

**Employing culturally responsive pedagogy to foster  
literacy learning in schools**

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# **Employing culturally responsive pedagogy to foster literacy learning in schools**

## **Abstract**

In recent years it has become increasingly obvious that, to enable students in schools from an increasingly diverse range of cultural backgrounds to acquire literacy to a standard that will support them to achieve academically, it is important to adopt pedagogy that is responsive to, and respectful of, them as culturally situated. What largely has been omitted from the literature, however, is discussion of a relevant model of learning to underpin this approach. For this reason this paper adopts a socio-cultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978) through which to view such pedagogy and refers to a number of seminal texts to justify of its relevance. Use of this lens is seen as having a particular rationale. It forces a focus on the agency of the teacher as a mediator of learning who needs to acknowledge the learner's cultural situatedness (Kozulin, 2003) if school literacy learning for all students is to be as successful as it might be. It also focuses attention on the predominant value systems and social practices that characterize the school settings in which students' literacy learning is acquired. The paper discusses implications for policy and practice at whole-school, classroom and individual student levels of culturally-responsive pedagogy that is based on a socio-cultural model of learning. In doing so it draws on illustrations from the work of a number of researchers, including that of the author.

**Keywords**

culturally-responsive pedagogy, culturally situated, socio-cultural, diversity, learning, literacy

## Introduction

In recent years it has become increasingly obvious that, to enable students in schools from an increasingly diverse range of cultural backgrounds to acquire literacy to a standard that will support them to achieve academically, it is important to adopt pedagogy that is responsive to, and respectful of, them as culturally situated. In so doing, it is important to recognise the fundamental importance of acknowledging the legitimacy of a view of literacy as a social practice as well as an individual attribute. What largely has been omitted from the literature, however, is discussion of a relevant model of learning to underpin this approach. For this reason this paper adopts a socio-cultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978) through which to view such pedagogy and refers to a number of seminal texts to justify of its relevance.

The underpinning of culturally-responsive pedagogy by a socio-cultural perspective on the learning process has a particular rationale. It enables acknowledgement of the learner's cultural and social situatedness in literacy learning in school (Kozulin, 2003) whilst at the same time focusing attention on the predominant value systems and social practices that characterize the settings in which young people's literacy learning in schools is acquired. It also forces a focus on the agency of the teacher as a mediator of learning who needs to adopt a culturally responsive approach to young people's literacy learning by

- recognising, responding to, and affirming the frameworks for literacy learning brought into the school by students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Glynn *et al.*, 2006; Wearmouth, 2017), and
- having a high degree of relevant literacy specialist and pedagogical knowledge to support students' appropriation of skills and the construction of literacy-related knowledge,

if school learning for those students is to be as successful as it might be.

The paper begins by drawing on a number of seminal texts to outline the distinctive nature of a socio-cultural approach to understanding the learning process, and outlines reasons for asserting the need for culturally-responsive pedagogy in school literacy learning. It goes on to discuss what a culturally-responsive approach to literacy learning might 'look like' at whole-school and individual classroom level, and at the

level of the individual student. In doing so it draws on examples from the work of a number of researchers, including that of the author.

### **Distinctiveness of a socio-cultural approach**

There is a particular distinctiveness in Vygotsky's (1978) work that is pertinent to claims that pedagogies for school literacy learning should be responsive to a diverse range of students and the frames of reference that they bring from home to their school learning. This distinctiveness lies in his profoundly social explanation of human psychology that couples a focus on

- culture as a context in which learning takes place, with
- an assumption that the special mental quality of human beings is their need and ability to
  - mediate their actions through the psychological tools of language, signs, symbols, tools, and so on (Wertsch, 1985) or, as Cole (1996) terms them, 'artefacts', and
  - arrange for rediscovery and appropriation of these forms of mediation by subsequent generations.

The special quality of the human environment is that it is suffused with the achievements of prior generations in reified form – that is, language, signs, symbols, physical tools, and so on. A fundamental assumption of a socio-cultural understanding of learning, sometimes called 'cultural-historical psychology', is that there is an intimate connection between this environment and the distinguishing qualities of human psychological processes. As Rogoff (2003, p.3) comments: 'We are prepared by both our cultural and biological heritage to use language and other cultural tools and to learn from each other.' Dewey (1938/63, p. 39) concurred with this view: '[...] we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which is in large measure what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities'.

In the social environment in which young people are reared, there are 'differences and similarities in communities' practices and traditions', including different 'configurations of routine ways of doing things in any community's approach to living' (Rogoff, 2003, p.3). It is obvious, therefore, that when the home cultures of

students in any one school vary widely the tools and frames of reference they appropriate for literacy learning outside the school may well also vary to a significant degree.

