Why Qualitative Research Continues to Thrive: Jason and the Politics of Representation
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Why qualitative research continues to thrive: Jason and the politics of representation

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> Reading is looking for the little words in the big words, and knowing enough words. Hey, you know I'm the third worst reader in my class. I know, because the other kids read books with more pages in them than I do.
>
> Jason, age 8 (Hinchman & Michel, 1999, p. 578)

This trusting third grader helped to confirm my belief that children's insights provide an important window through which to view their literacy, as Johns (1972) and others (Michel, 1994; Taylor, 1994) have long suggested. The purpose of this piece is to argue that the situated perspectives of literacy program constituents, including students like Jason, their teachers, and other members of their community, should be central to district, state, and federal program policy. This view suggests an important direction for qualitative research, one that considers policy implications for the social constructions represented in individuals' perspectives. Such representations can help to reshape current policy to address a more diverse range of individuals and literacies.

Status of qualitative research: Theorizing from qualitative representations

As my colleagues Dillon, Tobin, and Steinkuehler, Black, and Clinton acknowledge in their accompanying commentaries, we are in the midst of a pendulum swing that has made it more difficult to find public or private funding for qualitative research in the United States (American Educational Research Council, 2003), even at a time when the concept of literacies is exploding in multiple directions (New London Group, 1996). Although such a swing will be best understood through historical analyses (Woodside-Jiron, 2003), it is important to note that many literacy researchers continue to choose a qualitative stance. For example, slightly less than half the studies in volumes 37 (2002) and 38 (2003) of *Reading Research Quarterly*, across two editorial teams, used qualitative methods, either by themselves or in combination with other methods (e.g., Volume 37 included 8 qualitative or mixed method and 7 quantitative studies, and Volume 38 included 6 qualitative or mixed methods and 7 quantitative studies).

Our continued reference to qualitative perspectives may be due, in part, to pragmatics. With enough stamina and permission from subjects, one can orchestrate publishable qualitative research without extensive outside support. One needs time and energy to read widely, discern compelling questions, develop worthwhile theoretical groundings, gather and transcribe interviews or observational field notes, analyze data in ways that are thorough and consistent with theoretical groundings, and write. One must "only" make sure that one's questions are compelling enough, that one's data are rich enough, and that one's analytic techniques are trustworthy enough to garner novel and informative insights (Lincoln, 1998).

Policymakers might critique such qualitative representations, including my representation of Jason's insights, as too subjective interpretation of an idiosyncratic confluence of experiences, instruction, genetics, and other factors. Jason's words themselves can be interpreted as naïve. But does he understand how he feels about a particular program's instructional initiations, or what one might do to help him? He does, but not necessarily in words that carry the same meaning for adults. When I corroborate his words with data from other children and with other research reports, and when I acknowledge the theories and biases that frame my analysis, the representation becomes more understandable. It begins to make a contribution toward our developing theories regarding the perspectives of children who are identified as struggling readers (e.g., Ivey, 1999; Johnston, 1985; Kos, 1991). As Labov suggested, "The central prerequisite for advancing the teaching of reading is to grasp the process of learning to read through the nonreader's eyes and ears—we must understand what it is like not to be able to read" (2003, p. 129).

There is nothing new in the revelation that children like Jason can share understandings that, captured qualitatively, help teachers to explain other data, including such quantitative representations as scores produced during high-stakes literacy assessments or counts of oral reading miscues. Qualitative research can help us understand the variations in what it feels like to not read "well enough" for a setting, to participate in an intervention, or to provide that intervention to a group of students. Considered systematically over time, qualitative data can provide insights on why Jason responded in certain ways to instruction, giving an astute teacher clues regarding what and how to teach him. Such data can provide grounding for large-scale experimental studies, as we might do if we were to test a word identification treatment meant to modify ineffective reading strategies described by children like Jason.

Such data can also inform policy. Pressure is great to adhere to federal and state program regulations set by No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Because these regulations are derived from specific studies addressing areas such as phonological awareness, phonics, and comprehension instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), inferences must be drawn to set policy to drive instructional

programs. Jason's insights echo the literacy programs and other sources of information in his life. These sources have left him with a limited strategy for word identification and the stigma of not measuring up to classmates—both at an age when interventions are not usually very helpful (Allington, 1994). Our federal, state, and local policy should be able to account for and address insights like Jason's—even if he is the only child who thinks this way.

Representations of individuals' perspectives can help us account for variations in interpretations that occur when policy is implemented. The need for such representations is ongoing as times, instructional trends, and contexts evolve. Imagine this: One approach to phonics instruction caused Jason to talk about looking for little words in big words, and another, more evolved approach might cause him to describe a more efficient strategy, such as decoding by analogy (Gaskins, Gaskins, & Anderson, 1995).

