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ABSTRACT

Hidden messages are part of the culture of reading at any school, particularly at the secondary level. In many schools, the overt message that reading is essential to success on state-mandated tests and in society is jeopardized due to hidden messages about the nature of the reading process and the place of reading in everyday life. A qualitative study examined the nature of the culture of reading in a junior high school. The school serves a neighborhood in transition from middle class to inner city. Between 1996 and 2000 the school moved from 25 to 48% of students who did not speak English at home. Because of a drop in reading scores, in 1997 the school staff selected reading comprehension as an area of emphasis. Accelerated Reader, a computer program designed to monitor reading practice, was chosen as the reading program. Qualitative data based on Accelerated Reader testing indicated that, while 28 of 1,058 students read well enough to be considered outstanding, 60% of the students read few or no books, and 18% read no books at all. An investigation into the culture of the site seemed warranted. Ten students and six adults were interviewed, and six students were audiotaped during their homeroom period. Interviews suggest tensions between the formal curricular view of reading and the view of students who are experiencing the reading programs. Students know that reading is good for them, but these interviews suggest many students perceive reading as essentially school-centered and task-oriented. Students who group together to talk about books are often social misfits. Teachers need to articulate for students the factors that cause them to enjoy reading themselves--pleasure, interest, emotion, etc. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

The Hidden Messages of Secondary Reading Programs:

What Students Learn vs. What Teachers Teach

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A multitude of hidden messages are part of the culture of reading at any school, particularly at the secondary level. Adolescents may find themselves walking a tightrope, juggling the conflicting demands of the explicit, formal curriculum with their peer and home cultures. The overt message is clear—reading is essential to success on state-mandated tests and in modern society. Yet, in many schools, particularly those working with large numbers of at-risk learners, the overt message is jeopardized due to hidden messages about the nature of the reading process and the place of reading in everyday life.

In this qualitative study, I examined the nature of the culture of reading in a junior high school I will call Pueblo Junior High. Pueblo is located in a large suburban city which is part of a major metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. It serves a neighborhood in transition from middle-class to inner city. Currently, 73 percent of students are on free and reduced lunch. Between 1996 and 2000, the school moved from 25 to 48 percent students who did not speak English at home as recent immigrants, many from Mexico, moved into the neighborhood. The culture of reading in the building was affected by the language and ethnic backgrounds which students brought to the classroom and by the 41% mobility rate, which reflected the rapid shift in neighborhood demographics.

I began this study to investigate the drop in reading scores accompanying the change in the school neighborhood. This demographic shift, along with the imposition of new state performance standards and statewide high stakes graduation testing, increased the pressure on teachers to improve student standardized test scores in reading. In response to these pressures, in 1997 the school staff selected reading comprehension as

an area of emphasis for North Central accreditation purposes. During the following four years, teachers worked on outlining and summarizing across the curriculum; each department worked on its own reading goal; fifteen minutes of silent sustained reading was scheduled into the existing day; and the school purchased and implemented the motivational computer program Accelerated Reader.

Accelerated Reader is a computer program designed to monitor reading practice. Students take a test to determine their reading level, then self-select books within their level. After reading each book, they take a test (usually ten questions) on the computer to verify that they have read and understand the book. The computer provides a printout giving immediate feedback and awarding points based on the difficulty of the book and percent of comprehension. Students may use the points earned for extrinsic rewards, including grades. The novelty of computer testing, provision of immediate feedback, and use of extrinsic rewards of various kinds increased the visibility of reading at the school and caused library circulation to double after implementation.

However, Stanford scores during this period of significant schoolwide commitment (1997-2000) remained stable or dropped. Seventh graders remained at the 44 percentile; eighth graders dropped from the 49th to the 43rd percentile, and ninth graders went from the 40th to the 39th. There were other warning signs that the programs were not working as they were designed to do and may indeed have been counterproductive. Quantitative data based on Accelerated Reader testing indicated that, while 28 of 1058 students read well enough to be considered outstanding readers (having achieved 100 or more Accelerated Reader points), sixty percent of the student body read few or no books (having achieved under 20 points from August to April, the equivalent of

reading about one average-size book per nine weeks). Eighteen percent of students read no books at all. The adult aide who ran the Accelerated Reader computer lab, which was located in the library, stated

> Kids are picking up the books, taking them back to the class, thumbing through them, taking them back . . . and they're not testing on them. I'm seeing the testing, and who's testing, and I'm seeing the books that are coming in, and nobody's testing on the books that are coming back. Very few of them.

