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ABSTRACT

A project was undertaken at the University of South Australia to improve the understandings of tertiary lecturers and student teachers about disadvantaged schools as contexts for literacy pedagogy. The project conducted seminars and workshops on the nature of the relationship among literacy, poverty, and education. The project resulted in development of three videos titled "Literacy, Poverty and Schooling"; "Becoming a Literacy Teacher in a Diverse Community"; and "Teaching Literacy in Disadvantaged Schools." The videos focus on whole school structures that support literacy development and on teachers and student teachers planning, teaching, and debriefing literacy events. The videos highlight the different values and attitudes held towards some of the matters raised, for example use of the term "disadvantaged" versus "different." Specific content of each of the three videos is explained, and plans for three additional videos are described. Problems with involving student teachers in the project are discussed. For example, the students did not have the understandings or "lenses" that the research team members had, which caused concerns about "putting words in their mouths." Also, student teachers had little time to be involved in making the videos. (Contains 28 references.) (JDD)

REFRAMING LITERACY AND DISADVANTAGE: EMPOWERING THE STUDENT TEACHER

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Paper prepared for ATEA 24th Annual Conference
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Al stract

Increasingly, beginning teachers are appointed to schools which are labelled 'disadvantaged'. Research into university courses (Christie, 1991; Comber et al, 1992) shows that preservice programs fail to adequately prepare students to understand and work in these schools. An across-university team in South Australia, funded by two CAUT grants (1993 and 1994), is working with student teachers in a range of disadvantaged schools. The team is developing material which can be used in preservice education programs to help students examine:

- their assumptions about disadvantage
- the connections between disadvantage and literacy achievement
- the theory/praxis nexus
- school programs which address literacy/disadvantage

An outline of the team's work is presented and some of the video material which has been developed is shown and discussed.

The videos will be available later this year from Eleanor Curtain publishing, 905 Malvern Road, Armidale, Victoria 3143

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REFRAMING LITERACY AND DISADVANTAGE: EMPOWERING THE STUDENT TEACHER

BACKGROUND

The project which forms the basis of our discussion is called **Teaching literacy in disadvantaged schools: getting it on the tertiary agenda**. This is a National Teaching Development Grant project funded by DEET in 1993 and 1994 through the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT).

The project team from the University of SA in 1993-1994 is:

Barbara Comber	Language and Literacy Education
Helen Nixon	Diploma in Education/ Communication Studies
Lynne Badger	Language and Literacy Education
Susan Hill	Early Childhood Education

In 1994 the project became formally cross-institutional when we were joined by:

Lyn Wilkinson	Language Arts/English and Education The Flinders University of SA

The aims of the project

The project was undertaken to improve the understandings of tertiary lecturers and student teachers about disadvantaged schools as contexts for literacy pedagogy. We aimed to put literacy, culture, language and poverty on the tertiary agenda and in so doing enhance the quality of our teaching and our students' learning.

The project is important because research has shown that preservice and inservice courses in teacher development have not, in the past, adequately addressed disadvantaged schools as contexts for teaching and learning (Christie, 1991; Comber et al, 1992). Addressing what it means to teach literacy in disadvantaged schools is essential because students living in poverty perform less well on standardised mainstream school literacy tasks than their more advantaged peers. Non English Speaking Background (NESB) and Aboriginal students are also at risk (WRAP, 1992). Deficit attitudes towards children may contribute to this (Au, 1993; Badger, Comber and Weeks, 1993; Hill, 1992).

Further, if our exit students find employment it is more often than not in schools disadvantaged by isolation or poverty, or both, whether these are in the state system or the Catholic system. Our project involved examples of both state and Catholic schools. Unfortunately we were not awarded funding for travel and so were unable to include rural schools as we had proposed to do in our submission.

The design of the 1993 project

From the outset this has been a multi-layered project which was designed to impact on a **range** of courses within the University of South Australia. The 1993 phase of the project involved:

- undergraduate students on school practicum in literacy and language related units on three campuses of the University of South Australia in the following awards:
  Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education)
  Bachelor of Education (Primary)
  Bachelor of Teaching (Primary)
  Post-graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary)

- the project team and seven other university lecturers who were teaching in these awards and supervising student teachers on their practicum in disadvantaged schools working with us on this project

- supervisory or co-operating teachers in five disadvantaged schools, some of whom were also students in postgraduate awards in language and literacy, such as the Graduate Diploma of Literacy and Language Education and the Master of Education (Literacy and Language).