Borrowing from other fields: Theorizing meaning

What are the considerations in conducting qualitative research that will be useful to policy? In addition to orchestrating methodology with attention to trustworthiness, Schwandt (2000) argued that qualitative researchers must grapple with their beliefs about how individuals construct meaning, as well as with how this meaning is represented in researchers' reports. For instance, I was trained as a qualitative researcher within a phenomenological tradition, symbolic interactionism, that Schwandt would describe as interpretivist. Interpretivist perspectives suggest that "to understand a particular social action (e.g., friendship, voting, marrying, teaching), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action" (Schwandt, p. 191). During my training, I learned to engage in participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis to discern such meanings, generated from the premise that

> Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them,...the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows,...[and] these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (Blumer, 1969, p. 2)

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), these words position Blumer's interactionism as compatible with phenomenological approaches that assume that "human experience is mediated by interpretation" (p. 25), and that reality is "socially constructed" (p. 24). Deriving their work from such Chicago School sociologists as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Robert Park, and Erving Goffman, sociologists in this group use case studies to explore symbols and personalities emerging from social interactions as participants in settings see them. This has made the perspective attractive to some literacy researchers, notably those who share my interest in teachers' and adolescents' views toward literacy and instruction (Dillon, 1989; Moje, 1996).

However, symbolic interactionism's assumptions can be viewed as problematic. One criticism is that it is not, in a literal sense, possible for researchers to understand and represent a phenomenon as others see it. To compensate, researchers must spend enough time in the worlds of those we are trying to interpret to be able to theorize those worlds believably. Indeed, Denzin (1992) critiqued the tradition as representing an uneasy blend of behaviorist and less visible, more socially derived concerns. He suggested that the perspective fails to resolve competing arguments for "the interpretive, subjective study of human experience" and the historical desire to "build an objective science of human conduct, a science which could conform to criteria borrowed from the natural sciences" (p. 2), leaving the researcher rooted in this perspective in an unclear position as interpreter. Denzin argued for an alternative view that is more cognizant of social construction, pairing interactionism with contemporary cultural studies. He suggested that such a perspective provides a clearer path toward representation because it "[d]irects itself always to the problem of how the history that human beings make and live spontaneously is determined by structures of meaning that they have not chosen for themselves" (p. 74).

Denzin (1992) explained that cultural studies borrows from feminist and poststructural perspectives to locate meaning in the link between the personal and the political, in an effort to "make a difference in the lives that people live" (p. 167). Schwandt (2000) added that, as a result, knowledge in cultural studies is not understood to be disinterested or apolitical, but rather riddled with ideology and politics. Such a perspective directs researchers to acknowledge power relations in their interpretations of the realities of their participants as well as in the representations connoted by their conduct of the research. We recognize the power in our position of being able to offer interpretations of others' views and actions. We know that the theories that we

develop to explain others' experiences are colored by our own histories, values, and structures of meaning, only some of which are within our awareness.

Cultural studies includes varied theories of the social construction of meaning to frame researchers' interpretations of power relations. For example, Marxist epistemologies allow us to explore sources of oppression by locating individuals' meaning construction within the hegemonies of social hierarchies (Freire, 1970; Shannon, 1995). Critical race theory invites us to begin inquiry with the assumption that, because we live in a racist society, education and other social systems have evolved in ways that privilege some children over others (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Feminist postmodern theories invite us to a Foucauldian view of multiple subjectivities through study of how an individual's discourses shape and are shaped by others (Davies, 1993).

Sociolinguistic studies of discourse also add to our ability to theorize the social construction of literacy. Boden (1990) argued that "where thought becomes action through talk we may find a crossroads" (p. 265) when traditions of symbolic interactionism and conversational analysis intersect. For example, discourse analysis shows us the workings of the initiation–response–evaluation cycle of secondary school classroom discussions—the context by which we can explain much of adolescents' and teachers' enactments of academic literacy (Cazden, 2001; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). More recently, the critical discourse analysis of media studies has helped us to consider connections among the features of text, institutions, and society (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1999). Critical discourse analyses have also helped us to explore how discourses of femininity (Finders, 1997) and masculinity (Young, 2000) are woven through adolescents' literacy and identity construction. We understand how students' discourses position them in classroom discussions (Gee & Crawford, 1998).

Noticing connections among the texts that individuals produce and the social constructions of institutions and society allows us to theorize that individuals develop multiple literacies for use in varied social contexts in and out of school (Hull & Schultz, 2002; New London Group, 1996). This theorizing invites us to understand how social structures related to literacy inform the identity construction of adolescents like Grady (Alvermann, 2001) and Khek (Moje, 2000), young people who struggle with academic literacy but who exhibit multiple strengths with more marginalized literacy practices. This perspective shows us alternative paths to designing instruction that draws more effectively on youth's existing funds of knowledge (Moje, Ciechanowski, & Kramer, 2004).

