

# National Reading Conference 2005 Abstract for Outstanding Student Research Award Winner

## “So That You’ll Be Good Readers”: ESL Teachers’ Classroom Discourses About Reading

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In our recent attempts to regulate students’ learning and the ways in which they are taught, we have shifted too much of our collective focus onto what schools have to offer students, rather than also attending to what resources students have to offer schools. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the parameters for the “right skills” are set by policy makers who do not investigate the resources that *are* available in the homes and communities of diverse children, and they structure schools in such a way that teachers and other school personnel have neither the time nor the resources to engage in such investigation themselves. Consequently, diverse children are constructed as being needy rather than as bringing rich resources to the classroom. In turn, because these students allegedly do not have anything to offer in their schooling experiences, all instructional time is spent trying to compensate for their “deficiencies.” Furthermore, by providing singular solutions to the perceived global problems of all minority students, we cannot help but provide highly prescriptive, rigid solutions, which may alienate the learners whose interests, ideas, experiences, and backgrounds are inevitably different from the prototype of the student for whom certain policies and programs are developed. One way in which this standardized approach is manifesting itself is through what Gutiérrez et al. (2002a) have called “reductive or narrowly defined reading programs” (p. 329).

Furthermore, because school funding and accountability are currently driven by high-stakes standardized tests, students’ lives, interests, ideas, and other resources do not currently guide curricular and instructional decisions, and this has resulted in “the most reductive learning environment possible” (Gutiérrez et al., 2002a, p. 332). As I will illustrate in this study, this “reductive” approach results in the teaching of reading as a set of discrete decoding skills, with the hope that students will perform well on reading tests.

Standing in stark contrast to reductive approaches is culturally relevant curriculum, whose role in the academic success of diverse students has been well-documented in the educational research literature (e.g., García, 1999; Gay, 2000, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Willis & Lewis, 1998). However, given the current atmosphere of school reform, culturally relevant instruction is difficult to provide (e.g., Chamberlain, 2004; Gutiérrez et al., 2002a, 2002b; Lipman & Gutstein, 2001). Therefore, it is not surprising that “reductive” discourses about literacy are making their way into classrooms and directing teachers’ pedagogy in ways that strip reading down to a mechanical activity, while simultaneously obfuscating opportunities to draw on students’ resources, ideas, and interests in classroom instruction.

The power of these discourses became evident to me as I worked in the classrooms of novice ESL teachers Kevin Clark and Becky Jacobs (all names are pseudonyms). Here, I examine the

discourses about reading circulating in Becky's and Kevin's classrooms, as well as the embeddedness of their classroom discourses within a larger network of school and district discourses about reading and literacy. I explore how the interrelationship of these discourses discouraged the teachers from drawing on students' resources in their classrooms, even when students provided rich opportunities to do so through third space opportunities. It is my hope that an examination of how "reductive" discourses about reading and literacy are affecting classroom practices, and illustrations of opportunities to engage in alternative practices, will contribute to our understanding of how to transform literacy instruction in schools, particularly for the purpose of improving the academic opportunities of linguistically and culturally diverse students.

### SITUATING THE STUDY

This study is grounded in much of the literature on the education of English language learners (ELLs) and students of color, especially work in critical literacy and culturally responsive teaching, which has asserted that students' opportunities for academic success are improved when classroom and school practices are connected to students' linguistic and cultural resources (Comber, 2001; Lin, 2001; Reyes & Halcón, 2001) and are diminished when they are not (Cummins, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Zanger, 1994). This literature stands in sharp contrast to much of the work done in the field of reading research, and to the findings from this study, which emphasize the individual, cognitive dimensions of student learning (Johnson, 2005; Lloyd, 2004; Pardo, 2004; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Siegel & Fernandez, 2000). The classroom, school, and district discourses examined in this study together formed powerful systems of reasoning that made a view of reading as an individual skill set performed in a vacuum—rather than as a highly social and contextualized activity—salient and reasonable.

### METHOD

In Becky's and Kevin's classrooms, I conducted more than 60 observations, 6 formal teacher interviews, several informal interviews, and I collected numerous documents (i.e., texts, grading rubrics, tests, assignments, student work samples, classroom posters) for analysis over the course of one semester. In the two schools and one district in which Kevin and Becky were employed, I collected the following data: interviews with principals, district personnel, students, and veteran teachers; observations of faculty meetings, team meetings, and in-services; and numerous documents (i.e., documents about the district's framework for focusing on literacy; district and school documents containing guidelines for teaching ELLs, and activities for use with ELLs; in-service training documents). This study foregrounds the discourses that emerged in Kevin's and Becky's classrooms, and examines how the discourses from the teachers' school, district, and national contexts shaped their classroom discourses.