As staff development specialist and NCA steering committee co-chair at Pueblo, I was concerned that teachers' best efforts were unsuccessful in improving reading comprehension, as measured by standardized tests. I wanted to find out how students perceived reading and what the experience of reading was like for students in our building, where there was a significant commitment to reading improvement. The question I wanted to explore was: What is the culture of reading at Pueblo Junior High?

CULTURAL TENSIONS

Moll and Gonzalez (1994) define culture as the way that human beings make sense of experiences, including their lived practices and knowledge. This is a process-oriented view, in which the concept of culture is broader than a collection of traditions. Culture exists not just in a space but in a period of time and is always in a state of flux. This perception of culture privileges the study of change, interaction, and tension rather than definition and analysis of existing structures.

The culture of reading involves both individual mental constructs and social relationships. According to Wittgenstein (Washington, 1991), mental states, in which he included reading, have their origin in the relationship between the individual and the

social world. Oldfather and Dahl extended that thought to indicate that "literacy is a social accomplishment" (1994, p. 139). Street stated that "language and literacy [are] social practices rather than technical skills to be learned in formal education" (Street, 1997, p. 47). Cairney stated that "every reading event occurs within a rich social context, part of which is the shared beliefs that participants have concerning reading, materials, and instruction."(1988, p. 420). From this perspective, students' individual reading development is highly contextualized and influenced by the situated beliefs, attitudes, and reading-related behaviors of both the adults and students at the site.

The culture of reading in any classroom or building is situated in both time and space, shared by multiple participants, and is constantly shifting as multiple levels and types of languages interact. Current research on the varieties of literacy traditions and competencies children bring to the culture of school have focused on the types of literacy families of various cultural and socioeconomic groups foster in the home and the discourse and social structures of the primary school classroom (Valdes, 1994; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Villanueva, 1996; and Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, and Shannon, 1994).

Nevertheless, when numerous students fail to acquire the literacy which is valued at the secondary level, an investigation into the culture of a site is warranted. My purpose was to describe the experience of reading as perceived by those involved with reading at the site—students, teachers, librarians, and aides—and to detail previously unexplored tensions which could contribute to lack of achievement. In exploring the existing social practices associated with reading, I wanted to determine how to assist students to add the privileged literacy practices to their own repertoire (Street, 1997).

THE PLACE AND THE PEOPLE

Pueblo is a fifty-year-old inner-city junior high school built in five long rows, with the expanses of windows common in the fifties boarded over and painted brick red to match the walls. Two rows of portable classrooms are situated beyond the main building, along with separate buildings for science and special education, as well as the office, media center and computer lab, and gym. The traditional structure is reflected in the inner organization of the building, which is departmentalized. Unlike many middle schools, reading and English are separate subjects.

For this study, I interviewed ten students and six adults (the librarian, library and computer lab paraprofessionals, and three reading teachers) and observed students in the library and in my ninth grade basic (remedial) English classroom. Six students were audiotaped during the twenty-five minute homeroom period. I selected students to be interviewed by explaining the nature of the study and asking for volunteers from my ninth grade basic English classes. I provided audiotaped students oral prompts such as these: Tell me about learning to read. Tell me about learning to read in the United States (if applicable). Tell me about your reading now. When and where do you read? Do you know anyone who is a good reader?

Other student interviews and classroom observations were shorter and more informal, occurring as the occasion arose and recorded through field notes. I did two exit interviews of students who had just completed Accelerated Reader testing in the computer lab, one who had passed his test and one who had failed hers. I also interviewed two student aides, one in the media center and one in the computer lab. In

addition, I used field notes to record a library observation and two classroom vignettes that illuminated the culture of reading.

Four of the six audiotaped students were born in Mexico. Jose was a poor reader who had been referred by his previous year's English teacher for placement in ninth grade basic English. Maria, Alfredo, and Roberto had been sent to basic English after having failed first semester in a regular English course; however, Roberto was a successful reader by Pueblo standards since he had read over 100 AR points during the year. Sabrina was Mexican-American girl who spoke English as her first language and learned Spanish later; she had been in basic English all year. Jared was special education student with a specific language disability who had recently been mainstreamed.

I functioned as an action researcher in my building; however, my stance as both a participant and observer resulted in some tensions and ambiguities during the interview process. One boy, Alfredo, who had checked out To Be a Slave from my classroom library, reported in his interview that he was almost finished with it. Later, when given time to do silent reading in class, he began to talk instead to another student who was silently absorbed in his book. When I asked him to get out To Be a Slave, he replied, "Oh, that book! I can't read that book. It's too hard." I believe his comments highlight the conflict faced by such students as they try to balance the teacher requirement to read against the hidden messages of the reading program itself and the difficulties posed by complex text. My opportunity to be in the building and interact with him in multiple contexts allowed me to understand both his comments and actions in relation to one another.

