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Why won't they learn?

A contrastive study of literature teaching in two Cape Town high school classrooms

**A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Education**

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Declaration

This work has not been submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

Signed by candidate

Date: June 2017

Abstract

Literature is included as part of most English curriculums around the world. South Africa is no exception, and students are expected to study novels, poetry and plays as part of their school language curriculum. There are many debates about the best way to teach these texts in the classroom.

However what is often overlooked is that reading literature, like reading anything, is primarily a social activity, and as such has been 'learned'. The way we respond to literature depends on the social activities, attitudes and behaviours - what can be called the practices - of our social grouping that holds value for us. What many teachers hold as the 'right' way of reading and responding literature reflects their commitment and participation in a particular set of practices, whereas students come to class from backgrounds that are different from theirs, and with different commitments.

This thesis uses a case-study, ethnographic approach to study two teachers' English classrooms in a working class high school to in order to examine how practices around literature were negotiated between teachers and students who came from working class backgrounds.

Despite differences in personality and beliefs, both teachers in the study approached literature study in a limited way - the way that examinations prescribe - viewing the text as a given that had to be mediated for the students so that they were able to 'get the message'. The students in both classes were generally unruly, or passive, with about less than half the class focusing on the lesson at any one time.

This may partly be ascribed to this limited approach to literature. However this approach has been used more successfully in other schools, and I argue that the reason for the 'failure' of these lessons lay beyond the classroom walls. Working class students who want to perform adequately at school have to, in some ways, give up something of the values and beliefs of their backgrounds, and develop a new set of understandings of who

they are, a new identity that incorporates these practices. It is unlikely that this investment is going to be made without some reward or fulfillment.

In the classes in this study, students had no motivation to join this new literature club that might even affect their participation in other domains. They did enough to get by, to pass through the lessons and exams, but were engaged in very little real meaning making in the classroom. Literature study remained a foreign and sometimes puzzling requirement for examination purposes.

University of Cape Town

INTRODUCTION

This thesis was first going to be about how students in a particular school discussed literature in class: what terms they used, how they were being apprenticed into literature study? I collected data from two classes with this aim in mind. However it became increasingly apparent that in both classes students hardly engaged with the literature presented, and had no commitment to the apprenticeship process. The question as to why this was became a process of unpacking Russian dolls.

Was it the teachers' approaches? The two teachers in the study had differing styles and approaches, but the general atmosphere of the classrooms were similar, with the focus having to be on control rather than real engagement with literature topics. These experiences were also familiar to me as an experienced English teacher myself, in various contexts.

So I felt that the answer to my new 'question' lay beyond the classroom walls (and so more Russian dolls appeared). The teachers themselves are limited by demands of the curriculum, and the general ethos of the institution they are working in. There are also theories of identity, class and education that help to explain why learning and teaching cannot be seen as isolated practices between neutral individuals. All of these factors help to explain what was happening in these classrooms. The research focus shifted from a study of how students were learning to an examination of why they were not learning, hence the title of my thesis.

The limitation of this thesis is that each Russian doll came with its own theorists, analyses and applications worthy of whole theses in themselves. I have only swept over some of them superficially, and have left some hardly touched. However I hope the strength of this thesis is to demonstrate that what happens in the classroom cannot be separated from the world that created it. The students' own worlds and identities outside the classroom can mean that the students have no interest in 'joining the club' to which teachers offer membership.

CHAPTER ONE: Teaching literature: the theories

The power of literature

I started this research with a strong commitment to the great claims made for literature, and its effect on readers. "All great literature is essentially subversive. Because it explores, questions, suggests but seldom if ever instructs or preaches, its effect is profoundly transformative and moral." (Pereira, 1979, quoted in Reid, 1982: 31) Literature "is one of the most natural and productive ways in which we make sense of and share our understandings of the world." (Langer, 2000:4)

I also believed in the power of literature in the classroom. Literature has been described as a powerful learning tool, helping students to develop empathy, critical thinking, and imagination. Finazz (1997:6-12) describes how literature can help to "eliminate ethnic and cultural illiteracy" as children read about other people different from themselves. Literature is said to develop language and 'cognitive abilities' such as classifying skills, concept development, and higher-level thinking skills such as comparing and hypothesizing. Books are said to help with social and emotional development when issues raised in children's books relate to the needs of various psychological and developmental stages. Literature is also said to develop children's artistic development as children are challenged to use their imaginations.

Jacobs and Tunnell (2004:314) describe the transformative power of literature on various individuals, including a school dropout who robbed a bank, killed a teller and was sent to prison for life. There he discovered the love of reading, particularly non-fiction. "I came to realize that a lot of people had terrible beginnings, but they lifted themselves up and gave something back to the world." The prisoner went on to edit a now famous convict magazine that has been nominated for many awards.

At a personal level, literature has certainly played a major and in many ways transformative role in my life. I remember feeling comforted by reading about children facing similar challenges to me, and as an adult feel a wry recognition when I meet my own insecurities and fears in texts. I also have gained an insight into other

ways that people view the world, and have learned more about other countries and realities from fiction than any other texts. But it also affirms my own world, somehow, and gives me almost a spiritual satisfaction.

However my intentions to transmit a love of literature through my teaching have not always been successful. Students have been bored by the set works, and sometimes even threatened by books that I found challenging and stimulating, with the result that I have found myself using the threat of the exam to make them continue reading. I have wanted to believe that books can change people, and so was interested – and in a way rather dispirited – by Beverley Naidoo’s (1992) study which describes how a class of white middle-class English students studied novels with overt anti-racist themes for one year. They also had visiting black writers, workshops, role-plays and reflections. Many girls did seem to become more sensitised to issues of race, but one or two boys became even more racist – possibly as a way of rebelling against the school curriculum. She concludes that “the notion that we can address racism simply by extending empathy through literature is problematic” (Naidoo, 1992:136). Why did this happen? What happens to literature in the classroom? These questions led me to research literature lessons in more depth.

Overview

What follows in this first chapter is the conceptual framework that helped to shape my research. I give a brief history of how literature has been approached in western classrooms, and look at current debates about what is important in literature teaching, and how this can be achieved in the classroom. Then I describe New Literacy Studies and current work on literature, power and identity to help to understand why students and teachers can have such different understandings of what teaching literature entails. The implications that these ideas have for practice are described. I also touch on the theoretical framework offered by discourse analysis that helped to form my understandings.

In chapter two I describe the methodology I employed in the study. I used a qualitative, ethnographic approach, and the theoretical tools I used to work with to shape my data were drawn from concepts developed by New Literacy Studies and

critical discourse analysis. I also describe the physical location and participants of my study.

In chapter three, I give a broad overview of my analysis, and conclude that it is important to be aware of the context of these transcripts to be able to understand what is happening within the classroom. This provides the matrix for the following two chapters.

Chapters four and five are analyses of the processes in the lessons I observed. The two teachers are obviously drawing on different understandings of the functions of literature in the classroom, but both share the approach implicit in the examination requirements: the text is the message, and they are the experts helping learners to decode it. Chapter four focuses on the teachers' methodologies, and the relationships with the students, and chapter five focuses on the teachers' attitude towards and use of the texts themselves. In the last chapter I extend the argument that many of the reasons for the students' lack of investment in these lessons are found in the larger context, as the students unconsciously reject the middle-class understandings of reading that demand the development of new identities on their part. Finally I look at the implications of these findings for future research and practice possibilities.

History of approaches to literature teaching

A communal affair

Educational authorities' understanding of what constitutes reading has changed over time. The descriptions above of the emancipatory potential of literature for individual readers certainly reflect a modern understanding of the role of literature in our lives. In the nineteenth century reading was a communal, oral, affair with the emphasis being on memorization rather than comprehension. (Freebody et al, 1991:436) Students' reading would be evaluated by how well they learned the texts off by heart and recited them, rather than having to demonstrate any understanding of them. This was also inoculation against "the potential subversiveness of [some of the] literature" included in anthologies chosen for study (Johnson, 1997:16).

The timeless canon

Literature teaching shifted earlier in the last century to a much more individualist, elitist approach, where literature classes were text based, along with the assumption that the writer had a “message” that educated critics needed to explain or mediate for readers (Lehman, in press,5). The qualities of the canon were taken to be unquestioned absolutes, and the context in which the writers lived and worked was deemed irrelevant. (Art is timeless, after all.) Literature was viewed as texts (judged worthy using absolute and neutral standards) that need to be dissected (and worshipped) by homogenous students.

Reader-response theory

However this top-down approach to literature shifted and the idea of the passive reader and powerful text was challenged. An influential concept has been what is called the “reader-response” theory, associated with Louise Rosenblatt, who suggested that literature is “the experience between the reader and the text” (Lehmann, in press, 3). For Rosenblatt (2005:68-70) it is the reader who breathes life into the text, and each reader will create their own relationship with the text, different from those constructed by others. As teachers then our subject matter is “the transactions between readers and books” rather than the books themselves. Rosenblatt argued that conventional literature activities have led students to see literature as “an academically and socially required exercise in words” and “not something to be related to the ongoing stream of [their lives]” Thus the teacher needs to “*permit* [writer’s emphasis] a personal response to what is read”. (However although Rosenblatt argued that these interpretations needed to be recognized and validated, she seems to privilege some readings over others: “lessons should be aimed at “enabling the students to perform more and more fully and more adequately in response to texts”” (Lehman in press, 4.))

Rosenblatt’s “reading response” theory is in some ways reflected in the “whole language” approach to teaching reading in early childhood literacy, where reading is not viewed as merely about passively breaking the code but as an active meaning making activity. There is an “unstated contract between the reader and the writer” (Goodman, 1984: 80). The reader constructs the text, and is transformed in the process of knowing. Each person reads a text slightly differently: “the reader’s text

involved inferences, references and coreferences based on schemata that the reader brings to the text” (Goodman, 1984: 97). Post-modern enactivist literature study also stresses that what we understand of our reading is very much determined by who we are, and what we are concerned with: “...the meanings arrived at through reading arise in the complex interplay of authorial intention, textual representation practices, readers’ experiences, and contexts of reading” (Davis, Sumara, Luce Kappler, 2000:232).

Other writers critique this emphasis on personal response: for example, when students read a text that is completely alien to them, what resources do they have to make sense of it, if all they are encouraged to do is to relate it to their own lives? And a more fundamental limitation is the assumption that people respond to texts in natural ways. “An individual’s literary, linguistic and life experiences are not socially, culturally, or institutionally innocent, but have been constituted within these frameworks.” (Lewis, 1999: 121). Similarly, Freebody et al (1991:440) critique the concept of schemata (as described in the preceding paragraph) for overlooking the power structures that have shaped these individual lenses.

The reader in context

However despite these criticisms, the “reader-response” approach has provided the foundation for new theories, using sociological, psychological and cultural understandings to expand an understanding of the relationship between reader and text. Contemporary literary theorists draw on explorations of context, identity, community and power relations in order to understand or rather map the relationship of text and reader. Thus reading response is no longer understood “simply as a transaction between texts and readers but as a construction of text meaning and reader stances and identities within larger sociocultural contexts. Readers, text and contexts are studied as constituted by culture and history.” (Galda and Beach, 2001:66)

Current debates

Classroom concerns

Although much is written about the importance of literature in the classroom without much exploration of context (see Jacobs and Tunnell, 2004, Finazzo, 1997), there also

are various debates about desirable methods of exploring the relationship between text and reader in the classroom. Some contemporary writers argue that the authorial intention cannot be overlooked, and that if readers' understandings of a text are radically different from the author's intention, literary understanding is limited. Readers need to take "account of the beliefs and attitudes that the authors expected in their readers" (Rabinowitz and Smith, 1998, quoted in Lewis, 1999:121). This does not mean that they have to identify with this audience. Indeed, they can develop a reading of "resistance". This offers interesting possibilities in the classroom, but its limitations may be that marginalized students are constantly being required to adopt the mainstream perspectives expected by many authors before being able to challenge any assumptions presented. (Lewis, 1999:121)

Many writers recommend the use of texts that reflect the lives and concerns of the students being taught, so that they learn to identify with fictional characters, and recognize that literature can explore issues familiar to them (see for example Foley, 1995:27). Researchers recommend that other sorts of texts and modes are studied in the classroom, either to practice ways of reading with familiar texts, or to examine the social and political functions of popular culture (Lewis, 1999:25). Many contemporary writers emphasise the need for critical literacy, for students to be aware of the implicit assumptions and ideology of the text (See for example Freebody, Luke and Gilbert, 1991). The challenges of this are explored a little later.

Lessons from New Literacy Studies

Lewis (1999:125) argues that it is both important and sometimes difficult to remember that particular ways of reading are conventions rather than natural processes. This understanding of the processes of reading literature can be usefully linked to arguments in literacy studies. New Literacy Studies theorists (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton, 1994) have challenged the idea that reading and writing are a neutral set of skills. They argue that it is extremely difficult to define "literacy" in any absolute sense, as people in different contexts have different access to and different forms of social practices with regard to reading and writing. There is no such thing as reading and writing, says Gee (1990), only reading and writing something. Literacy is always a situated literacy, involving particular ways of making and taking from text, for specific purposes, as part of different human activities.

In this light, the same way that students read literature (or anything else for that matter) is not a neutral personal skill and response but rather is a socialized experience. Thus Griswold (in Freebody et al, 1991:437), in her study on “literary response”, concluded that “readers’ senses of literary quality are culturally constructed”, framed by learned practices. This applies to any sort of literary practice. For example Heath (1983) demonstrated many ways in which two sets of American working class communities each “took hold” of literacy in different ways, and used it for purposes within their social relations. However, this literacy was not recognised by mainstream schools, and the children from these communities generally did not succeed at school. (Heath, 1983) Although texts can produce many readings, not just one, invariably one is “institutionally approved and validated”. (Cranny-Francis, 1996:173).

