'At a school like this' Implementing policy in a kindergarten reading program

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This paper examines influences in a teacher's working context on policy implementation in a Kindergarten reading program. This exploration is based on a year's observations, interviews and artefact collection in the teacher's classroom; and is framed by Bernstein's notion of the pedagogic device (2000). Positioned between policy and the history of her own beliefs and practices, this paper describes the operational space that Sandra carved out. In this space, a number of messages converged which mediated the teacher's policy implementation. These mediating messages are described in terms of teaching philosophy; children's needs, predispositions and resources; parents' expectations; collegial interactions; and organisational priorities, norms and provisions. In light of this study, policy implementation in the class reading program is seen to be anything but clear-cut; and recent unilateral approaches to literacy policy reform and their underlying assumptions are brought into question.

 Key words: reading, early school years, literacy policy, reading teaching practices

INTRODUCTION

Recently in Australia and overseas, there has been a surge of reading reports and policy reforms that have recommended highly specific teaching methods based on arguably narrow definitions of research. These documents have included Australia's *Teaching Reading Report* (DEST, 2005), U.S.A.'s *No Child Left Behind* (U.S. Act of Congress, 2002 and U.K.'s *National Literacy Strategy*, (DEfS, 1998). Since the release of these documents, more inclusive research reports have been published (e.g., Freebody, 2007) that establish what long has been argued by policy makers (e.g., Bullock, 1975) and experienced by teachers (Broadley *et al*, 2000)—that there is no single magic bullet for teaching reading in the early years. As Australian educators and policy makers now engage in the development of a national English curriculum and literacy continuum, it is timely to explore the relationship between reading policy and classroom implementation in the early school years. To that end, this paper documents one Kindergarten teacher's experiences as it asks, What messages does a teacher encounter in her operational space that influence policy implementation in the class reading program?

Conceptual Framework and Related Research

This study draws on Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic device that identifies research, policy and practice as three sites of educational endeavour. Research is the field where knowledge is produced; policy is the field where this knowledge is changed or recontextualised into official discourses to guide teachers' work; and practice is the field where knowledge from research is reproduced as teachers implement policy in their classrooms. Individuals may occupy one, two or all three fields of the pedagogic device. For example, while teachers might most obviously be associated with the field of practice, many also participate as researchers in the field of knowledge

production (e. g., Aubusson, Brady and Dinham, 2005; Hoban and Ewing, 2005) and contribute to policy development at localised or higher levels of governance in the recontextualisation field.

Further, pedagogic knowledge developed in one context may not be transformed easily in another context (Wheelahan, 2007) and so teachers' practices are not wholly or ideally determined by research and policy (Harris, 2006). Teachers encounter myriad sources of information and rather than merely replicating research or policy messages, they exercise their own decision-making powers to do what they find works for the children they teach (Broadley *et al*, 2000; Hammond and Macken-Horarik, 2001). Moreover, research has found teachers do not necessarily buy into policy change (Ryan, 2005)—they may interrogate, innovate and even resist or ignore policy (Coburn, 2001).

In the interface of reading policy and practice, teachers' professional judgment is critical (Pearson, 2003) as they carve out their operational space in terms of decisions they perceive have not been made by others (Smith and Lovatt, 2003). This paper focuses on this space, contributing to knowledge about the pedagogic device in terms of messages a teacher encounters and responds to in ways that shape the class reading program.

APPROACH

This observational case study was conducted in a classroom over a school year, thus falling in the naturalistic paradigm of research (Glesne, 2006). A key assumption of naturalistic inquiry is the construction of multiple realities arising from multiple perspectives. This assumption resonates with this study's premise that messages from texts of policy, research and other sources are subject to teacher interpretation.