### ***Learning process***

Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) proposed that there are two planes where the learning process takes place:

- the interpersonal, that is the ‘between the people’ plane, and the
- intrapersonal, within the individual, as s/he thinks about and reflects on new concepts and learning and appropriates psychological tools, skills and knowledge.

Appropriation (Leont’ev, 1981; Wertsch; 1991) is the process through which an individual ‘takes up and makes use of’ (Newman *et al.*, 1989, p. 15) literacy, language and other tools available in society. Outward ‘interpsychological’ relations become the inner, ‘intrapsychological’ functions, and through this process of appropriation, the learner develops ways of thinking that are the norm in specific cultural practices such as that associated with literacy. Symbolic systems, for example language and literacy that are legitimated within a child’s cultures, are remodelled into individual verbal thought. Hence the very well-known quote:

Each function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological).

((Vygotsky, 1978, p 57).

Both cognitive development, in particular language and literacy, and social development are thus seen as mutually facilitative and inseparable (Glynn *et al.*, 2006) and depend on the presence of mediators during interactions between the individual and the environment. The agents of mediation can be human or symbolic (Kozulin, 2003, pp. 18-19). In schools, teachers-as-mediators can prompt, guide, reward, punish, model, and so on the use symbolic cultural tools, as, for example, language and literacy. However, once a student has acquired a measure of competence in literacy, literacy skills themselves mediate cognitive development. If literacy is seen as both the product of ‘mediated’ activity and agent of mediating cognitive development, literacy achievement can be understood as participation in social

practice. In schools, students expand their understanding and use of different kinds of text and literacy tools. not only through observing mediators model written language structure and usage, but also by participating in learning conversations on the interpersonal plane.

### *Concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD)*

One of the concepts for which Vygotsky's (1978; 1981a, 1981b) work is well-known is that of the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) to explain the process of learning in a social context:

- Learning mainly occurs through interacting with others, especially a more able other.
- The ZPD comprises the next steps in learning and the range of knowledge and skills that learners are not ready to learn on their own but can learn in interaction with more informed and experienced others.

The role of the more-skilled adult or peer mediators working in this zone is thus to support students to participate in activities in which they are as yet unable to participate on their own. As Kozulin (2003, p. 19) comments, in terms of a human mediator an important question is 'What sort of involvement by a more informed/expert other can enhance a learner's performance?' In relation to literacy acquisition, a more informed/expert other may 'scaffold', that is provide structured support for, new literacy learning (Wood *et al.*, 1976) based on his/her knowledge of the learner, his/her current level of literacy achievement, the frame(s) of reference the learner is currently using with regard to literacy, including those brought into school from the learner's cultural and family context, and so on. The degree to which teachers-as-mediators of literacy are sensitive and responsive to students' existing culturally-based literacy-related frames of reference can be highly significant to literacy learning and cognitive achievement (Wearmouth, 2017).

### **The need for culturally-responsive pedagogy**

As Hall and Murphy (2008, p. ix), among others, comment, there are two common views on what constitutes pedagogy. The first relates simply to what pertains to teaching in schools, that is, techniques and strategies related to a particular domain of

knowledge which, in the current case, is literacy. The second is broader. It includes the narrow definition of the first, but also takes account of the social order: school policy and assumptions associated with it as well as the ‘experienced’ world, including beliefs underlying how policy is put into practice. It is this socially-situated understanding with which culturally-responsive pedagogy for literacy learning is associated.

From a socio-cultural perspective there are very important reasons why pedagogy in schools should be responsive to the cultural backgrounds of students:

- Children learn to speak, think, read and write within their own cultural contexts. Their frames of reference for doing these things come from these contexts. Teachers need to create a means to mediate students’ own cultural contexts and the school cultural context (Bishop *et al.*, 2014; Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011).
- Literacy learning and its context are not independent of each other. The acts of reading and writing have meaning within a context. Teachers need to create the safe spaces in which these acts can be understood (Sleeter, 2011; Wearmouth, 2017).
- It is important to facilitate students’ sense of personal agency in learning and achievement, as well as the opportunity for participation on the interpersonal plane (Rogoff, 2003) and interaction through talk (Littleton & Mercer, 2013), in literacy-related activities alongside more skilled mediators. This may well include siblings and/or parents and families.
- It is essential to acknowledge ‘[...] learning to think’ as a ‘function of appropriating speech-based concepts through cultural practice’ (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 14) in which students engage with different communities (Wenger, 1998, Wearmouth & Berryman, 2009) at home and school. ‘Mind’ cannot be seen as located entirely inside the head. Literacy learning therefore involves transactions within culturally structured social and natural environments of which students are a part (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011).

