I’m not a good reader because…

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Abstract
This paper is an investigation of the multiple ways in which a year seven student, Fraser, is constructed as a reader. It draws on a variety of data sources, which include interviews, observations, videos, photographs and emails, collected as part of a larger study on the construction of readers and reading practices within and across in-school and out-of-school communities of practice. Analysis of the data indicates a range of discourses working together construct Fraser as a reader in multiple ways. These multiple constructions have implications for Fraser in terms of being considered and participating as a competent reader. This analysis provides insights into constructions of reading as representations that both afford and constrain what it means to be a reader.

Introduction
At the time of data collection in 2005, Fraser\(^1\) was a year seven\(^2\) male student in a multi-age structured double teaching area classroom. Within an email, Fraser recorded that he was “not a good reader…”. His self identification as ‘not a good reader’ conflicted with teacher reports of Fraser’s reading competence. Moreover, it did not fit with observations I had made of his reading engagement and performance within his classroom. Subsequent conversations with Fraser’s mother provided yet another view of ‘Fraser the reader’. Standardised testing and assessment details also defined Fraser as a reader quite differently. These multiple, and in some ways, conflicting constructions of Fraser the reader, lead me to see this case as a crux (Fairclough, 1992a; Rogers, 2003) in my data corpus.

\(^1\) Throughout this paper, pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the school and participants.

\(^2\) Year 7 is the final year of standard primary schooling in Queensland.
Within this paper, I report conceptual and theoretical views about how readers are constructed, and to ascertain existing thoughts on how reading, reading competency, readers and their identities are defined. I then move on to analyse data collected of one middle years student’s literacy practices to identify the influences that have shaped how he, Fraser, is constructed as a reader across a variety of contexts. I conclude the paper by suggesting the implications of such constructions for this particular child.

**Reading and the reader: Social and cultural constructions**

Reading, and the reader, are given meaning by the culture of the community in which they exist (Ferdman, 1990; Heap, 1991; Mahiri & Godley, 1998). As one learns what counts as reading culturally, one also learns “what counts as reading, criterially” (Heap, 1991, p.129). Text and context influence what reading means, including understandings of what is valued and the rules associated with reading within a particular task or context (Gee, 1996). This is related to what it means to be a reader: how to act, think, and look competent when required to read. Socially and culturally accepted forms, functions and values of reading, therefore, are social constructs shaped by community-accepted views of reading and how reading is valued. In addition, social and cultural artefacts and interactions play a key role in establishing what competent reading means, while mediating the position each member can play (Alvermann, 2001; Rex, 2001). As readers learn the accepted ways of being a reader with particular texts, tasks and contexts within each community, they gain membership within a community and opportunities to practice such membership (Rex, 2001). These ideas indicate to me that the constructions of what counts as reading and who counts as a competent reader are negotiated within and across discourses and are situated within the activities of particular communities.

Although reading and readers may be considered to be context bound entities, the changing nature of people’s work, public and personal lives and the changing nature of literacy challenge this view. We now see people being members of multiple, and often overlapping, communities (Kalantzis, 1995; The New London Group, 1996, 2000; Usher, 2002) and, redefine literacy as literacies; thereby acknowledging the diversity of contemporary texts as incorporating printed words, speech, multimedia, technology, gesture, visual, auditory and mixed formats (The New London Group, 1996, 2000). At the same time as people participate in reading in their communities, their identities are being constructed. Thus, identity construction is a complex, ongoing process involving interactions in various contexts (C. Luke & Luke, 1999), and “negotiation of discourses, contexts, social action and artefacts during the course of activity” (Leander, 2002, p.127). The result is not one singular, stable identity, but rather multiple, “fluid and changing” identities (Hammerberg, 2004, p.649). Accordingly, “one’s identity as ‘literate’ or ‘not literate’, ‘abled’ or ‘disabled’, ‘poor student’ or ‘good student’ can shift and change according to context and task” (Hammerberg, 2004, p.649). These ideas see me now questioning the notions of reading and the reader’s identity as bound to a particular community of participation. Therefore, there is the potential for multiple reader identities, as well as the likelihood reader identities may be unstable; constantly shaped in accordance with social, cultural, and contextual factors.

The idea of reading, readers and reader identities as socially, culturally, and contextually shaped phenomena prompts me to wonder how ‘the self’ shapes the
construction of the reader and their identities. Bakhtin (1981) defines learning as a dialogical process of mediation and negotiation with the self appropriating the ways of being in his/her social world. Resistance and redesigning formulate part of the individual’s appropriation efforts. Extending upon this view of the reader as an active agent, Leander (2002) suggests that individuals may position themselves by aligning or distancing themselves through actions such as appropriating or subverting discourse, making affirming or critical remarks, supporting or trivialising other’s views, dominating speaking space or being silent. Consequently readers are constructed via mediated processes which may or may not involve alignment, negotiation, redesigning, resistance and/or distancing by the self of particular cultural views of what counts as reading.