This means that my own experience of literature, seemingly such a natural development, was acquired as a primary discourse, or what Heath (2001) calls a particular “way of taking” from the books I read, modeled by my social class in general and my English teacher mother in particular. Therefore it is not enough just to analyse the methods and approaches to literature so as to find out what is going wrong in literature lessons. Like any other lesson, literature lessons are sites of practice that are shaped by wider dynamics of power, social control, divisions of labour and identity processes.

Literature, power and identity

Discourses and domains

Gee’s (1990) concept of discourse and his more recent understanding of semiotic domains (Gee, 2001), are also helpful for purposes of understanding the workings of classrooms. According to Gee (1990:5), “Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing ... by specific groups of people”. We play different roles in society, and so we are members of many discourses. Gee distinguishes between the “primary discourses” that we acquire early in life, and “secondary discourses” that we learn in various ways. Gee describes the difficulty for “non-mainstream students” to master secondary discourses

at school, as he posits that discourses are acquired, rather than learned (Gee, 1996:146).

Gee (2001) extended the idea of competing discourses into the concept of the semiotic domain “which recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, and so forth) to communicate distinctive types of messages.” (Gee,2001:12). These semiotic domains rest on “situated meanings” that are “negotiated by people in interaction.” (Gee,2001:13). The assembling of situated meaning “is always relative to your socio-culturally defined experiences in the word and, more or less, routinized (“normed”) through cultural models and various social practices of the socio-cultural groups to which you belong.” (Gee, 1999:47) For students to take on the “institutionally approved and validated” understanding and response to literature they must be successfully inducted into this new semiotic domain.

Even writers who are challenging the status quo and so have overt political agendas of conscientising students and developing their awareness of power relations write about responses to literature as if they were typically decontextualised or generalized, rather than situated and specific: “students lend part of themselves to the stories as they read them: they become a part of the world of the characters in the books... and they emerge from the fictional worlds with a better understanding of their own” (Kornfield and Prother, 2005: 221). It is very difficult, when you are so used to responding to literature in a certain way, to recognize your own induction into this particular domain.

Teachers who espouse the qualities of creativity and originality in responses to literature forget that these sorts of terms are all “culturally bound” (Kapp, 1995) and part of a particular semiotic domain. Thus Cranny-Francis (1996:174) describes modern Australian educational discursive practice as “liberal humanism”. In questions that demand what is called a “personal response” in Australian literature exams, honest and certainly personal answers that incorporate racism, prejudice or misreading of what is accepted as the writer’s intention will not score high marks. Students have not mastered the vocabulary of this particular semiotic domain, and have understood “personal response” as a request for their own opinions, whereas

what is being demanded is the institutionally validated response. Even those students who have mastered the rhetoric often repeat politically correct statements in a “disturbingly cynical fashion”, but do not actually deconstruct their own prejudices (Cranny-Francis, 1996:182). Freebody et al (1991:448) also describe how particular practices in the classroom are actually about teaching what they call an “ideological practice”. “The effect of such pedagogical practices may be the achievement of a self-ascription of particular morally regulatory positions and practices – the adoption of the ideological and textual practice as one’s own.” Thus students become part of the “secondary discourse” or semiotic domain to some extent – or just learn enough of the vocabulary to get by.

Freebody et al (1991), at school level, and Kapp (1995), at university level, both make calls for making the ideological positioning behind the text and its treatment visible. Freebody et al (1991:443) analyse literature texts in the classroom to demonstrate how the text “covertly positions readers into ordering their sense-making procedures within a covert ideological perspective”. Kapp describes how various English lecturers in one department work from very different theoretical frameworks that are never made explicit in their teaching. If we make our theoretical underpinnings explicit, or point out how texts position us, the idea is that it will be possible to expand what students understand as “literacy” to include critical literacy – to see how “textual discourses can make, twist, and remake literacy” (Freebody et al, 1991:451).

However, an important adjunct to Gee’s work is that not only is it advantageous for students to have had previous experience of the vocabulary and design of the new domain (as described in Heath’s work) but they must “be willing and motivated to engage in extended practice in the domain in such a way that they take on and grow into a new socially-situated identity, a identity that they can see as a fruitful extension of their core sense of self” (Gee,2001:14). Thus students need to feel that they want to “belong” to this domain. What is the “entry price”, as Gee calls it, to join? What identities and values will they have to give up to become part of this particular community?

If students have a vested interest in other identities then merely giving them alternative information is not enough. McKinney and van Pletzen (2002:2) describe

how their course for first year university students, based on Critical Language Study following Fairclough, explored “manifestations of unequal power relations in language”. Far from having an emancipatory effect, the content in fact alienated and threatened the predominantly white, middle-class, male students. The assumption that revealing social inequalities will change people “ignores the fact that people are invested in particular social positions and that these kinds of investments are not lightly given up” (4). Hilary Janks (1995, quoted by McKinney and van Pletzen:5) who analysed responses to her series of Critical Language Awareness materials for secondary schools commented that “interpreting the interview data is like disentangling a knot of identity investments”.

This is perhaps where Gee’s description of the idea of an entry-fee comes in so useful. The entry fee to this particular semiotic domain was just too high for these students – they had too much invested in other identities and domains that they might have to forego to become part of the ‘liberal humanist’ and ‘critically literate’ reading tradition.

An imagined community

Norton’s (2001) work, although focusing particularly on second language English speakers learning English, also explores these kinds of ideas of identity and investment, and her ideas can help to understand students’ participation – or non-participation – in different contexts.

When language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), I have taken the position that if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase their value in the social world. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on their investment in the target language – a return that will give them access to the privileges of target language speakers. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. (Norton, 2001:166)

Norton (2003:248) talks about an “imagined community”, a community beyond geographical or physical constraints. “Our identities... must be understood not only in terms of our investment in the ‘real’ world but also in terms of our investment in *possible* worlds.” If students do not perceive themselves as part of this “imagined community”, and have no wish to join it, then they are unlikely to have any interest in the rites of membership demanded in the classroom. This notion of “imagined community” is a helpful one. For example, I have strong ties to my imagined community of literature readers and writers. Reading not only gives me pleasure (as I have learned how to make it do so), but it is part of my relationship to the world. I am interested in the writers, I discuss the books with my friends and at my bookclub, and going into a bookshop and buying a book is something to be savoured. I look out for reviews of books as eagerly as my son looks for details about Manchester United’s fixtures, as they are a direct connection with my imagined community. When I meet someone socially, talking about books is one way to establish bonds as well as identity. However the students I teach have rather different imagined communities, and make sense of their lives very differently with their cellphones, music stars, TV programmes and brand names. They have not learned to read “literature” for pleasure, and a tie to the “imagined community” of literature readers will apparently not “increase their value in the social world” that they see themselves living in.

Ritual or gift

Luke (in press:121) describes potential non-participation slightly differently. In discussing early literacy he posits that “literacy failure [is] a refusal of... institutional exchange [by some] students in postindustrial educational systems ... those segments of the school-aged population most marginal from mainstream systems of economic exchange.” Thus students are unconsciously resisting what they might perceive as forced entry into an unequal system.

In the South African context, for middle class educationists, it is a huge challenge to understand, let alone work with, the pressures and identities of working class teenagers. The strains of poverty and AIDS, as well as social pressures such as domestic violence, absent fathers, have created stressed families which produce “emotionally and cognitively stressed children” (Soudien, 2003:66). However they

are not passive victims, but are “making choices’ and “taking decisions’, and are “working hard at making their identity”. (Soudien, 2003:70) There is policy aimed at creating spaces in schools to help these processes (for example, next year Life Orientation will be a compulsory matric subject). However the discourse in the newspapers and society in general is still that education is in crisis, and that schools are not meeting the needs of students or society generally.

Implications for practice

Many new literacy studies explore the terrain of teaching children how to read - a much more contested and researched field than that of teaching literature - and its insights into what constitutes successful classroom practice offers much to all educators. Heath’s (1998) work, described earlier, concluded that teachers needed to be ethnographers in order to enable learners to bridge the chasm between school and home literacy. She later described case studies (Heath,1991, cited in Kamler and Comber, 2005:125) in which a strategy that helped to change teachers was to encourage them “to turn their “problem students”, those with the lowest outcomes for normative literacy, and learn about them as people, and see them as “children of promise”. This led the teachers to redesign the curriculum, and they drew on the students’ own areas of interest and expertise, for example popular texts and media (eg new technologies) to engage them more effectively in the classroom.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2005:292), in their argument for drawing on popular culture in the classroom, state that:

the movement towards a curriculum that is more representative of students’ daily lives is potentially the most powerful school reform that can be made. If we can encourage and support our teachers and schools in taking this pedagogical stance, we may be able to resuscitate a failing urban school system and the learners that are currently drowning in it. For this to happen, though, we must embrace the notion that the cultural activities that our students engage themselves in on a daily basis (music, sport, style, play and the media) contain knowledge relevant to the classroom.

This move towards an alternative curriculum is not an easy process. There is the risk that studying popular texts in an 'academic' way might distort these texts for the students, and they will cease to become sources of pleasure. (Alvermann and Heron, 2001) Developing students' critical literacy and exposing them to the 'truths' of how the media of popular culture is a lucrative industry controlled by multi-nationals might also be more destructive than helpful as it could impinge on the students' own identities. (A small home example – Manchester United again. How can I tell my young son that the posters he adores, and the mug he saves up for are part of the ruthless profiteering of Manchester United Inc? These artifacts are sacred to him, and I might erode these important aspects of his identity, his sense of self.) On the other hand I would also find it difficult to work with the misogyny and violence of some aspects of current youth culture without being dismissive and judgemental. However there are successful case studies of popular culture being part of the curriculum (See *Turn-Around Pedagogies: Literacy Interventions for At Risk Students* by Comber and Kamler, 2005), and these ideas might have much to offer the classrooms that I analyse in the next chapter.

Luke (in press: 58), in his more recent work in early literacy, suggests that we should have as an ideal the "model of pedagogy as gift, as precapitalist exchange" rather than "marketised exchange". He recommends the "alteration of the exchange structures to approximate those of gifting", where there are reciprocal responsibilities and literacy is culturally and institutionally meaningful. The ramifications of this would shift classroom practice dramatically, and he explores the practical implications of this for younger children learning to read, stressing the need for meaningful and ritualised participation of the students' communities and family elders. However for teenagers this paradigm would need to be explored differently, as at this age they are unlikely to want to be inducted into any society sanctioned and supported by their parents, and are creating new group identities and communities. For example, even young boys from urban areas who submit to traditional initiation rituals are challenging their elders during the process, "using their education to displace more oral-based traditions and practices" (described in Soudien, 2003:70).

Luke (in press:154) also describes the importance of including culturally significant texts, but also warns of the potential problems of incorporating material seemingly

culturally relevant to marginalized communities into the curriculum, as these “‘formalised impositions” could entail misrecognition of cultural resources and gifts, and recast these as ‘official’ institutional exchanges, hence symbolic violence.”

It is not only teachers in classrooms who need to work with the students’ communities. Schools as institutions need to become more aware – and possibly less judgemental of – parents’ and communities’ beliefs and aspirations. There needs to be “a renewed effort ..to.. develop understandings of the aspirations of the parent community in relation to the school and its curriculum... working class parents may share fundamentally different expectations of schooling than the middle class teachers” (Samuel and Sayid, 2003: 93).

Discourse analysis in the classroom

So far this review has concentrated on the importance of exploring the broader context of particular literature lessons to understand how these classroom practices are reflecting this greater context, and to also make sense of how particular personal relationships fit into a broader pattern.

I have been using the concept of discourse, and its focus on the “relationship between discourse and larger social formations” (Luke, 1996:8), and will use techniques suggested by critical discourse analysis to make sense of my transcripts.

Many linguists look at how texts work. Critical discourse analysts go beyond this, seeing language interactions not only as communicative acts, but social practice (see Fairclough, 1992, Pennycook,1994). Individual interactions are in many ways determined by the “larger social and ideological conditions of society” (Pennycook,1994:121), and can reflect the status, beliefs, conflicts and identities of the individuals involved. Critical discourse analysis helps to challenge the concept of ‘normal’, as it explores the complex influences that lead to any interaction. This echoes the ideas of New Literacy Scholars described above, who focus on literacy to illustrate that context and identity are critical parts of literacy practices. Perhaps by definition, then, critical discourse analysis implies a challenge to the status quo.

In his work on critical discourse analysis, Fairclough (1992) uses the idea of 'text' being written or oral. (NLS writers tend to use the term text to refer to written work.) He presented a three dimensional conception of discourse to bring together three analytical traditions: the close, textual analysis, the "macrosociological tradition of analysing social practice in relation to social structures, and the interpretivist or microsociological tradition of seeing social practice as something which people actively produce and make sense of on the basis of shared commonsense procedures" (Fairclough, 1992:72).

Fairclough's second two traditions have been part of the analysis covered earlier. In terms of the first tradition he mentions - close, textual analysis - particular patterns of discourse in the classroom have been well researched. As in other areas of educational concern, the theory of "best practice" is subsumed by the more dominant traditional discourse of the classroom: "the three part sequence of teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation (IRE) is the most common pattern of classroom discourse at all grade levels." (Cazden, 1988: 29) The teacher is almost always the voice of authority in the classroom – even during discussions, most students address the teacher directly and talk about each other's ideas in the third person. And "a child's claim to the floor is validated by the teacher, both verbally and visually, or not at all, in the official structure of talk". (Philips, 1983, cited by Cazden, 1988:58)

Cazden (1988) also describes the patterns that teachers and learners can create together: "to the extent that a lesson structure is consistently enacted by the teacher... and learnable by her particular students, it can be sufficiently familiar and predictable to offer clear clues to the shifting contexts, and to the talk that is appropriate within them." (Cazden 1988:48) She points out that although this can relieve teachers of difficulties with managing the classes, the danger is that these patterns create the illusion that learning is happening as the class and teacher go through these empty rituals.

