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ABSTRACT

Students' book choices and discussions during independent reading were studied in a combined fifth/sixth grade classroom. The meanings students and the teacher gave to the practice of independent, "free-choice" reading were studied, and the influences that shaped students' choices of books were explored. Independent reading is actually social in very complicated ways, and "free choice," is terms of students choosing what they want to read, is actually not free of the need to establish particular social identities in relation to local and institutional discourses. Tensions emerged as children brought into the classroom cultural symbols and materials of the sort that teachers, and adults in general, do not feel comfortable in legitimating, such as violence, sex, and an acceptance of rigid gender roles. One of the most important roles a teacher can serve when he or she participates in literature discussions is to mediate the literature in critical ways to help students traverse popular culture and the official and unofficial discourses of the classroom. (Contains 36 references.) (SLD)

THE SOCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF "FREE-CHOICE READING"

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Perspectives and Methodology

This paper addresses the tensions that emerge when children bring into the classroom cultural symbols and materials of the sort that teachers, and adults in general, do not feel comfortable legitimating: violence, sexuality, and an acceptance of rigid gender roles. My focus is on the practice of "independent reading" in one combined fifth/sixth-grade classroom. This research is part of a year-long ethnographic study of the literary culture of one classroom (Lewis, 1997; in press). The larger study examines how the social and cultural contexts of classroom and comunity shape four classroom practices involving literature: read aloud, peer-led literature discussions, teacher-led literature discussions, and independent reading. It's focus is on how these practices are shaped by discourse and rituals within the classroom and by social conditions and dominant cultural assumptions beyond the classroom. For this part of the research, I studied students' book choices and discussions during independent reading, a time set aside daily for students to read books of their own choosing and discuss them on a voluntary basis.

The theoretical framework that informs this study includes a view of classroom life as a culture enacted through discourse and ritual (Bell, 1992; Fairclough, 1989). Discourse, as I use it throughout this study, includes not only classroom interaction but the world views and ideologies that regulate and define particular social contexts and activities (Brodkey, 1993; Weedon, 1987). While a culture shares norms and standards for belief and evaluation , it is also dynamic as it is co-produced by teachers and students. Because interaction is constituted in relations of power, the meaning of classroom rituals varies depending on one's position and status within the classroom (Turner, 1982). Thus, practices and beliefs within the culture of the classroom are created discursively through and against competing interests and differential power relations.

Grounded in a performative view of classroom context, this study conceives of social action as performative (Lewis, 1997), speech communities as heterogeneous (Pratt, 1987), and contexts as continually reshaped through social interaction (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). I also draw on work in the fields of

gender studies and popular culture studies. From the field of gender studies related to literacy, I refer to work which argues that children come to literacy in contexts which support in word, action, and ideology gendered ways of reading (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1993; Davies, 1993; Gilbert & Taylor, 1991; Moss, 1995). From popular culture studies, I refer to work which argues that popular culture subverts social control, shapes social allegiances, and creates subcultural capital (Fiske, 1989; Thornton, 1996) at the same time that it also exerts a powerful influence over readers' gendered positions (McRobbie, 1990).

In conducting this research, I pursued the following questions: What meanings do students and the classroom teacher give to the practice of independent reading and how are these meanings related to social and interpretive expectations within the classroom? How do classroom meanings for reading and discussing literature shape students' book choices and responses during independent reading? How do contexts beyond the classroom shape students' book choices and responses during independent reading? The research site was a midwestern school located in an older neighborhood of mixed-income residents. Data sources for this part of the study included audiotaped literature discussions, interviews with students, parents, and teacher, and field notes taken throughout the year.,

Data analysis focused on two categories of events: 1) key events -- those that research participants characterized as particularly significant; and 2) illustrative events -- those that were repeatedly documented in field notes and audiotapes. Analysis began with early searches through transcribed interviews and expanded field notes, employing the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). In order to examine contextualized events, I decided to focus on interactional contexts rather than on each focal student as a particular case. In analyzing these events, I have framed each with the sociocultural conditions of its occurrence, including the social and interpretive competence of the key players in the discussion as well as information gleaned from interviews. I've done so in keeping with Goffman (1981), who argues that analysis of the social conditions that shape spoken interaction must be "identified and mapped with such ingredients as are available to and in local settings" (p. 193). I analyze each event according to

the institutional discourses that shape it as well (Fairclough, 1995), examining the ways in which social and institutional discourses intersect and compete (Beach, 1996).