- principals, teachers and students in five disadvantaged schools in SA:
  Immaculate Heart of Mary School, Brompton
  Paralowie R-12 School
  Salisbury North West Junior Primary School
  The Pines - Parafield Gardens North West Primary School
  Blair Athol Primary School

Thus the project was complex and multi-layered. We established a critical community of participants including lecturer-colleagues, the reference group, school-based educators and student teachers, all of whom met several times in seminar situations with visiting lecturers who contributed to the videos. This process ensured ongoing professional development for all concerned and much ongoing evaluation as segments of draft videos were scrutinised and discussed.

Practical outcomes of the project

We have developed a set of three self-contained videos which captures the complexity of teaching literacy in disadvantaged school contexts. **Teaching literacy in disadvantaged schools** (60 mins) consists of three self contained modules of video documentary material.
Module 1 : Literacy, poverty and schooling (21 mins)
Module 2 : Becoming a literacy teacher in a diverse community (17 mins)
Module 3 : Teaching literacy in disadvantaged schools (23 mins)

The videos document interviews with school principals and other educators working in the areas of research, policy development and implementation in literacy and

language education at the state and national levels. Also recorded were student teachers and teachers investigating the demands of different school contexts and the organisation of literacy programs.

An accompanying book is designed to suppor. educators who are committed to raising issues of social disadvantage in their work and to promoting discussion and questioning about the ways in which educational institutions can become sites for social justice. The book suggests ways of using the resources in a variety of educational settings, including detailed examples of approaches which have been trialled by the project team.

The videos have potential uses in a range of disciplines and in multi-disciplinary courses concerned to address issues of poverty and equity. Possible uses for the material are in:

- undergraduate literacy courses
- undergraduate education studies courses
- post-graduate courses
- professional development
- induction of teachers new to the school community
- induction programs for student teachers

SOME DIFFICULT ISSUES

A significant proportion of evaluation in this project has been ongoing, particularly evaluation by the reference group. Small segments of versions of the videos were evaluated at each meeting and difficult issues were discussed at length. At an early reference group meeting concerns were raised about the problematical nature of filming in disadvantaged schools; in particular, the danger of a deficit model being shown on the videos.

As a result the project team organised three workshops to explore discourses of disadvantage and the nature of research that has been and is still to be done into the nature of the relationship between literacy, poverty and education. These issues are raised in the first video in particular. The three workshops were:

1. **Background literature and research**
   The project team led the first workshop, providing key papers as pre-reading, using base data from the National Survey of Literacy and Language Practice in the Early Years in Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) schools, and leading discussions of current projects and research by workshop participants.

2. **A systemic understanding of poverty and its implications for education**
   Basil Varghese, Education Coordinator, Brotherhood of St Laurence (Melbourne)

3. **Poverty, literacy and educational performance: what's missing in the research?**
   Professor Peter Freebody, Professor of Education, Griffith University

In short, a significant amount of intellectual and emotional work went in to the conceptual planning of the implementation of the project. We found that including the whole range of project participants in the process increased everyone's understandings and generated further enthusiasm and energy.

Rationale for the approach taken to scripting

The use of the word "disadvantaged" became a major concern in the implementation of the project, with some members of the reference group preferring "difference" and others committed to the blunt reality of "disadvantage". Out of this ongoing debate in the reference group it was decided that the videos could function to generate further debate, to unsettle deficit stereotypes, whilst at the same time not shirking hard realities. Thus we decided to write the scripts in a very conscious way and make the words themselves the object of analysis and discussion.

A major aim in the scripting, then, became the presentation of material in ways which did not attempt to hide complexity, tension and contradiction. On the contrary, we worked hard to produce material which is not prescriptive and invites speculation and highlights the different values and attitudes which may be held towards some of the matters raised.

Because of the emergent concept of the project and the decision that filming would not be tightly scripted in advance special care was taken with the choice of sites and school personnel. The collaborative ethos of the project has been upheld with members of the project team working with the participating lecturers, student teachers and school personnel at every site. Initial meetings were organised with the principals to discuss the school contexts, school structures which support literacy development, and teachers' strengths and literacy events which could be highlighted in their schools. Interviews with principals have contributed to the theoretical framework of the project and edited sections of them appear on the videos.

Filming has focussed on whole school structures which support literacy development and teachers and student teachers planning, teaching and debriefing literacy events. Student teachers' questions and the ways teachers operate around issues involved in literacy learning in disadvantaged schools are interwoven into the filming.

EXAMPLES FROM THE VIDEOS

Literacy, poverty and schooling

Module 1 **Literacy, poverty and schooling** sets the scene for the issues raised in the following two videos. Using extracts of interviews with educators and students in the primary, tertiary and secondary education sectors, Module 1 raises issues of definition surrounding the terms poverty, literacy and disadvantage. The video opens up debate and informs the audience of

possibilities for change and social action. The video presents facts, statistics and interviews with experienced educators and students about literacy, poverty and schooling. Module 1 questions and encourages debate by including a range of views and interpretations of the issues surrounding the teaching of literacy in disadvantaged schools. The video encourages further reading, research and discussion by presenting differing views and interpretations.