The notion of the reader and reader identities being shaped by socially mediated processes also implies the existence and influence of ‘others’. Parents, teachers, and the reader’s peers are ‘others’ who play a crucial role in socially mediating the construction of the reader and reader identities. It is pertinent at this point to remember that, like the reader, each of these community members have been shaped by the social and cultural discourses in the various employment, educational, familial, and other communities in which they have participated. Through these experiences, these ‘others’ have been socialised into particular ways of considering what counts as reading and reading competency. Thus, I speculate that the ‘others’ draw upon their particular views of reading and reading competency to define the reader. As a result, their verbal and non-verbal language position the reader in a way that either privileges or silences him/her (Leander, 2002; Matthews & Kesner, 2000). Additionally, the ‘others’ expectations and perceptions of the reader shape their constructions of the reader in particular ways which may be similar or dissimilar (McCarthey, 2001). Although McCarthey (2001) conjectures such disparities may be due to inaccurate assumptions of individuals as readers, I continue to ponder on other possible explanations for this phenomena’s existence. For example, disparate reports could result because individuals construct different identities in different contexts. Therefore, assessments made on the basis of a reader’s performance in each context could feasibly differ. Alternatively, disparate identifications of a reader might be reflective of how what counts as reading is constructed differently in different contexts.

In considering these views on how the reading, reading competency and the reader are constructed, I ponder how their relevance to the construction of ‘Fraser the reader’, who is defined by himself and others in multiple, and in some ways, conflicting ways. This paper examines how Fraser is constructed differently as a reader by his mother, classroom teacher and standardised literacy testing, as well as how he positions himself as a reader. In particular, this paper investigates how the self and each of others draw upon their particular views of reading and reading competency to define Fraser the reader.

**Case study of ‘Fraser the reader’**

This paper examines one case study from a much larger study of middle school reading and readers across a range of in-school and out-of-school contexts. The study was conducted at Paradise Primary School which is located in the south-east corner of Queensland.
Participants
Participants in this case study are Mr Green, the classroom teacher; Karen, Fraser’s mother; Fraser, the reader; and the researcher.

Fraser
The focus of this case study is Fraser, a Year Seven student. Fraser was in his third year as a member of his multi-age structured classroom.

Mr Green
Mr Green was Fraser’s classroom teacher. Mr Green was an experienced teacher who had completed several educational degrees and who had been teaching for more than twenty years in a variety of educational systems, schooling approaches, and year levels. At the time of this study, Mr Green had been teaching at Paradise Primary School for six years. Mr Green was one of two teachers in this multi-aged open-area classroom. Within this classroom, a mixture of year 5, 6, and 7 children were assigned to one teacher and taught primarily by that teacher. However, the other teacher in the classroom and specialist teachers also teach Mr Green’s children for particular subjects: Music, Language Other Than English - Japanese, Studies of Society and Environment, Health and Physical Education.

Karen
Karen is Fraser’s mother. Karen has only one child, Fraser. Karen is a sole parent who works several evenings a week. Her mother assists with the care of Fraser when Karen is working.

Researcher
I am the researcher. I have completed several academic degrees focused on literacy pedagogy and have greater than ten years experience as a teacher. I have undertaken the current study as part of my PhD study requirements.

Data Collection and Analysis
Within this particular case study, field observations, videos and photographs of Fraser and Mr Green ‘at work’ in various reading situations, interviews with Mr Green, the interview conducted with Karen, and email communications with Fraser form the corpus of data which is analysed using the tools of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). This analysis enables the discourse that participants draw upon to describe Fraser the reader to be discerned; providing insights into how the construction of reading, reading competency, and Fraser the reader are socially and culturally shaped phenomena.

How Fraser is constructed as a reader
In the following section, I use the headings ‘classroom teacher’, ‘mother’, and ‘self’ to illustrate the identities taken up by participants, Mr Green, Karen (Fraser’s mother), and Fraser respectively, as they call Fraser the reader–non-reader in to being. Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that in the interviews, I invite them to take up these identities and to draw upon their experiences within pertinent work, public and personal community spaces, to define reading and to construct Fraser the reader. During their current and past experiences within these communities, each participant will have been exposed to a number of different views about reading and what it
entails. In the following, I analyse each participant’s verbal and/or written
descriptions of Fraser the reader to discern traces of particular views of reading and
how each participant draws upon these to construct Fraser the reader.

**Classroom teacher**

Before I examine how Mr Green constructs Fraser the reader, I need to establish how
Mr Green constructs reading and reading competency as these invariably shape how
the reader is defined and positioned.

During his more than twenty years of teaching, Mr Green has had a considerable
amount of training and experience as a teacher of reading. In his work and personal
lives, he has been immersed in a number of academic communities (university and
school based) within which both complementary and contrasting theoretical views
about literacy teaching and learning were explored. Some of the perspectives of
reading, Mr Green has been exposed to, have been rejected by him and others
appropriated to become part of his discursive and teaching repertoires. Additionally,
over this time, he reports, in an interview, that his understandings of reading and his
teaching practices have evolved.

