Conceptualising a Literacy Education Model for Junior Secondary Students: The Spatial and Reflective Practices of an Australian School

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Abstract: Evidence suggests that increasingly young adolescents are finishing school with poor literacy skills limiting their access to further education, training and employment. This has lifelong effects in terms of their economic participation and health and wellbeing. This paper examines the spatial practices of one school's approach to improving literacy outcomes for its Years 8 and 9 students, in order to increase positive pathways after school. It shows how staff at this school have begun to work collaboratively with each other and community members in trying to address the reading needs of their students. Using the conceptual frameworks of spatial theory and reflection the paper will share the conceived and perceived spatial practices of staff identified in interview data. We argue that when ongoing reflective practice occurs potential transformative or ‘third space’, practices result; ensuring positive literacy learning outcomes for all students.

Introduction

Language, literacy, and learning are about being in the world. They do not have to be about a rush to teaching. (McDermott, 2005, p. 123)

Evidence in the literature suggests that increasingly, young adolescents (aged 12–14 years) are ill-prepared for the literacy demands of the 21st century, resulting in limited opportunities beyond schooling (Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger & Torgesen, 2008). In Australia, an annual assessment program has identified approximately 12% and 6% of students in Years 7 and 9 respectively are below the national minimum standard for reading (NAPLAN, 2015), for those who complete the test however there may be many more. Without effective reading skills students may have difficulty participating in society (McGeown, Duncan, Griffiths & Stothard, 2015). For some time, researchers have noted how educators are in need of effective and appropriate strategies to best address adolescent literacy concerns (Alvermann, 2001; Moje, 2002) but further evidence suggests that a ‘rush to teaching’ (McDermott, 2005, p. 123) or reactive approaches to improving literacy outcomes occurs (Comber & Cormack, 2011; Freebody, Barton & Chan, 2013). Additionally, these ‘one size fits all’ approaches tend to be impacted on by the fact that schools are mandated to raise achievement levels on the above mentioned standardised tests; rather than take a collaborative approach that acknowledges students’ learning strengths.

This paper shares one school’s multi-pronged approach in their attempt to improve literacy learning, and in particular reading, for its students in Years 8 and 9. We apply the conceptual frameworks of spatial theory and reflection to report on data collected during interviews with administration, teaching and support staff at the school. We also share some of the students’
suggestions on what works best for them in their own learning.

Spatial theory and reflection

Spatial theory

Spatial theory explores space and place and the social relationships between these. Work by Foucault (1977, 1980), Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996) explains how socio-spatial practices are highly influenced by politicised ideologies. These ideologies impact on the physical, social, cultural, political spaces in which teachers work. For some time, socio-cultural theorists have illustrated these spatial practices in education such as in curriculum development (Barton, Garvis & Ryan, 2014; Ewing, 2010); institutional and systemic approaches to improvement in student learning outcomes (Comber, 2012; Moje, 2000); as well as teachers’ pedagogic strategies enacted in the classroom (Barton & McKay, in press/2016; Comber, 2015; Mills, 2015). These practices are shaped by the context of spaces within which they are situated – both actual and rhetorical.

Real or first space practices are often referred to as perceived spaces. This is where everyday objects and practices are ‘perceived’ as normal and therefore offer a sense of cohesion and continuity (Ryan & Barton, 2014; Lefebvre, Soja, 1996). First space practices are signified by what we do in established practices and routines. Ideal or second space practices relate to conceived spaces or spaces of power and ideology. These are often the ‘representations of space’ dominant in society and therefore influence what we do or the first space practices. Third or lived space practices are where potentially transformative change can happen. Third space requires people to subvert or re-imagine real and imagined spaces (Soja, 1996). Spatial practices can therefore be made and re-made for new possibilities that may not have been considered before. Sheehy (2009) however, contends that it is critical to understand what constitutes both first and second space practices in order for change to occur. A full understanding of these spatial habits requires reflection on the part of teachers and administrators for growth and change to occur (Brookfield, 2005; Larrivee, 2000).