Contextualisation of the particular phenomenon under investigation is an important purpose of naturalistic inquiry (Glesne, 2006). This study was conducted at a school situated in a suburban community with a high percentage of Chinese families. Sandra (pseudonym) had been teaching for 25 years. In her classroom, called K-Green here, children came from mainly Cantonese or Mandarin speaking backgrounds. Other language backgrounds were Japanese, Arabic, Greek, Hindi and Macedonian. One child spoke English at home as their first language. Observations of the class reading program were made and documented through field notes and audiotaping. This documentation focused on whole class interactions such as modelled reading, and small group experiences such as follow-up reading activities. Texts used and children's work samples developed in these documented experiences were photocopied. Interviews with Sandra explored her reading program in terms of her plans and perspectives and the messages in her working environment that shaped her choices.

Literacy as social practice (Luke and Freebody, 1999) provided a broad lens through which Sandra's teaching reading practices and policy implementation were viewed. This framework is consistent with the policy support document with which Sandra worked (NSW DET, 1997). From this perspective, reading is defined as engagement with written, visual, auditory and multimodal texts that involves a repertoire of practices that relate to the codes of texts (e.g., word recognition, word analysis, sound/letter relationships), meaning (e.g., literal retrieval, making inferences), purpose (e.g., reading for particular purposes) and critical analysis (e.g., reading between the lines to identify representation, voice, position in text) (Luke and Freebody, 1999).

Audiotapes were transcribed and field notes word-processed. Literacy as social practice provided analytic tools for identifying and describing the kinds of reading practices that were selected and prioritised in the classroom. Interpretive analysis identified and categorised themes in the interview data. These analyses led to a mapping of the pedagogic device in the class program,

as well as identifying mediating messages arising in the teacher's operational space. Such work is consistent with an assumption of naturalistic inquiry that variables are complex and interwoven (Glesne, 2006).

The study's validity was enhanced through collecting data in an actual classroom and triangulating data across methods (observations, transcripts, and interviews). Reliability was maintained through audio equipment to accurately record the data, and cross-checking data records with the teacher.

RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE IN SANDRA'S CLASSROOM

An overview of ways in which research, policy and practice aligned in Sandra's reading program is shown in Figure 1, framed by Bernstein's pedagogic device as explained above. The key state policy was the *English K–6 Syllabus* (NSW DET, 1998).

RESEARCH	POLICY	SANDRA'S PRACTICES
Genre theory (Christie and Martin, 1997), register theory (Halliday, 1985), functional grammar (Halliday,1994)	*NSW English K-6 Syllabus* (NSW BOS, 1998) – explicit teaching about texts in contexts and text types	Teaching about text types (foregrounding recounts, procedures and narratives)
Sociocultural learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978) Literacy as social practice and four reading resources (Luke and Freebody, 1999)	*Teaching Reading Framework* (NSW DET, 1997) – modeled, guided and independent reading experiences; four reading resources: code-breaking, meaning-making, reading for social purposes and critical literacy	Assisting children's reading practices through modelled, guided and independent reading, with focus on meaning, purpose and code practices
Reading Recovery research (Clay, 1979, 1993)	Reading Recovery School Policy	Levelled readers, ability groups, related worksheets and activities School-wide assessment
Home-school relationships (e.g., Cairney and Ruge, 1998)	School Home Partnership Policy	Home reading program Levelled home readers
Developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp and Copple,1997)		Hands-on, learner-centred activities (e.g., drama, play)

Figure 1: Research, policy and practice in Sandra's reading program

Syllabus outcomes for reading in Early Stage 1 are shown in Table 1, which the Syllabus further specifies in terms of numerous demonstrable indicators. In addition, the Syllabus specifies outcomes and indicators for writing, talking and listening, which were not this study's focus *per se* but which Sandra also needed to include in her class program. Practices Sandra used to meet these outcomes are also shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
ENGLISH K-6 SYLLABUS READING OUTCOMES (NSW BOS, 1998)

