**Recognising difference: One of the challenges of using
a multiliteracies approach?**
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It's not unusual for a multiliteracies approach to literacy teaching to be equated with the literacies associated with computers and other information communication technologies. Although literacy educators need to take account of these emerging technoliteracies, a multiliteracies approach should encompass much more than that. What can sometimes be forgotten are the diverse social, cultural and literate practices of homes and communities – the literacy backgrounds that seem to often play a determining role in whether children are successful or not in school settings.

As The New London Group (2000) pointed out in their initial work on a multiliteracies pedagogy,

> To be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning. Curriculum now needs to mesh with different subjectivities, and with their attendant languages, discourses, and registers, and use these as a resource for learning. (p.18)

In practical terms, this means that the cultural and linguistic diversity of our students should be considered at, and integrated into, every stage of our teaching – from the first spark of an idea for a unit and our consequent thinking and planning, through to the sequence of learning-teaching activities and the implementation of that plan in the classroom. Students' strengths, what they *can do*, are the starting points for successful literacy learning. And in a world where we so often focus on deficits, a focus on strengths is not always that easy.

Whilst the idea of working from students' strengths sounds fine in theory, it relies on teachers being able to "see" such strengths. Teachers need to be able to identify difference and to think positively about it – and it's not very encouraging that research (e.g. Department of Education, Queensland, 2001) has suggested that teachers, at least in Queensland, are not particularly good at accommodating difference.

In conducting research with families, I've been struck by the differences that exist amongst them, even when they appeared at the outset to be a fairly homogeneous group. As a result, I am now intrigued when I hear teachers say, "In my school, diversity isn't an issue," or "Yes, we have diversity, but it's not something that affects literacy learning." In trying to reconcile these comments with my own understandings of the extent to which families are diverse – and the effects of that diversity on how we approach the teaching of literacies – I've become interested in the way that difference can be invisible. In this paper, then, I want to consider:

- Why is it that difference is not always visible to teachers?
- If recognising difference is one of the challenges of a multiliteracies approach, how can we work to address that challenge?

Why is difference sometimes invisible?

A lens analogy seems to be useful for thinking about this question. Photographers use lenses for framing subjects in different ways and teachers more or less do the same thing. Our "view" of children depends on the lens that we choose and our choice of lens helps to determine the picture that we see. For example, if we make judgements about children's ability to follow a teacher's instructions, then we might read children's demonstrations of independence as naughty behaviour. However, if we use a lens that highlights independence, then the "naughty children" may very well be the competent ones. This was evident in Malin's (1990) study of Aboriginal children in an urban classroom, where

> three Aboriginal students were visible to their teacher and peers almost exclusively when being spotlighted for "doing the wrong thing". In addition, they were largely invisible to the class when demonstrating the considerable competence which they had developed in their previous four years at home.
>
> (Malin, 1990, p.312)

My current research has offered some further insights. In the case of data I collected about the three children – Leilani, Sepi and Sina – of a Tongan family, teachers considered the children's academic progress as "okay under the circumstances." At approximately six monthly intervals, the children moved between North Queensland and Victoria with their parents who were itinerant farm workers. As a result, the children changed residences, schools, states and education systems on a regular basis. When teachers talked about the children, they focused on the family's itinerant lifestyle, thus applying a lens that foregrounded the children's movement from place to place and the associated changes to the children's education. Residential stability – or living in the one place – was seen as the "normal" way of life, while an itinerant lifestyle was understood as being out of the ordinary.

In literacy learning, the three children, particularly the two brothers (Sepi and Sina), were seen to be experiencing a range of difficulties. In interviews, teachers commented that:

> About Sepi:
> - Written comprehension . . . a little bit more difficult than just oral reading a story.
> - He's not obtaining meaning.
> - I know the structure problems he was having.
> - Composing, gets sentences down . . . they're not grammatically correct.
>
> About Sina:
> - His reading is hesitant.
> - His writing is a little bit disjointed.
> - He'll confuse words like 'they' and 'there'.
> - Spelling is a weaker area definitely. In spelling he's borderline.
> - His writing is also a bit hesitant at times and that also means that when he's editing he doesn't recognise if it's wrong.

The teachers explained the children's underachievement in literacy learning as a predictable result of the family's way of life. They recognised the children as "regulars" who returned to the school year after year and, as one teacher said, "Like

they were here last year, then they left late in the year and they didn't come back until this year, so the continuity was broken in the school structure and system." In this way, teachers used an "itinerancy" lens to frame the children's school experiences. The difficulties the children experienced in literacy were attributed to the family's itinerancy, time missed at school, and problems caused by changing schools and school systems.

An important question, then, is to ask whether another lens – or another way of viewing, thinking and talking about Sepi and Sina's reading and writing – would have made a difference?