Opposing the Social Discourse of the Classroom

> Ten fifth and sixth-grade students surround a teacher at a table in the front of the classroom. They've just finished reading Alanna: The First Adventure by Tamora Pierce. There are 4 books in the series, and having loved the first, the group wants to read another. The teacher tells the students that they can't read the book as part of their sanctioned reading time because Alanna, the adolescent main character, has a sexual relationship in the book, and the teacher does not want to promote early sexual activity among teens. One of the students points out that another student in the class is already reading the second book in which Alanna sleeps with someone. The teacher tells them that she won't impose her views on their free reading time, but will not support teacher and group time spent on these books--that she can't do this in good conscience personally or as a teacher.

I start with the Alanna example to make visible some of the opposing social discourses that were patterns in the data on independent reading practices in the classroom I studied. I'm using social discourses to mean the world views and ideologies that regulate and define particular social contexts and activities (Brodkey, 1992; Weedon, 1987). Here the classroom teacher uses the social discourse of protection that adults often use when they refer to what they see as dangerous elements of the dominant (and often popular) culture. Barrie Thorne (1987) points out that adults construct an image of children as either victims or as threats, yet neither image leads to a contextualized understanding of children's actions. The students, on the other hand, use the discourse of desire--the desire to know what it means to be an adult, what to do, how to act, how to fit in. For many females, this means learning how to perform heterosexual relationships (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Finders, 1997; Moss, 1989) and for many boys this means learning to understand their place in relation to authority, power, and

aggression (Connell, 1987; Connelly, 1995). In addition to these conflicting discourses of protection and desire, there is another set of oppositional discourses--the official stance regarding appropriate material for school consumption represented by the teacher, and the resistant stance represented by the students seeking to bring the desires I've just described into the classroom and to subvert institutional norms.

It's easy to see why the practice of independent reading in schools would embody these oppositional discourses. The nature of the practice is meant to give students choices, and therefore to bring kid-culture into the classroom. During independent reading, teachers invite students to choose their own texts as well as some of the conditions surrounding the reading of these texts (location, pace, form of response) hoping to increase student motivation to read, enjoyment in reading, and authenticity of response. I'd like to argue, however, that the practice needs to be situated within a sociocultural context if its role in the classroom is to be understood. In the classroom where I studied literary practices for a year, the fifth and sixth-grade students used independent reading to appropriate elements of the larger culture--dominant and popular cultural symbols and resources. However, it must be understood that this appropriation of the larger culture was dependent on elements of the local culture. Thus it is necessary for me to explain more about gendered ways of reading in the local culture.

The classroom I studied was one in which girls' reading and response practices were established as the norm for competence. Many researchers (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Sarland, 1991; Simpson,1996;) have found that when given what we refer to as "free" choice, girls tend to choose fiction that often includes romance with an emphasis on characters while boys choose fiction that includes some violence with an emphasis on plot. Girls tend to choose books based on suggestions from others, while boys more often choose books based on their genre. Girls tend to talk about feelings and relationships connected to texts while boys tend to talk about action. Rather than seeing these differences as innate and universal, I hold the view that they are socially and

discursively constructed. That is, we come into literacy as children in contexts which support (in word, action, and ideology) particular ways of reading, talking, writing, and those ways are constituted in gender as well as other social and cultural factors (Luke, 1994).

The kinds of responses to literature that were valued in this classroom were related to experiences, characters, and ideas rather than to plot and action. The teacher, Mrs. Davis, emphasized personal responses to reading. In introducing the culminating project for one of the texts read in class, Mrs. Davis told the students that she wanted them to do "anything to make your book your own." As an example of a personal response to literature, she read one of her daughter's high school English papers that was about understanding honor as it related to her process of self-discovery. When Mrs. Davis first discussed how to write journal entries, a sixth grader raised her hand and said, "Here's a hint to fifth graders. Don't say 'This character did this and then he walked.' (which, of course, would emphasize plot), Tell us what you <u>think</u> about it." Mrs. Davis, affirming the student's comment, told the class "Yes, we all have read the book, so we know what happened. We need to know what you <u>think</u>."