The kinds of questions we might put to students before and after viewing are as follows. In most cases the video does not provide clear answers. Key readings may also be used as prereading or as follow up reading.

The terms poverty, literacy and disadvantage

*How would you define **poverty**? What causes it? How can it be measured?*
Can you describe the beliefs and values on which your opinion is based?
How and why might definitions of poverty differ within a society or from one society to the next?
What responsibility does the state have towards people defined as living in poverty? How can it best discharge this responsibility?

*How would you define **literacy**?*
How might definitions of literacy change over time?
How might definitions of literacy differ within a society or from one society to the next?
What explanations might there be for changing definitions of literacy?

*What do you understand by the term educational **disadvantage**?*
What individuals or groups do you think might be disadvantaged within the Australian education system? How and why might they be identified?
Whose responsibility is it to redress educational disadvantage? How might it be done?

* Show two sets of excerpts from Module 1

Becoming a teacher in a diverse community

Module 2 **Becoming a literacy teacher in a diverse community** aims to generate discussion about the different ways of explaining literacy success and failure in disadvantaged schools. It is also designed to highlight the kinds of actions that university students may take to learn about their role as literacy teachers and to provide insights into the ways they may gain more from their field placements in disadvantaged schools.

The following questions are examples of the kind we might use to generate thinking about issues raised in the video:

Explanations for students' literacy performance on mainstream assessments

What do you think contributes to children's success or lack of success as literacy learners in schools?
What do you expect of children as literacy users when they come to school?
What role do you expect parents to play in their children's literacy and language development?
How would you describe the home language experiences of children living in poverty?
In what ways are schools middle class institutions?
What are the possible consequences of each of the different explanations for children's literacy performance?

* Show excerpt from Module 2

THE 1994 PHASE OF THE PROJECT

It became obvious to the team that the material contained a number of gaps which still needed to be addressed, so a submission was prepared and a further CAUT grant secured for 1994. Using a design similar to that of the 1993 project, this grant will be used to fund the production of a further three videos with accompanying written material.

The first of these three modules will deal with the issue of family and community literacies, in particular the cultural discontinuity between disadvantaged communities and schools. It will investigate the ways in which schools confront structural inequality and poverty, and show some strategies that schools are using to encourage students to act as agents for social change.

The second module examines issues to do with assessment, interrogating the link between standardised testing procedures and the perpetuation of social inequality.

The third module will tie together issues raised across the whole package (ie. 1993 and 1994 material) by presenting a case study of one school, Paralowie R-12, which runs a number of innovative and successful literacy programs.

FURTHER DIFFICULTIES

Progress on these videos has been slow for a number of reasons. We have already alluded to the difficulty of producing professional quality material which investigates disadvantage and challenges myths and stereotypes, rather than prescribing or presenting 'best practice'. None of the "1993 problems" has gone away!

Secondly, the team wanted student teachers to be more involved as researchers in 1994, as well as to examine issues from their perspective. There were two

significant difficulties with this. Not surprisingly, the students didn't have the understandings or lenses that the research team members had, and so there was considerable discussion around the issue of 'setting them up' or 'putting words in their mouths', the legitimacy of this, and its possible effect on the authenticity of the final product.

Additionally, the student teachers' major focus during the final practicum is on securing the best possible report. The complexities of working in schools like those we are using as our sites, coupled with anxiety about this final practicum, where performance significantly affects their employment chances, meant that most of the students had little time or inclination to think about the making of the videos. This is not to say that they are not interested, or are unconcerned. Towards the end of the practicum they did ask what was happening about the filming, and indicated their willingness to return to the schools in their own time in Term 3 to be involved. But rather than being an integral part of the practicum, as we had hoped, our agenda (the making of the videos, not the focus on disadvantage) was a peripheral concern which the students found easy to ignore.

THE VALUE OF THE MATERIALS

The project was devised, in part, in response to a perceived need; the need to assist student and novice teachers to better understand and be able to teach in disadvantaged schools. (And as one principal remarked, a teacher with twenty years experience is often a novice when appointed to a disadvantaged school.)

We believe that the value of these materials for such teachers lies in the questions and challenges that are raised through the presentation of "warts and all" scenarios. The materials invite examination of myths and stereotypes, present actual responses by teachers and schools to difficult issues, and encourage the consideration of these issues from a number of perspectives. They provide an opportunity for novices to think, speculate and rehearse before they confront actual situations. They present the role of teachers and schools within society as complex and open to contestation.

We believe that they reframe literacy and disadvantage in ways that will empower student teachers.

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