THE NATURE OF THE READING EXPERIENCE

Separation and Interaction

A common expression used in discussing reading was student computer lab aide Susana's: "I just don't get into books," as if reading involved a motion, as in entering a room. The word into suggests a mental movement or shift, perhaps analogous to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, in which the reader experiences an altered state of consciousness when deeply involved in a challenging and satisfying activity (2000).

Nadine, a reading teacher, articulated the mental movement through a corresponding physical separation: "...reading was an escape mechanism. I used to lock myself in the bathroom in the family room, so I could get away from everything. It was the only place that was quiet." When Maria was asked why she picked the dining room table as her preferred reading spot, she responded, "'Cause everybody sits in the living room and watches TV, and it's real quiet." The idea of separation, mentally and often physically, appears to be a significant metaphor in reading.

The separation often involves the notion of comfort. Jared described his reading ritual as, "I usually read in my room. And I usually have some music to listen to when I'm reading . . . it just calms me down. And sometimes my dog comes in and sits with me, and I read to him." In spite of serious reading difficulties, Jared claimed to like reading. In contrast, when asked to describe his friends' reading, he said, "I have no clue. If they read, they probably sit in the library. Or at their house in the dining room." The contrast between the comfort of his bedroom and the formality of his friends' supposed reading places is quite clear.

The type of separation required by the Accelerated Reader testing did not involve that type of comfort. Lisa, the adult computer lab aide, explained, "On a typical day, we turn on every other computer, so there is a computer between students to keep them from glancing over at another computer, and so that they can stay focused on the questions." The enforced isolation of the testing situation is different than the self-chosen privacy and comfort of the natural reading situation.

At the junior high level, a surprising finding was that successful readers are often separated socially from the mainstream. As the computer lab aide indicated,

> There seem to be a group of kids—they're not as social as the other kids. You can see that they don't go to the dances; they don't want to go to the dances; they seem to have social problems. I've watched them out there. They're teased and what have you, but they've formed groups by themselves, and they enjoy reading and talking books and can't get enough of them.

Peer groups have a great influence in junior high, in reading as in everything else. When students were asked if they knew anyone who was a good reader, not one mentioned teachers. Students thought of family members—a grandmother, mother, sister, cousin--or of friends. One second-language learner who had just failed an Accelerated Reader test on a read-aloud book because she said she didn't understand some of the words, nevertheless said, "It [my next book]'s a great book! My friend told me about it." Friends who recommend books can make a difference.

However, non-reading friends can draw even avid readers away from reading. Ricky, a library aide, stated, "I was read to all the time when I was a kid. When I was in seventh grade, I tested out at about the tenth grade reading level. But I don't read much

any more. I started doing other things after school—going out and skateboarding and stuff."

When asked why he didn't read now, Alfredo stated, "I don't know. I'm always playing or something. When I go home, my friends come over, and I have to go be with them." Sabrina said, "No one that I hang out with is interested in reading and books and studying and all that stuff. [They like] going out, having fun, you know, hanging out with friends, and stuff like that. They just don't get into . . . reading."

During a lunch hour library observation, I could clearly see the importance of peer associations. Eighty-six percent of observations were of students interacting together; only fourteen percent of students came and left the library alone. Clearly, the library was a social gathering place. However, I had great difficulty observing students at the moment of book selection. They wandered along the stacks, often touching books; if I glanced away for even a second, they had their book in hand and were walking toward checkout. Only two were observed reading back covers or a few pages of the prospective selection. The book appeared to function as a prop, necessary for a trip to the library in order to socialize and required by a teacher.

Jose, Sabrina, Jared, and Roberto never talked to their friends about books. Maria, who did, explained her conversations this way, "We just say we have to get an AR test, or we have to go to the library to check out a book." When asked if she ever talked about titles or what books were about, she, along with other students, replied, "No."

Interest and Task-Centeredness

The words <u>have to</u> appear often in these interviews. Susana said, "I have to read it," referring to a book she promised her reading teacher she would finish because she did

not take an Accelerated Reader test on her last book. She said she does not know what is going on, but she has to keep going. She said she enjoyed Drive By, but didn't do an AR test on it because "I didn't do a narrative organizer [plot chart]. Mrs. H. makes us do a narrative organizer. Those are hard."