From a socio-cultural understanding of mind, and in order that all students from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds make progress in their literacy learning, it is essential that schools ‘teach to and through the strengths’ (Gay, 2010, p. 31) of their

students by '[...] using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them'.

Major pedagogical challenges can arise when the literacy activities and practices of the school differ substantially from those in students' homes and communities, and where teachers have little or no understanding or appreciation of those home and community literacy activities (Glynn *et al.*, 2006). The way in which a lack of understanding of students' backgrounds by teachers can feel threatening and can lead to feelings of discomfort, anxiety or exclusion is illustrated by an inmate of a UK prison who recalls in relation to his own school experiences, 'a cocktail of . . . um . . . conflicts there all the time' as he tried to cope with the expectations of a mainstream London school that conflicted with those of home. He said:

I was weak in certain subjects, like English mainly, because I tend to write the way I speak. I'm born here my parents are from the West Indies. I am in an English school I had to cope with the different . . . criteria because at home it was like a cross between Caribbean where we tend to speak more Patois or broken English. School was like trying to do it faithfully. . . . You get to learn . . . how important language is for you to fit . . . and then, like . . . I might get homework to do and I'll ask my dad and he will say no, it's done this way, which is, their schooling was from the old grammar, and it's always a conflict and I would always believe what my father had said because he was a father figure . . . Yes, and then it was completely wrong, and eventually you get frustrated, and I am not going to do this, and you just sort of throw it out.

(Wearmouth, 2017, p.120)

When this happens, the literacy knowledge and practices students bring with them to school are neither validated nor affirmed by the school's literacy practices. A further example that is branded into the memory of the author of this paper is her anger and sense of futility when her secondary students in West Cameroon, West Africa, when taking an English Literature examination paper set by an English university examination board, were faced with an 'unseen' poem that began:

For days these curious cardboard buds have lain  
In brightly coloured boxes. Soon the night  
Will come. We pray there'll be no sullen rain  
To make these magic orchids flame less bright.

(<https://fromtroublesofthisworld.wordpress.com/tag/for-days-these-curious->

The students were not even given the title of the poem (Scannell's 'Gunpowder Plot') as a cue into what the poem was about. Clearly the examiners in England had little understanding that the poem might be completely divorced from the prior frames of reference of students brought up in a Cameroonian context.

Pedagogy that is culturally-responsive and takes account of the social-situatedness of literacy learning in schools by definition avoids such disjunction. It includes, as Gay (2010, p. 31) comments 'seeing cultural differences as assets' and creating caring communities of learners where individual differences in culture and heritages are valued, using 'cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families and communities to guide curriculum development [...] and relationships with students', mediating imbalances of power in classrooms and 'accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups'.

The need to adopt a culturally responsive approach applies at whole school level in terms of decision-making, relationships and partnerships with families and so on, as much as it does at classroom level and at the level of interactions with individual students (Sleeter, 2011).

### **Cultural responsiveness at whole school level**

Education is the opening of identities, as a number of authors note, for example Bruner (1996), Wenger (1998) and Wearmouth & Berryman (2009). Literacy learning is also about participating, for example having the chance to behave as a reader and writer alongside other readers and writers (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011). It is important for those with management and policy-making decisions in a school to recognize that, where language, culture and experience are ignored or excluded, what students have learned about life is dismissed as irrelevant and, for those students, there are few points of connection to the curriculum (Gardner, 2014). For many students, identification with, or marginalisation from, what they perceive as the norms through which the literacy practices of a school are mediated, may well have long lasting and deep effects (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2005). Carrying the identity of marginalisation may mean that students do not acquire competence in the skills of literacy that are so

crucial in mediating their cognitive development and, thus, future life chances.

Learners' active roles are fundamental to appropriation. Central to a Vygotskian approach is understanding the kinds of culturally-defined futures that motivate students' activity and the kinds of tools, particularly literacy, that are developed to mediate individual progress toward those futures. Concepts of ideal personal and societal futures are promoted implicitly or explicitly through the ways in which school activity is structured (Smagorinsky, 2011). School cultures sanction particular tools and signs that mediate individual appropriation of cultural values based on the ways in which people invest signs with meaning (Cohen, 1989; Wertsch, 1985). What tends to be privileged is the traditional culture of school in which officially prescribed and sanctioned texts often constitute the literacy curriculum (Gardner, 2014). Analytical written text, for example, is prized very highly by schools. What may become problematic, therefore, is the way in which official school-sanctioned conventions, including, for example, speech genres and literary genres that are unfamiliar to certain groups of students, take precedence over what students might most usefully use to construct meaning in their schoolwork (Wearmouth, 2016). Hence school success is less likely for those whose home cultures provide them with a different set of mediational tools and different concepts of what constitute appropriate texts (Heath, 1983; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Applebee, 1993) unless teachers create the means to bridge between the home and school (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011).