Literature lessons are no exception. Schools' conventional approaches to literature – with the text being the message that novices are guided to decode by experts – suit the traditional approaches to classroom practice, as teachers control the process and content of the lesson. A researcher concluded that the teaching of literature in

America remains dominated by text-based approaches that focus on 'right' answers and predetermined interpretations (Langer, 2000:3) And a large scale study in American classrooms showed "how literature discussions are shaped by the discourse conventionally at work in the institutional context of secondary school classrooms" (Lewis, 1999:115).

The South African curriculum

The South African Education Department's Language Curriculum Statement (2003:9-10) relevant to this study require that students develop an aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment of texts, and that through their interactions with texts that learners "are able to reflect on their own lives and experiences and to consider alternative worldviews". They should also "interact critically with a wide range of texts... and recognize and be able to challenge the perspectives, values and power relations that are embedded in texts".

However these requirements have not yet been reflected in the final school leaving matriculation examination, where texts are treated as discrete items and questions are generally very technical, with little space for personal opinion. There is a possibility that this will change in 2007 as a new examination will be introduced. However the curriculum has similar requirements as the ones quoted above, and there has as yet been no model examination disseminated.

So with these current examination constraints, teachers' own understandings of literature, and the dislocation between working-class students and their middle class schools, how is meaning negotiated around literature in South African classrooms? What are students really learning?

CHAPTER TWO: Research Methodology

Classroom ethnography

To get to some understanding of how students and teachers interact with literature in the classroom I chose to use an inductive approach (Ensor and Hoadley, 2003:1) or classroom ethnography, where I gathered data and then used this to arrive at some conclusion. I did not use a deductive approach, as I was not testing a theory. The nature of this kind of research is that data is “unlikely to be complete, and it is unlikely that data can ever be collected independently of theoretical orientation” (Ensor and Hoadley, 2003:2).

Hammersley (1993:2) identified the features of ethnography as an “analysis of empirical data systematically selected”, in “real world” “unstructured contexts”, with the “focus on a single setting or group”. The analysis “involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most.” In the past, ethnography was criticized for not being scientific enough (unlike quantitative research), but more recently has been critiqued by what Hammersley calls ‘anti-realists’ for being just one representation of reality, no more valid than any other version (Hammersley, 1993:13).

It is true that an ethnographic study does not aim to find out the real external objective truth, as it is debatable whether there is any, independent of the social practices which shape perception. However it has to be acknowledged that different arguments of how the world works can be useful to understand and explore: they are created, evaluated and applied in a particular context. Many researchers agree that these studies can be useful and valid, as long as it is acknowledged that “human behaviour cannot be understood without incorporating into the research the subjective perceptions and belief systems of those involved in the research, both as researchers and subjects” (Nunan, 1992:54). Therefore it is important to introduce myself, not “for the purposes of confession” (Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001:365) but to acknowledge that my research and conclusions will be shaped by who I am. It is also important to give a detailed description of the context – the site, the relations and the process, so that the

reader can follow the narrative and have enough information to understand my argument, or even perhaps come to a different conclusion. An ethnographic approach also frees me to use my own experiences and reflections as resources in developing my argument rather than perceiving them as biases that hinder it.

Ethnographic studies have also been criticized for being concerned with only “documenting how things are, not with discovering how they might be changed for the better” (Hammersley, 1993:12). This is obviously not necessarily the case, but I have also drawn on concepts developed in critical discourse theory to understand the power relations and ideology at play in the classroom, and draw on the research of some New Literacy Studies scholars to help to suggest other ways of interacting in the classroom. It is beyond the constraints of this thesis to suggest ‘solutions’, but I hope that the research does offer some direction to potential change.

My own circumstances are of relevance to the direction this research takes: I am a white South African woman, old enough to have grown up during the apartheid struggle, and the ethics and morality this developed in me continues to be a part of the way I relate to the world. I am an English teacher and textbook writer and editor. My middle-class background and my own enjoyment of school, and especially reading, have made it difficult to understand why so many students I have taught have failed to share these responses. This is in many ways what drove this thesis – I wanted to come to some understanding of why literature lessons just did not live up to the ideals that I (and many writers I have read) have for them. I hoped that the understandings gained would shed some light on other, similar classes.

Critical discourse analysis

Another body of theory that I draw on in my study is that of critical discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis shares with sociolinguistic and ethnomethodology the assumption that language use should be studied in a social context.. It also shares the view of educational ethnographers that human subjects engage in the negotiation of knowledge, identity, and social relations in the everyday patterns of institutional life. But it departs from much mainstream research

with its focus on how power and identity are legitimated, negotiated and contested towards political ends...Such an analysis attempts to establish how textual constructions of knowledge have varying and unequal material effects and how constructions come to 'count' in institutional contexts is a manifestation of larger political investments and interests. (Luke, 1996:12)

Thus critical discourse theory helps me to demonstrate how the lessons observed reflect – and develop – unequal relations of power and access to resources in society more widely.

To understand discourse in a socially situated way, I drew on Gee's (1990:5) work. "Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing... by specific groups of people". We play different roles in society, and so we are members of many discourses. Gee distinguished between the 'primary discourses' that we acquire early in life, and 'secondary discourses' that we learn in various ways. And as many critical discourse analysts point out, some discourses 'count' more than others in the divisions of social power. In the classroom, there is more than one 'discourse' at play. Looking at who says what and how in a particular context, and what assumptions, attitudes and relations to power this speech reveals, gives an insight into the greater workings of society.

The challenge of drawing on critical discourse analysis is that

many educational analyses have difficulty showing how large-scale social discourses are systematically... manifest in everyday talk and writing in local sites. On the other hand... many sociolinguistic and linguistic analyses of texts pay close attention to patterns of language in use but stop short of explicating how discourses evinced in local contexts have political and ideological consequences. (Luke, 1996:11)

My challenge is to be able to create a broader understanding of the workings of power and ideology in schools through an analysis of very particular lessons in a particular school.

I found it useful to draw on Fairclough's (1992) three dimensional conception of critical discourse analysis: there is of course firstly the text, then there is the discursive practice (who produced it, who distributed it, who is it for), and then there

is the social practice in which it is embedded. In this case the text is the lessons, and to help to understand them I moved between a close textual analysis and an exploration of the greater discursive and social practices that formed their matrix.

New Literacy Studies

My analysis has also been enriched by work in the 'New Literacy Studies'. New Literacy Studies (NLS) "grew out of a dissatisfaction with conceptions of reading and writing which were prevalent in education" (Barton, 2001:93). Like critical discourse analysis it is characterized by "detailed investigations of particular situations", and aims to illustrate how literacy is part of particular social processes and interactions that need to be understood in context, not just as a neutral set of skills. This understanding of literacy helped me to reflect on how my own reading of literature was a learned practice, and not a neutral process that everyone would go through. This was a difficult realization for me, but it was an extremely helpful one as it really did shape my understanding of the classrooms I observed.

Some NLS theorists, such as Heath (1983), talk about literacy events, a term that grew out of the linguists' phrase "speech events", and refers to "a speech event with the text in it" (Barton, 2001:99). However Barton, and other NLS writers, also use the unit of analysis of "literacy practices", which refers to the "general cultural ways of utilizing literacy which people draw upon in particular situations". This idea developed into the notion of "communities of practice" which views learning as "a form of participation in activities" (Barton, 2001:96). To view the lessons as social practices helped me to draw the connections more overtly between Fairclough's idea of the initial 'text' (in this case a lesson) with its outer dimensions.

Critical discourse analyses and New Literacy Studies both strive to understand and explain reading, writing and textual practices by drawing on theories from a variety of fields, such as psychology, sociology and anthropology. This interdisciplinary fluidity is very attractive to me, as I feel it would have been very limiting to try to understand the classroom practices I observed through only one particular lens. If I had not had access to the notions of identity and self (traditionally the preserve of psychologists) I would have struggled to make sense of the learners' responses.

Terminology

Although there is no reliable biological definition of 'race', the terms designating race or racial origins used in South Africa are very much part of social discourse, and form a significant component in the understanding of identities and communities as well as social histories. Thus I have used the terms 'white', 'coloured' and 'African' as shorthand ways of describing particular communities that share some cultural capital such as language and historical advantage or disadvantages. However I do not believe that these terms have any essentialist meaning or value, and I use them with the understanding that they are social constructs.

The research site

Nelson High¹ was originally a school for white children. However it is situated in a working class area and so even during later apartheid years did not have the homogenous white student body of many other ex-white Cape Town schools. In the 1970s fifty percent of students were Portuguese. Numbers started dropping, perhaps because there were not enough white students in the area as coloured and African people were moving in to the suburb, and at the end of the 1980's the Principal declared Nelson High a 'community school' and took in any students in the area even if they were not technically white. Then it became a Model C school and could admit anyone regardless of race. At that stage many township students came to the school and since then the number increased to the current ration of about half of the 475 learners being 'coloured', half African, and four or five whites.

Teaches felt that the school did not get enough support from the government as they were treated similarly to other (well-resourced) ex-Model C schools, but yet had students who could not pay the fees or buy books.²

Class sizes are around 40 and in some standards there are over 50 in particular classes. In grade 10, the classes I observed, the class sizes were officially around 40 but there

¹ Nelson High is a pseudonym. I use pseudonyms in this thesis to protect the identities of persons and schools.

² Information in the two paragraphs above was gathered from an interview with one of the participating teachers who is also the Vice Principal of the school.

were generally a few students absent. The school was better resourced than many township schools with enough desks, working photocopiers, and some computers in offices. The staff were a mixture of coloured and white teachers.

Gaining access

I chose the school because I was particularly interested in observing a school with working class students, and also because I had easy access to it. One of the teachers is a good friend of mine, which made the whole process much easier. Although I had to go through the formality of applying for permission to observe lessons from the Department of Education, the principal said to Patty, one of the teachers, that it was fine for me to come and he never requested the letter from the department. My friendship with Patty – and the fact that I had visited the school in previous years to test textbook material – meant that my presence in the staffroom was accepted, and I do not think that teachers behaved at all differently when I was there. They chatted, complained and rolled their eyes about students, and were friendly and accommodating.

Participants

The main participants were the two teachers and their grade 10 classes, each of about 45 learners. Lindy was a qualified and experienced English teacher in her fifties, and had taught at Nelson High for over thirty years. She was currently the Vice Principal at Nelson High.

Patty was also a qualified and experienced English teacher, and a good friend of mine. I met her when we both taught at a boarding school for African students in Limpopo Province. She has taught at a range of schools for coloured and African students. When the study took place she had been at Nelson High for eight years. She has subsequently left and is teaching at a private school in Swaziland.

The coloured students were mainly from the surrounding working class homes, whereas many of the black students came in from the townships, probably perceiving this school as a step up from township schools. There was also a number of refugees

who mostly lived in very poor conditions near the school. Although most students probably spoke Afrikaans or Xhosa as a first language, all of them took English as a first language and Afrikaans as a second language.

Data collection methods and procedures

The primary data consisted of classroom observations carried out over a period of four weeks in August/September 2005. As the school ran on a fortnightly timetable it was sometimes difficult to work out exactly when the teachers would be having literature lessons. I attended five literature lessons of each teacher in a four week period.

I sat at the back of the class and jotted down fieldnotes. The students were always friendly and respectful to me. As Patty was particularly comfortable with me, it seemed that the students did not really seem to be overly anxious about my presence.

I had a large, rather old fashioned tape-recorder (courtesy of UCT), which could record the main voices, but when people spoke softly, or all at once (as often happened) it could not pick up all the words. When I did not manage to catch something, but I knew something had been said, I used the following notation: (-). I did not measure silences (not that there were many) or pauses. I focused very much on just the words, not the intonation or body language. I numbered the lines of the extracts if I referred to them later in the text. The teachers are represented by the initials of their first names (L and P) and the students are represented by S. When there were different students contributing to discussions, the notations of S1, S2 S3 were used.

On two occasions when Patty was in a different classroom the plug did not work, and I jotted down as much as I could. I have indicated this when I use these extracts in my analysis. (Lindy was always in the same classroom.) I also jotted down impressions and a few comments that students made to each other that I could hear, and I knew would not be picked up by the tape-recorder

I had informal conversations with both teachers, especially Patty, and then interviewed them after the process to find out more details. I interviewed Lindy in her office to get an idea of her own feelings about teaching literature and her perceptions of her experiences with her classes at Nelson High. (This interview was taped and transcribed). At this stage Patty had left to teach in Swaziland so I interviewed her over the phone and jotted down notes.

Just after I had finished observing the classes I had a discussion with each class, without their teacher, to talk about literature, and what they felt about learning it. These were class discussions led by me to get a sense of the students' own attitudes towards literature and why they think they learn it. These I recorded and transcribed. I also had a discussion with a retired UCT lecturer who came in on a voluntary basis to help the refugees with their English, as I wanted another outsider's perspective on my findings. I refer to her in my analysis as the 'retired teacher-observer'.

I analysed the transcripts, the classroom observations and my discussions using the conceptual framework previously described.