During my first interview with Mrs. Davis before school started, I was struck by the gendered way she described her class: She talked about the wonderful girls, returning as sixth graders, who valued education and reading, and the boys, "nintendo freaks," some bright but not productive in school.

As a white middle class female with interests similar to this teacher's, it was easy for me to feel comfortable in this classroom. Two out of the three boys who were my focal students, however, felt that the girls were privileged members of the classroom. While my third male focal student, Jason, did not explicitly mention that girls were privileged in the classroom, he did tell me that his favorite group was an all-male group that I will describe later in my talk. This group consisted mostly of fifth-grade boys who, according to Jason talked about "what's happening, how we like the book, what we like

about it." It was a group where the boys focused on plot and action rather than on character relationships.

Mrs. Davis was concerned that girls often lacked power in the larger culture, she wanted to make sure that this was not the case in the culture of her classroom--where girls would not be "patted on the head." She purposely acted against the socialization of girls to be overly concerned with image. For instance, when she noticed that one girl ignored an adult during a field trip in order to sustain a conversation with a boy, she told her "Your body language, everything about you said my social life is far more important than any content here. If that becomes a pattern, you have closed a huge door." She also wanted the girls to understand that women can do meaningful things, and that meaningful things might not be what the male dominated culture says is meaningful.

It's important to keep in mind, then, that the local culture valued reading practices that are associated with girls. It should come as no surprise, however, that the local culture of the classroom was shaped by the masculinist culture outside the classroom. The larger culture--the dominant culture beyond the classroom--is one in which male violence toward females is widespread, in which males hold more economic and cultural capital, and in which male ways of knowing, acting, believing, and being are normative. This encompassing social discourse or ideological position competed with the local social discourse just described in a dynamic that was played out during independent reading.

There were several times during the year when independent reading took center stage. I'm going to focus on a time during the last month of class when students read independently during reading time. They met in optional discussion groups that divided along gender lines with the girls agreeing that they wanted to hold discussions three days a week and the boys preferring two. The teacher allowed them to hold discussions according to these preferences. The boys formed one large group of twelve which met together only a few times on occasions when the teacher insisted that they all participate. Most Tuesdays and Thursdays, the group consisted of three or four boys. One of my

focal students, Jason, told me that the first time the boys' group met, Mrs. Davis put Brian in charge, a fifth-grader who had behavioral, emotional, and academic difficulties. Jason, who did not feel comfortable in groups that focused on discussions of what he called "big ideas" with sixth graders, enjoyed this group and was one of the regular members who attended even when the teacher did not request his participation.

Connecting to the Social Discourse of the Dominant Culture:

I'm about to share with you three excerpts from a discussion which included ten boys on a day when their teacher asked them all to participate. In these excerpts, you'll see the boys' discussion working in opposition to the social discourse of this classroom with its female norms for competence.

Tyler: This [book] is about, well, this dude /

Brian: Bobby's Back.

Tyler: named Bobby. He, like, gets this group of people -- they call themselves the five cuz it's just five people, and at the beginning, he, this kid Bobby, he wanted to be in their group, but they, they told him that he had to do one test, and then, and it was to go into this old house and just to walk through and go out the back door. Well, so he did. He went, and then I guess, yeah, he fell through a hole/

Brian: and he landed, and he uh /

Tyler: and this rat jumped on him. And then /

Brian: He was scared. They left him down there.

Tyler: They left him down there cuz they thought he just chickened out cuz they were waiting on the other side to see if he really had, if he was really gonna come out. . . .