As teachers learn what counts as literacy at home, it would be equally important for them to make explicit what counts as literacy in their own classrooms to themselves as well as to the children and to their families. Once that is clear, they can experiment with techniques and materials used at home in ways that complement their own approaches. [...] By interweaving different approaches, teachers will make it possible for children to draw on what they learn in both settings when interacting with print.

(Volk and de Costa, 2001, p.221)

### ***Salience of drawing on funds of knowledge from home communities***

A number of educators assert that teachers in schools should be aware, and take deliberate account, of the 'funds of knowledge' (Moll *et al.*, 1992; Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, 2005) in students' lives. Most children spend their first few years living at home with parents, siblings and other immediate and extended family members and

learn to use language to enhance social and cultural relationships with adults and peers. Before entering pre-school or school students are already participating in communities of practice, and may be proficient in the stories, songs, music and in engaging in conversations with both adults and peers about cultural events that take place in their homes and communities (Rogoff, 2003; Glynn *et al.*, 2006). In some communities, children may have acquired literacy in schools outside the regular state school system. Duranti *et al.* (2004), for example, draw attention to the function of religious schools in a Samoan context in promoting children's literacy acquisition in many countries:

For centuries, religion has promoted literacy. Jews, Muslims and Christians alike rely on written scriptures and instruct their congregations how to read passages within them. ... Far more than public schools, religious schools serve as the cornerstone of literacy across nations.

(Duranti *et al.*, 2004, p 159)

In the UK, many Bangladeshi British children in Gregory's (2004) Spitalfields study in East London were involved in out-of-school Qur'anic classes and/or Bengali classes of up to 30 children where the teaching was very formal and the children's role was to listen, repeat, practise and be tested.

In a *Best Evidence Synthesis* in a New Zealand context, Robinson *et al.* (2009, p. 45) comment on the potential power to influence students' learning of connections between schools families, whānau<sup>1</sup> and communities, particularly

where the gap between the educational culture of the school and the home is wide. Particular kinds of school–family connections can have large positive effects on the academic and social outcomes of students, especially those who have been under-served or who are at risk. For example, positive effects are associated with curriculum units that access relevant community and cultural expertise and resources.

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<sup>1</sup> In Māori society, 'whānau' are extended families or communities of related families.

They note (p.45), from the findings of a meta-analysis of research on the educational impact of making connections between schools, families/whānau, and communities, an effect size of 1.81<sup>2</sup> for interventions interwoven between families and schools.

Home/school literacy schemes are most successful when teachers are aware of the strengths of their communities and encourage a ‘syncretism of practices’ (Gregory, 1998). In and around children’s homes there are often a number of mediators, such as siblings, parents, carers, relatives and community members, who can support their children’s literacy development (Gregory, 2004; Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011). Some researchers have pointed to the special role which may be played by older siblings in families where parents do not speak the majority language to suggest that how children learn from older siblings at home may have implications for school learning. Play between young children and older siblings can initiate children into mainstream school literacy practices and the role of the teacher (Gregory, 2004; Williams, 2004). In the context of Gregory’s Spitalfields study (*op cit.*) children might read English school books informally with older siblings where the ‘tutor’ might synthesise Qur’anic and school literacy practices to scaffold literacy learning. Features of play-teaching were obvious, where younger siblings were taught to listen and repeat, as in Qur’anic and Bengali classes. Older siblings taught younger siblings the content of recent classroom literacy lessons delivered by their own teachers: demonstrating what the younger sibling should do, checking up on past learning and directly instructing the younger, whilst using the teaching style of their community language classes outside the mainstream school. Gregory comments that, where older siblings mediate the literacy learning of younger siblings through culturally-relevant teaching practices, ‘it is clear that teachers have found the “perfect partners” ’ (Gregory, 2004,

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<sup>2</sup> The effect size is particularly striking given that the authors of the *BES* note (p. 252) that > 0.6 indicates a large effect size.

p. 104). Gregory concludes that teachers have much to learn, for example, from some of these older siblings in building upon such finely-tuned scaffolding in reading lessons. Volk and de Costa (2001), among others, concur with this view and:

... point to the importance for teachers of looking beyond the replication of school experiences at home to the range of literacy interactions and people in children's lives and of recognising them as genuine resources for literacy learning. Interacting with network members, asking questions and listening to their perspectives on literacy, and observing them interact with children may provide teachers with a new appreciation of network members' skill as teachers. [...] teachers must find new ways to be a part of children's families and to bring parents and other significant teachers into schools along with literacy practices from homes and communities.