Field notes from observations, transcriptions of interviews, and documents were first analyzed for emergent themes using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As discourses about "literacy" and "reading strategies" emerged in the in-service data, critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Gee,

1999; Luke, 1995, 2002) was then used to examine these discourses in more depth, and to examine their relationships to the systems of reasoning present in powerful national discourses about reading and literacy. I engaged in ongoing member checking with Becky and Kevin, first by sharing my questions and ideas about emergent patterns in field notes and transcribed interviews, and later by emailing Kevin and Becky excerpts of data and my interpretations of the data, and asking for their reactions.

## FINDINGS

### *Reading as an Individual, Cognitive Act*

Becky articulated a discourse in which her students' racial/ethnic and cultural identities played an important role in their lives, and she felt that these identities had to be recognized and built upon if effective classroom instruction was to take place. As she stated to me about her teaching, she wanted to avoid "perpetuat[ing] the status quo of marginalizing and cultural insensitivity [that ELLs often experience]," and "be more sensitive and compatible to [her students'] cultures."

In contrast, although Kevin was very dedicated to helping his students and their families successfully negotiate new settings and systems in the U.S., he did not consider the inclusion of students' identities in classroom curriculum an important factor in their academic success. Instead, Kevin was incited by discourses about helping ELLs to assimilate, and stated that he felt it was important to "help transition [students] into American culture and transition them into school culture and learn English."

Given the difference in the discourses that underpinned the teachers' pedagogy, it was striking to find that both teachers' classroom practices were dominated by decontextualized, cognitively-focused discourses about reading, in which they portrayed reading only as a series of strategies for decoding texts, and not also as an opportunity to engage students' linguistic and cultural resources in meaningful ways. In this mechanistic discourse about reading—which I have called the *discourse of reading strategies instruction*—there was no mention of text as contested terrain, no discussion of the text shaping and being shaped by the particular social context in which it was being written or read, and limited exploration of the interaction between the readers' subjectivities and the text. Most importantly, the discourse of reading strategies instruction was unidirectional and compensatory. It did not recognize readers as bringing any contributions to the reading of text, but rather as needing only to have their skills remediated.

I next examine the discourse of reading strategies instruction circulating in both classrooms, and briefly illustrate moments when this discourse could have been disrupted and broadened by "third space" opportunities proffered by students. Gutiérrez and her colleagues (1995, 1999, 2000) define the third space as a place where the teacher's official script and the students' counterscript intersect and there is potential for authentic interaction (1995), "collective negotiation of meaning" (2000, p. 157), and change (1995). I argue that the third space is an important pedagogical tool to examine in the pursuit of the academic achievement of diverse students because it affords opportunities to engage students in curriculum and instruction that are responsive to their interests and backgrounds.

*"So That You'll Be Good Readers": Discourses About Reading in Kevin's and Becky's Classrooms*

In Kevin's classroom discourse, some of the reading strategies that were held up as important for turning students into "good readers" included students' ability to recognize five nonfiction text types, as well as scanning, and self-questioning while reading. By portraying these techniques as "reading," the discourses circulating in Kevin's classroom limited reading to a unidirectional process, in which the text transferred information to the reader when the reader used the appropriate strategies to decode it. There was no opportunity for the reader to "talk back" to the text by bringing her own resources and strategies to interrogate and examine it. This unidirectionality made it impossible to take up the rich third space opportunities proffered by students, which, if explored, would have provided opportunities to engage students more deeply, by making important connections to their interests, ideas, and resources.

As in Kevin's classroom, a common refrain in Becky's classroom was one that emphasized the importance of students becoming "good readers." Despite Becky's desire to use her instruction to "be more sensitive and compatible to [her students'] cultures," it was very difficult to shift classroom discourses to integrate students' lives, interests, experiences, and ideas into the classroom discourse in significant and meaningful ways. Instead, the discourse of reading strategies instruction that circulated in her classroom was so powerful that it prevented her from engaging students in reading as a critical, interpretive act, in which they needed to draw on resources from their backgrounds (and not just their repertoire of mental strategies). Becky spent the majority of the semester that I observed teaching a number of reading strategies, such as summarizing, scanning, and using context cues to determine word meaning.