While teachers can often identify ways in which they can improve their pedagogical practice they may not always be able to enact them if institutional or systemic pressures require other mandated approaches (Comber, 2012). Challenging these spaces can be difficult due to lack of time; expectations related to curriculum; and/or personal awareness or reflective capacities (Fullan, 1993; Howard, 2003). When teachers are able to reflect on both the first and second space practices in their work, and consider how these practices impact on student learning, then the potential for third space practices or spaces of possibility will be increased. These spaces can be where ‘the competing knowledges and discourses of different spaces are brought into “conversation” to challenge and reshape both academic content literacy practices and the knowledge and discourse of youths’ everyday lives’ (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo and Collazo, 2004, p. 44). Third space practices enable teachers to not only reflect on their current experience but in their practice by considering ways in which they could take risks not previously deliberated.

The importance of reflection for teachers

Reflection is important for professional growth, particularly as a teacher (Calderhead & Gates, 1993; Loughran, 2002). In fact, Russell (1993) believes that reflecting in and on practice enables teachers to step back from their everyday work and make more effective decisions about improving learning and teaching.

Working through a number of levels in order to reach deep and critical thinking is central for potentially transformative learning and teaching (Luttenberg & Bergen, 2008; Pollard & Collins, 2005; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Ryan and Ryan’s (2013) 4Rs model of reflection (based on Bain et al.’s, 2002 work) shows how when working through the levels of reporting and responding, relating, reasoning and reconstructing, critical reflection occurs. Reporting and responding often are foundational reflective skills where people can describe critical incidents that may occur. Relating is where one may refer back to previous experiences or occurrences where similar phenomena have happened. Reasoning requires one to consider why things happen the way they do which leads to reconstructive practice – findings ways in which to improve and move forward. Reconstructive practice involves an analysis of power in the context in which learning occurs. This may uncover hegemonic assumptions that normalise the acceptance of decisions that serve those in power and ideologies embedded in decision making and practice.

In order for positive change to occur, particularly in relation to improving literacy learning for young adolescents, administrative and teaching staff need to work collaboratively. It is also important to view
students from a strengths-based rather than a deficit lens. Moje (2002) notes that research on adolescence is often from a problematic view, in that adolescence is seen as a ‘troubled hormonal time’ and that issues associated with learning need to be fixed. An alternative view would recognise or reframe this perspective of adolescents by focusing on the potential value and power of young people’s local and global skills and attributes. This includes, according to Moje (2002), the way in which ‘adolescents are sophisticated meaning-makers who use various texts to represent or construct identities and subject position in the world’ (p. 215). Meaning-making, boundary crossing and agency would be the focus rather than how best to manage dilemmas (Moje, 2002). This would require thoughtful and well considered approaches to supporting adolescent students who may need support in the area of literacy.

If a reframing of current practice is to occur, then ongoing reflection and investigation of spatial practices is necessary on the educator’s (including leadership teams, teachers and support staff) part. This paper therefore explores the spatial practices of teachers working in one school, via a lens of reflection, in relation to their approaches to improving literacy for their young adolescent students.

Background to the study
Merry State High School had for some time recognised the need for a multi-pronged approach in improving literacy learning, in particular reading, for their students entering high school. Working in collaboration with a community partner from a charity, its feeder schools, and a strong volunteer-base the school had implemented a range of strategies to support its students in class and through additional programs. Extra learning support classes, that included phonics and comprehension programs, as well as support in regular classes with volunteers assisting all students, contributed to a collaborative approach to improvement. This paper focuses on the findings of a qualitative study undertaken at the request of the school. The school was interested in knowing how the approaches they had chosen to improve literacy learning for their students were working. The participants in the study were the leadership team, teachers and support staff responsible for working with the students who needed reading support, and the students involved in the additional support classes.

Data methods and analysis
As the school had some quantitative measures of the students’ achievements (including NAPLAN and PAT-R testing [ACER, N.D.]) they were seeking some qualitative information about the impact of their literacy support programs. We therefore carried out both interviews and focus groups at the beginning of the school year and again, six months into the year with school staff and students.

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<th>Interviews/focus groups at the beginning of school year</th>
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In order to investigate the spatial and reflective practices of the school’s program for the year we utilised a case study approach. Case studies allowed ‘an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’ context’ (Simons, 2009, p. 21). We had each of the above interview and/or focus group audio files transcribed which then underwent an analytical coding process. The data were analysed through the lens of both spatial theory (that is identifying the first, second and third spaces of practice) and reflection (that is whether the participants were reporting, relating, reasoning or reconstructing on this practice).

