

Teaching Preservice Teachers to Read the Discourse of School Reform

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In this article, I argue for redesigned preservice teacher education courses that provide opportunities for teaching students to read the discourse of school reform, especially in terms of how that discourse both restricts and builds capacity for the kinds of teachers they want to become. Drawing from the experiences of three preservice teachers who opted out of teaching, I attempt to show how their experiences intersected with my own journey from experimentalist training into critical hermeneutic work and, more recently, into policy and editorial arenas to produce sites in which to explore the discourse of current reform efforts in literacy education in the United States.

When 3 of the 17 preservice teachers in my literacy methods course designed for secondary English majors changed their minds this past semester about wanting to become teachers, I naturally took notice. Curious about why these particular three undergraduates (all high achievers) had decided that teaching was not in their future, I inquired about the individual reasons for their decisions. Although varied, all could be linked directly or indirectly to the much-talked-about school-reform measures associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2001), a controversial piece of legislation that has only recently begun to have an impact on secondary schools in the United States.

The impact of NCLB was initially felt in primary schools through federally funded programmes such as Reading First, in which administrators ensure that teachers in kindergarten through third grade spend a total of 135 min daily teaching lessons that pass the litmus test of “scientific” reading instruction. Until recently, however, secondary schools had remained relatively untouched by the new

legislation. But as provisions in the law pertaining to high schools serving low-income students began to garner greater public attention, teachers in those schools began to feel the pressure of strict accountability plans that are tied to state standards and tests of yearly progress. Such was the climate in the schools where my three preservice teachers were observing (and occasionally teaching minilessons) the semester prior to their full-time student-teaching experience. All three were disheartened by what they perceived to be NCLB's negative impact on teacher autonomy and student motivation.

For example, "Denise" described a situation in which she had asked her cooperating teacher if the class would be doing a play that semester. The teacher pulled open her file drawer and, pointing to a folder filled with ideas on high school drama productions, told Denise there would be no class play that year because nothing mattered anymore except instruction aimed at improving students' reading scores in district-mandated tests. This exchange with a teacher whom she greatly admired was but the latest of several eye-opening glimpses that Denise had had into what she anticipated teaching to be in an era of high-stakes testing and increased teacher accountability. She spoke candidly about her decision to opt out of student teaching the following semester. To her, it was better to earn a general education degree than to spend any more time preparing for a teaching position that she did not want. She was outwardly discouraged and more than a little disappointed with herself for not making a better choice in majors.

So was "Gayle." In Gayle's case, however, the situation was more desperate. She was contemplating dropping out of college before the end of the semester, much against her parents' wishes, to seek full-time work and then accumulate enough money to reenter the university and pursue a different career path. Gayle's disillusionment stemmed from exposure to the curriculum in a high school that, while geographically distant from Denise's, was close in several other respects. Not only were plays off-limits in Gayle's school, teachers were also required to stick to a rigid "no-frills" curriculum that was designed to produce better test performance among students. When Gayle's cooperating teacher and university supervisor requested that she substitute a series of skill-and-drill worksheets on correct grammar usage for several poetry minilessons that she had spent a weekend preparing, Gayle began to see teaching in a different light. Her demeanour changed notably in my class as well. The situation worsened to the point that I had asked Gayle to stay after class one day to discuss ways of making up for missed assignments and unexcused absences. More tears than words flowed that day, but in the end she, like Denise, elected to substitute additional coursework for the dropped student-teaching credit hours. In effect, both young women will have their degrees in education but not the credentials required for teaching.

The same will be true for "Daniel," the third student who opted out of student teaching partially as a result of recognizing that his pedagogical beliefs were at odds with the expectations of his field placement school. Daniel's stance, one that was stu-

dent centred and marked by his abiding interest in technology and creative writing, clashed with the school's notion that the bridging of literacy achievement gap could best be accomplished by concentrating on direct instruction using primarily printed texts. Daniel simply would not (or could not) adhere to teaching practices that he deemed lacking in innovation and ineffective when used with youth who struggled to read selections from the state-adopted literature anthology. Rather than comply, he started missing so many field placement classes that he was eventually withdrawn from the course. He remained in my methods course for the rest of the semester, but judging from what he told me, it was only to avoid being withdrawn from the university at large. His plans for his senior year consisted of taking as many courses outside his major as possible—most notably, those in the area of fiction writing.