In the following, Mr Green’s interview responses and report card comments are
examined to discern how he constructs the notions of reading and reading
competency, their influence upon his reading practices and, subsequently, his
positioning of Fraser as a reader. Observations of Mr Green’s reading instruction,
reading activities, and interactions with students are also analysed to gain
comprehensive insights into the construction of reading and readers within this
classroom.

Analysis of Mr Green’s reporting methods and interview responses in regard to
reading and students’ reading competencies indicate that he draws upon several
theoretical views to inform his practices and decisions. One theoretical view that he
draws upon is reading-writing reciprocity (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). Mr Green
reported that he finds it difficult to consider reading without writing as the two are
complementary, as is evidenced in the following interview extract:

> “…my writing and reading are almost the same thing. They only have a name
to separate them because the reading is predominantly building up the
information base and experience base for the kids and the writing is where
they take that information base and then they try and generate it themselves.
So I can’t separate the reading and writing into like they are reading Energy
and Our Earth, Our Future so they couldn’t do the writing without the reading.
And I would just never do it any other way….”

Therefore, classroom literacy activities are planned to incorporate reading and writing
in partnership. For example, on several occasions, I observed children reading a text
and then writing an innovation on the text. Although, in an interview, Mr Green
described the set reading modules as involving “reading only”, my observations
showed students are required to read and respond in writing to the associated
comprehension questions. Mr Green’s adoption of reading-writing reciprocity clearly
underpins the reading-writing practices within his classroom.

This construction of reading also plays a key role in his identification of students’
reading competency. Within an interview, Mr Green reported that he assessed
students’ reading capabilities through conferencing by the depth, or lack there of, within their written and spoken interpretations (comprehension) of the module texts. From the data collected from interviews with Mr Green, it is evident that he positions students using a three level achievement system of good, average, poor: for example:

- “[Tess] is very fluent. Because she reads an enormous amount, she reads above her ability level”;
- “[Ellen] is a competent reader but not a what’s the word I want an avid reader”;
- “[Ryan] is mostly an average student …. his reading’s about average in terms of the reading program that I run … he hasn’t really he doesn’t really show deep insights into the reading work that we do in class … it’s sort of an average interpretation of what he reads …he never extracts any extra…”

Although Mr Green’s view of reading achievement may draw upon ideas of reading as consisting of three levels of comprehension - literal, inferential, evaluative (an adaptation on Smith and Barrett’s (1974) classification system), it is also likely that his assessments of students’ reading achievement are linked to the three achievement levels used in the school’s report card: competent, emerging, beginning (see Figures 1 and 2). Nonetheless, Mr Green’s positioning of Fraser appears to be a complex mix of these two positioning tools. In order to illustrate this complexity, I consider the work Mr. Green does to position Fraser as an ‘average’ reader, the discourses he draws on to justify these claims and the tools that constrain and enable these judgements.

Mr Green also professed that he regarded good readers to be people who read a lot and often. ‘Reading mileage’ and ‘reading frequency’ are evidenced as indicators of students’ reading competency levels. These two facilitators of reading development are other theoretical frameworks which inform Mr Green’s construction of reading and shape what Mr Green counts as reading and how he measures students’ competency as readers. When describing some students’ competency, his evaluations of their reading often reveal evidence of these two indicators, as apparent in the following extract from Fraser’s Semester 2 report card, “[Fraser] has been completing reading activities regularly and has a wide range of reading interests”.

In Fraser’s Semester 1 report, his effort and participation in reading and viewing is designated “satisfactory” (see Figure 1). However, within his Semester 2 report, Fraser’s effort and participation are deemed to have improved to an ‘excellent’ level (see Figure 2). The changes here are attributed to the recognition of Fraser’s regular engagement in reading: evidence of Mr Green once again drawing upon reading
mileage and reading frequency as indicators of reading competency. Meanwhile, despite these gains, within all other reported aspects of reading and viewing (reads and comprehends text; reads fluently; reads with expression), Fraser was consistently reported as performing at the middle achievement position. He continued to be constructed as an ‘average’ reader.

In the interviews, the majority of Mr Green’s comments circulated around Fraser’s behaviour. However, when Mr Green did discuss Fraser as a reader, he identified Fraser as “an ‘average’ reader”. The following Semester 1 report card comment also illustrates this positioning of Fraser: “[Fraser] is maintaining a satisfactory level in reading”. This judgement was reportedly based on Fraser’s provision of only a basic understanding of the set readings and failure to elicit any depth in his interpretations of these texts. This view of Fraser as positioned mid-way on all three criteria between a good and a poor reader was evidenced in the report cards (see Figures 1 and 2) where he was recorded in both Semester 1 and 2 of 2005 as operating within the middle achievement level.