Ethical concerns

Initially I told the teachers that I wanted to tape and study students' responses to literature, which was true at the time. However I had to change the course of my study, as the lessons contained much teacher talk and little student discussion (as described in more detail later). I did say to the teachers that I was having to rethink my thesis. Once I had completed my visits, and started to work with the data, I began to critique these lessons. This made me feel uneasy, almost as if I was betraying these teachers' trust: they were both so welcoming, honest and accommodating, and so obviously very dedicated teachers in their different ways. However, I hope that it is clear in my data analysis that ultimately I feel that it is the system that is not working. I imagine that I would be a very similar teacher to Patty in this context, and I also believe that Lindy would be an outstanding (and happier) teacher in a different kind of school.

Because of this I have used pseudonyms for the names of the school, the teachers and the students, and have not identified the area in which the school is located. I want to emphasise again that although it is an individual study, I would like this thesis to be read as part of a greater argument of how schools are failing many of our students, rather than a critique of two teachers, who are probably more qualified and committed than many teachers in South Africa.

Limitations of methodology

The results of this investigation should be interpreted in the light of several limitations. Firstly, my own presence must have had some effect on the nature of the lessons. I do not think, though, that a self-consciousness on the part of the participants would have had any major effect on the greater dynamics reflected in the classroom that I analysed.

Secondly, in my analysis of the transcripts I was focusing on the understanding of literature, and more broadly, the 'lessons' that the students were learning through the interactions around literature with the teachers. These transcripts, written up differently, might offer rich analytical material to people exploring other areas, such as gender in the classroom, or analysis of power relations and attitudes amongst students (particularly as I was informed that there was tension between the refugee children and the local students, as well as between African and coloured students.). However, I made no distinction between students unless necessary to illustrate a particular point.

Finally, by its very nature it was a small, qualitative study, and focused on what was happening, rather than on how this could be improved. However I hope that the theoretical understandings point out the areas of potential change.

CHAPTER THREE: Teachers and students in context

This chapter presents a review of the research focus, describes how it shifted, and presents my analysis of the transcripts of the lessons I observed. It also explains why I felt it necessary to extend my analysis to look beyond the classroom for an understanding of the relations and practices within it.

Introduction

Lindy was reluctant at first to let me observe her Grade 10 lessons as she said to me that she and this grade 10 class had been fighting, and that eventually they had had a “blow-out” when they “told me everything they didn’t like about me, and I told them everything I didn’t like about them.” Since then things seemed to have calmed down, and she gave me permission to sit in her classes. She was always generous and helpful in her attitude towards me.

In the lessons that I observed, Lindy was teaching a long story (*The story of Henry Sugar*) from an anthology of Roald Dahl stories to her students. Patty was using a different anthology, and discussed three stories during the lessons I attended (one was revising a particular story that had already been read). Patty had broken up her class into boys and girls to teach them separately due to discipline problems. I attended separate classes, and then one class of boys and girls combined.

Initially I had wanted to focus more on student talk, to observe and record how students made meaning out of the literature they read in class. I had chosen grade ten, where there were two teachers, which I was pleased about, as it would provide some contrast in how the discussions worked. However as I went through my transcripts of my recorded lessons, I recorded many lines of teacher talk, with very little student response. And as I read the data closely what emerged for me was a contrast between two teachers.

At first observation the teachers seemed similar: both qualified, committed and exhausted. Patty’s classes seemed more chaotic, but perhaps a little warmer than Lindy’s. But as I got close up in my transcriptions, I saw more and more differences

between the two teachers' approaches. Lindy was a much more conventional, or traditional literature teacher in that she imposed norms of language and behaviour, criticizing students' dialects and overtly modeling the correct way to behave and speak. Patty had a more open classroom where she tried to encourage learners to engage in dialogue and to draw on their own experiences.

I analysed the transcripts carefully, drawing out the implicit assumptions and patterns in the interactions. I was surprised that despite Patty's more interactive, progressive approach, the features of the lessons were remarkably similar to Lindy's: both teachers controlled the lessons, with much teacher energy expended on keeping unruly and/or inattentive students in order. The teachers both focused heavily on keeping to their specified task as a way of keeping order in the lesson. In each lesson a few students participated in order to keep the lesson going, while the majority either 'switched off' quietly or noisily, depending on the context.

This was certainly not only the case in Patty and Lindy's classes. It was clear from staffroom talk that most teachers felt frustrated in their own classes by inattention and 'discipline problems'. And from informal discussions with other teachers, and various reports of violence in schools in South African classrooms, it seems that a lack of student focus and commitment – at the very least - is not only a problem of literature classes at Nelson High. It seemed unfair, somehow, to get close up to demonstrate what was not working in Lindy and Patty's classes when I know that these lessons were not untypical.

A different context

As I came to write up this study I could not help comparing these conditions to the teaching that I do now, as it is a thought-provoking contrast. I teach at a private, progressive, donor-funded school for predominantly working class African students who have been identified as exhibiting promise (particularly in the fields of maths and science) and commitment. They attend this high school from 8 to 5 every day, and with many Saturday classes. They have been assured that this education is their ticket to economic and personal development. The bursaries offered, the competitions won by the students, and the numerous important visitors reinforce this belief. The students

feel that they have been chosen, and so they have status. They want to be there, they want to learn. In many ways it feels like all the work is done before I walk in the door. The lessons that Patty and Lindy presented to reluctant and resistant students would have been eagerly welcomed by my students, and they would have taken on the apprenticeship mantle eagerly.

An interesting example in this regard is the study of Shakespeare. I have taught too many reluctant learners of Shakespeare for me to enjoy it anymore, and until last year was convinced that Shakespeare's plays should not form part of any school syllabus. However my current students relish the language, and learn quotes off by heart. The difficulty of it seems to increase its appeal, as they gain each other's respect by showing their insight into the play. It certainly is giving them status in their peer and home community: one student admitted that she enjoyed quoting the plays at home to impress people. But they use the quotes appositely and cleverly in different contexts, indicating a deep understanding of the words and the ideas behind them. One might dismiss this as not 'true' appreciation, but just branding, a 'status symbol', or a display of cultural capital. However that is not an easy distinction to make. I imagine that this Masters thesis is a status symbol – but that does not diminish its value in how it has helped me make meaning of what I do.

A tangential point, that could be another whole thesis, is the question to what extent are these students abandoning their own cultural capital, selling out as it were to the middle class? Am I part of a subtle oppressive force that imposes a 'dominant discourse' on them? However, I do believe that in many ways they do not simply take on the new, but reshape it to suit them. I think it is what Kress (2000) would call "the transformative action of individuals using the shaped stuff but reshaping it - I will say transforming it - in the light of their interests in the moment of interaction, an interest which arises out of their own social histories, their social locations in that interaction, and their sense and awareness of the social environment in which the interaction takes place." Just the way the students delightedly give each other a very streetwise 'high five' each time someone finds a quote that expresses a truth about a situation demonstrates that Shakespeare is being owned by them in a new way.

In other schools teachers seem to be still trying to teach this ideal audience, as if their students are thirsty for the teachings of their respected teacher. They are confused by these learners who so obviously are not wanting to 'join the club' of the educated middle class, whose identities are enriched by other domains, and for whom school is something to endure and try to get through. Lindy and Patty – and most of the teachers in the school (and probably this country) have a much more difficult job than me. Many young South Africans know that a matric will not be a passport to economic success. The world of school and academic learning is at odds with the discourse and ideologies of home and peers. Unfortunately “the sense of conflict with one’s identity and social origins seems to be a legacy of working-class encounters with schooling” (Collins and Blot, 2003:117)

Thus in my analysis of the transcripts I have tried to keep to Fairclough’s (1992) model of always holding the text in context – to see what the microcosm (in this case my transcripts) is reflecting about the greater context, and the ideologies/culture/identities, etc. that gives rise to the interactions described – rather than presenting a critique of two teachers.

It must be noted that it is not only my own personal conclusion that the teachers were not satisfied with what their students were gaining from the lessons. When I asked Lindy what she would like to achieve in her literature lessons she says quite simply that “ideally I would love to be able to inspire a love of literature and reading in the kids. These days my chances of achieving that are next to nil. If I can get each of them to actually have read the book and to have got some interest out of it these days I would feel I was doing well.” And when I asked her what she thought she was achieving in the classroom, Lindy joked: “I’m not sure that any of that should go down in writing!”. Patty also said that although she thought that teaching literature was “terribly important” for various self development reasons, the practicalities of the situation meant that she felt that she did not achieve her aims.

CHAPTER FOUR: The teachers and students in the classroom

Introduction

As described previously, I first I thought I would be looking at the discourse around literature teaching, particularly amongst the students, and how literature was shaped and framed in the classes. However it became clear that this interest could not be separated from educational practices very closely related to particular ways of teaching literature. This chapter focuses primarily on the general educational practices of each teacher, and then the following chapter moves on to more particular attitudes towards literature itself. However it is inevitable that there are overlaps and echoes in these two different chapters.

In summary, Lindy's lessons demonstrated the dislocation between the well-used approach of an expert aiming to initiate the students into the 'right way' of understanding, and the students' resistance to being inducted into this community. Patty's classes, on the other hand, demonstrated the inadequacies of a seemingly interactive progressive approach that does not go far enough, is not well organized or carefully designed for the particular students being taught, and is embedded in a system of greater 'disorder' and control.

However, as emphasized previously, the teachers cannot be blamed as individuals. The demands of current examinations require a particular reading of a text that has to be overtly taught and learned. Both teachers' tasks are made more difficult by the majority of students' lack of investment in conventional schooling. Patty has since moved on to teach at a prestigious private school, and says that her lessons are now completely different, as there the pressure is to keep up with the students' academic demands as they are "extremely motivated" (they want to 'join the club'), rather than the pressure to keep control and maintain some academic focus.

However Patty's current classroom – and mine – are more the exception than the rule. Teachers and policy makers need to pay close attention to our failures in the classroom, as we cannot order a new set of students, however desirable that may feel!

For “it seems a sad commentary that so many students see school as a place where they must negotiate over how much of themselves they are willing to give up, rather than as an additive place where they can grow” (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2005:294).

The didactic ‘traditional’ approach– Lindy

I use the term traditional here to refer to the approach favoured by teachers and schools before more progressive ideas of affirmation, self-expression and self-esteem became part of the mainstream educational discourse. The main aim is for the teacher to impart neutral knowledge to the students, and make sure that they keep up to the absolute standards that are set.

Lindy’s classroom reflected her organisation, meticulousness, but inability to acknowledge or use her students’ interests. She had some posters with wild animals, which probably did not have wide adolescent appeal, and a sign exhorting students not to chew gum (which I saw had no effect whatsoever; it was probably a relic of a previous battle.) She also had a typed list on a board with names of famous people as suggested oral topics (such as Einstein, Van Gogh etc). There were few South Africans (eg Emily Hobhouse) and no-one from the apartheid struggle. It was obviously an old list, but the fact that she had not updated it does indicate that she was certainly not focusing on celebrating recent South African history, or recognizing its potential to offer new role models to African and coloured teenagers.

Right students versus real students

The call for teachers to build on their students’ backgrounds is by no means limited to New Literacy studies scholars, and has in its roots the old educational adage: ‘Start with what they know’. But even more than that, “if we want our children to understand the complexities of our societies and to engage in constructive dialogue about the world in which they live, we cannot ask them to leave their language, their experience and their culture on the doorsteps of our schools” (Raban-Bisby, 1995: 43).

However, this theoretical position, extended by Heath's (1983) idea that teachers should be ethnographers, drawing on the students' own experiences to bridge the gap between home and school is an approach that Lindy did not seem to share, as can be seen from the extracts from the transcript cited later. She was a teacher who had as part of her discourse the concept of standards, the way things that 'should be done'. Meaning was not muddled in negotiations – her role was to lead the students to share her understanding. And her understanding was underpinned by a conventional and English traditional view of “manners”, classroom procedure and, ultimately, the right way to read literature.

Lindy tried to replicate hierarchical classroom relationships and rituals in a community of learners who came from working-class, often troubled, backgrounds. She seldom validated or acknowledged their own experiences which were probably rather far removed from the ideal students she had in mind, and at whom her lessons were aimed.

For example, in her class, students were required to stand and greet her in chorus 'Good morning Mrs Roberts', and also had to greet me in the same way. A typical beginning:

L: have you quite finished? [in response to the noise]

Students: Yes miss.

L: good morning grade tens.

S: Good morning miss

L: Good morning miss Dyer thankyou?

S: Good morning miss Dyer

From this also stemmed her desire to teach the students appropriate (to her) manners and speech. When a student mumbled that the reason for his new position in class was that he didn't have a book, Lindy modelled for him:

L: Are you sharing a book? What you mean is please may I sit here so that we may share a book?

The students had certainly absorbed her perspective on them – during a discussion about the meaning of what vulgar is, there was the following exchange (showing a certain irony from teacher and student):

L: Vulgar? [waiting for students to define the word]

S: rude

S: rude

S: rough manners, Miss offending against good taste, Miss [reading from his dictionary exercise]

S: which we all don't have, Miss.

L: Offending against good taste. Sorry that you do not have good taste.

In this way students received the message very clearly that their own dialects and behaviours were not acceptable in her classroom. Interestingly, in my first lesson with this class, a student warned me that “this class is very vulgar, Miss.” This was even before the interaction recorded above. The student had obviously internalized Lindy's perception of them (and one that he assumed that I as a white female teacher would inevitably share), and implied that it was not alterable – it was the way things were. (Beyond that, I cannot guess at the motivation for this comment – was there some shame, some pride, was he trying to distance himself from the rest of the class?)

Another example of Lindy's perception of the divide between genteel classroom behaviour and crude home behaviour was the comment on something that I did not witness:

- 1 **L:** And you can save that till break or when you are in the privacy of
- 2 your own home but that doesn't do anything in the classroom or (-)
- 3 **S:** S: [yawns] sorry Miss

The student could not be faulted in anything he said, but his yawn (line 3) made it clear that he did not subscribe to Lindy's values. When her students so obviously had little interest in the classes, and little investment in joining the club – even if it was presented as attainable - this rejection of their semiotic domains probably caused even greater dislocation between their identities and the identity the school (and other places of authority) expected of them, which inevitably has ramifications for learning.