Each of the authors read through the transcripts and made notes according to the above fields. We then cross-checked to see where the similarities and/or differences lay between each of our coding practices in the first phase. Transcripts were then read together confirming the identification of the above coding elements. The following section describes the findings of this analysis.

Findings
First space or perceived practices
The real or perceived practices of this school at the beginning of the year resonated a top-down leadership model. Data indicate the leadership team felt their role was to support both the learning support and
general teaching staff in the development of literacy improvement strategies. Throughout his interview, the Principal reported on the importance of his leadership role in supporting staff in their everyday work. This perceived influence included that of other schools and colleagues within the geographical locale:

So I find that whole thing enormously interesting more than anything. [My sphere of influence is over the people who are here and the people who are in the primary school down the road. (Principal)

The Principal reported on how, as a result of his leadership, the school had improved in morale as well as its reputation within the community.

This was not a particularly nice place to be when I came here four and a half years ago. We had poor staff morale ... a high degree of misbehaviour, a bad reputation in the community ... We have moved from a conversation of low morale to what we're proud of what we do. We work together and we like what we do and I love coming to work. (Principal)

The data from the Principal reasoned that a strong sense of pride in the school existed amongst the leadership team and staff; something they attempted to develop in the students:

So everything we do is about respecting each other and trying to instil that value of pride in all of our kids, so its form both ends ... we did very well in our audit and we are proud of that. I think there's a little bit of a bubbling of hey, we're not so bad. We're actually doing quite well of ourselves and we're doing the right thing by our kids ... so there's ... pride in what you're doing and its purposeful teaching in a way. (Learning Support Teacher – LST)

Despite the desire to make Merry State High a great place of learning a very real challenge for the staff was the perceived increase in the numbers of students entering the school with low literacy skills, particularly in terms of reading:

There are so many referrals this year as well, like it just seems to increase, the referrals [of students] from teachers who aren't reading or misbehaving. Therefore, they think it might be a literacy issue so you get referrals in. (LST)

An acknowledgement of the increasingly large number of students who were not developing adequate literacy skills in their primary school years provided impetus to seek change. The staff made this decision based on information provided to the school by the primary school colleagues as well as other data such as NAPLAN and PAT-R testing. These basic skills needed to be addressed before curriculum literacies, necessary to succeed in the secondary setting, were attempted:

These are the kids whose phonemic awareness says that they're just going to bang up against the ceiling, have never been able to move any further. We've got to fix that problem before we can do high school literacy problems. (Head of Department – Humanities (HOD))

Two particular individuals – the Head of Department-Humanities and Learning Support Teacher – were the drivers in leading the school to a charity’s community-based program. The federally-funded program, which involved a community partner, provided the school an outsider’s vision that perhaps challenged the school’s first space practices.

My role is probably more about communication and the ability to think strategically … most organisational see what’s wrong with their world, rather than being able to look over as a broad picture. So my role is very much trying to look at the broader picture, bringing the partners that would assist that to happen … and then building that structure to enable that. (Community Partner)

The program implemented included more learning support classes with two learning support teachers and two teacher aides, outside the regular classes, that focused on improvement in phonics and comprehension for the students. The overall program also began to utilise volunteers from the community to support the students when they were attending their regular curriculum classes. Despite this program having the potential to support the first space practices of the school, several staff still noted the limitations on what is perceived to be possible (in relation to responding to adolescent literacy). These systemic constraints impacted on who was employed; on how staff roles were allocated; on how lessons and support mechanisms were timetabled; and the links between the learning support team and ‘mainstream’ teachers. Staff accepted these limitations as the normal challenges faced by schools.

They wouldn't commit to a contract for her (part-time support teacher) until day eight numbers. So we didn't even know we were going to get learning support ... so learning support was farmed out ... it was only after the second week that we knew we could get her back and then we had to restructure the timetable. People’s enthusiasm and work ethic is amazing and all that but it is the constraints of the system. (LST)

The first space practices at this school, particularly evident in the first round of interviews, were generally accepted by the leadership and teaching staff including aspects of education that they felt could not be
changed even though they wanted to change them. Relating and reasoning comments about raising standards on the NAPLAN tests; having to cover set curriculum in a set amount of time; departmental mandates; as well as financial constraints were commonly cited as constraints by the staff. These perceived practices contributed to the school’s sense of success in relation to student learning outcomes.