I perceive that the particular way in which Mr Green constructs reading and reading competency constrains how he can measure Fraser’s, and in fact each of his student’s, competency as a reader. Students’ reading competency is assessed primarily through their written and oral responses, comprehension, of provided texts. Mr Green is also constrained, when reporting readers’ competency, by how reading is constructed within the school report card. This institutional grid, which provides the framework for reporting to parents/guardians, constructs reading as composed of three elements: “reads and comprehends texts”, “reads fluently” and “reads with expression” (see Figures 1 and 2). Although, the report card construction of reading does not align completely with how Mr Green constructs reading and reader competencies, as a teacher in this school, Mr Green is expected to use this institutional grid to report how a reader is performing. Although Mr Green does not work with students on reading fluency and expression, he is challenged how he will report his positioning of readers. In response to this constraint, Mr Green overlays his positioning of Fraser as an ‘average’ student onto the provided grid and elements.

What is notable in this situation is that both the teacher’s and the school’s construction of reading act as constraints on, firstly, what counts as reading, secondly, how competent reading is measured, and, finally, how students are positioned as readers. Unfortunately, I anticipate this will result in some reading practices not being acknowledged. The result being some students identified as ‘at risk’ due to limited or non-performance of particular sanctioned forms of reading. This, however, fails to recognise reading as socially and culturally constructed and students as competent in other forms of reading. Furthermore, this illustrates how misalignments between classroom teaching practices and school reporting frameworks may lead to misrepresentations of reading practices and readers being reported to parents/guardians. For teachers, conflict around this matter is both philosophically and politically challenging: whether to teach to the reporting framework (A. Luke & van Kraayenoord, 1998); or to advocate for change of a reporting framework; or to teach what one perceives is pertinent (Fehring, 2001), and, subsequently, to accommodate reporting from this onto the existing reporting framework.
As a teacher and researcher of reading, during the interviews, I called upon a particular aspect of Mr Green as a teacher, the role of ‘reading teacher’. Knowing the researcher as a fellow teacher of reading interested in his practices, Mr Green shared his views of reading, his assessment practices, his positioning of readers, and concerns he held. He established his identity as ‘reading teacher’ and as a member of the teaching community, enacting the collegial connectedness established through recognition of shared experiences as teachers of reading. This connectedness enabled me to gain insights which may not have been gained if I was not a teacher of reading.

**Mother**

Although throughout the interview, Karen, Fraser’s mother, talked about Fraser in considerable depth, she provided few responses that referred to Fraser’s reading capabilities. However, when she did describe him as a reader, it was always in deficit terms in relation to what he could not do. She stated that she considered Fraser to be a very poor reader. The following is the first time in the interview; Karen talked about Fraser’s reading abilities despite considerable effort by the researcher to focus her attention to this. Note P stands for Parent and R for Researcher in the following:

63  R  no well we all have different interests so would you describe him as a reader if you had to put it into a few words

64  P  ((shook her head indicating ‘no’))

65  R  shaking your head no

66  P  stunted lacks expression lacks fluidity does it under endurance he’s still very substandard in my books he’s um he doesn’t read ahead to see whether a sentence finishes and how he should use inflections and how just put a bit of interest into the reading it will just be nuh which I think you know most of us would have got through in Grade 3 really

The first reader characteristics referred to by Karen (turn 66) focus on expression and fluency. These responses draw upon two of the three major elements of reading identified in the school’s report card (see Figures 1 and 2): notably the two elements that Mr Green does not teach for. As Karen listens to her son reading aloud a couple of times each week, it is feasible that she would call upon these elements to define Fraser as a reader. Karen’s responses, for example, “very substandard”, “doesn’t read ahead” and “use of inflections”, incorporate the kinds of talk teachers often use to describe and categorise reading. Her capacity to use this talk displays her experience of discussions with teachers about her son’s educational progress over the last seven years. Additionally, her experiences with mainstream media will have provided her with considerable exposure to discussions about phonic and motivational elements of reading. Karen also draws upon her own experience as a student. This is evident when she says “most of us would have got through in Grade 3”. Using her experiences as a measuring stick, Karen rates Fraser’s reading performance as four years below his current grade level. Karen’s description of her son as a poor reader is shaped by a complex mix of ideas about reading from her own experiences.

On several occasions, Karen identified that Fraser found reading to be a difficult task. In the following Karen describes these difficulties:

76  P  mm but as I said when he says he reads to himself I don’t know I guess he reads reads page by page but I don’t think he would do more than in quarter of an hour he probably wouldn’t do more than 2 or 3 pages

77  R  mm
Reading for Fraser, as identified by Karen, is a hard task. This difficulty is evidenced through slow reading and minimal amounts of reading within a particular time frame. Once again, Karen drew upon fluency, which was one of the three major elements of reading within the report card framework, to define Fraser the reader. Fluency is also a key component of phonic views of reading where the ability to read and comprehend texts effectively is correlated to children’s ability to access letter and word knowledge fluently (Hill, 1997; Samuels, 1994). Fraser’s reading difficulties could have been attributed to the text’s difficulty level or lack of interest, but instead Karen links them to Fraser’s lack of reading competency.