It is a challenge for teachers who have absorbed the hierarchical and didactic relations and attitudes as normal to recognize that students who do not fit into their norms have their own powerful jostling discourses and identities. “The essential condition [of teaching] is “entering into communion. Where cultural differences make that communion harder to achieve, at least at the beginning, we have to be ready to give up nostalgia towards our own origins, including ways of speaking that have seemed so ‘normal’ in our past.” (Noso, 1985, quoted in Cazden, 1988: 77)

Lindy clearly drew on conventional and authoritarian modes of understanding how lessons should be running, and tried to shape her students into behaving as they should, pointing out when they did not. In this way students learned of the great gap between them and the far more desirable students in Lindy’s head. One of her expectations voiced below (lines 4-5) seemed to me to be unrealistic except for the most dedicated of students – in my experience very few students who have been absent are organized enough to follow up work that does not form part of formal assignments. So the students were set up for failure – and enough research has been done on the dangers of that teacher perception - and became used to the idea that in this context, that is exactly what they were.

- 1 **L:** Answers - not one written down, even though you started in class.
2 Right. Question number one was: He couldn’t possibly go out -
3 **S1:** [indistinguishable – must be saying that she was absent]
4 **L:** the questions were written on the board, darling, if you’re absent it’s up
5 to you to sort out how you get them.
6 He couldn’t possibly go out and find a real live yogi to instruct him,
7 what reasons, and we pointed out it was reasons *plural*. You want to be
8 able to pick up more than one reason why he couldn’t do this. By now
9 your books should already have been opened. The section starts on
10 page 130, but you should have your answers written into your writing
11 book.
12 Right, Anthea, what would you suggest as the answer to that one.
13 Whether you wrote it down or not, even if you didn’t write it down,

- 14 you can think of it now. Yoliswa, You're singing, it's not the singing
15 class. [giggles]
16 Right, hands up those of you who do have an answer to that question.
17 **S2:** What question miss? What number?
18 **L:** nobody has an answer.
19 **S3:** What's the question?
20 **S4:** Number two miss?

This extract reflects how Lindy tried to keep going with the format and pattern of the lesson valiantly, even though it is clear that no-one was really focusing on her instructions. This next extract also reflects her dedicated attempts to improve her learners' answers, engaging on a level of abstract and academic thinking that was evidently lacking in both oral and academic work. She was in the paradoxical position of seemingly expecting 'high standards', but was not at all surprised when they were not met.

- 1 **L** Now grade ten many of you wrote in the answers that you scribbled
2 down over break that he got very wealthy. First of all, he was *already*
3 very wealthy before he started his training. Secondly, the section that
4 this series of questions is set on is not after he started to go into the
5 casinos to make money. Nowhere in chapter eight did he go into a
6 casino. SO you *cannot* tell me when I ask you a question that is based
7 on part eight that he made lots of money at the casino. But because
8 you won't sit down with your books and re-read section eight in order
9 to do these answers - because you are so lazy, most of you, that you
10 try to remember something and write down two sentences without
11 having to reread those ten pages. That's why many of you end up
12 writing down what's actually I'm afraid to say is rubbish.

Lindy was obviously aware that the lessons were not progressing as she might have planned, and the students were not behaving as they should (they 'scribble' (in line 1) their 'rubbish' (line 12)). In the extract below, she shared a joke with me, the outsider, about how ridiculous the lessons are because the students themselves do not behave as students should. Her belief in absolute norms and standards make her the archetype of

the disillusioned moral uplifter, the missionary who fails because the natives are just too uncooperative. This model offers no self-reflection – there is no hint that *her* behaviour is in any way farcical - which is a pity, as Lindy was an intelligent and caring teacher who genuinely felt that she was doing the best for her students.

- 1 **L:** A farce generally is a play that is almost stupidly funny. Not clever
2 funny.
3 **S1:** Would you say this is farce - and the other rude ?
4 **L:** Completely different.
5 **S2:** Completely different
6 **S1:** I'm only asking Miss. (-) [quieter, to himself] Farce, *bru*, farce, like
7 farce farce
8 **L:** T: So. We use it however not just to do with plays. We take it from
9 the situation where the play's involved and we transfer it to other
10 situations. So, to sum up: outsiders looking on at what goes on in
11 this classroom it must seem like a ?
12 **S3:** farce.
13 **L:** farce.

What is also interesting in the above extract is that a student asked an unsolicited question (line 3), and the teacher's emphatic response (line 4) obviously made the student feel slightly defensive (line 6), and that it was not safe to ask questions.

Perhaps his repetition of the word (lines 6-7) was even a face-saving exercise. I think this also revealed the chasm between Lindy and her students: her emphasis was on the content, yet the student read her emphasis as a reflection of how wrong he had been, and that he had been impudent to ask. The lesson plan in Lindy's head – and her aims at this particular point, of expressing emphasis to help understanding – did not leave space for an awareness of the students' own insecurities and identities.

Initiation, response, evaluation

In Lindy's classes the students and teacher commonly retreated into safe patterns where students fell into the familiar initiation – response – evaluation pattern, just doing enough to keep the feeling for both sides that learning was taking place. For example:

L: What kind of lifestyle do you think a yogi leads? Where do they live?

S: In mountains

S: In mountains and forests

L: Do they have lots of money, do they have fancy cars?

S: [chorus]No miss.

Some students fed Lindy appropriate answers while the majority sat passively – some furtively doing other work, or some having whispered conversations when they thought they could get away with it. This could be read as passive resistance. “When students are subjected to instruction that is irrelevant and that devalues their language and cultural knowledge, they tend to resist in various ways, sometimes even by sabotaging their own learning.” (Powell et al, 2006:22)

I did not hear one spontaneous class discussion during the lessons I observed. I also saw no personal discussion between her and any student. All individual discussions with Lindy that I observed were around discipline (she is the vice principal and so detention is part of her portfolio). Students came to talk to her to try to get off detention, or to ask for confiscated material back.

The contrast between the two teachers was reflected in a marked difference in their responses to one particular student. I witnessed a heated exchange between Nodumo and Lindy, after a lesson, about some issue of discipline, where I could see that both Nodumo and Lindy were very angry and each felt that the other had been extremely rude. A few minutes later I was chatting to Patty when she drew Nodumo towards her, put her arm around her and said something like “Help me persuade this lovely girl that it is a bad idea to drop out of school,” as apparently Nodumo was considering this possibility due to personal reasons.

Both teachers were, in their ways, trying to help Nodumo: Lindy by imposing detention and training in etiquette, and Patty by being affirming and warm. Unfortunately Lindy’s attempts were met by sullenness and rudeness, and it is unlikely that Nodumo learned the lessons that Lindy had intended.

This was perhaps the tragedy of Lindy's 'missionary' approach – that however well-meaning and dedicated she was, it did not offer her other ways of understanding the processes around her, and in the classroom work on literature itself became part of the way she tried to keep the students in order.

For example, at great cost to herself (she missed break and a cup of tea in a very full schedule), Lindy kept in a grade 10 class at break for not doing their homework. Many members of the class were angry and resentful, and for the first time I witnessed them initiating a discussion with Lindy. It was a noisy discussion and I could not catch it all on the tape. Here was one typical comment:

S: but Miss, I'm just trying to say - Miss can't punish us for not doing our homework – we pay for that – not Miss.

However Lindy stood firm in the face of this sophisticated piece of logic. The students did their homework during their breaktime very hastily, with no real engagement. Their concentration levels fell even lower as they had to carry on for another English lesson after losing their break. Combined with repressed resentment, this led to an even more unproductive lesson. Lindy might have felt that she had 'taught them a lesson', but it certainly did not include literature.

Receive the lesson

As described previously, there was very little meaningful dialogue in Lindy's classes, let alone a negotiation of meaning. The model of Lindy's lessons was that Lindy had the answers, and the learners had to try to get to work out what they were. The text was the authority, and Lindy was the guide to help students decipher the code. There were those common 'guess the answer I have in mind', initiation, response, evaluation encounters. Larson (2002:78), in her critique of a kindergarden teacher, describes a similar process as "how commodified language arts instruction may be used as a panoptical practice (Foucault, 1979) that positions students as objects to be disciplined in ways that exclude meaningful participation in literacy events".

Some typical examples:

L: let's go back to the fourth line at the top of the page. 'He could smell real success in the offing.' Is that literal or figurative?

S: [confidently]: figurative.

L: He couldn't really smell the success. [murmurs of assent] He could sense that it was there. In the offing that it was close, it was not far away.

Another typical example:

1 **L:** Why was it important that he could read the cards quickly?

2 Neddy?

3 **S:** Maybe it was because he .. (-)

4 **L:** Why was it important that he could do it faster?

5 **S:** ...so they couldn't see what he was doing.

6 **L:** They couldn't see what he was doing anyway, it wasn't a question of
7 seeing, alright, Greyton yes – Greyton?

8 **S:** No Ma'm because he's a gambler and if you take too long, looking at
9 the cards they're going to think you are cheating, so he has to be with
10 - instant saying "I need more cards" so that they don't get suspicious
11 that any-

12 **L:** Exactly. Suspicious is the word we want. If he took too long then
13 they would think why is it that this guy who used to call out the cards
14 or the response quickly why is he taking a long time to do it, it would
15 make the other people suspicious.

Lindy zoomed in on the word she wanted - 'suspicious' (line 12) - rather than letting the student finish his explanation (lines 8-11) that seemed to be the same as hers, if not as well expressed. She knew that her explanation was the 'right' one, and she wanted to retake the floor – for her, at this point, it was not of educational benefit to let the student try to express his ideas and 'own' the explanation in any way.

Ironically, however, she used that disingenuous 'we', (line 12) so loved by teachers, to try to persuade her learners that they were all part of the same search for answers. Incidentally, this extract was the only time I heard Lindy use a colloquialism the learners might use: 'this guy' (line 13). Usually her speech was formal English in fully formed sentences, and might point to a pre-planned lesson, not a conversation.

Barnes (1976, in Cazden, 1988:61) describes the speech style of real discussion as “more exploratory and less final draft”. However even in informal conversations Lindy showed the same articulate expression with full sentences. Obviously correctness was an important feature of language for her.

In many of these sorts of exchanges, Lindy did not affirm the student who got the right answer (in line 12 her emphatic affirmation of a student’s answer “Exactly” was also unusual - although it actually was an interruption.). She was dedicated to transferring knowledge to her students, but her practice did not seem to be part of a more progressive educational discourse of affirming students, and building their self-esteem. Indeed, she sometimes made rather sarcastic remarks about students and their abilities and habits:

L: I haven’t seen Milton look anything but relaxed. Except when the results come out, perhaps.

Or, when a student denied having been part of the chatting that was reprimanded:

L: Oh, you’re saying nothing, that’s a refreshing change

And on another occasion, even praise was double-edged:

L: You’re working so nicely and quietly no wonder the weather’s changed.

She also did not pick up on her students’ use and potential ownership of the discourse: when one student started asking about the origin of a word, or another later begged to play Hangman “literally and figuratively” she paid no attention. It seemed that her aim was to impart knowledge, and for her to see the students adapt it to their purposes did not fit into her idea of learning. It is a transmission approach that Bernstein (1999) would describe as having strong framing and classification: the content of the lesson has been set previously and allows no intrusions from individual concerns and interests: these “pedagogical approaches leave little room for teacher and pupil autonomy” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005).

Perhaps Larson's (2002) critique of a kindergarten classroom would be applicable here:

there were few opportunities for students to shift roles in the participation framework to allow for increased participation in literacy activities. Patterns of participation in literary activity control meaning, ie control how meaning is constructed in schools, by whom and for what purpose... The students' struggle for recognition... by the teacher at micro-level may reflect macro-level exclusionary practices in segregated societies. (Larson, 2002:26)

Thus in a small way, these literature lessons played a part in keeping the status quo outside school walls, with the marginalized and unmotivated working class students learning that they have no place or voice in the middle-class club even if they had wanted to join.

The interactive approach - Patty

Patty was comfortable with my presence – she is a friend of mine, and I have used her classes in previous textbook research. Her classroom had two Lifeskills posters on the wall, but was otherwise bare. She was also school counselor and spent her free periods dealing with students' personal issues. In the time that I have known her she has had to take two students to hospital for attempted suicide, has supported two students going through abortions, had to deal with the aftermath of fights, the worst one being a stabbing, and had to deal with numerous family problems. She also has talked about the problem of drug-taking amongst her students on numerous occasions.

Recognising the real students

Unlike Lindy, Patty was more aware of the realities of the students' lives. She knew and named her learners more frequently than Lindy, and in conversations with individual learners showed her awareness of their personal difficulties and challenges. She used themes in stories to discuss general lifeskills issues (something Lindy did not do in the classrooms I observed). For example, after a story on forgiveness she initiated the discussion whether you should be punished for stealing if you own up yourself. Although the discussion never became a discussion between students some students spoke honestly and interestedly on the topic.

In the same lesson Patty made the following comment after a story about a young boy who struggled to take responsibility for his own wrongdoing, expecting unconditional forgiveness.

P: This is a problem a lot of us have. Some of us can't see what we are doing. They don't know when they are lying. Then there's something wrong.

In previous personal discussions with me she had expressed her frustration with students who, she said, lied so convincingly that they persuaded themselves that they were telling the truth, and were terribly offended and hurt when they weren't believed. So here she is trying to use literature to point this out. Notice her use of pronouns – she did not want to sound like an outsider judging them – she included herself in the first two sentences as part of the group – and then just separated herself from the actual perpetrators in the next sentence.