In reference to her at-home reading at the kitchen table, which she did for fifteen minutes, Maria said, "I have to." Her reading teacher required at-home reading every night, and Maria, a dutiful student, complied. When asked if she would read at home if her teacher didn't make her, she replied, "If I really get interested in the story, yeah. 'Cause I'll be coming home, and I'll be thinking about it, and I'll be saying I have to read the rest of the story." Maria is beginning to emerge as a reader who understands the metaphor of entry into other, interesting worlds and is developing internal "have-to's" of her own, one story at a time.

The issue of interest appears to be another key factor in reading. Roberto, born in Oaxaca, remembered that he did not like to read in Mexico but started to read in America. When asked what caused the change, he responded, "I don't know. I just started, and they [books] were interesting."

Sabrina, an American-born student of Hispanic origin, stated, "I never, ever liked reading, and I think that's probably why I have trouble reading 'cause I never liked it. I never was interested in it." Sabrina describes her reading this way:

> Most of the time when I'm reading I just read through the words, but I'm not really paying attention to them. Like I can read a whole paragraph, and if you was to ask me what it was about, I'd have to go back and read it again 'cause most of the time I'm thinking about something else.

One might assume that Sabrina would be functionally illiterate; however, this is not the case. She revealed that she has held a summer job for two summers at the juvenile court, where she files papers, enters data on the computer, answers phones, and runs errands. When asked if she uses reading on the job, she replied,

> Not really. Like I have this piece of paper, and it has the name and numbers on it and stuff, and on the computer it has the name and you need to type in the numbers . . . and so you could say it's a little bit of reading, but that's about it. I know how to type, and I'm already familiar with the computers, but I'm not hurrying for the reading thing.

Sabrina is considering a career as a clerk in the juvenile court, a position which clearly requires reading, yet her perception of reading does not include real-life literacy tasks which engage her interest.

In any secondary school where reading is an emphasis, there are unavoidable periods of enforced group reading, in which all students have to open books together and read, either a common text or individually chosen materials. Students who refuse to comply or who come without books are issued citations by one eighth grade teacher team, resulting in assignments for campus cleanup or other community service activities. Other common penalties are detentions, parent phone calls, or issuance of alternative reading material (preferably textbooks or other material perceived as boring). The concept of reading itself as a task suggests that some students such Sabrina may be unwilling to complete the task; thus, a schoolwide emphasis on reading generates an association with threat and punishment.

However, at the time of this writing, Sabrina was observed reading intently during a silent reading period when the cooling was broken, the room was uncomfortably hot, and most students squirming restlessly. She was halfway through Luis Rodriguez's Always Running. La Vida Loca: Gang Days in LA, a autobiographical account of the author's gang activity. As a former self-confessed runaway and troubled teen, Sabrina may have seen in this book a link to her inner life that more sterile school reading could not provide.

A program such as Accelerated Reader requires a formal, task-oriented structure that can send unexpected messages to students. Adult computer aide Lisa perceived the varieties of forms and requirements generated by teachers as negative:

> "The reading logs are difficult because we have very creative teachers, and they all have their own forms and their own way of bringing stuff to us. Mrs. J., she wants only her signature on there, no other teacher to sign off her students. Now Mrs. H.'s students bring in a bookmark that they get signed, and if [students] bring in a reading log, we'll sign it if it's another teacher's but not if [they need] her bookmark. We have a hard time identifying which kids are whose and which form they are using."

In addition, Lisa stated that "[Some teachers] are saying that all you have to have is two books, doesn't matter how many points or what size of book. Some are requiring two books at least 150 pages." [Students] want to know, 'Where's a little book? That's too fat. I want a littler book.'" The numerous forms, signatures, and requirements associated with running the program send the message that reading is a task, one that

should be completed as expeditiously and with as little personal inconvenience as possible.

Ruben, a variable reader whose scores seesaw from high to low on standardized reading tests, demonstrated a typical task orientation toward reading. One day in class when showing me a new book he had checked out from the library, he said, "Here's a new book that I think you'll like." He failed to indicate that he would like it; he explained that it would be pleasing to the teacher. He added, "It's short. I need lots of points for Mrs. H."

My fifth period as a group demonstrated a similar orientation after listening to a booktalk on Sachar's Holes. I asked them if they would like me to read part of it to them. My offer was followed by a long silence. Jared, who liked reading, said, "Yes." Other students spoke up: "Are you going to make us write summaries?" "Are you going to make us learn vocabulary words?" "Are you going to give us a test on it?" When I assured them that I would read to them just for pleasure, to enjoy, they finally said, "Okay, you can read."