Interestingly, in earlier comments, Karen stated that getting Fraser to read to her involved “a lot of whinging and complaints and yelling and screaming” (turn 22), “excuses, getting up, walking about, finding things that he really must do” (turn 24). “He will also always find excuses it’s nothing it’s not something that comes to him he’d rather do something other than reading” (turn 30). These avoidance behaviours are of interest as they could be evidenced for a number of subject or contextual factors, including interest level; text difficulty level; availability of other things to do; time constraints; and interaction issues. Karen, however, attributes these behaviours to Fraser’s lack of reading ability and interest.

Meanwhile, I continue to ponder whether these behaviours are part of the work Fraser does to resist and distance himself from the kind of reading his mother is encouraging him to do. On several occasions, Karen said she disliked the fantasy and computer game texts Fraser chose to read. She dubs them “these awful things he’s into” (line 26). Karen reported that she worked hard to get Fraser “to try and contact the real world” (turn 40). Through her actions to provide Fraser with some ‘real world’ texts, for example, “some articles from a newspaper” (line 26) and “National Geographic articles” (turn 40), Karen hopes that she will enable “a bit of the real world to seep in every now and then” (turn 318). However, she reports Fraser’s comment to her about these texts is “… but mum I’m a kid” (turn 318). This comment indicates Fraser does not see the value in him, a child, reading the ‘real world’ texts his mother values. In his child’s world, these ‘real world’ texts are of little interest or use. Fraser’s behaviours, therefore, may be seen as his active resistance to and distancing from reading these texts.

Interestingly, throughout the interview, Karen mostly responded to queries about Fraser’s reading with references to his behaviour. In several instances, Fraser’s reading difficulties are attributed by Karen to hyperactivity and concentration difficulties. In the following, Karen tells how hyperactivity has been a part of Fraser’s life for a long time, the negative impact this has had upon his concentration and, consequently, his capacity to learn to read.
and his reading has always been a huge task even as a little I mean he’s he’s been very hyperactive and um the beginning of school I’d have to actually sit him on the bench at eye level and put his hands under it you know stop him wriggling and everything and grabbing things as he was just like a whirling dervish

to get that concentration to read you know your most basic school reader was you know I’d be on the carpet frothing at the mouth after half an hour ((laughed)) because it was huge and I don’t know what the poor teachers went through and I should imagine I do but ((big breath in)) um so I think the concentration thing was getting a bit better um

When referring to Fraser’s behaviour, Karen often draws upon medical talk and, at times, includes references to the paediatrician and dietician. For example, in turn 164, Karen states “…paediatrician was saying oh I’ll wait until you think he thought that yes he did need it (medication which, in turn 170, is identified as “dexamphetamines”) and the fact that he was falling behind in school and driving everyone crazy um we then decided to give it a go …. so we’ve been trying to get the dose right”. The collaborative nature of the work she is doing with these experts is also evidenced in her comments.

Karen identifies Fraser’s behavioural issues as a disease ‘in his head’, something he cannot control: a disease which requires dietary and medicinal treatments to aid in its management. For example, in turn 254, Karen reports “he gets on people’s nerves when he can’t be quiet and sit down …..I don’t know that he can always totally help it”. Karen extends upon this, in turn 258, when she states “I mean it is after all a chemical imbalance in the brain”.

The location of Fraser’s problems within this ‘in-the-head’ disease has necessitated Karen seeking advice from experts; resulting in her engaging in many conversations with paediatricians, dieticians, school counselling personnel and teachers. Through these interactions, Karen has been able to take up the medical talk that surrounds Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It is highly likely that Karen also accessed information on ADHD and its management from the plethora of publicly available publications; further extending upon her knowledge of medical talk. The extent of Karen’s knowledge about ADHD and the various ways to ‘treat’ it are evidenced throughout the interview. In fact, a large proportion of Karen’s comments in the interview focus on this matter.

In addition, Karen often responded to positive things about Fraser with a negative response. Indeed, whenever positive aspects of Fraser’s reading are mentioned, Karen always seems to provide an alternative view which undermines any attempt by the researcher to identify what Fraser can do as a reader. This pattern is evident throughout the interview data and results in Fraser being constructed in deficit terms. For example:

the little man at the shop said to me the other day your son’s got very nice manners and when he comes in with the other boys and I says oh yes does he fill his pocket with lollies because I actually don’t give him money and he said no he stands back and they have lollies
In the above example, the positive framing of Fraser is attributed to “the little man at the shop”. Karen, however, promptly negates this view of her son by referencing to her own observations and experiences with Fraser. In these instances, Karen places greater value on her own long term experiences with Fraser. She seems to use these instances as a chance to have her voice, her opinion about how difficult Fraser is, heard.

Initially, I was puzzled by Karen’s focus on Fraser the behaviour problem, especially given that I had invited her to talk about Fraser the reader. In hindsight, I realise that the majority of Karen’s interactions within the school context have focused on discussing Fraser’s behaviour problems. My interview focus which called upon Karen to talk about Fraser with particular attention to what he could do as a reader, therefore, would have been a foreign experience; leaving Karen with little option but to draw upon her prior experiences in interacting with teachers.