A LEGITIMATE QUESTION

Why do I begin a piece in the inaugural issue of *Pedagogies: An International Journal* by focusing on three students who chose not to become teachers? My answer is this: *Pedagogies* is about change and innovation, the very elements that Denise, Gayle, and Daniel appeared to find missing in their anticipated lives as English teachers. And although at first blush it might seem that I am blaming schools (and indirectly NCLB) for the students' decisions to opt out of a teaching career, it is not my intent to do so. Nor is it my intent to dismiss out of hand the need for high-stakes testing and teacher accountability. Rather, what I suggest in this short article is that productive change and innovative classroom practices need not be at odds with, or foreign to, currently mandated schoolwide literacy-reform efforts in the United States.

I say this knowing full well that such a suggestion may be interpreted as being naïve in some circles, Pollyannish in others, and downright dangerous in yet others; so let me explain. My journey from experimentalist training into critical hermeneutic work and, more recently, policy and editorial arenas has produced diverse sites in which several of the concerns raised by the three students who opted out of teaching may be examined. What is needed, I argue, are not more "scientifically driven" mandates (supported by schools and universities alike) but, rather, more opportunities for preservice teachers to read and explore the discourse of current reform efforts in literacy education, especially in terms of how that discourse can both restrict and build capacity for the kinds of teachers they hope to become.

CHALLENGES TO PEDAGOGICAL IDENTITIES

Pedagogy is a form of identity work: it is a positioning practice in which "different classrooms [come to] signify different teachers, types of activities, and associated

ideologies” (Sheehy & Leander, 2004, p. 9). Classrooms affected by NCLB-related reform efforts appear not to have provided adequate spaces for Denise, Gayle, and Daniel to practice the pedagogical identities that they had projected for themselves as future English teachers. The source of at least some of those projected identities is most likely the preservice teacher education curriculum to which I contribute as a faculty member at the University of Georgia. It would not be outrageously unfair to state, I think, that the faculty in language and literacy education is largely composed of former teachers such as myself, who envision a kinder, gentler world of public education than is presently available in the United States. I would not call ourselves hopeless romantics, but I would charge that we are not doing enough to show the preservice teachers in our courses that reform-minded measures, while presenting potential challenges to their pedagogical identities, need not drive them away from the teaching field.

In my own methods course, for instance, I could have been, retrospectively, a better modeller of how I have come to mediate the intrusion of federally legislated assaults on my own identity as a literacy educator and researcher. Schooled in an experimentalist paradigm, the notion of “scientifically” based reading instruction is not all that foreign to me (Alvermann, Smith, & Readence, 1985). Yet I know from personal experience that generalisations from so-called scientific research look very different when applied to actual classroom practice. Concerns for random assignment and control-group designs aside, certain findings from the experimentalist and quasi-experimentalist literature on literacy teaching and learning need to be examined critically, especially with an eye to what they mean for preservice teachers such as Denise, Gayle, and Daniel.

For instance, I might have shown Daniel evidence from recent experimental and quasi-experimental research on literacy instruction at the middle school and high school levels that explicit and systematic (direct) instruction in a wide range of literacy activities can improve young people’s comprehension of texts—whether in print, visual, or digital media—on a variety of performance-based measures (Alvermann, Fitzgerald, & Simpson, in press). If I had encouraged Daniel to design an action research project in which it was his responsibility to share this information with his cooperating teacher and university-based supervisor (perhaps in the form of a discussion about the pros and cons of using technology and creative writing in today’s reform-minded English classroom), might he have found a bit more support for his own stance on the importance of helping struggling readers engage with texts of various kinds (including digital and student-created texts) in personally meaningful ways? If Daniel had a better understanding of how the label “scientific research” can be used to simultaneously enforce and resist the notion of one “right” way to bridge the literacy achievement gap, would it have enabled him to practice the pedagogical identity that he had fashioned for himself?