(Volk, & de Costa, 2001, p.221)

### **Cultural responsiveness in the classroom**

Literacy learning is mediated in a number of ways in classrooms. Smagorinsky (2011) has identified three of these: social, cultural and historical.

#### ***Social forms of mediating literacy learning***

Students acquire literacy, behave and construct their sense of themselves as literacy learners to a great extent within their classrooms. As Wearmouth & Berryman (2009, p. 33) note:

Participation in the practices of the classroom relates to active involvement in classroom activities and also to the sense of self both as able to make a legitimate contribution to those activities and as belonging to the classroom community.

As students participate, they 'develop or preserve a sense of' themselves that they 'can live with, have some fun, and fulfil the requirements of' (Wenger, 1998, p 6) the literacy learning goals of that class. Without such active participation and construction of the self as able to become literate, students are not included (Wearmouth & Berryman, 2009).

Social mediation of literacy learning occurs through interactions during particular classroom episodes, as well as the way a teacher conducts discussions among students. The view that the literacy learning process can be conceptualised on two planes, inter- and intrapsychological, implies that learners need

- 'dialogic space' to enable scaffolding and elaboration of literacy learning on the

intrapersonal plane (Berryman *et al.*, 2015; Wearmouth, 2016), that is metaphorical space where discussion can take place between

- literacy learners and the more informed other(s), and
- literacy learners with peers – ‘interthinking’ (Littleton & Mercer, 2013).

If we are to understand the complexity and the diversity of creativity, and especially if we want to maximise opportunities for it to be achieved, then we need to widen the focus from the individual as lone creator to recognize that creative development normally involves the collective intellectual efforts of a group of people. Creative thinking can of course be pursued *intramentally*, but it commonly only reaches fruition through *intermental* activity as people ‘interthink’ in pursuit of some common interests.

(Littleton & Mercer, 2013, p. 107)

- time for personal reflection on the intrapersonal plane for appropriation of literacy tools (such as systems of reading and writing) that they have begun to acquire intermentally (Newman *et al.*, 1989);
- respectful relationships among literacy learners and between literacy learners and adults to encourage feelings of safety in talking about their literacy work (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011).

An example of the creation of dialogic space can be seen in the practice of ‘dialogic teaching’ (Lyle, 2008) in classrooms where talk is understood as key to the development of literacy acquisition. In ‘dialogical meaning-making’ the learner is seen to play an active role in constructing personal understanding through the process of dialogic interchange (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984). This is exemplified in a case study of the classroom of a New Zealand primary teacher who had been identified by a national body of teachers as having excellent practice in supporting literacy acquisition in a culturally diverse classroom (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011). Findings from this class of 28 mixed gender, mixed ethnic (Māori, Pasifika and Pākehā) students reflected Alexander’s (2006) list of essential features of effective dialogic teaching, including:

- teachers and students addressing learning tasks together, listening to each other and considering alternative viewpoints. In explaining her approach to mediating the development of new writing skills, this teacher:

[...] deliberately encouraged students’ active engagement in discussing the

structure and content of writing from an understanding of its particular purpose and then modelled what had been collectively agreed. [She said]: ‘We agree success criteria together. If we’re looking at introductions, what is it that makes a good introduction? We decide to find that, we agree that that’s what we’re looking for today, and then we write it, I’ll model it’ (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011, p.92).

- students articulating ideas without fear of embarrassment about being wrong, and giving each other mutual support:

All students had writing ‘buddies’ with whom to discuss their work and elaborate their ideas and understandings as they went along. Ways to ‘buddy’ a partner to support improved writing outputs and standards were not left to chance, however. Cognizant of the importance of not publically singling out lower attainers for “special treatment”, the teacher had guided all students in the class to behave as writing ‘buddies’ for their peers. All knew what they were looking for and how to respond constructively and positively (*ibid.*, p.95);

- teachers and students building on their own and others’ ideas and linking them into coherent lines of thinking:

Everything is carefully considered so that students know what is expected of them through the sharing of examples of effective writing. [The teacher] noted: ‘I try to find either from the writing students have done themselves or from published material, quality examples of that style of writing and I share that with the students, and we unpack what makes it good’ (*ibid.*, p.94);

- teachers planning dialogic teaching with particular goals in view. It was clear from the teacher’s interview in the case study research:

[...] that everything in the learning environment had been deliberately planned to be constructive, positive and very supportive of all students’ identities as developing writers. She modelled scaffolding through the ZPD in the way in which she used her awareness of students’ current levels of attainment in writing and her own expert knowledge of literary genre to devise the scaffolds that would support and guide students to new writing achievement (*ibid.*, p. 98).

