for a purpose, to present information relevant to them for their peers; this activity replicates the types of functional literacy that occur within our society. "The reading of texts is an occasion for gathering, not an act necessitating separation and individualised activity. The "good reader" is a public reader, a performing reader, and the goodness of [his] reading is measured not by the private he can enter" (Newkirk, 2002, p. 52).

The uniqueness of the individual is devalued in a practice that demands sustained silence and inhibits literacy learning as being perceived as part of a social practice. By allowing students to form collocations with the word, *silent*, attempts were made to gauge their preconceptions about a literacy activity that is completed in silence. The boys' connotations with the word, varied from

positive to negative. All twenty-seven boys responded with the word "quiet." One boy indicated that "silent" made him think of the word "serenity." However, for most of the boys, being *silent* demonstrates the ability to "make no sound at all." The respondents also used the words such as, "mute", "test," "in your head," and "consequences." For these Year 7 boys undertaking a task in silence becomes a negotiation between 'muting' their own practices "in [their] head." Their individualistic ideas are to be reserved for themselves only. They experience anxiety or as one boy put it, "nervous tension," as they are expected to comply with these conditions or face "consequences."

While students are expected to be using literacy strategies, when participating in silent reading, their ability to do so cannot be monitored by their teacher, as the student's reading experience is 'silenced.' If the vocalization of literacy strategies is meant to empower students in their literacy learning, then unquestioned literacy programs such as SSR which condone literacy development as a 'silent' practice may disempower students. "They [boys] deserve to engage with an examination of... how performance of masculinity may be at odds with performances preferred in literacy classrooms" (Gilbert, 1998, p. 22). Pedagogical programs need to assist students in making sense of critical literacy skills, which will allow them to decode the familiar and unfamiliar social events. How can we expect students to perceive reading as a functional practice if it is 'silenced' and not deconstructed during classroom practice?

Conclusion

While silent reading requires students to construct personal realities from dialogues with the self, it is the expression of these inner dialogues through social interaction, which will collectively transform students' literacy abilities. Literacy is therefore more than the capacity to decode, make meaning and construct texts within certain domains; rather it can also be understood by perceiving the identities of individuals as reflections of their unique social practices. It is this

definition that sees literacy as a process unique to each individual, exclusive of gender and supports the differences in student experiences in our classrooms. It is clear that current pedagogical practices need to be enriched through the personalization of literacy learning, in order for students to have a voice in their literacy practices.

Educational research that inspects learning and teaching must be coupled with the inner dialogue of teachers' metacognitive thinking about their teaching practices and an examination of normalized practices. Teachers need to externalize their reflections, and engage in discussion with their peers, in order to broaden the horizons for all stakeholders in the school community. The teaching profession will shift beyond its Neverland state when teachers seriously consider the recommendations made by action research projects, and liaise with other education practitioners, as to how these future goals can be realized within school contexts. Perhaps, it is not only students being silenced in some of our archaic practices but also the voices of our teachers. Action research gives teachers the power to be heard. Therefore, if we take the view that action research is a "practice-changing-practice" and as a practice shapes other practices then 'action research might thus be thought of as a meta-practice' enabling teachers and policy makers to work towards transformative practices (Kemmis, 2009, p. 467).

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