When I thought about the teachers' comments about Sepi and Sina's reading and writing, I was reminded of the characteristics described by Gibbons (1991) as associated with the English of bilingual children. The characteristics listed by Gibbons were:

> Characteristics associated with the English of bilingual children – reading:
> - reads slowly
> - has poor comprehension if the topic is unfamiliar
> - has trouble paraphrasing and isolating the main idea
> - has difficulty reading for meaning, drawing conclusions and, in a narrative, predicting what will happen next
> - rarely self-corrects when reading aloud
>
> Characteristics associated with the English of bilingual children – writing:
> - has generally poor written language skills, especially in subject areas
> - can write sentences but has difficulty writing a paragraph or sequencing paragraphs
> - writes only in an informal, "chatty" style
> - uses a limited vocabulary which lacks descriptive words
> - uses simple sentence structures only
> - makes grammatical errors not typical of a native speaker – for example, in word order, word endings, tense or prepositions
> - spelling is poor.
> - lacks the confidence to write at length
> - tends always to write the same thing (such as a simple recount) in free choice writing
>
> (Gibbons, 1991, p.5)

Yet, in the interviews where the teachers talked about the boy's literacy learning, they did not make any links to their bilingual backgrounds. In applying a different lens – a lens that framed the children in terms of bilingualism and second language learning – I was seeing a different picture. So why didn't the boys' teachers link the difficulties in reading and writing with the characteristics of second language learners?

There were several reasons. Firstly, the children always spoke in English at school and many teachers were unaware that the children were bilingual and spoke in both English and Tongan at home. In interviewing the family, I had spent a considerable

amount of time in their home and I was privy to information that was not readily available to teachers.

Secondly, the children were popular with their peers and demonstrated that they were communicatively competent in both playground and classroom conversations. In other words, there was no visible evidence in the school setting that a second language learning or bilingualism lens would be appropriate.

Thirdly, children sometimes hide, at times deliberately and at other times unwittingly, information that would be useful to teachers. The Tongan children, for example, demonstrated effective strategies for coping with their arrival in new classes in a new school. They were skilled at checking with students sitting nearby to make sure that they had taken out the correct notebook from under their desks or that they were doing the correct activity. At all times, they demonstrated successful social interactions and were actively engaged with classroom learning tasks. However, despite the children's best intentions, such behaviours masked the difficulties they were experiencing. During a conversation with Sina about a series of worksheets pasted into one of his notebooks, it became evident that he could not read some of the sheets, let alone complete the answers. Yet, the work in his notebook was complete. The transcript of our conversation reads:

> Sina: This one – it's hard, because I don't know how to do it. See, (*reading*) List the, I can't read that answer.
> RH: Oh, you can't read the question.
> Sina: The big words.
> RH: (*Reading*) List the features
> Sina: (*Continuing to read*) on the TV. Undue
> RH: (*Reading*) Underline
> Sina: (*Reading*) Underline the
> RH: (*Reading*) attributes. That is a hard word, isn't it? So how did you get these answers?
> Sina: My friend help me.

With the help of his friends sitting near him in the classroom, he had managed to get the tasks done, thus providing the teacher with "evidence" that he was coping well.

Whilst such an example illustrates how easy it is for children to unwittingly mislead their teachers into believing that they are coping with particular tasks, there were also times when the children admitted deliberately hiding their inabilities. They explained that the last thing they wanted to do on arrival in a new school was to admit, in front of their newly-met peers and a new teacher, that they couldn't do something. In wanting to be like their peers, the students gave the impression that they were coping okay.

Recognising diversity
Such examples indicate how tricky it can be for teachers to recognise difference, particularly when children set out to blend with the other children in the class. This certainly does not mean that teachers are doing a bad job. What it does mean is that we need efficient and flexible strategies for recognising difference – a challenging task, in anybody's terms.

Whilst there are no sure-fire answers to the recognition of difference, the following list might offer some starting points:

> *Use a wide lens.*
> Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivilland & Reid's (1998) study, *100 children go to school*, discusses the way that a "wide lens" opens up opportunities for teachers to consider socio-cultural practices and the children's home and community contexts. Such an approach should offer opportunities to consider the complex issues that often impact on students' lives.

> *Consider multiple lenses.*
> Keep an open mind and consider the possibility that "my" way or "our" way of thinking about children might be only one of many possibilities. As with the Tongan family example, the dual lenses of itinerancy and bilingualism offered far more information that either could offer alone.

> *Question assumptions about children and families.*
> A multiliteracies pedagogy incorporates critical framing, helping to show students that all literate practices are framed by social and cultural contexts. Apply that framing to your assumptions about children. You might ask some of the following questions:
> - How have I constructed this child/family?
> - Why do I think this?
> - Am I stereotyping?
> - Am I generalising from limited information?

> *Identify children's strengths.*
> Find out what children can do, rather than focusing on their deficiencies. Observe children in the playground and the classroom. The pedagogical framework of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 1996) incorporates Situated Practice, during which students are immersed in a range of practices and experiences that allow them to identify what they already know. This is a useful time for teachers to observe and talk with children.

> *Talk with students and their families whenever and wherever possible*.
> Consultation is one of the assessment tools teachers already use in the classroom. Take every opportunity to talk with families. Assumptions about children and families are often based on flimsy evidence and sometimes a single case has been generalised to all families described in a particular way. Let's move past such generalisations and do some investigation. In doing this, however, we also need to be willing to share some of our own narratives, as that's also part of recognising difference.

Recently I read an article (Bausch, 2003) that discussed one teacher's attempts to learn about the literacy practices of the community in which she and her students lived. She began by taking photographs "to document occasions of serendipitous literacy events" (p.215), but her efforts became more radical as time went on. As she explained,

> Then it became more peculiar. I started picking up papers from the roads and parking lots of my town . . . I canvassed the streets with a plastic bag in one hand and rubber gloves in the other. I also kept field notes observing and documenting children helping family members read prescriptions, directions, and correspondence. (p.216)

I'm not suggesting that we need to go to such extreme lengths, but it's important that we get to know the community, understand the community's literate practices, and take account of differences amongst the students we teach.

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