In this particular class, there was an overwhelming feeling of enjoyment and interest in writing, whether students had been identified as higher or lower attainers. All had a positive sense of themselves and could reflect on their own strengths. Findings reflected Lyle’s (2008, p. 230) comments that dialogic teaching ‘.. explores learner’s thought processes ... treats students’ contributions’, including answers to teachers’ questions, as an ‘ongoing cognitive quest ... [*that*] nurtures student’s engagement, confidence ... responsibility’. ‘Alice’, for example, reflected in interview:

[...] about the complexity of the writing process and herself as a writer in this.

She commented: ‘I think there’s a whole lot of things involved in writing. [...] There’s a whole lot of different places you can go in writing. [...] I don’t think you can be just simple and plain. I think I’m better at some types of writing than I am at others, probably I like writing about sort of quite short poems almost about my family especially my sister. I came up with quite a lot of funny pieces of work like that. Probably not so good at persuasive writing and argument writing’ (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011, p. 96).

It has to be said that this approach to classroom teaching also challenges the dominance of the teacher. In this particular classroom the teacher had opened up her own writing to critical scrutiny, and shown students how to evaluate this and how to give critical feedback in order to guide them into supportive practices as a writing buddy.

### ***Cultural forms of mediation***

Teachers have the responsibility to scaffold students’ literacy learning by ensuring access to cultural resources prized by society generally. However, they also have a responsibility to pay attention to the literacy-related resources that are of value to the students themselves and supportive of their self-respect (Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2011; Wearmouth, 2017). In a very well-known investigation into how young school children in urban American classrooms appropriated superhero figures from popular culture to take on powerful cultural storylines in ways that gave rise to both literacy and social learning, Dyson (1997) took the view that learning to write includes learning socially appropriate ways to participate in cultural groups. Children’s ways of writing were seen as

shaped, not only by their interaction in adult-guided worlds, but also by their social goals and ideological positioning in peer-governed ones. Moreover, social identification and social conflicts, not only social interactions, make salient new kinds of writing choices, newly imagined ways of depicting human relationships  
(Dyson, 1997, p. 6).

In her research Dyson showed how children, irrespective of socio-economic or ethnic background, could build from ‘the very social and symbolic stuff of their own childhoods’ (Dyson, 2003, p. 328) to enter school literacy practices. She described how, in one particular classroom, manipulating media materials shaped how ‘children made sense of and began to participate in school literacy’ (*ibid.*) when they used songs and reflections on characters from the film ‘Space Jam’ for:

drawing adventures, making lists of valued knowledge, announcing and reporting the results of sports events, composing and recalling songs, telling and retelling stories – these were just some of the literacy practices through which children recontextualised popular media texts.

(Dyson, 2003, p. 349)

### *Historical forms of mediation*

A classroom context has a cultural history through which are established particular specific literacy-related outcomes that direct much of the activities related to literacy learning within it. As Wertsch (1985, p. 212) comments: ‘The motive that is involved in a particular setting specifies what is to be maximized in that setting’. Classroom ‘motive’ has important implications for considerations of what comprises culturally-responsive pedagogy, for example:

- appropriateness of dominant classroom discourses associated with the content of texts, and
- the use of pedagogy that reflects the officially-sanctioned, or teacher-preferred, approach to understanding the process of literacy acquisition.

### *Discourses relating to curriculum content*

Classroom discourses are highly significant in student literacy learning when it comes to particular curriculum subject areas. History textbooks, for example, might be dominated by the interpretations of particular cultural groups that conflict with other cultural groups, members of which are in a classroom. Smagorinsky (2011, p. 25) notes how

U. S. history textbooks elide contradictions and uncomfortable facts in producing a grand narrative of the U. S. as a leading moral force in the development of society (Loewen, 1995). Similarly, Russian textbooks were rewritten following the fall of the Soviet Union to produce versions of historical events that met new political exigencies for the restored Russian state, with official accounts of the Russian Civil War and World War II revised to reflect new narrative needs (Wertsch, 1999).

### *Influence of understandings of literacy acquisition*

Teachers’ understandings of the process of literacy learning are particularly important in decisions about pedagogy. Reading, for example, is fundamentally about the construction of meaning. However, there are a number of different views about

processes involved in the act of reading. Traditionally two have dominated: so-called 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches.