Tyler and Brian collaborate on Tyler's summary of the book for a while, after which several of the boys engage in a discussion of the main plot line of several other books in the Bobby series. About ten minutes further into the share time, after one of the boys had just shared his summary of another book, James, one of my focal students, asks Tyler if he could see his copy of Bobby's Back. James was a working class student who did not meet the expectations for social or interpretive competence in this classroom

culture. He often didn't complete his work and was expelled from two reading groups during the year because he didn't complete the reading. In collaborative peer groups, his ideas were usually not taken seriously, and he often played a slightly resistant (either angry or goofing-off) but manageable role. During this particular half-hour discussion, James is a central participant in that he took more turns than any of the others in the group of ten. However, many of his turns are either disruptive or playful. He makes noises into the speaker of the tape recorder and yells at students who did not follow the procedures he had in mind. For instance, when one student began to share his book by announcing the page he was on, James shouts "That doesn't matter, Just say what happened! His other comments during the discussion include "Sounds kinda stupid," and "Okay, you're done; shut up. Come on Tyler. It's Tyler's turn!" While these comments have a disruptive element to them, they also show him to be far more involved in the procedures and talk than he ordinarily was, keeping up with the conversation and moving it forward, in his own way. At one point, he asks to see the cover of Bobby's Back, initiating a conversation which spun into a discussion of the relative merits of horror films that all the boys had seen:

Brian: Jason's better than Freddy. Jason kills more people. One movie he kills like fifteen people. The most Freddy ever killed was five, six.

James: They run from him and they get like a mile away, and then they turn around and he's right there and he's just walking.

Tyler: Who cares who kills more people?

Brian: Jason doesn't even act real.

Mark: The guy is like running away from Jason and he stops and Jason is right in front of him, and he's only walking.

Brian: They're never even scared.

[James makes the sounds from the theme song for Friday the Thirteenth.]

Clearly this conversation is not the sort sanctioned by the social discourse of this classroom. It is, however, in keeping with the social discourse of the larger male-dominated culture, particularly in its violence toward females. In several of the sections I

did not include in this excerpt, the boys talk about a girl being hit in the head with a harpoon gun and a mother, who herself was a killer, getting her head chopped off. The boys talk about these events with very little commentary, none of the big ideas that my focal student, Jason, likes to avoid. Horror fiction is part of a regulatory process that positions boys within hegemonic versions of masculinity. I'd like to suggest, however, that talking about violence and who feels fear in the face of violence is a way of examining and questioning masculinity. It also provides the boys with an opportunity to resist the social discourse of the classroom and re-gender the discourse. Isobel Urquhart (1996) speculates that boys uses of popular culture can be especially threatening to female teachers because, as women, the teachers have themselves felt oppressed by masculine identities. Yet, the adult fear of boy culture, Kathleen McDonell (1994) argues, accords it with a degree of respect and power not bestowed upon girl culture which tends to be trivialized (and, indeed, was trivialized in this class by the male students in particular.)

While the social discourse of the classroom opposed the discourse of this literary event, this event proceeded by way of certain forms of shared local knowledge among certain members of the classroom culture. The need to fit in--to belong--is strong, and perhaps stronger still for those who need to replace what Bourdieu (1986) calls cultural capital--the status middle-class knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education--with subcultural capital. Subcultural capital, according to the popular culture theorist Sarah Thornton (1996), is about the status one gains from being "in the know" about popular culture. One gains access to this capital through media exposure, not through education. Access to this capital results in allegiances--bonds with other members of the subculture that foreground particular representations of masculinity.

Like that of many teachers, Mrs. Davis's view of popular culture was on the order of "don't ask, don't tell." That is, she knew her students were very influenced and enamored of popular culture, but she didn't want to know too much about it. She never

watched television and purposely stayed out of the loop. She told her students to consider what they wanted to hold as "furniture in the brain." She understood, however, that at this time in their lives, the answer might be RL Stine or Beavis and Butthead. She remembered having a nun catch her with a book on her lap during class and naming it trash, which led her to want to understand why she liked trash, the beginnings of firmly held beliefs about the difference between "high" and "low" culture. Mrs. Davis also believed that watching violence makes people more prone to violence, and that watching terrifying material, made for more terrified people. The students were very well aware of Mrs. Davis's view of popular culture. Nikki once told me "Don't even mention the word Christopher Pike to Mrs. Davis. She's like yuck. . . . But I think kids are pretty good at just ignoring that. I mean, I try to. I get kind of sick of reading, I don't know, books my mom would want me to read and stuff, you know."