She also drew on the students' own experiences to explain events in a story, and was obviously aware of the students' feelings towards other teachers. Here she was trying to explain why a young boy's response to his principal after discussion about his misdemeanour was inappropriate.

P: When you get into trouble with Mr Roman – or lets say Mr van der Merwe – ...would you say 'I am satisfied'?:

(Mr Roman is the principal, and I imagine that Mr an der Merwe is an even more frightening teacher!)

So Patty recognized where the students come from and encouraged them to link what they read to their own experiences, and at these sorts of moments, the class did seem more attentive than usual. However she did not extend these links to shift the way that she taught, or to become what Heath (1983) would describe as an “ethnographer”. She made these links to help the students understand the story, not to open up more dialogue or to make links with other issues and events in their lives. Patty was open to these sorts of discussions (in a later extract she accepts unsolicited criticism of the

text) but her primary aims were to cover the work in the lesson for exam purposes (as teachers are required to do), and to keep order.

Ironically, Patty's knowledge and recognition of the students sometimes actually distanced the class from the content of the lesson. She acknowledged the realities of the lack of real learning happening for many students in the classroom, and her awareness of their real attitudes and opinions about literature led her to collude in some way with them against the demands of the syllabus. For example, in the extract below, when she set a letter-writing assignment based on a story, she instructed students who had not read the story to find others who had in order to complete the work (lines 19-20) – the implied aim, therefore, was to write the assignment in whatever way possible, even if it meant that you did not actually read the story (which was partly what the assignment was testing.) In this way Patty strengthened her own relations with the students, perhaps, as she was an ally against the system, but it certainly perpetuated the idea that the focus was on the assignment being handed in, rather than on a literary experience. This is perhaps an almost inevitable result of the centralized and bureaucratic education department that is trying to regulate quality but does not trust its teachers. (But that is another thesis.)

- 1 **P:** There is no one way of beginning the letter. There is no right way
2 it's your -
3 **S1:** it's your thoughts
4 **P:** It's your thoughts. You can't Right. How many of you, when we
5 read this story, were sleeping?
6 **S2:** Me miss
7 **S3:** Me miss
8 [hubbub – lots of students admitting at the same time]
9 **P:** so now you have a problem.
10 **S:** [hubbub – one student above the rest starts proving she still knows
11 the story.] I know he stole a watermelon and he was....
12 **P:** Alright. Okay. This is why, grade ten, you need to pay attention
13 when we read in class. Be quiet, ...(-) [Discussion amongst students
14 – telling Patty they 'understand the story'?] Ja I know, just wait -

- 15 Right, grade tens. [bangs on the desk] If you haven't understood the
16 story, or you weren't paying attention, Lulama, when we read the
17 story. Then -
18 **S:** I was paying attention. I was trying not to sleep.
19 **P:** Alright. Then you're going to have to try and pair up with someone
20 who was not sleeping and understands the story.

This extract also shows the comfortable atmosphere of Patty's class – students felt free to finish her sentence (line 2) but it also shows how this atmosphere could also lead to chaotic interchanges.

Patty also sometimes used the portfolio and examination demands as a way to discipline students. Later in the same lesson as she was trying to get the students to summarise the story she said:

P: Right, Sibulele, what do you remember of it.

(-) Okay we're only going to have one person speaking at a time, Okay so in a nutshell [more class murmurings chats]

I don't have to go over this story, I can just say do it and hand it in and I'm going to give you a mark and if you don't have the story that's your tough luck. [murmurs]

Another time she said something like:

'If I walk out, you can do the four stories yourselves and see how you do.'

I know this kind of threat – I have used it myself, and always felt the failure it reveals: that the only reason you can convince students to concentrate on a text is because it is going to be part of their exams or portfolios as it is patently obvious to them (and at that stage to you) that it is not an enriching experience for them in any way! It is merely part of what Luke (in press) would call a “commodity exchange” where the teachers are trying to persuade their students to “buy in”, using the only power they have which is the promise of marks, which are perhaps rather “inaccessible and invisible” rewards (especially if you slept during the lessons).

Thus although Patty recognized her students' concerns in her day to day interactions with them, and used them as a way to make some concepts clearer, she did not go as far to see their outside favoured texts and practices as resources in their own right. Alternative literacy practices might have "powerful consequences for student identities" (Duck and Hudson, 2005, quoted in Kamler and Comber, 2005:128), which would of course shift dynamics in the classroom quite dramatically. But it is a hard – near impossible - thing for a teacher to 'see students differently' (see chapter six) and change a curriculum without the vision being shared by the rest of the staff, and being reflected and reinforced in examinations.

Meaningful dialogue

Many studies have shown that meaningful dialogue is an important part of learning. NLS scholars have described how collaborative literacy experiences are likely to stimulate student engagement (See Gee, 2001 and Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). Researchers from different paradigms (e.g. New Literacy Studies, cognitive psychology, enactivist theory) generally agree that students need to talk more in classrooms. Researchers have concluded that "peer interaction enhances the development of logical reasoning through a process of active cognitive reorganization induced by cognitive conflict" (Cazden, 1988:128).

Patty's classroom did have some time for spontaneous discussion. Discussions sometimes went on tangents, as students gave their own opinions on various issues in their own dialect, and answered each other rather than the conventional format of the teacher mediating the discussion.

'here it would take them 12 minutes to get to you.'

'Wot you *mal* [mad]! It would be 12 hours!'

In the same discussion (the tape recorder wasn't working so I did not get all the exact quotes) boys went on to comment about race and "niggers" here and in America. Patty allowed this discussion, one of those rare moments in the classroom where students actually addressed each other directly, and not through the teacher as chairperson (Cazden, 1988:58) and certainly did not comment on or correct the

student's 'slang', (as would have probably happened in Lindy's class) but then quickly brought the class focus back to the story.

In Patty's lessons I did get the feeling that those learners who were concentrating were trying on this language and working out the story because they wanted to rather than because they wanted to keep the lesson going and keep her happy, as happened in Lindy's class. I say this because the students were obviously thinking hard as they spoke (see further page 52) whereas in Lindy's lessons the students did very little of this thinking aloud, but just gave half-sentences or one words as answers. Students were also often honest about their responses.

- 1 **P** Would his life change?
- 2 **S1** Yes, Miss.
- 3 **P** Why?
- 4 **S1** I don't know, I'm just saying yes.
- 5 **S2** Miss, he won't change

Here I think the student (S1) misread the closed question, thinking that the teacher expected a yes, and just gave it to her (line 2). But when quizzed, she was honest enough to say that she did not know (line 4) – perhaps she had felt like being part of the discussion, perhaps she wanted to hurry the lesson along. However the second student (S2) obviously felt very strongly about what he was saying, addressing Patty directly to emphasise his response (line 5). He was certainly not just going through the motions, and went on to give the answer that Patty wanted. Which also is a reminder that although there was open discussion, Patty's questions were conventional 'guess what I am thinking' questions, with some space given to free discussion, rather than "a move from lesson to discussion" which is a "very different conception of knowledge and teaching" (Cazden, 1988:203), and very far from current examination demands.

Students in Patty's class also obviously felt free to be rather critical of the texts. During a session of reading aloud, a student commented – unsolicited- about the text:

S: There are too many 'he said's'

P: I see what you mean. Roshana, carry on.

And a little later, a student said:

S: This whole story's practically about forgiving and forgiving.

[After which that particular student put her head on her desk for the rest of the lesson!]

Patty was open to small suggestions by the class, relinquishing a modicum of control over the pattern.

S: Toni never reads, Miss.

P: Okay, let's have Toni then.

When I first arrived, a student wanted to give me his book, so that I could follow what was going on, showing on his part some feeling of power in the class, and some feeling of belonging to the proceedings. Or even if it was partly an interaction to entertain the others (which is perfectly possible!) the fact remains that he felt he had the space to make this offer. During the same lesson, a student asked if I would also read aloud, again comfortable that Patty would allow her this request – she too has control over the proceedings. There was never space for this kind of interaction in Lindy's class, although the students were as aware of me there and in the first lesson asked me questions after the lesson about where I taught and where I was studying. (Thereafter my presence became more unremarked.)

During another class students even felt free to criticize Patty's practice:

- 1 **S1:** Especially when we read in every English period. Every day.
- 2 **P:** You haven't read every English period. You've read for the last
- 3 week or the last week and a half.
- 4 **S1:** Every day, miss.
- 5 **P:** I know, I know. But the thing is I find if you only read a bit this

- 6 week and then a bit again next week you know like
- 7 [various murmurings – following comments distinguishable:]
- 8 **S2:** Have a break between stories.
- 9 **S3:** A sentence a day and then a free period.
- 10 **P:** P [bangs on desk.] A sentence a day and then a free period.
- 11 Sharon’s solution to literature teaching. [laughter]
- 12 Alright. Okay. So. Quickly then. Let’s have a recap of the story.
- 13 Fiona, tell us what you remember of the story.

Patty accepted the criticism (line 5), and in doing so acknowledged their right to make it, but did not engage with it on a critical level. She demonstrated her humour and warmth with them, but used her joke (lines 10-11) to move back to the lesson plan in her head (lines 12-13).

Patty tried hard to get the learners to feel part of the discussion, often mentioning comments learners made previously:

P: Add to Sibulele’s nutshell

P: the narrator decides he’s going to try and steal the watermelon that Sonwabile mentioned.

However when she did try to get learners to participate in this discussion it often turned to chaos, as students started talking amongst themselves once she relinquished the floor, even for a brief moment.

- 1 **P:** You need to think about – well, you tell me actually, what else do
- 2 you think he might – okay, that’s the reason why he did it. Okay
- 3 well there are a number of reasons.
- 4 **S1:** Why did he come up there and you know (looking for words)
- 5 **S2:** Why did he apologise -
- 6 **S1:** Yes -
- 7 **P:** so that’s what you’re saying why is he apologising

- 8 **S1:** yes why is he coming andum
9 [Student makes some sort of strange noise.]
10 **P:** Yahhh [interrogating noise]
11 **S:** Sonwabile.
12 [Sonwabile makes noises of dissent.]
13 **P:** It wasn't Sonwabile.
14 **S:** It was Lulonke.
15 **P:** Lulonke, you're caught on tape doing that. [laughter]
16 **S:** He's famous!
17 **P:** Right. So why he's apologising. What else.
18 This is to help you write the letter. You need to think about it.

In lines 1 to 8 Patty and another student were busy helping S1 to express his answer (notice again the potential democratic nature of the class as student helped student in line 5) but this did not sustain the interest of the whole class, and the discussion was sabotaged. Patty joked with the class briefly, removing herself from teacher talk (line 15), but and then quickly retreated to the topic, closing the openings for discussion.

Later Patty was trying to discuss with a particular learner why she chose to describe a character as 'aggressive'. She was obviously modelling that people can debate about characters, but need to use the text for evidence – meaning can be negotiated, and reading is about negotiating meaning (lines 9 to 10, then 16 to 17). However this discussion again got thwarted by the shouts of the rest of the class who took the opportunity to chat to each other.

- 1 **P:** Why did he want to prove – what was – tell us more about Mr Wills,
2 what sort of person was he?
3 **S1** Very strict, Miss
4 **P:** very strict. Chantal?
5 [Murmurs.]
6 **P:** Very strict, Chantal?
7 **S2** Miss he was an aggressive person

- 8 **S3** hardworking
- 9 **P** Aggressive, worked hard. I wouldn't say he was aggressive, why do
10 you say he's aggressive?
- 11 [Noise as various students shout out].
- 12 **P:** can you let Chantal answer, please?
- 13 [Chantal is talking, others shouting]
- 14 **P:** Do you want to finish the sentence, yes?
- 15 **S:** S: (-)
- 16 **P:** Well, we don't know that yet, we have to find that out first, ja, what
17 else why do you say he is aggressive
- 18 **S2** I say he's aggressive because when he found that his watermelon
19 was stolen he was all angry and started tearing down his whole
20 patch and started ...
- 21 **P:** P: okay. Also they say about – this is – once his watermelon has
22 been stolen. And still some of you are not listening. Once his
23 watermelon has been stolen

The most animated discussion I witnessed in all the lessons I observed was an irrelevant discussion about what name to give to an unnamed narrator in a creative response activity. Was it perhaps that at least here the students knew they could not be wrong, and for once they were not trying to guess at the right answer? Or was it that here was a chance when they could introduce their jokes, their teases of each other, and so express themselves in a way that other discussion did not allow? Students were shouting out names of singers and friends and any other selection that might entertain their peers. This extract was from the end of a protracted discussion when there was already a list of names to choose from on the board:

P: So. Just to [noise] just to give you an element of choice so we don't have a big sort of and spend twenty-five minutes deciding which name we're going to choose you can choose any one of those. [Hubbub]

You choose a name. That's it.

S1: Peter

S2: George

P: from there.[indicating board. Students still shouting out.] Grade tens we're not going to discuss it cause there is no discussion. You choose whichever name you particularly want to use from that list there. That's it.

[Hubbub]

I'm not going to spend 25 minutes eliminating names. Minaz, your hand up.

S3: ... George

[Laughter – students shush each other Shhhh]

The question here might be: why could she not get the same level of interest and engagement in discussions around the short story itself? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the lack of coherence and structure in Patty's lessons, as is described under the following heading, and part of the answer certainly lies in the concluding paragraph to the previous section: the study of literature would have to be quite dramatically expanded to be able to reflect and develop the interests and identities of the learners in her classroom to create motivation for real engagement and dialogue. This is near impossible for teachers who are working towards external exams and portfolio requirements.