- From a 'bottom-up' view, reading comprises decoding the abstract alphabetic code, and, from this, reconstructing the author's meaning. First children must establish the principle of sound-symbol identification. Then they must learn to apply this in order to decode words. The implication of this view is to highlight the significance of: phonics, exercises with frequent blends and digraphs, attention to every letter of the word, in left-to-right order (Adams, 1994), and so on.
- The second approach views reading as the active *construction* of meaning, not simply the decoding of visual symbols into sounds. The reader is assumed to have expectations of what a text might be about, and then to test these expectations and confirm or reject them as s/he proceeds, the so-called 'psycholinguistic guessing game' (Goodman, 1996). This approach is linked with the concept of learning to read through reading, using whole texts.
- A third approach, the 'interactive' model, suggests that readers use information simultaneously from different sources. During the development of reading skills, some readers may rely more heavily on visual and auditory cues, others on meaning and context. Stanovich (2000) calls this process the 'Interactive Compensatory' model.

Some students who experience difficulties in literacy acquisition may be identified as having severe deficits in the mechanics of the reading process and, having been positioned in this way, may then be immersed in remedial programmes constructed from a bottom-up perspective only (Wearmouth, 2004). This may well prove problematic if the tasks and activities generated within these remedial programmes become so focussed on mechanics and so fragmented and decontextualised that the social and meaning-making qualities of literacy activities are degraded or destroyed (Glynn *et al.*, 2006). The result may be exclusion from participating in literacy practices with other students in the classroom. From a culturally-responsive view, it makes more sense to focus clearly on the significance of content and meaning to stimulate and maintain children's interests in reading and acknowledge the importance of phonological knowledge in literacy learning but to teach this within the context of whole texts (Wearmouth, 2016).

Clearly the choice of books for beginning reading is crucial, as Gregory (1996, p 142) comments in relation to the literacy learning of bilingual children. It may well be appropriate for teachers to use texts to bathe children ‘in a magic where story and text intertwine and understanding comes somewhere in-between’. Her point (p. 122) that this choice should include ‘memorable stories and texts from all times and places’, perhaps containing ‘universal truths, values and morals, fear and ‘security which experiments’ pertains to students of all levels, ages and cultural backgrounds. The author of the current text remembers supporting an 11 year old non-reader in a secondary school to learn to read through preparing for him recordings of ‘A Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’. All his friends had read it and he wanted to be able to join in their discussions. Using this approach through a number of texts he progressed from non-reader to reader, able in six months to read the (English) ‘Daily Mirror’ newspaper independently at home (Wearmouth, 2016).

Schools may collaborate with families and communities in creating new spaces in which students’ home and community literacy activities, as well as school literacy activities, can be acknowledged and respected. One strategic approach to achieving this is for teachers to share with family and community members some of the ‘school ways’ of engaging with classroom texts, such as collaborative negotiation and co-construction of meaning. Ford (2015) describes a project with families and a local Māori community, ‘responsive writing’, that interweaves school and home literacies, to support writing skills, with parents and family as respondents. In a session with families and the community she explained to them ‘that they did not need to concern themselves with correcting and evaluating the writing, but rather focus on providing a response to the messages contained within the student’s writing’ (p. 192). She assumed that:

By modelling correct spelling, punctuation and structure in their own response they would be supporting the students with their written language development, and most importantly they would also be demonstrating to the students that their writing communicated messages that were understood and valued by another person.

*(ibid.)*

In the students’ own session, they were ‘[...] required to write something of their choice. They had five minutes to plan their writing, 10 [*sic*] minutes to write, and five

minutes to proofread and edit their writing. [...] The writing exchanges happened each week for a period of one school term (10 weeks)' (*ibid.*). Analysis of study writing samples subsequently indicated large gains in the length of students' writing, writing accuracy and the use of more challenging vocabulary. Following the success of the study it was decided that this was the opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the school and the local community and families and that the school would maintain and broaden the initiative.

### **Cultural responsiveness at individual student level**

One value of the ZPD construct lies in the idea of assisted performance. In the context of literacy learning there are many examples of well-known 'tried and tested' collaborative literacy learning interventions for use in classrooms, among other locations, where literacy learners can be assisted to appropriate literacy knowledge on the 'intramental' plane. These include Glynn's (1995) 'Pause Prompt Praise' technique, Montgomery and Kahn's, (2003) 'Scaffolded story-writing', Palincsar and Brown's (1984) seminal work on reciprocal approaches to developing comprehension on which many others have built, and Topping's (2001) and Topping *et al*'s (2015) work on paired reading and writing approaches. If the chosen intervention focuses on the mechanics of the process only, it is possible to miss the opportunity to be responsive to the cultural individuality of the learner, however. To be successful in terms of cultural responsiveness:

- the more informed other must set out to understand the frames of reference learned and developed by a learner within the social context of which s/he is a part, and used by him/her to construct his/her new learning;
- interaction must be collaborative between the student and the more knowledgeable other to understand how students are thinking and constructing their worlds;
- the scaffolder must access the learner's current level of understanding and then work at slightly beyond that level, drawing the learner into new areas of learning;
- relationships among learners and between learners and more informed others should be very positive to encourage learners' feeling of safety in talking about themselves and asking and answering questions.