In showing Denise and Gayle how current reform efforts do not necessarily have to limit the range of English teachers’ classroom practices, I might have in-

volved them in an inquiry project or a WebQuest based on examples from my work on the planning committee for 2009 National Assessment for Educational Progress and national advisory panels that select NCLB-approved materials. From these examples and links to sites featuring NCLB and National Assessment for Educational Progress documentation, Denise and Gayle would have been able to explore for themselves some of the complex issues surrounding current reform efforts in literacy education. For example, they would have discovered that nowhere in the documentation on the NCLB Act does it say that reading plays and writing poetry are banned literacy practices. Moreover, the 2009 National Assessment for Educational Progress reading test includes poems and questions that require students to critique and/or evaluate high-quality literary and informational texts (National Assessment Governing Board, 2004). This is not to say that the tensions that Denise and Gayle experienced in their field assignments were a figment of their imaginations—quite the contrary, in fact. Presently circulating is a powerful discourse that would have teacher educators and their students buy into the notion that restricting the range of literacy approaches and materials at the secondary level will lead to improved test performance among students. It is a discourse fuelled in part by policies established in the name of Reading First programmes for kindergarten through third grade. The research on effective literacy instruction at the middle school and high school levels simply does not support this notion.

Indeed, reviews of research involving the upper grades, which was highlighted in the National Reading Panel's report (2000) and in additional research conducted in the wake of that report (Alvermann et al., in press; Kamil, 2003), suggest that instruction that is deemed exemplary at the middle school and high school levels must address first and foremost the relation of self-efficacy and motivation to young people's sustained reading engagement. Had Denise and Gayle been encouraged to explore the implications of such research for classroom practice with their cooperating teachers, they would have learned that instruction needs to involve youth in higher level thinking as they read, write, and share (Alvermann, 2005). They would also have learned about the need to avoid as much as possible a transmission model of teaching that emphasises skill and drill and to substitute in its place a participatory model of instruction that actively engages students in their own learning and that treats texts as tools for learning rather than as repositories of information to be memorised and then all too quickly forgotten (Wade & Moje, 2000).

TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTIVE AGENDA

Redesigned preservice teacher education courses that provide opportunities for teaching students to read the discourse of school reform, especially in terms of how that discourse both restricts and builds capacity for the kinds of teachers they want to become, hold promise for accomplishing but a small part of the reconstructive

agenda that Luke (2004) outlined in his brief notes on the future of critical discourse studies. That agenda, which calls for something more than “a safe scholarship” (p. 152) in its bid to redress and rebuild institutional lives and pedagogical identities (among other things), will not be satisfied with mere classroom talk between professors and students. To address challenges similar to those experienced by Denise, Gayle, and Daniel, riskier moves will be required, such as extending the “safe” discussions in college classrooms to include cooperating teachers and other supervisory personnel at the very sites where preservice teachers are currently feeling the tensions associated with deep-reaching literacy reform measures.

It will also require more than a cursory critique or unpacking of the issues involved, for as Gee (1996) and Lankshear and Knobel (2003) have thoughtfully reminded us, discursive practices do not simply materialise out of nowhere; they are historically and politically situated in the linguistic, social, cultural, and behavioural identity kits that we carry around to recognise and be recognised by others like ourselves. The discourse of school reform, and how it is interpreted by particular kinds of people for particular kinds of purposes at particular points in time, is again but a smaller piece of the overall reconstructive agenda that Luke (2004) seemed to have in mind. His project is one that seeks to push the boundaries of what change and innovation can contribute to everyday classroom teaching and learning—and especially to the formation of pedagogical identities not unlike those that were once part of Denise, Gayle, and Daniel’s repertoire. It is the stuff of which *Pedagogies* will be made.

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