Although this might in part explain why Karen constructs Fraser in deficit terms, I continue to wonder whether some other kind of work is happening. On two occasions, Karen shows empathy with teachers having to cope with her son. In turn 116, Karen recalls “…because it (Fraser’s hyperactivity) was huge and I don’t know what the poor teachers went through and I should imagine that I do…” Later in turn 369, Karen indicates teachers to be “you special people”. Firstly, these comments in conjunction with her high usage of “you know” throughout the interview suggest that Karen was actively engaged in building her relationship with me; a person she recognised as a teacher. Secondly, the comments suggest Karen adopts a respecting and collaborative role with teachers in general. The collaborative nature of Karen and Mr Green’s relationship is evidenced when Karen says “…I’m not here to see both wise but Brian’s aware and he tends to let me know if he’s [Fraser] going off the deep end” (turn 172). Karen’s use of Mr Green’s first name also signifies familiarity within their teacher-parent relationship. Interestingly, Mr Green reports that Karen always apologises to him for Fraser’s behaviour. I am left to continue to ponder on why Karen feels the need to apologise to a teacher for her son’s behaviour.

From Karen’s reports, school life has not been easy for either Karen or Fraser. Karen found advocating for Fraser during his early years in school to be a situation full of tension, conflict, and no reward. On several occasions, Karen confessed that “it breaks my heart” (turn 260; 266; 268), “this is my grief” (turn 254), to see how Fraser behaves and is treated. She reports, for example, that Fraser has “been ostracised constantly throughout his school”, and “he’s had a bad time he’s always been in to trouble”. As a result, Karen has often been called into meetings where Fraser has been talked about in deficit terms with his behaviour being the main topic of discussion. Karen will also have found herself the recipient of lots of advice from ‘experts’, with few opportunities to share her experiences without being judged negatively as a mother (Landsman, 2003; McKeever & Miller, 2004). In adopting a strong advocacy role, Karen would most likely have found herself marginalised and silenced. Carpenter and Austin (in press) proposed that mothers of children with ADHD are often forced to advocate strongly on their children’s behalf and, subsequently, are silenced. It is possible that Karen is tired of playing this advocacy role and of life being so difficult. Consequently, she has adopted an alternate approach to enable life to progress more smoothly. By adopting a self effacing and apologetic stance, Karen may have achieved a way of working that makes for a harmonious existence. It is
most likely that Karen takes up this identity of talking about her son in deficit terms in this particular context as it is what she has experienced and expects in the school context. She has also probably found it to be the easiest mode to relate to teachers. She may have learned that the best approach is to be quiet, agree, apologise, and denigrate her son. This approach, however, will constrain her opportunities to have her voice heard and to complain about teachers, teaching, and the availability or otherwise of resources for her child.

Karen, Fraser’s mother, brings together a variety of discourses to define her son’s reading capabilities. In particular, Karen drew upon her repertoires of institutional discourses to position Fraser as a deficit reader. It may be argued that, in this community of practice, this is how Karen acts out mother. However, it should also be kept in mind, that I invited Karen to take up the role of a particular kind of mother, that is, the mother of a reader. In calling upon her to adopt this position, I worked actively to focus and refocus her on what Fraser can do and does do as a reader. My role as teacher will also have constrained Karen in regard to how she could interact and define Fraser.

Self

In his email communications to the researcher, Fraser identifies the characteristics of a good reader and positions himself accordingly. A good reader is someone who “is reading on a regular basis”. In positioning himself, Fraser also defines a good reader as someone who reads a lot. These comments have echoes of the way Mr Green talked about reading. I am left to ponder whether Fraser is revoicing his teacher’s views about reading.

In measuring himself against these criteria, Fraser positions himself as “not a very good reader because I don’t read a lot”. Fraser’s identification of himself as someone who does not read a lot puzzled me as I had seen Fraser reading regularly in class. In fact, I had often thought he read more than any other child in the class as I had noticed him regularly engaging in both school sanctioned and unsanctioned reading. For example, often when Fraser was unable to progress with a Maths or English task, I had noticed him reading. Once upon querying him about this, he stated that he was unable to answer the Maths question and was reading while he waited for someone to come and help him. I also often observed Fraser reading at his desk prior to the start of school, and, at various times, during the day. For example one day, shortly before the bell for lunch went, Fraser was sitting at his desk reading silently what appeared to be a very thick book. Initially, I thought it was a thick oversized novel but upon speaking to him, I discovered what he was reading, how much of this particular text he read, and his interests.

1. R What are you reading now Fraser?
2. F Oh just some chapter things about my about this war hammer thing.

The book was a ‘White Dwarf’ magazine containing information about a number of computer games including ‘War Hammer’: a game which Fraser had purchased recently. The length of the text and the complexity of the vocabulary and sentence structures led me to assume that Fraser would skim through the text and have little
understanding of the content. This, however, was not the case. The following comment by Fraser indicates that he reads the whole text:

17 R does it take you a long time to read through it all or do you just select bits and pieces
18 F oh no I read the whole thing
[continued to read mostly silently though at times very quietly – inaudible]

On several occasions, I observed Fraser perusing a brochure or book through a small gap of his partially open tidy box. His behaviour, at these times, appeared to be secretive as though the reading was not sanctioned by the teacher. At times, however, the unsanctioned text he was reading was in full view of the teacher. See figure 3 for a photograph taken of Fraser with a magazine placed on top of his music book. On this occasion, I observed Fraser reading the magazine during the music lesson. He often glanced at this magazine and turned pages, when the teacher was talking.