It is noteworthy in the case study in the New Zealand classroom that the support

given to individuals by both the teacher and ‘buddies’ who had been taught how to give constructive feedback on peers’ writing was unvaryingly reported by the students as positive and helpful to them as writers. ‘Formative feedback from both the teachers and peers constantly gave them the message that they already were writers and could improve and grow.’ For example, a typical student comment at interview was: ‘I really like [...] constructive criticism from other people [...] it makes me just want to get heaps better and makes me want to work harder to get to a point where my writing’s good’ (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2011, p. 97).

## **Conclusion**

Education is fundamentally important in opening students’ learning identities (Bruner, 1996). The more we learn the more we want to learn (Cummins, 2009), and, therefore, the experience of participation in the social practices in literacy learning in schools is potentially crucial to expectations and future life experiences in society as a whole. Students need to see themselves as able to contribute to, and engage in, literacy practices in schools in order to learn. The social contexts of schools provide the means of mediation through which their students appropriate ways of thinking and acting in the world. School literacy learning is a ‘socially situated, culturally- and historically-grounded form of mediated action that shapes human development’ (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 14). School-based pedagogy, related particularly to reading and writing, should therefore not merely focus on content and skills-training without any consideration of them as psychological tools capable of organizing the cognitive and learning functions of individuals in different contexts and in relation to different tasks. Otherwise literacy skills remain mechanical and do not influence the overall cognitive abilities of students (Kozulin & Lurie, 1994). In terms of symbolic mediation, the mere availability of spoken and written word does not mean that they will be used as psychological tools. For example, the various forms of writing constitute the most significant type of symbolic mediators (Kozulin, 2003). However, it is the type of literacy, the context in which it is acquired and the kind of tasks that are mediated through literacy that should all be taken into account when considering what kind of influence literacy as a psychological tool has in the mediation of cognitive functions (Gardner, 2014; Scribner and Cole, 1981).

Educators attempting to include all students in literacy learning activities might well

ask themselves to what extent the pedagogy within schools is responsive to its students as products of their cultural context and enables all students to have the opportunity to, as Wearmouth & Berryman (2009, p. 200) comment:

have access to materials and experiences with which to build an image of the world and themselves, where they can locate themselves in the world, distance themselves and interpret their lives in multiple ways, to see themselves anew, look for different experiences and try out different selves with the possibility of different future trajectories. For many students school creates a conflict between their social and personal lives outside and their intellectual engagement inside. Schools therefore need to engage students' identities on a trajectory that is meaningful to them.

It is obvious that the most important literacy-related interactions take place between teachers, as experts in the practices of the learning communities, and students. For students, whatever pedagogies are employed in classrooms and elsewhere, they should contribute to young people's identities as able to contribute to the literacy practices of the school in a way that is viewed as legitimate and leaves them with a sense of belonging (Glynn *et al.*, 2006).

Literacy learning and behaviour are integrally connected, situated in a social context and holistic in combining doing, feeling, talking and belonging. 'Relations of participation' (Wenger, 1998, p. 56), and, therefore, relations of non-participation and marginalisation, help to construct personal identity. There is a paradox of learning where individuals need an identity as a participant in a community in order to learn, yet need to learn in order to acquire an identity as a participant. To have an effect in and on the world means, increasingly, being able to find ways of being that can reconcile multiple, often conflicting, perspectives. Wenger reconciles this paradox of learning through the notion of reciprocal teaching and mutuality:

In the life-giving power of mutuality lies the miracle of parenthood, the essence of apprenticeship, the secret to the generational encounter, the key to the creation of connections across boundaries of practice: a frail bridge across the abyss ... it is almost a theorem of love that we can open our practices and communities to others ... invite them into our identities of participation, let them be what they are not, and thus start what cannot be started.

(Wenger, 1998, p 277)

Inclusion in schools influences the way students behave in literacy-related activities, the interpretations they put on their own actions and the kind of literacy learners they

are (Bruner, 1996). Without active participation and construction of positive identity as participants in the literacy practices of schools, students cannot be included effectively (Wearmouth, 2016). They will fail to acquire competence and confidence in literacy and are likely to be marginalised in schools and in relation to future life chances.

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