Patty's focus seems more to be on the students' emotional well-being generally – the retired teacher-observer I spoke to said that in the staffroom Patty "really fought for children's psychological and emotional needs". However perhaps this more progressive approach did not translate into Patty's literature classes – although her classes were comfortable, and the students' own voices were heard, the lessons still ran along conventional lines. I think that Patty's energy was spent on what she considered as more important and perhaps more immediate battles, and her lessons were not the primary sites of the implementation of her aims of working towards transforming the students in some way. Teachers like Patty might be spending more energy in desperately needed counseling and social work than in reworking the academic curriculum. For teachers to transform the literature curriculum they would need the support of the English Department at their school, the school management, the Education Department, and a lot of time.

Even if Patty did decide to work explicitly on changing the processes within the classroom, it would be a very difficult attempt for one classroom in the greater

context of the students' lack of investment in the culture of the school. Currently it is likely that those students whose identities included success in English were the ones responding most frequently in class and thus were having some meaningful learning experiences (as seen in the transcripts), while the rest were being pulled along by the strong conventions of classroom practice.

However an interesting caveat that cannot be explored here is that even in optimum conditions, there are challenges in applying more democratic methods, for example getting learners to discuss with each other rather than always having a teacher as mediator. A complication reflected in a literature classroom that strove to be truly dialogic, was that peer discussions themselves, rather than "decentring power in the absence of a teacher as they are meant to do... often gave dominant students a position of power" (Lewis, 1997:check page, idiot). It is a great challenge to shift power relationships in the classroom!

Preparation and organisation

There is a difference between the conventional kinds of preparation where teachers prepare what they want their students to learn, and the more modern approaches which recognize that learning is a process that teachers need to facilitate for their students. Both require preparation, the latter perhaps even more. In the examples of 'good teaching' demonstrating ideas from the New Literacy Studies, critical literacy and socio-cultural historical theories, one of the common factors in all teachers described was dedication, organisation and preparation (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). One of the distinguishing characteristics of Hall's (2003:16) effective literacy teachers' practices was "excellent classroom management..and thorough planning".

At Nelson High, both teachers taught full-time - about 8 classes a day. There were new and onerous portfolio requirements for each grade. Each teacher taught over 100 students, and thus had to compile numerous portfolios and mark literally thousands of essays/comprehensions etc during a year.

The predominant student culture at Nelson High did not value academic success highly. School was to be endured, manipulated and challenged. (Hopefully this has

been made evident in some of the transcripts above, and is dealt with in more detail in the last section of this chapter.) Patty herself said that most students “never do well and so most of them just give up”. It would take much effort for one set of teachers to change this pattern in her class. Naidoo (1992) describes how she had time and resources at her disposal, but still failed to transform the most resistant students’ attitudes, as she had possibly overlooked their identities and values that they would have to forego to join her ‘club’.

Lindy generally seemed to have a clearer idea of what she wanted to achieve in each lesson: she had questions prepared, sets of dictionaries that were handed out in most lessons, and seemed to follow a pattern of reading, then questions and dictionary work over a series of lessons. Each day she had a micro lesson in her head from which she seldom deviated. She was following her curriculum. However, in her case, it seems that preparation was not quite enough to ensure a ‘successful’ lesson. Patty was not as clear with each lesson. In her transcripts there was a lot of talk that reflected her organizational concerns, such as debate about who should read, or who had taken books home. For example in the following introduction to a lesson she was clearly going through various portfolio requirements in her head. She spent a lot of time talking about these, and reminding herself and the class what stories they had covered, but ended off with setting an individual task based on one story for the lesson. Thus a huge part of this monologue about forming a group for a piece of portfolio work was unnecessary and probably extremely confusing for the students. This introduction also took a long part of the lesson. I have put what I consider unnecessary and confusing information in italics.

P: You are going to – listen carefully please, you are going to - for the next little while in English you’re going to be writing things for some part of your portfolio. There are still things we have to achieve. Um - You have to for your portfolio hand in one piece of one piece of work done by yourself - as far as Aziz is concerned [murmur of amusement] - and one piece done as a group. So I’m going to give you those assignments today [hubbub]. Right the problem is that because there aren’t enough books – [hubbub as books are handed out then the class settles down] Right. Okay. Right. Grade tens listen. I’m afraid you have to share - who else is sitting without? Asiphe, Asiphe is

sitting without a book and ...[indistinguishable] right, okay grade tens, settle down.

You're going to have to work on this [class themselves shush each other] shh class, put away any other work. That looks suspiciously like business. [student says something, Patty says in quiet voice to the particular student] I don't care I'm afraid. At the moment I don't care at all. [then back to the whole class.] Right. So what you're going to have to do is this. Because there aren't enough books I'm obviously going to give you time to work on particularly the group thing together in class, and ideally you want four people in a group. I tell you why because the task consists of four things. Okay, so each person can do one of those things. Alright. Okay then obviously the individual response is your own. Okay now the four stories that we've looked at and I think I've done myself out of a book - no, here: 'Withoek Shade', um, the 'Destructive taste of watermelon' [kids call out indistinguishable] ooh and there's 'Vendett'a also and 'Love and Forgiving'. Ja. We've done five stories actually. [kids calling out to her about this -indistinguishable] Quiet - settle down. So today I'm going to explain the task to you and then I'm going to ask you to start working on the group one. You need to make sure folks that you are here everyday so don't get sent home for anything, right. Your class funnily enough seems to be alright for portfolios. [some murmurings - Patty jokes with kids about someone's long weekend] Right, okay grade tens take out a book to write this down in please. Okay so this is what you're going to be doing by yourselves. [hubbub getting out books.]

As mentioned in the extract above, there were not enough books. Patty also admitted that books went astray, and were unaccounted for. This lack of resources – and organisation of resources – had quite a major impact on classroom management and capacity for effective learning in the classroom.

Patty herself identified her lack of preparation as a major issue in her teaching and said that she said that she struggled with time management. She was also one of two school counselors, a fulltime English teacher, and a mother of a one year old. Her

school life was dominated by meeting portfolio requirements and dealing with students' social/personal problems.³

Conclusion

In their different ways, both Lindy and Patty were caring and concerned teachers. (For example, Lindy even had a book where she would record 'black marks', and students without a black mark would receive a chocolate after a stipulated period of time. Patty described many incidents where she got involved in challenging situations (at homes, at hospitals) because of her care for the students.

However this dedication translated itself very differently in the classroom: Patty had little time to prepare, and although her classes were comfortable and she recognized where her students came from, there was still little real engagement with literature as much of her time had to focus on control. Lindy's regimented and organized approach offered little opportunity for meaningful dialogue and discussion. In both classes, the focus was on getting through the lesson and keeping control (see appendices).

³ Many South African teachers teach huge classes, and need to manage much departmental bureaucracy. If the education department encouraged teachers to reflect more on what happened in lessons, rather than what was presented in portfolios, it might be easier to reflect more carefully on the quality of the actual lessons

CHAPTER FIVE: Teachers and literature

Although the last chapter has inevitably covered some aspects of how the teachers approached the texts themselves, its main focus was on the relationships between teachers and students in the classroom. The focus in this chapter is on the teachers' particular understandings of literature, and how it should be taught.

Curriculum and examination requirements

Despite the more open-ended aims of the curriculum (as described in chapter one) the demands of the current matriculation examination are still very narrow and technical. Students have to 'explain', 'justify' etc, and there is no space for personal opinion, and there are no questions that demand critical literacy skills in the language paper or the literature paper. The literature texts are treated completely separately (poetry, novel, short stories, play) and there are no links made in the exams between them. There are no questions about the contexts of the texts – they are givens (texts and genres) that students need to decode and explain for the examiners. Both Patty and Lindy taught matric classes and were well aware of the demands of the examinations, and so their teaching was by necessity dominated by these requirements.

Recently, 'creative responses' to literature have been introduced as part of portfolio work for matric. These are the only activities that encourage learners to identify with the characters, and infer a bigger world beyond the text. They also do not have 'model answers'. All students would have to do at least one. It is perhaps coincidental that I witnessed more than one being written in Patty's class, but none in Lindy's class. However it seems to me that this open-ended kind of question sat easier with Patty's methodology.

Selection of texts

There is a lot of debate about what constitutes texts worthy of study in a classroom, and I cover some of the arguments about introducing less canonical 'literary' texts elsewhere. The focus of this study however is not on selection of texts, but I cannot

leave it out altogether as the texts chosen obviously have impact on the classroom activities. The Department has an extensive list of novels and stories for teachers to choose from in grade eight to eleven, many of them modern and South African, and in selection at least there is space for teachers to break new ground.

However the selection criteria at Nelson High rest mainly on the availability of texts. As Lindy explained:

We do get a certain grant from the department – but it’s a long way from being what a lot of non formerly Model C schools get in terms of support from the department, and of course a lot of our kids don’t pay fees. So to say to the kids ‘you must buy your own setwork book’ would be nightmarish because by the end of the year you would still have only one third of the class who actually had a book from which to work. So we have to provide the books, and that means that we tend to recycle the old chestnuts again and again and again rather than being able to bring in fresh works as often as we’d like to, although in Grade Nine we did bring in *Jimmy Valentine*” [a South African suspense novel written for teenagers].

The texts that I observed being used were short stories, aimed at teenagers. One anthology was written by Roald Dahl, the other anthology was by various authors, including some South Africans. In discussion some of the students seemed to quite like the stories themselves. They particularly enjoyed doing *Jimmy Valentine* in Grade Nine

S1: because of the *vloek* [swear] words

S2: it’s our language

Some students enjoyed Alan Paton’s reformatory stories because they were “local” and because the boys were “naughty”. One student said that a thief in a Roald Dahl story was his “role-model”! It should be remembered that these are only the students who spoke up in a discussion I had with them and are not necessarily representative. However the general feeling in the class seemed to be that they quite enjoyed some of the stories but did not see the point of all the work that was based on them. When I asked them why they thought they did literature most of the students suggested that it helped them learn new vocabulary. So perhaps it is not so much the texts themselves

that are a problem, but how they are dealt with, which leads on to the next section. (Interestingly, all of the opinions about the story were told to me in my discussion with them rather than during their lessons.)

However attention also needs to be paid to modes of communication that interest students. Many students, although poor, owned cellphones. Probably all watched TV. During class I saw two boys surreptitiously reading magazines at different times. Much successful experimental work has been done incorporating students' preferred texts into the classroom, and it is possible that a more radical approach to the understanding of what texts to teach, and why, would have fruitful results.

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2005), arguing for the use of popular culture in the American classrooms, believe that this would have far-reaching effects. "This movement towards a curriculum that is more representative of students' daily lives is potentially the most powerful school reform that can be made. If we can encourage and support teachers and schools in taking this pedagogical stance, we may be able to resuscitate a failing urban school system and the learners that are currently drowning in it." (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2005:292) This is an aspect that will be taken up later.

Making connections

Literacy theorists, studying early literacy teachers, describe how "the strong presence of themes taught through cross-curricular connections was one of the most extraordinary characteristics of outstanding first grade literacy instruction" (Morrow, 1999 in Hall, 2003:5) Critical literacy theorists also describe the importance of making connections, of intertextuality: "a key strategy for discourse critique is to engage in lessons that actively juxtapose more than a single text... for comparison and analysis" (Freebody et al, 1991:452).

In all the lessons I observed, the only texts studied were the stories themselves. And as seen in previous sections, the stories were treated as discrete items that were to be dissected for their own sake. They were content to be examined, vocabulary to be learned, rather than a source of meaning-making, self development, aesthetic

appreciation or critical analysis. Links to the students' own lives and interests were only made incidentally; the focus was on examination requirements. In one of Lindy's lessons the text even became a place to find a common error:

- 1 **L:** Read that last paragraph again. And think of your grammar sheet on
2 common errors and see if you can find the mistake.
3 [Quiet murmuring]
4 **L:** Anyone got a clue?
5 [Quiet murmuring]
6 **L:** what do you think's wrong with that?
7 **S:** (-)
8 **L:** That's just a slightly colloquial way of putting it, it's a difference in
9 style but it's not actually a grammatical mistake. Uh, Neddy, Hands
10 up dear.
11 Strictly speaking there's a grammatical error; it's on that sheet, you
12 should all be able to find it. There would be? Less. And what should
13 it be?
14 **S:** fewer
15 **L:** When you're dealing with numbers (-) strictly speaking there should
16 be no fewer than ten of them. Alright. There are some questions on
17 the board, you need to write them down.

This is an extreme example of how the texts themselves, however potentially interesting, were dwarfed by their function as examinable material for assessment. As Cazden points out, "relevance is often advocated as a necessary characteristic of curriculum materials. Instead, it should be considered a characteristic not of the materials but of the relationship between the materials – any materials – and the learners." (Cazden, 1988: 72) (However, given the disenchanting, resistant students, the idea of integrating popular culture – such as rap lyrics that they already are familiar with - might be more engaging.) However, even with these materials that do in some ways relate to the students' lives, this relationship was seldom developed in these – and other - literature classes.

The preceding extract also gives an example of how Lindy did not affirm the students' correct responses: she set up the whole problem, almost as a competition, and although it was obvious that she drew it out of them with great difficulty, she did not acknowledge the student who eventually understood the answer she wanted (lines 14-15).

Lindy, particularly, seemed to envisage the subject of English as something that could be learned and mastered in a procedural, grammar based way, as she referred to worksheets of common errors, of adverbs and adjectives that could be cross-referenced and applied in literature work.

Learning Literature?