I picked the teachers and the classes based on need, around their NAPLAN Scores or they were identified as a modified program … So we had a literacy plan in action that was having results, … NAPLAN data shows that. (HOD)

After six months, however, when we returned to re-interview the staff an indication of change to the program was evident. The school were beginning to realise that the increased number of learning support classes and the volunteer support was plateauing progress. A volunteer coordinator was employed on a part-time basis to seek out more people to assist in the regular classrooms. In addition, an English program was developed as a bridge between the phonics and comprehension programs and the regular classes for those students who still required additional support. These changes allowed staff to be more aware of the approaches they were taking (or the first and second space practices) and were able to take risks by considering further options for the students’ who were improving; providing opportunities for third space possibilities.

Second space or conceived practices
Second space or conceived practices were highly influenced by the political ideologies that were part of this school despite the staff generally wanting to improve student learning outcomes. Students who were identified as needing support participated in the Learning Support Program – which involved commercial programs for improving phonics and comprehension skills. The data revealed that the main underpinnings of the literacy support program at this school were initially driven by the desire to improve student results in high-stakes testing such as the NAPLAN tests. In fact, data were drawn from these tests to identify the students to be included in the program as well as to distinguish in which skills the students had deficits.

Children who are in [the program] have been identified because they’re learning support children or their NAPLAN scores aren’t quite there, or more importantly the reality is these two things happen. They’re tested, they’re picked up, and tested again because the year eights do ACER testing and that can be just an absolute highlighting, a stop signal for kids and go oh well this kid clearly is not cutting any – their score is like one out of five or whatever. (HOD)

Controlling practices were evident in this school where pressures from the system, that is the department of education, in which the school is a member, highly influenced the ways in which they went about their everyday work.

There’s so many agendas that the [Education Department’s] running that you’ve got to keep your eye on the ball with the agendas and keep those things moving along and that. (Deputy Principal)

Despite the staff’s ideal vision for their students, including improvement in individual reading results, increasing self-worth and esteem, and working towards positive post-school pathways, the political agendas still had power over the approaches selected. The Principal for example, indicated his disdain of pressures from the broader education department but he still carried out his role with systemic directives in mind.

Because of the political pressure around the NAPLAN stuff which makes me angry … it is immeasurable and our system is a bit cranky about the fact that we’re third last in the nation. Of course everyone badly wants to be first. So they pour money and pressure into schools around improving literacy and numeracy results for kids. I actually don’t have an issue with that. (Principal)

The Principal is reasoning about the political pressure of the systemic approaches to improving NAPLAN results saying it makes him angry but he also states that he doesn’t have an issue with that. This provides evidence that conceived spatial practices, while aiming to improve student outcomes, are still heavily influenced by first space practices.

Second space is where power, implicit and explicit, sustains the cohesion of first space. At this school it was evident that second space practices heavily impacted on first space practices. Certain ideologies about what was important in developing the school’s identity were sustained in the representations of what should be done to support the students. These decisions were largely made by the support staff but the directives came from the administration team, who were in many ways disconnected with what was happening on the ground. Unfortunately, those in control often sustain the ideological and hegemonic conceptions of what is best for the students and this is often
driven by processes such as school improvement plans and audits, professional standards, and accountability measures such as high-stakes testing and the subsequent use of the data produced.

In fact, at this school the Head of Department – Humanities reported that participants in the program were selected according to the results on NAPLAN rather than asking the students themselves.

I picked the teachers and the classes based on need, around their NAPLAN Scores or they were identified as a modified program … So we had a literacy plan in action that was having results, and our NAPLAN data shows that, but the point with the NAPLAN data is and the problem with NAPLAN data is, with the kids we know cannot we always ask them to be withdrawn. So the data's skewed from the beginning. (HOD)

The Head of Department reasons that the data by which they organised participation is skewed yet continued to make decisions based on these results. Therefore, conceived practices had an extensive influence on the everyday organisation and conceptualisation of the support program in this school. This ‘top-down’ approach was recognised by the staff but not necessarily questioned:

There's a top-down … so if your principal and leaders are strong then that usually filters down to the student population. But on the other side too it also is a grassroots [approach] as it comes from the students themselves. I think we all, particularly in the special education department, we foster a real collaborative community, 'we are family' kind of approach – or try to. So everything we do is about respecting each other and trying to instil that value of pride in all of our kids, so it's from both ends. (LST)

Barton & McKay (in press/2016) identified this school initially working from this ‘top-down’ model (Figure 1).