We must not assume that this formalization is negative. Task structures help both teachers and students be clear about goals and how they are to be accomplished. Reading teachers themselves are very clear about the goals of reading instruction. When asked why students should take reading, Nadine replied, "The more they read, the more they will be able to read." Ken, chapter reading teacher, responded that there were two reasons. "First, the vast majority of our kids are not reading at grade level. The second reason is that the vast majority are operating in the casual language register. We need to

teach them specialized vocabulary." Suellen added succinctly, "To improve their reading comprehension."

Students themselves understand the purposes of reading. When Jared began having trouble with reading, he reported that his dad told him, "'Well, you need reading for reading instruction . . . to read your score for golf'—because I liked golf when I was a little kid—'and you're going to need it for high school.'" Sabrina said that her grandmother, who, according to her, likes to read a lot, told her that "I should read more. It'd help me more and stuff."

Where is the place of enjoyment in all this task-centeredness, formalization, and group routine? Reading teachers themselves know that pleasure is an important part of reading. When asked why she reads, Nadine replied, "Basically for my focus of study." But then she quickly added, "But I'm trying to make space in my life for a different kind of reading, on Sundays. My daughter got a new series of books. I enjoy reading them. It's like another world." Ken explained his fascination with reading by explaining that his house was full of books.

> We have six or seven rooms lined with books, big oak bookshelves—all about history, war, mostly, about battles and the human drama associated with war. It's the greatest story every told—except the religious one—it's about the passion and the drama and the great struggle for human freedom and dignity.

These teachers were very clear about their deep motivation for reading, that it was for enjoyment, to experience entry into another world of passion and drama and emotion. Suellen reported that she overheard a conversation between two of her students in which one asked the other, "Why do we need to do this?" And the second responded, "It's like

she said, 'You hear it, you see it, you feel it!'" That her students understood the deep purpose of reading was gratifying to her.

But do most students understand that enjoyment, based on emotion and interest and experienced as a moment of escape that is both mental and sometimes physical as well is at the base of the reading experience? Alfredo articulated the tension he felt: "I don't like to read a lot. It's good for me, but I don't think it's fun." He added further, "I don't like to read and read. I just like to watch the movie." Jared explained that his early reading experience "felt kind of boring because we had TV, VCR, whatever, and we were able to watch TV instead of read." In addition to friends, the media entice students to spend their time elsewhere rather than developing a skill that requires, as Maria explained, "practicing." When asked why other people like to read, Sabrina replied, "I really don't know." She paused, then said it again, softly, in a puzzled voice, "I really don't know."

CONCLUSIONS

What is the reading culture of Pueblo, a school that has chosen a cross-curricular emphasis on reading? These interviews suggest that there are tensions between the formal curricular view of reading and the view of students who are experiencing the reading program. In addition, there are tensions between the stated goals of reading instruction and the lived experience of successful readers.

For students with limited experience in reading, the experiences of reading at school come to embody the reading process itself. Street stated that people who engage in a literacy event such as reading have "culturally constructed models of the literacy event in [their] minds" (as quoted in Cairney and Ruge, 1997, p. 3). Therefore, teachers

need to become aware of the hidden messages conveyed by the staff, curriculum, and selection of reading materials and programs.

Students know that reading is good for them. However, these interviews suggest that many students perceive reading as essentially school-centered and task-oriented: required, structured, formalistic, involved with academic chores such as homework, plot charts, and tests, enforced through threats and punishments, and essential in the future but often not enjoyable in the present.

Book talk does not appear to be widespread in the student culture at the school. Students who group together to talk about books are often social misfits. Library use appears to serve a social function as much or more than the function of providing books, which are usually chosen in a cursory fashion.

Reading teachers, who themselves understand that interest and pleasure are the basis for their own reading, teach students to read in order to improve their comprehension and build their vocabularies, strictly academic tasks with no more appeal than studying for a test in geography. Students buy this rationale. As Jared said, "Well, I have to deal with this [reading], so I might as well do it." Why anyone should like to read appears hidden from students like Alfredo and Sabrina who, pulled into the dominant peer culture, resist reading.

The prospect of changing peer- and media-driven adolescent culture is not very promising. Teachers need to articulate for students the very factors that cause them to enjoy reading themselves—to make a place for pleasure, interest, emotion and even privacy and comfort in secondary reading classrooms. Students need to spend time sharing books with one another, reading and talking in partners or groups, and creating

artwork or video presentations to advertise favorite books throughout the school. If the current push for increased accountability, high-stakes testing and academic standards drives enjoyment from the classroom, we can expect more students who say, with Sabrina, "I really don't know [why people read]. I really don't know."

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