Early Stage 1 Outcome	Implementing Outcomes in K-Green
RES1.5 'Demonstrate developing reading skills to read short, predictable texts on familiar topics' (p. 28)	Modelling reading; using texts on familiar topics; building knowledge about unfamiliar topics; guiding reading through questioning and prompting; linking to children's experiences; focusing on pictures; using drama.
RESI.6 'Demonstrate developing reading skills and strategies for reading books, dealing with print and comprehending texts' (p. 32)	Using questions and prompts to interpret pictures; encouraging predictions; focusing on word recognition and analysis; distinguishing words from pictures; modelling directionality of written English and written/spoken word correspondence.
RES1.7 'Demonstrate an emerging awareness that written and visual texts convey meaning and recognise that there are different kinds of texts that serve different purposes' (p. 30)	Encouraging children to respond to texts; discussing subject matter; modelling basic book conventions; inviting children's interpretations of illustrations; linking different kinds of reading material to different topics (Did not explicitly discuss audience and purpose, or text genres).
RES1.8 'Identify some basic language structures and features of text' (p. 34)	Doing code-breaking work in modelled and guided reading; code breaking activities (e.g., bingo) and worksheets (e.g., cloze).

Sandra's literacy classroom practices fell into two broad categories. Core practices were undertaken daily and comprised whole class modelled reading and guided reading with leveled readers in groups that connected with the home reading program. Non-core practices supported the core literacy program but were given less priority in terms of time, resources and formalised assessment. Yet these experiences were amongst Sandra's preferred practices for teaching literacy and resonated most strongly with her beliefs about children's literacy learning. They included experiences such as drama and are explored under 'Messages about teaching philosophy'.

The *Teaching Reading Framework* (NSW DET, 1997), a support document for the Syllabus, is framed by literacy as social practice (Luke and Freebody, 1999), as previously explicated under 'Approach'. The documents also detail the teaching/learning cycle of reading to, with and by children—respectively called modelled, guided and independent reading and underpinned by sociocultural theories of learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). The documents provide some broad guidelines for working with ESL students, including the need for systematic and explicit instruction, developing mutually understood language of the topic and developing children's background knowledge.

As Sandra talked in interviews about the Syllabus, she questioned how realistic demands for standards and mandatory outcomes are if they do not pay heed to the contexts in which teachers teach and children are supposed to learn:

> I think that [policy makers] are expecting teachers to fit in their curriculum every day now so much more and it's even harder at a school like this [with predominantly NESB new arrivals in the first year] where you're not only expected to get children to a certain academic level but you've also got to socialise them and teach them English at the same time. So it's like you're two

steps behind everybody else. The Syllabus assumes a level playing field, that all children start at the same base. But they don't. I mean, I can't say it applies to everybody, but I know other schools who are in the same boat. That's what it feels like sometimes. And the push today [in Kindergarten] is for the academic program. We're supposed to be teaching children to read up to a certain stage.

So what were the messages that Sandra encountered in a *'school like this'* that compelled her to take this view?

MEDIATING MESSAGES IN SANDRA'S OPERATIONAL SPACE

Multiple and often contradictory messages prevailed in Sandra's work context. These messages fell into four thematic categories—teaching philosophy; children's needs, predispositions and resources; parents' expectations of children's learning and progress; and organisational priorities, norms and provisions.

Messages about teaching philosophy

Sandra's philosophy emphasised *'a happy learning environment where children are keen to come to school each day and learn to the best of their ability … I want children to see learning as a worthwhile experience where they can develop as individuals, so it is important to make their learning fun, interesting and needs-appropriate.'*

Sandra incorporated drama and play to foster learning. She generated discussions among her children and injected lively humour into her interactions. Sandra planned on a weekly basis, developed and reviewed individual profiles, conferenced with individual children about their learning, and used ability groupings to provide needs-based instruction. Sandra implemented free play that included literacy-enriched play. During play, children read books with one another or on their own. Children also drew or wrote during play, sometimes on the chalkboard in scenarios of playing school, and created their own narrative dramas in pretend play. Sandra saw drama as an important means for developing children's literacy. She guided children in re-enacting stories in big books they had shared. These books also formed a focus for class writing activities, games, art and craft. She explained drama activities helped the children *'interact with the books'* and *'enjoy books'*. Sandra encouraged children to *'look for rhyming words…look for words that have been modified, whether they're bigger or smaller, to use the appropriate voice'*. Sandra worked to make children *'aware of reading strategies'* and *'get the children to read with you and try to get them to respond, and most of them do'*.