What both teachers were teaching was a version of the “institutionalised speech genre of literature discussions in school” (Marshall, cited by Lewis, 1999:115). In both classrooms, following Marshall’s research, “teachers took longer turns, student responses reflected teachers’ questions and primarily took the form of informative statements”. And this is only reflected in the more functional interactions transcribed – it is likely that some students were not mastering even the basics of this “institutionalised speech genre” during the classes. Both teachers presented the texts as given, ‘the received’, and were there to help the students interpret them in the correct way. Patty did encourage the students to relate some of the issues to their own lives, but I never saw Lindy do this.

I cannot comment on how either teacher contextualised the story, or encouraged students to use any techniques of critical literacy, as I did not get a comprehensive overview of all the lessons around a particular story. However I saw no signs of these techniques being drawn on in any of the worksheets or exercises they did at the time, and I imagine that as it was not an exam requirement it is unlikely that much – if any – time was spent on it.

Both teachers did touch on the art of writing, an acknowledgement that a text is not a reified given, but is created by a human who had to make choices and decisions.

(Interestingly, this acknowledgement has never formed part of a matriculation examination question.) Lindy led a long discussion around one of her questions:

L: ..the details of how Khan learned to read blindfolded take up 24 pages. Only 9 are devoted to how Henry develops the skill. Why do you think the author gives so much less time to Henry's training?

One of Patty's assignments included a rework of part of the story:

P: I'm asking you to imagine that you're going to – the story as it stands would make a good short film. But if you were asked to expand it to a feature length there's a lot in the story that is not explained. It's just stated. For example – can you think of some of them. I know it's a while back, but can you think of some of the – we just are told, we don't know why, we're just told.

However, although meaning was more negotiated in Patty's classrooms, her questions were in many cases 'guess what I am thinking' questions, and she and Lindy leaned on the accepted understanding of how to approach literature as a way to instill order in the classroom – the students had to shut up and listen otherwise they would fail. As described in the literature study, to change these practices would be to change more than just an approach to literature study, so neatly bound it is to didactic classroom practice and current examination requirements.

Chaper six: Closing analysis and conclusions

In this chapter I apply Gee's notions of 'Discourse' (1999) and then 'semiotic domain' (2001) to examine what students are really learning in the classroom. These ideas have implications for what changes might be effective, and ideas from New Literacy theorists are suggested as possible alternative approaches.

Learning the discourse?

Patty and Lindy are both experienced English teachers with years of experience. They are practiced at the basic levels of text mediations, those encounters that make student and teacher feel that learning is happening. Both Lindy and Patty modelled the discourse and practices associated with literature at various times in their classes.

P: Right. So the narrator – let's call him the narrator – and his two friends – what are the friends' names?

Later when a learner was trying to answer something she looked for the language of the discourse:

S: Miss I donno .. he didn'twhat do you call him?

P: The narrator

S: yes he didn't actually offer to help him he just like Mr Wills ... he didn't actually offer to help him he just like "Mr Wills ...he didn't..

In the extract on page 52 Patty also tried to model the way to debate aspects of a story: it is fine to disagree but you must back up your statement with evidence.

Here Lindy talked about the different shades of understanding words:

L: Under what circumstances does one 'gloat'? Anyone know the word?

S: to brag

L: It's very close to brag. Can you give me an example of when you might use it? 'Cos sometimes you can use a word in a sentence even if you are not absolutely sure of what the meaning is.

However, as demonstrated previously, Lindy did not encourage the students to apply these words and/or ideas to their own contexts. Patty's attempts at modeling dialogue often ended in chaos when she relinquished control in the class. For both teachers it was easier to control the content and pace of the lessons, with a focus on what is measurable and concrete. Although some students dutifully learned the basic vocabulary and labels, they did not seem to engage with the literature in any meaningful way in the few classroom discussions I witnessed (and as described previously). Langer's (2000) reflection on American literature teaching is applicable here:

It seems... that current approaches may be leading to the development neither of sufficient background information nor of adequate skills of interpretation and analysis. What students seem to have developed instead is a set of superficial reading skills that allows them to answer multiple choice comprehension questions about the selections they encounter, together with a vocabulary of technical terms (character, theme, setting) that they can use in limited contexts, but cannot use effectively in developing their own interpretations. In many ways this behavior is a sensible reaction to instructional demands; students have developed a response to literature scaffold – an ordered 'ladder' on which to hang the 'key school words' which are appropriate in responding to a predictable 'school-type' question. (Langer, 2000:7)

Thus the students are not really mastering what Gee (2001:11) would describe the "semiotic domain of literature":

For example, in school science, learners are often not mastering any semiotic domain at all. They are just learning details, facts, or messages from a scientific semiotic domain without any real knowledge of this domain's design grammar and, thus, no real capacity to join any real affinity group associated with any such domain.

In many ways it rests again on the identities of the students, and can become a vicious circle. If students are not interested in mastering a semiotic domain, and have too much invested in other domains to want to join this particular 'club', the teachers will

– out of necessity – just try to give them enough tools and vocabulary to get by in examinations, and will not even try to teach the domain’s real “design grammar”. The motivation of the students I teach make it much more feasible for me to work on a more abstract and challenging level, and set up discussions that enable them to behave like literature critics – even though these students are not English speakers, and find the content of the lessons difficult. But in many ways they internalize, transform and apply the discourse(s) of English literature. For the students of Nelson High, the teachers were focused on just doing enough to get the learners to pass. The students found the truncated discourse they were learning boring and ultimately alienating. Unfortunately we cannot change our students. But we can change the way we think about teaching.

Potential for change: Seeing students differently

As described in chapter one, New Literacy Studies scholars such as Heath (1983) described a strategy that helped to change these patterns. Teachers were encouraged to turn their ‘problem students’, those with the lowest outcomes for normative literacy, and learn about them as people – as “children of promise” (Heath and Mangolia, 1991, quoted in Kamler and Comber, 2005:125).

This then led them to redesign the curriculum to “incorporate what young people carried in their virtual school bags” (Thomson, 2002 quoted by Kamler and Comber, 2005:123). This overlaps with many of the other topics touched on in this study: teachers spent time getting to know students – their interests, their home backgrounds – to find out about their potential resources. Teachers then drew on popular texts and media (e.g. from the internet, computer gaming and cellphones) new technologies) to engage students’ interest and expertise. This of course required immense preparation and organisation. And it all started with a change in attitude towards the students. “..it is crucial that we recognize that students enter the educational institution already exposed to vast amounts of knowledge... and... this knowledge of new media texts that students bring to bear must be embraced by schools as academically legitimate”. (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2005:296)

The retired teacher-observer described an experiment at Nelson High, where learners studied a subject called 'Hospitality Studies' and learned skills such as catering. She observed that students who she would have described as 'at risk' were full of enthusiasm for the subject, and wanted to open their own restaurant at the school on Saturdays. Perhaps here the reward for investing in this domain was far more tangible, and articulated with the other energies and identities of the students. And perhaps for once they were not perceived as the 'weak' learners, but as people with a skill that is worth paying money for. However Hospitality Studies is apparently no longer offered as a subject.

The dominant discourse of the staffroom of Nelson High, that both teachers shared, was that the learners were children of deficit and things were getting worse. Clearly both teachers felt that they were struggling, and felt that the students themselves had changed. Lindy commented that "increasingly we are finding a lot of learners who are really quite arrogant towards the staff have no work ethic. Some of them have reading levels so low that one can understand why they find it difficult but that's not the same thing as having a poor work ethic." At another point she commented that "one's aims are pretty different at a different kind of school." Patty described the students as "functionally illiterate".

Patty had felt such a lack of control of the class I observed that she often split the boys and the girls and taught them separately (the more chaotic lessons were those with both girls and boys.). What that meant in practice was that contact time between the teacher and the class halved. The theory was that she would assign work to be completed in the other period, but it was clear that this was not happening, and was a tacit understanding between Patty and the students.

It was not only in English lessons that teachers were struggling with control, with the processes of teaching and learning. In the staffroom teachers talked wryly about their losing "battles" with students around discipline, work ethic, etc. Patty said to me that the school had got "worse" over the years. It seemed to me that the obsession with trying to enforce order had become a higher focus than academic study. Students who were late for a lesson without a note were sent back to the teacher to get an excuse note, thus missing even more of the lesson. In the middle of an English lesson I

observed a teacher interrupted the proceedings to bring a message from the biology teacher, which was that those students who had not handed in their work must write out 50 numbered lines of “I have little chance of passing Grade 10 Biology if I insist on not handing in work.” This, as can be imagined, took at least 10 minutes of a 35 minute lesson to copy down and explain, and of course interrupted the flow there was in the lesson. On more than one occasion I was told that there was a smaller class because students had been sent home to fetch portfolio pieces, and so missed hours of lesson time. The demands on the staff of this kind of approach were also onerous, as detention was now offered more frequently due to the high amount of offenders. I also saw a huge pile of duplicate letters to parents to complain that their children did not attend detention. The staff talked of burn-out and exhaustion.

Although some ideas were explored in the literature review earlier, it is beyond the parameters of this thesis to give practical ways of how a school like Nelson High can see students differently. However in the current South African situation, if we are in education, we can do little about what is happening at homes and on the streets, but we can try to change what happens in schools. It might be argued that LEAP school, where I teach, is successful because the students know they have a ticket out – like middle class students, perhaps they participate so diligently because “they see a value in believing in the immediate and long-term exchange value of conforming to the school’s expectations” rather than “because they are impressed with the curricular offerings” (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2005:293). However perhaps that is not the only reason: there are small classes (one of the first differences Patty mentioned as significant between Nelson High and her present private school); LEAP school also has a powerful life skills programme that overtly aims to help the learners create new identities for themselves; there are well qualified teachers who are paid well and allowed their independence in the classroom. Other schools might be trying different approaches. We need to research them – for the sake of our children – and our literature lessons!

A rather disturbing caveat must be added here: Nelson High is functioning much more effectively than many schools in the townships. The retired teacher-observer described her visits to a nearby primary school where she said it was “impossible to work with the children as they just went up the walls”. The staff had “given up”, and

the principal would just intervene every now and then with a cane for corporal punishment. I get similar stories from my students at LEAP school – when asked what is different about LEAP, they mention that there are teachers in every lesson, there is no noise so they can work in class, and they are not beaten. My son who spent two days in a township high school as a school plan to improve his Xhosa, said that on one day there were four consecutive lessons without a teacher. All these descriptions point to more fundamental problems than those faced by Nelson High. However I would imagine that the shifts that would help Nelson High would perhaps help to give shape to a new vision for these township schools, rather than following a Nelson High model which would probably lead to similar sorts of problems.

Closing summary

In chapter one I described the conceptual and theoretical tools that I used as a foundation for my analysis. I described current debates about teaching literature, and drew on New Literacy Studies to highlight that teaching literature is a social practice rather than a missionary activity! Students and teachers' identities, ideologies, beliefs and personalities are all an integral part of the interactions in the classroom. Chapter two described the tools I employed in my method of research: a qualitative, ethnographic approach, and the conceptual framework offered by New Literacy Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis.

The next three chapters focused on the teachers in the classroom. As I reflected on my findings, it became clear to me that the 'failure' of the lessons could not be the fault of the lessons on their own. It seemed obvious that there were bigger forces at work beyond the classroom walls, and it was important to me – in the interests of accuracy and fairness - to set this in chapter four as the foundation of my close analysis of the transcripts.

Chapter five and this chapter focused on the interactions in the classrooms, as I selected extracts from the transcripts to illustrate the relationships between teachers and students, and the attitudes towards the texts. One teacher exhibited an authoritarian didactic approach; the other teacher had a much more interactive classroom. However in both classes, the literature was studied in isolation from any

context, and the teacher mediated the text for the learners. This is partly a result of the examination requirements that are based on this approach. The students in both classes did not engage in much discussion: in one classroom they were never required to, and in the other, when there was an opportunity, it was generally sabotaged by the students' own behaviour.

Finally I used Gee's (2001) work to look at what students were learning (or not learning) in the classroom, and it is this work that then led to the challenge of looking beyond the classroom. The school saw the students as in deficit – they were undisciplined and difficult, and needed to be brought into line. This approach has taken precedence over academic concerns. Lessons from New Literacy Studies scholars such as Heath (1983) suggest that if schools change the way they see students, and develop this understanding into new ways of teaching and learning, there is a chance that there will be a shift away from the destructive dynamics seen in many South African classrooms. However, as the case of Patty shows to some extent, these shifts need to have the support of the Department to extend into curriculum and school management concerns, as the warm and nurturing environment that Patty provided was not enough to transform the social dynamics of working class education.

Closing comments

Unfortunately literature lessons are not fulfilling the aims expected of them. This is partly a function of the classroom social practices, where the text is regarded as the message that teachers need to help their students decode, and which mirrors the greater school dynamics where teachers were experts guiding learners to be more like them. Even progressive teachers do not seem to be using literature as a tool for exploration of critical literacies, for any in-depth work on students' own contexts, or other possibilities suggested by contemporary writers. This is most likely because despite the curriculum documents, final examinations themselves have remained highly de-contextualised, technical and text-based, with no space for any other ways of approaching the text. Portfolio demands ensure that teachers do not have the freedom or time to create new ways of teaching literature.

However what happens in literature lessons is only partly to blame. The lack of student interest and commitment in schools, particularly working class schools, has been researched as a world-wide phenomenon. Students' own backgrounds need to be acknowledged, and worked with in the classroom. In literature classes, this may include studying popular culture texts as worthy in their own right. In the greater context, schools may need to work more closely with the parents in their community, spending more time listening to them than telling them what to do, and being more aware of what students bring to school from their out-of-school worlds.

South Africa has its particular challenges of ethnicity and language as well as class to deal with in the classroom. In some schools there are also huge problems of lack of qualified teachers, and a scarcity of resources. However even in these schools that face such challenges there are instances of successful practices. Perhaps future research should focus on 'good practice' to help South African classrooms live up to the demands being made on them by government and society.

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