Within his email communications, Fraser also identifies reading enjoyment as a useful characteristic of a good reader: “if u actually like reading will help”. At no time in the data corpus, however, does Fraser comment about what he enjoys reading. However, through examination of the texts Fraser choses to read at school, his penchant for reading fantasy and computer game books are evidenced. These are also the kinds of text his mother, Karen, identified and devalued as his preference in reading materials.

What is puzzling though is why Fraser fails to recognise how the considerable amount of time he spends reading these texts fits within his view of good readers: people who read a lot and regularly. Is it that Fraser doesn’t regard the texts he reads as the kinds of texts good readers read? Is this reflective of ‘others’ not recognising his engagement with these texts, as representative of what counts as a good reader? When I consider this in light of his mother’s identification of these texts as “awful things” (turn 26), these conjectures seem highly plausible.

His email communications position a good reader as “usually a person who keeps to your self and doesant like talking”. He is describing behaviour here, not reading. A good reader, therefore, is not a person who enjoys socialising with others and talking. A person who talks a lot and doesn’t get on with reading would be defined as a poor reader. Fraser’s view of what counts as a good reader is a good student who behaves appropriately, is on task, and is compliant. This view of a good reader is about what counts as ‘good’ behaviour and restricts Fraser’s potential to construct himself as a competent member of a community of readers.
In defining good readers, Fraser brings together particular discourses which in part seem to echo his classroom teacher’s views of good readers and, in other ways, are reflective of his mother’s views of reading. Subsequently, Fraser measures himself against these views. Despite evidence that Fraser regularly reads a range of fantasy and computer game texts, he positions himself as a poor reader. It seems that Fraser does not deem his choice of reading materials and his regular engagement in reading them as feasible measures of his reading performance. Rather he only appears to consider measurement of his reading performance in accord with school or mother sanctioned reading materials.

It is important to remember at this point that in my communications with Fraser, I was a teacher asking him, a student, to describe how he saw good readers and how he saw himself as a reader. I had invited ‘Fraser the student’ to tell me about ‘Fraser the reader’. Furthermore, all of my communications with Fraser occurred within a school context. Therefore, it is likely that the school context and our student-teacher relationship may have constrained Fraser in regard to how he could explain reading, good readers, and his competency as a reader. Of particular concern to me is that Fraser regularly demonstrated good reader behaviours, but these were not identified by him or by others.

**Standardised literacy testing: Year 7 test**

The Queensland Year 7 test in Aspects of Literacy and Numeracy is used once annually to assess, across the state, the literacy and numeracy performances of individual year 7 students and year 7 student cohorts. Subsequently, each student’s performance on the various elements of this standardised literacy test is recorded in various written and visual formats. Their results are also shown in relation to the benchmark for nationally agreed minimal standards each element of literacy and numeracy, and in relation to the average performance of students at that year level (Queensland Government & Queensland Studies Authority, 2005). Within this paper, I use extracts from the visually formatted report (see figures 4 and 5) and the tabulated class report to show how Fraser is positioned as a reader by this standardised state testing device.

As Fraser’s performance as a reader is what I am interested in, the ‘reading and viewing’ is the element of this assessment tool that is examined in this paper. However, before analysing Fraser’s report, I need to ascertain how reading and viewing are constructed within this testing device.

The 2005 test reporting handbook indicates that ‘reading and viewing’ require students to “acquire, evaluate and use information by reading texts with content from a range of learning areas” (Queensland Government & Queensland Studies Authority, 2005, p.48). Reading and viewing, therefore, are not limited to reading only literacy texts, but rather also incorporate a range of texts from various disciplines including history and science. To determine students’ capabilities in reading these texts, the test items are structured as comprehension questions with multiple choice answers which require students to identify one correct answer. Unfortunately, this approach does not acknowledge that readers come with different understandings and experiences which shape their comprehension of text (Pardo, 2004). Rather, it provides a simplistic
easily measurable notion of reading which fails to “demonstrate the complexity of literacy acquisition and use” (van Kraayenoord, 1999, p.2).

“To measure the full range of student abilities”, the test contains “some items at benchmark level (minimum competency), some below benchmark level, with the majority of items above benchmark level” (Queensland Government & Queensland Studies Authority, 2005, p.7). In addition, ‘reading and viewing’ are defined being comprised of the ability to “focus and retrieve explicit information”; “make straightforward inferences”; “interpret, integrate and apply information”, and “examine and evaluate.” (Queensland Government & Queensland Studies Authority, 2005, p.48). This harkens back to the three level analysis of reading comprehension: literal, inferential, evaluative (an adaptation on Smith & Barrett, 1974) which Mr Green appears to use when assessing students’ reading competency. I ponder whether this will mean that Fraser the reader will be positioned in a similar manner to how his teacher has constructed him as a reader.