It's interesting to note that the two most affluent, high-achieving girls in the class both expressed some ambivalence about reading series books, as if they didn't want to be caught liking them. Once one of the girls told me that she was reading an R. L. Stine book. Her best friend, Mackenzie, announced "Brooke's been reading that R. L. Stine book all year!" Brooke was very indignant about this, and insisted on making it clear to me that she was only reading it as a second book and always had another book going. Mackenzie also expressed ambivalence, telling me that it was important to read a variety of books, books like Anne of Green Gables along with R. L. Stine. She claimed that to read only Stine would be like eating one kind of food and that the variety makes her a better reader (very much her teacher's and her mother's language). Reading Stine and Pike are easier, she said, but when you read "other kinds of books, you get more of a sense, and a visual image of what is really going on." Yet, Mackenzie admitted that outside of school, reading Stine and Pike were necessary in order to achieve the kind of subcultural capital I mentioned earlier. She told me about a friend who didn't read Stine and Pike, who was consequently left out of many conversations.

This finding is in keeping with Anne Haas Dyson's (1997) recent work on children's uses of popular culture in writing in which she found that the middle-class children also played with cultural material from the popular media, but they distanced themselves from that material in official school contexts.. They wanted to mark their difference, and possibly their cultural capital, from others--a difference which, for Mackenzie and Brooke in this classroom, connected them to the ethos promoted by Mrs. Davis. Other students delighted in the minor subversion of engaging in independent reading at school. Tara, a working-class student, was most explicit about this. She loved all the Stine and Pike books, and talked at length with me about the social bonds they engendered among her friends. When I asked her to describe the difference between these books and the ones that Mrs. Davis chose, she replied: "Well, the ones that she picks usually have a meaning that you could learn something from, but R. L. Stine books don't really have anything that you would learn." Tara liked that there was nothing educational about them and when I asked her why, she told me "Well, I kind of like it because it's different and you get a chance to just, I mean, it's, you're in school but you don't have to be learning something all of the time."

During an interview, the teacher told me that adolescent series books often seemed to uphold the power structures and to position women in a submissive way, thus "upholding attributes of the majority culture." While one can read Mrs. Davis's distaste for such books as a feminist response, there are also ways in which such a response can be seen as anti-feminist, feeding off of the historical view of women whose consumption of romance literature was seen as a sign of weakness. As she told me on another occasion, "You simply do Little LuLu comic strips until you're sick of it and you can predict with absolute accuracy what's gonna happen next, and you're bored. And then you go on to something a little more challenging." These books, then, carried both status and stigma -- the stigma of being female and, according to many of the boys, manipulated

by formulaic writing, or according to their teacher, controlled by patriarchal and commercial technologies.

Performing Popular Culture to Appropriate and Transgress

Cultural theorist, John Fiske (1989), argues that "Popular culture is always in process; its meanings can never be identified in a text, for texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and in intertextual relations." Another look at the boys' discussion of horror books and films will reveal how meanings are constituted in social and intertextual relations.

James: Jason's better. He carries a chain saw.

Tim: It's really scary

Mark: Not always. He uses anything he can find.

. . .

[The conversation turned to a movie about Freddy.]

Tyler: What happened? How does [Freddy] get killed? How does he get killed?

. . .

[The boys discuss other movies about Freddy]

Brian: They conquer him in a video game, like.

Sam: Isn't there a Jason versus Freddy?

. . .

[The boys discuss other movies about Freddy and Jason.]

Brian: Free Willy scared me.

[laughter]

Tyler: Free Willy versus Jaws.

Sam: Care Bears scared me.

Tyler: Oh, free Willy versus Jaws. Oh!

Brian: The Smurfs versus Jason.

[Several boys repeat the above, laughing as they speak.]

Brian: The Flinstones could bash his face in.

James: Bam Bam Bam Bam

Sam: Bambi versus the smurfs.

Tyler: Free Willy versus Jaws.

Sam: Willy versus Shamu.

James: Tyler versus Mark.