This model shows how first space practices involve the learning support teachers, teacher aides and volunteers being responsible for, and having direct contact with the students needing support. It highlights the disconnection between the leadership team, as the managers of the school, and the students. It also shows how the school initially viewed the regular or other curriculum classroom teachers as a component separate to the learning support area. However, even after six months, when we conducted the second round of interviews and focus groups there were some third space practices emerging.

Emerging spaces of possibility: The third space

Upon our return we learnt that the students in the learning support program had ‘come a long way’, as indicated by the learning support teacher in the post focus group. An emerging multi-pronged approach that included a wider range of strategies in the learning support lessons, an English bridging class once the students had reached a certain level in the learning support classes, and an expanded volunteer-base in the regular classes, reconstructed the school's practices in supporting the students. The school employed a part-time co-ordinator for the volunteer program who recruited and managed up to 40 community volunteers to work with the students both in their learning support lessons and regular classes. Comments from both school staff and volunteers showed positive results:

It's consolidated in our current school environment. You can see that with the breadth of teachers accessing the resource of volunteers … these children are getting supported with their reading then they're getting supported in their classroom environment. (HOD)

Well, from my perspective, I think it's morphed a lot. It's really been quite transformational. (Volunteer Coordinator)

All of a sudden, they’re kind of like, yeah. They’re just starting to beam. So in terms of resilience, they’re trying a little bit harder, whereas before they might have given up. (Volunteer)

Another addition to the program was an English-bridging program. The staff felt that although the students had improved in their reading capacity they
provide them more opportunities to show leadership such as teaching each other.

Barton & McKay (in press/2016) recommended how this school could shift from a top-down model to a more collaborative and community-based model (as shown in Figure 2) with the students at the centre; but at the same time recognised the strong need for this to be sustained through ongoing reflection and awareness of the spatial practices surrounding literacy learning.

**Figure 2: An effective model of teaching reading for adolescent learners: A collaborative, community approach (Barton & McKay, in press/2016).**

**Conclusion**

In an age of accountability, particularly in education, there is a risk that schools do not recognise their own power and professionalism in sustaining change. If schools are to appreciate young adolescents as competent and creative individuals (Moje, 2002) despite their learning needs, then third space practices need to occur.

Our research findings indicate that although the teaching staff’s underlying principles at Merry High School were well intentioned towards improving the students’ learning outcomes, they were ultimately hindered by the continuing constraints imposed through first and second space practices. Indeed, the organisational structures of the school such as everyday routines and staffing; the selection and allocation of resources; and pedagogical approaches were prioritised over their intended audience and most importantly what their students themselves had to offer. There was also
evidence that staff were not aware of these ‘competing discourses’ (Moje et al., 2004).

Unless these well intentioned principles are supported by ongoing reflection in identifying the opposing ideals, then spaces of possibility remain limited. Top-down approaches will continue to drive the practices of staff and limit the contributions of students rather than have the students’ interests, strengths and weaknesses at the centre driving the decisions about the learning process (Barton & McKay, in press/2016). Reflection therefore is essential for teachers to identify, address, challenge and uncover hegemonic assumptions and ideologies embedded in decision making and practice. As Brookfield (1998) notes contesting hegemony allows transformational practice. The students and the teachers at this one school – Merry High School – were beginning to respond to their students’ needs by uncovering these spaces.

All schools experience pressure to improve student results particularly in the area of literacy. The push for improvement often occurs without asking the students themselves what they need; what approaches to learning they would prefer; as well as finding out their own personal strengths or interests. It is therefore recommended that when schools begin to develop literacy support programs, regardless of school context, that the position of the student at the centre is considered in their own learning journey. This would ensure that information about, and assessment of, students is not done before even meeting them. Third space, reflective and reconstructive practices must therefore take into account the funds of knowledge (Moje, 2002) students already bring with them into the learning space as well as their own and the school’s community practices.

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