In modelled reading, Sandra nurtured children's enjoyment and sense of meaning while developing code-breaking skills. She provided *'demonstration'* so as to allow children to *'learn various strategies, to learn to cope with reading'*. When focusing on code, teacher question/child response sequences directed children's attention, for example:

T: Look at this printing. What can you tell me about how the printing is different?
C1: The word at the top is big and the words at the bottom are small.

Sandra also guided children through jointly constructed interpretations in more open interactions. For example, the class was sharing a big book called 'The Jigaree' (Cowley, 1983) and looking at a picture of extra terrestrial beings emerging from craters:

T: When we look at the back, here is one coming out of the crater. Can you see it?
A: There's one stuck in the crater.
T: I think he's coming out. He's probably looking to see who's around.

A: No, that one! [pointing to picture]
T: That one looks like he's about to fall in! [Childrenn laugh] All you can see is his bottom!
L: [turning around to other children] That's not funny!
T: And this one is flying, and he looks like he's about to go in too!
A: He's about to crash into his bottom! [Children laugh loudly]
T: This one seems to like flying. Does this little jigaree seem to like flying?
Chn: No!
T: He's very scared, isn't he? I think he likes to cuddle more.
A: And he's in that hole, that little hole!
W: Looks like he's staying there!

Sandra believed these kinds of interactions were essential to nurturing children as meaning-makers. Children offered more of their own perspectives, allowing Sandra to tune into their needs, predispositions and resources.

Messages about children's needs, predispositions and resources

At the time of the study, Sandra was working with children from predominantly Chinese backgrounds as new arrivals in Australia. Separated from their parents in their prior-to-school years, they were raised in China by their grandparents while their parents established their lives and employment in Australia. These children were reunited with their parents in Australia on commencing school. Starting school understandably presented a challenging transition for these children. Sandra particularly attended to children's resources that grew from their engagement in solitary sports and cultural activities such as learning a musical instrument, which she believed predisposed them towards technical excellence and solitary experiences at school.

Sandra valued group work and play, but found that these experiences were challenging as children were reluctant to share and tended to compete and fight with one another. Consequently, she explicitly nurtured classroom behaviours such as sharing, co-operation and turn-taking; and she reduced spontaneous and unstructured play in her classroom to instead focus on teacher guided and directed play in small settings.

For the emergent readers in her class, Sandra construed their needs as high on learning how to participate in classroom events, focus attention and take turns. She believed these children needed *'to get the reading behaviour happening'* in terms of book-handling turning skills and gaining some sense of meaning. While the big books provided by the school dated back to the 1980s, she perceived they fostered children's enjoyment, as seen in the earlier 'Jigaree' interactions and as Sandra reported:

> '[The children] will come out, and even [children] who are on E1, they will get the book down and they'll start flipping over. You look at those books, they're practically falling apart, because so many kids enjoy reading them.'

However, cultural frames of references needed to be continually negotiated. Sandra referred to the need to *'talk a lot about the language, because there's just so much to talk about'*. For example, she recounted reading a book about a skier:

> 'I was doing a book with E1s yesterday. It was called 'The Skier'. I was looking at the picture first of all. [I said], 'Everybody look at the picture, what's this about?' And of course, dead silence, and then Kristy said, 'Snow'. I went, 'Yes, this is snow, but does anyone know what this person is called when you're in the snow and you've got these special things on your feet, what do you call them?' Nobody knew that, so of course it was a lot of language that we had to talk about.'

As Sandra built bridges between children's school and out-of-school experiences, her relationships with their parents were vital.