Brian: Fee Willy versus Jaws.

Brian: Mark versus Tyler.

[James is making Jaws noises].

. . .

Sam: This dummy on the cover versus Jaws.

Sam: We started out talking about Bobbie's Back. Now we're talking about Bambi versus Spiderman!

[laughter]

Although this conversation again opposes the social discourse of the classroom, I want to make a case for the social work these students are engaged in. First, the students who are speaking in this segment (and others in this half-hour discussion) are all academic outsiders within their classroom; a few are social outsiders as well. Here they are animated, engaged, and participatory, a stance that is highly uncharacteristic for them and one they maintain throughout this literary event. Second, the language used throughout this excerpt is playful, parodic, and performative in ways that allow the students, in Dyson's words, "to play with each other and with powerful societal images" (1997, p. 283). In this case, and earlier in the conversation as well, the boys bring up the issue of fear. Earlier, we heard Brian say admiringly that the characters in the film were never even scared. Here, Tim admits that Jason's chainsaw was scary, and soon after that the parodic exchange begins, an exchange that is almost entirely related to fear.

Perhaps this conversation serves as a way for the boys to abstract themselves from the fears they have being members of a culture where they are supposed to be fearless in the face of monstrous opponents. Connell describes "hegemonic masculinity" as one

that aims to dominate femininity as well as other masculinities through "power, authority, aggression, and technology" (1987, p. 187).

It would be scary, I suspect, to take on those attributes, and the boys deal with this condition through parody and performance. They juxtapose something scary with something that's not (Free Willy vs. Jaws), then something not scary with themselves (Care Bears scare me!), and finally one of them against another --but in play not aggression. The tone is lively, quick, and innovative. The boys are collaborators in performance and in audience. Indeed, being an audience member is to be a part of the performance itself--so entwined are the two. This is an emergence of text in context, as anthropologists Bauman and Briggs (1990), have described such performances and, together, the boys act as a performance team (Goffman, 1959).

To take Goffman further, here, and to make an important point about opposing social discourses, I'd argue that the boys are engaged in both front stage and back stage performance sites. The front stage is the metaphorical site where the performance is given, and this was clearly a joyful performance for each other. Yet in the classroom context, it was a backstage performance as well--a site where suppressed selves can appear. Within the context of the classroom, then, this was a subversive event with a social discourse in opposition to the social discourse of the classroom yet allowable within it. The social and interpretive boundaries in the classroom culture were permeable enough to allow for this transgression, and to allow the students to appropriate and subvert, to some degree, the larger social discourse of hegemonic masculinity.

It's an interesting irony, I think, that what we call "independent reading" is actually social in such complicated ways, and what we call "free choice," in terms of students choosing the books they want to read, is clearly not free of the need to establish particular social identities in relation to what Fairclough (1989, 1995) calls local and institutional discourses. Theorists of popular culture argue that the common pedagogical response to popular culture--to worry over its effects on students who are seen as passive

consumers--is mistaken given that readers actively reproduce rather than passively consume texts, and I think we can see this happening in the examples I shared today. However, as I've already made clear, the boys' desire for aggression and fearlessness and the girls' desire for protection and romance are constructed through dominant ideological discourses which also must be examined.

For this reason, one of the most important roles a teacher can serve when she or he participates in literature discussions is to mediate the literature in critical ways, helping students to traverse social and institutional discourses--the discourse of the dominant popular culture as well as the official and unofficial discourses of the classroom. The difficulty of this kind of pedagogy lies in the ease with which it can tip the balance toward teacher-directed practice. Yet the role of the English/Language Arts teacher has long been ambiguous in that the teacher is cautioned to lead without squelching individual freedom. Gemma Moss (1989, 1995), who writes about critical theories related to literacy teaching, points out that a critical pedagogy is no less ideologically based than a humanistic pedagogy. As educators, she argues , we need to acknowledge that we want students to read texts in certain ways because we hope to influence the sort of people our students will become. When I think about the people I want the students whose voices we heard today to become, I realize that I want them to use reading for their own important purposes but also to learn to engage in critical readings of texts that make visible the social and institutional ideologies at work.

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