The remediation-oriented tone of the discourse of reading strategies instruction was so strongly connected and supported within the network in which Becky's and Kevin's practices were embedded that it overpowered Becky's discourse of cultural relevance. For instance, Becky and her students spent more than half of a semester reading a juvenile fiction novel about the adventures of two Latino teenagers, which provided rich opportunities for making connections to many students' lives. When I asked Becky why she had chosen this particular book, her response emerged not from a discourse about improving students' individual decoding skills, but instead from her discourse of cultural relevance, in which she indicated an interest in connecting her curriculum with students' cultures, languages, and experiences:

I thought "Well, 90 percent of my kids are Latino, so why not pick a book that has some Spanish in it and talks about some of their culture?" ...When we read about tamales and we read about the food and stuff like that, they love it. They laugh at [the use of the colloquial Spanish word] "chamacos" [in the book].

However, aside from calling on students to *decode* Spanish phrases for the class, Becky did not overtly connect the material in this book to her ELLs' experiences and backgrounds.

Why, despite Becky's discourse of cultural relevance, did the amelioration of students' reading strategies persist as centrally important in Becky's practices? Through discussion with Becky, I realized that her focus on reading strategies came, at least in part, from a school-wide goal to focus on teaching eight strategies in every classroom (summarizing, schema, questioning, visualizing, inferring, prediction, monitoring for meaning, and synthesizing information).

Thus, school-level discourses about reading strategies exerted significant influence on Becky's classroom discourses. The power of this reading strategies discourse persuaded Becky that strategies instruction was what her students needed. Becky's culturally relevant discourse thus seemed to be co-opted by the remediation-oriented discourse of strategies instruction, which compelled her to focus on improving her students' cognitive skills, so that, as she explained to me, they could "successfully compete with the L1 (Language one, English) students in their mainstream classes." In this discourse, the cognitive skills of "mainstream" students were held up as the standard against which ELLs were compared, and ELLs were found lacking. Thus, the only way for ELLs to "compete" was to mimic the behaviors of those who fit the cognitive profile of "good readers." In this way, the knowledge, skills, and abilities that ELLs brought with them from their unique social contexts were rendered invisible and irrelevant in the face of all that they lacked, and Becky's culturally relevant discourse was unintelligible.

*Limitations of the Reading Strategies Discourse: Missed Third Space Opportunities*

For both teachers, the limited nature of the reading strategies discourse hampered them from engaging students in the third space. For instance, one morning Kevin and his students were practicing how to identify five different types of nonfiction text by reading about Christopher Columbus's discovery of America in their history textbook, and students identified the paragraph they were reading about Columbus as "descriptive" text. Kevin asked the students to identify what the descriptive text in the paragraph said about Columbus:

Kevin: What else does the paragraph describe [about Columbus]?

Student 1: He explored the Caribbean.

Kevin writes this down in a graphic organizer on the board.

Student 2: He's a racist.

Kevin: It doesn't say that [hurried, dismissive tone]. Who wants to read next?

Because the comment from Student 2 emerged from a discourse that was firmly rooted in interacting with and critiquing texts, rather than simply decoding them, it represented a counterscript that the narrow parameters of the reading strategies discourse circulating in Kevin's classroom prevented him from acknowledging as legitimate for classroom discussion. Kevin therefore did not take advantage of this third space opportunity, but instead moved immediately on to the next paragraph ("Who wants to read next?"). Had he asked this student what he meant by his comment, this interaction might have provided entrée into the third space, where Kevin and his students could have discussed how colonization is bound up in issues such as racism, power relations, social struggle, and language loss. Such discussion might have led students to make connections to their own experiences with racism, colonization of their home countries, their experiences with language loss, and so forth.

However, Kevin's teacher script was limited to discourses about identifying text types to more effectively decode text, and therefore, if the text did not say that Columbus was a racist (Kevin: "[The text] doesn't say that"), then this was not a valid point of discussion, and it was time to move on (Kevin: "Who wants to read next?").

*School and District Discourses About Literacy*

Remediation-oriented discourses about students and their reading capabilities emanated from multiple points in the discursive network in which Becky's and Kevin's practices were positioned, including school and district discourses about "literacy." Observations in faculty meetings and in-services, and interviews with principals and district personnel revealed that the school district in which both Kevin and Becky taught had just begun an explicit focus on what was being called literacy in their secondary schools the previous year. Furthermore, it quickly became evident that literacy was being defined in these settings as the cognitive maneuvers that underpin reading and writing skills, and that this narrow definition significantly influenced Becky's and Kevin's classroom discourses.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the power of remediation-oriented discourses about literacy for diverse students was so strong in the discursive networks in which the teachers were embedded that it compelled both of them to attend to students' deficiencies by focusing on their need to become "good readers." However, as long as we are only attending to the *lack of* literacy skills that certain populations are deemed as having, we will not be as effective in improving students' academic achievement as we would if we involved students' backgrounds, interests, ideas, and resources in their learning, to foster both their basic and critical literacy skills.

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