Messages about parents' expectations of their children's learning and progress
Sandra valued parents as *'significant educators in the child's life'*, stating in her teaching philosophy, *'I like to work with parents so that together we can provide a significant start to the young child's formal education'*. This belief was reflected in Sandra's availability to parents each afternoon and the apparent respect the parents had for her.

Parents sought tangible demonstrations of their children's progress, such as completed textbook exercises and homework. From conversations with parents, Sandra found that learning in children's homes was *'more formal'* and *'very structured'*, which was *'a different type of learning'* from what occurred in her classroom. Parents sought homework because *'they want to move their children along'* and want their children, as one parent put it, *'to win the race'*. Parents also supported children's learning through means such as after-school coaching to strengthen their children's chances of school success. Many had aspirations for their children to win scholarships and be admitted into selective high schools and university so as to forge successful adult careers.

Sandra took stock of these expectations but also wanted *'parents to understand the learning process'* at her school and in her classroom. While parents' concerns lay with the children's longer-term futures, Sandra's more immediate concern was with getting the children through the first year of their formal schooling and preparing them for a successful transition to their next school year. Hence she provided guided play and group experiences to foster co-operative learning (as previously seen); her use of explicit modelling and focus on enjoyment to teach basic literacy skills and engage children with texts and reading; and her use of guided reading and leveled readers that scaffold reading and carry children through to later grades in ways the school expected.

Sandra worked most directly with parents through the school's home reading program. The books children took home were the same levelled readers used in guided reading in the classroom. While this program met expectations of structured homework and tangible demonstrations of progress, it also intensified parents' concerns with their children's reading levels—Sandra frequently fielded requests from parents for their children to be *'moved up'* to the next level. The home reading program was an organisational priority and operationalised at the school level—heightening the impact that this program had on Sandra's class program.

Messages about organisational priorities, norms and provisions
The Principal was a strong advocate for parental outreach and involvement. At the beginning of each year, the school sent a newsletter about the home reading program to children's homes. This newsletter described reading routines and how to tackle words children did not know. Parents were advised on how to talk about texts with their children, direct attention to illustrations, encourage children to predict, and hand over control to the child to read aloud. Parents were encouraged to praise their children for their efforts and to avoid reading a text more than three times.

The school otherwise provided quite broad guidelines for class programs, provided the Syllabus was followed. Teachers could put their own stamp on their classroom reading practices—as Sandra did with her non-core practices like drama and cooking. As the Principal reported, *'You'd probably find in every classroom every possible approach.'*

While this aspect of school policy was broad, school norms and routines did impact Sandra's reading program. The school implemented a Reading Recovery program (Clay, 1993) and a benchmark kit that saw Sandra use levelled readers for guided reading in ability-based reading

groups. As a practice across the school's early grades, Sandra's children were organised into four such groups. These groups were a core component of Sandra's reading program, running four times a week, at either the beginning or end of the day, and lasting 30 minutes. These groups typically involved children reading a levelled reader with an adult and completing a follow-up activity such as word and sound bingo; sight word concentration game; playing with alphabet magnets and puzzles; and completing worksheets that involved sounds of the week, cloze passages, word/picture matching, and sentence matching and sequencing exercises.

As part of the school's Reading Recovery program, running records were used for ongoing assessment. These involved a child reading a levelled reader to the teacher or teacher's aide. The adult used a running record sheet that had the text and room to make notations about the child's words s/he accurately read, the words s/he substituted, the code-breaking strategies s/he used and processes of predicting and confirming meaning. In Sandra's implementation, her preliminary interactions with the child were geared towards contextualising the text and putting the child at ease.