A cultural studies analysis of Jason's insights might lead us to consider how his background in rural farming poverty is woven into his sense of self. Such an analysis might consider that males in his family have long found work on the family farm without diplomas, and that his family has other hopes for Jason. Jason's funds of knowledge include extensive farm work, both before and after school. Knowing more about the social structures from which Jason and other students develop funds of knowledge can be accounted for in education policy. His school district can acknowledge and build from his expertise as they purchase texts and design programs. Without diminishing expectations for his eventual performance, policy at the state and federal levels can allow for such situated decision making.

Methodological issues in my current work: Theorizing intervention

As I noted in the preceding section, my earliest work referenced a symbolic interactionist perspective, exploring secondary subject area teachers' perspectives toward reading (Hinchman, 1987). Wanting to understand teachers' use of content area literacy recommendations, I orchestrated a classroom study in collaboration with a social studies teacher, and we developed interpretations of students' perspectives toward events in her classroom together (Hinchman & Zalewski, 1996). Finding myself increasingly influenced by the explanatory power of theories of social construction to be found in cultural studies and sociolinguistics, I moved to attending to a more explicitly critical perspective, examining power relations in classroom talk about text (Hinchman & Young, 2001).

Most recently, I have been collaborating with teachers and administrators in an urban middle school that is at risk of closing due to the school's inability to meet current requirements for annual yearly progress in English language arts and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Our first goal is, of course, to improve test scores; we like to tell ourselves that we are also working to improve literacy in broader, more generative ways that will augment students' life opportunities. In addition to basing our decisions on test scores and item analysis, our collaboration considers qualitative data, such as

error patterns in writing and oral reading samples. Almost all the youth in this school know letter sounds and can read single- and many multisyllable words. Even so, many read in halting, word-by-word fashion, struggling with reading technical and less regular words like *colonel* or *sergeant*. Other students sound fluent and understand main ideas but cannot write cohesive, extended written pieces to fulfill subject area or testing requirements.

The school constructed policy that all teachers were to address literacy across the curriculum, requiring daily reading and writing in each class, cooperative groups, and strategic comprehension and composition instruction, agreeing in principle to attending to sociocultural issues that research suggests are important to adolescent literacy development (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca, 2003). To implement this policy, reading teachers teamed with subject area teachers to model strategies and help with planning. The school provided coaching in the use of culturally responsive participatory instructional structures (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and planned schoolwide reading events to foster a more literate school culture (Fullan, 2001). Because initial progress was not dramatic, reading teachers recently began working directly with small groups of students in collaboration with English language arts teachers, engaging in responsive reading, writing, and discussion of strategies (Pressley, 2002).

Even so, we continue to see youth choosing to engage only sometimes and for some teachers. Our slow progress has suggested that we might benefit from better understanding of our students' existing literacies and identity construction (Alvermann, 2001), exploring mismatches between youths' funds of knowledge and academic requirements (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997; Moje et al., 2004). We have decided that constructing qualitative case studies will help us take a larger step toward instruction to which participants are more likely to bring "multiple resources or funds to make sense of the world and...to make sense of oral and written texts" (Moje et al., p. 42). Learning more about students' situated perspectives and theorizing underlying social structures may yield revision of school policy for more inviting and beneficial instructional space.

Conclusion

I echo my colleagues' calls for varied research methodologies to address questions whose answers will best inform the policy we need for effective literacy instruction. Dillon, Tobin, and Steinkuehler, Black, and Clinton offer several alternative theoretical groundings for such work in their commentaries, but one implication across these groundings is consistent: Exploring the social structures of individuals' literacy-related perspectives can inform policy in important ways. At the same time, I know that the multiple and competing theories used to explain social structures can be frustrating to policymakers who want to know which to believe and enact. I would like to argue that such epistemological pluralism is a good thing: Each adds a new way of seeing and each has limitations. Acknowledging such strengths and limitations to our understandings, and then looking at commonalities across findings, should be central to the ongoing process of constructing an education policy that allows for attention to situated representations—like those we might develop about Jason.

Social structures that can seem impermeable to individuals can, over time, be restructured through changes in policy that result from what we learn from individuals' perspectives. At the same time, the mistakes of white liberalism teach us that the paths to such restructuring will not be easy to discern and are likely to result in unanticipated consequences that will disadvantage individuals in new ways (Lalik & Hinchman, 2001). For instance, Jason's instruction might be changed following analysis of his perspective, but this change could result in even less productive insights. This reminds us to bypass current either/or policy debates by creating policy that examines individuals' responses to such changes in ongoing ways. Such a new direction for policy promises to promote more engaging, situated interventions.

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