So how is Fraser the reader positioned by this standardised testing device? Firstly, in looking at the visual report (Figure 4) and checking the coding devices against the legend (Figure 5), it is clear that Fraser has performed well above the minimal national standard for reading and viewing for Year 7 students. So at the national level, Fraser is considered to be performing reading and viewing at an adequate level to be able to make “sufficient progress at school” (Australian Government: Department of Education Science and Training, 2006, p.1). Meanwhile, within the class tabulated report, students’ literacy scores across the state range numerically from 320 to 1000, with Fraser’s score at 733. This score indicates Fraser performed well about the mid-point (50% correct) in the literacy segments of the test. On the visual report, Fraser’s result for reading and viewing correlates to this: he is positioned above the average result for Year 7 students in Queensland (see Figures 4 and 5). In addition, when compared to the range of results for the middle 50% of Year 7 students in Queensland, Fraser’s result sits on the top edge of this range (see Figures 4 and 5). So both nationally and state wise, Fraser the reader measures up as performing literacy competently.

Figure 4: Extract from Fraser’s standardised testing Year 7 test 2005

Figure 5: Extract from Fraser’s standardised testing Year 7 test 2005
Interestingly, at the school level, of the 18 students in Year 7 in Fraser’s school, only two scored higher than Fraser did. Two students also achieved the same score as Fraser. In comparison to his fellow Year 7 students, Fraser achieved well above the majority of his peers. So why then is Fraser considered as an average reader in the school context? Some correlations are evident between how his teacher constructs reading and how reading is constructed within this state standardised testing device, so this does not seem to be the source of difference. One is left to ponder whether the difference in evaluations of Fraser’s competency as a reader is due in part to the difference in assessment methods: multiple choice versus verbal and written explanations of texts.

In taking a closer look at the tabulated class report, I noted that most of Fraser’s errors were made on one particular text which was an excerpt from a mystery/adventure novel. He answered six out of eight questions incorrectly on this text. In considering why this occurred, I wonder whether Fraser was able to draw on his prior knowledge and experiences when reading this text. An element, Pardo (2004) stipulates, is crucial to effective comprehension of a text. Since the story is set in Venice, using context specific vocabulary and thick descriptive phrases to describe the setting, characters and actions, it is highly likely that limited prior knowledge of the context played a role in inhibiting Fraser’s capacity to effectively comprehend this particular text.

**Conclusions**

Within this analysis of the constructions of one child as a reader, both reading and ‘Fraser the reader’ are identified as being constructed by self (Fraser) and others (his class teacher, his mother, the researcher, and standardised testing) in some what different ways; although similarities, intertextual links (Fairclough, 1992c, 2000), are sometimes discernible across participant’s responses. Both reading, and ‘Fraser the reader’, are shaped by the communities in which they reside, and by the manner in which ‘self’ and the ‘other’ construct what counts as reading and reading competency.

There is no singular identity of ‘Fraser the reader’ but rather multiple constructions which are in part constrained by the discourses drawn upon by participants. Analysis of the various constructions of Fraser the reader indicate that each assessor of Fraser’s reading competency was constrained by a range of social, cultural and contextual factors. Fraser’s identity as a reader can also be deemed a product of his communities, contexts, discourses, and artefacts such as sanctioned texts. While, in each instance, Fraser’s identity as a reader is tied to a particular construction of reading and reading competency, it seems relatively stable. Fraser’s identity as a reader, however, also shifts according to assessor and context (Hammerberg, 2004).

Despite evidence of Fraser displaying good reader behaviours, there is little attention afforded to describing ‘Fraser the good reader’. Why this aspect of Fraser is silenced puzzles me, although the considerable attention given to discussing Fraser’s behaviour suggests his behaviour has been the main area focused on teachers and his mother during Fraser’s schooling; resulting in a pattern of viewing Fraser through deficit lens. Hence, in discussing Fraser the reader, deficit language is often employed. The silencing of ‘Fraser the good reader’ is of key concern to this researcher, as Fraser’s reading competencies are not being acknowledged by either him or other community members.
In closing, I acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings that may be gained by analysing these data sets through different lenses. I am also aware of the potential of "different interpreters possibly generating different coherent readings of the same text" (Fairclough, 1992c, p.291). As a beginning researcher, my lack of experience and insensitivity to discourses as well as my interpretative biases may have limited the identification of discourses and intertextual links (Fairclough, 1992b). Although, some layers of meaning may have been missed by this researcher’s choice of discourses and analytic tools, identification of all elements is likely to be a challenge for any researchers of text and reader identities.

Of key importance, however, in this analysis, is the recognition that people appropriate and draw upon multiple discourses in complex ways to define reader identities. Assessments of readers are shown to be social and cultural constructions based on an assessor’s discourse experiences and appropriations. As such, measures of readers need to be framed tentatively and critically reflected upon.

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References