Children's reading performance was cross-referenced against the school's benchmark kit and learning outcomes in the *English K-6 Syllabus* (NSW DET, 1998). Reading ability levels in the benchmark kit ranged from Emergent (E1 and E2), to Beginner (B1, B2 and B3), through to Fluent. According to children's ability levels, they were given particular levels of readers in the classroom as well as ones to take home as part of the school's Home Reading scheme. Labels such as 'E1' entered Sandra's discourse when talking about children in her interviews – for example, *'I got William to be a giant today in a play we did. William's E1 and he did a fabulous job!'*

Support provision at Sandra's school saw serious constraints. Levelled readers were allocated to classrooms on a rotating weekly basis—one new book a week for children to *'learn to read'*. There was not sufficient quantity of these books to be part of each classroom's permanent collection, despite them being designated as *'core reading material'* against which children's performance as readers was developed and assessed. In terms of providing support staff, the five Kindergarten classrooms, mainly comprised of new arrivals from overseas, were given one ESL teacher. In view of this teacher's other commitments and children's acute ESL needs, support was limited—as Sandra commented, *'When you need those people, they are not there.'* In the face of such and constraints, Sandra found support and solidarity with her fellow Kindergarten teachers.

Collegial interactions

Sandra and her Kindergarten colleagues engaged in ongoing conversations through which they collectively constructed their understandings and practices related to their class reading programs. These interactions more than any others provided a means through which she filtered and reconciled messages from various other sources.

Through these conversations, Sandra and her colleagues clarified what they would focus on in the English syllabus, as illustrated in Sandra's comment, *'In Kindergarten, I, we teachers, stick with just a few of the genres in the Syllabus, and to me it's always just the recount for starters.'* They collectively decided on strategies for teaching Syllabus content and meeting mandated outcomes; identified ways and means for meeting children's literacy needs as well as support their transition to school; supported one another as they worked to meet parents' expectations; and negotiated the practical details of their work such as sharing resources among five Kindergarten classrooms. As they did so, they affirmed one another's philosophical stance and developed shared understandings that continued to converge the more they worked and talked together.

DISCUSSION

Experiences of teachers such as Sandra bring into question unilateral approaches of recent nationwide reports and proposed policy reforms with which this paper began. The relationship between literacy policy and practice is mediated by myriad messages such as we saw in Sandra's professional context. These messages shaped Sandra's work, the choices she made and the options she perceived. How policy makers reach teachers and enter into authentic dialogue with teachers and schools to render policy manageable and relevant is a question of pressing concern – one which the current national English curriculum initiative has been working to address through its consultative processes that include teachers and their professional associations.

Providing improved and much-needed levels of support for teachers to implement literacy policy is another key issue. At the end of the day, Sandra's greatest over-riding constraint was time, recurring as the most common theme throughout her interviews:

Time. You're so busy trying to do what's on the agenda.

This study focused on just one school. However, Sandra's school—*'a school like this'*—is not unique. It is important to properly recognise that every school faces its own particular circumstances; and that, together, schools make up a very diverse collection of educational settings despite working with similar policy guidelines and mandates. How policy addresses teachers' different circumstances is a central concern, for clearly, teachers and children do not engage with policy implementation on a *'level playing field'*. Yet how children perform is put under increasing scrutiny through standardised testing and is leading these days to the suggestion of comparative league tables and the like to determine student learning, school performance, and funding allocations—what in the U.S. has come to be referred to as high stakes accountability.

More studies of policy implementation in schools are needed, in terms of the mediating messages that necessarily influence this process and with a view to identifying how teachers might best be supported. As Luke (2003, p. 69) also has argued, there is a need to develop 'a repertoire of shared strategies and approaches that are appropriate and effective for communities, targeted at particular linguistic and cultural demographics, and built at the whole school level'. Just as Sandra experienced in her classroom, there is no single method for working with students' needs, predispositions and resources. Repertoires of practice are needed in the early years that might include but not be limited to the kinds of practices seen in Sandra's classroom, such as Reading Recovery, ESL instruction, home/school partnerships, developmentally appropriate practices and scaffolded learning. Such practices need to be strongly supported, properly resourced and informed by the operational spaces in which teachers work, to optimise effective literacy policy implementation—matters of increasing importance given the imminent release of the new national curriculum in 2010. For, how might implementing a national English curriculum best work and be supported in 'a school like this'?

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