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Pauline Davis
Journal of Early Childhood Literacy 2007; 7; 219
DOI: 10.1177/1468798407079288

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ecl.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/2/219
Discourses about reading among seven- and eight-year-old children in classroom pedagogic cultures

PAULINE DAVIS  University of Manchester, UK

Abstract  This article reports on case study research of seven- and eight-year-old children’s discourse about reading. The case studies were selected to provide classrooms in contrasting neighbourhoods within a white ‘working class’ town in the North of England. Mixed methods were employed, but primarily the case studies were ethnographic in character. A sociocultural perspective is taken, drawing on Gee’s (1999) definition of discourse and cultural models. Two main differently gendered discourses about reading were encountered. The one discourse, dominant in the ‘working class’ classroom, was strongly gendered and afforded reading low status. The other discourse encountered in the ‘middle class’ classroom was gender-inclusive and reading carried high status. It is argued that the interaction between social class and gender is important in understanding children’s discourse about reading. The idea of a classroom meta-discourse is introduced. It is argued that, when classroom meta-discourse about reading is intense and in opposition to the values and expectations of preferred school pedagogic practices, under some conditions children’s classroom meta-discourse can influence classroom processes and practices.

Keywords  cultural models; discourses about reading; primary school; school mix; sociocultural

Introduction

In the 1990s renewed interest in boys’ underachievement, especially in literacy, was hitting the headlines in England. This was understood, in part, in relation to a feminization of schooling, with differences in reading
practices between boys and girls used to exemplify this characterization (Collins, 1997; Millard, 1994, 1997; Simpson, 1998; Telford, 1999). At this time, there was also a significant drop in children’s attitudes towards reading in England identified by Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) over the decade leading to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2001 survey (see Martin, Mullis and Kennedy, 2003). This was the decade that saw the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy into almost every primary school in England. In addition, Mullis et al. (2003) confirmed that attitudes towards reading held by children in England (and also in Scotland) tend to be less positive compared with most countries in their survey.

As children step into life in the classroom, they encounter different pedagogies, pedagogic cultures and their corresponding discourses (Gregory et al., 2004: 86). However, they also, collectively, bring to the classroom discourse and knowledge that is constructed within the practice of everyday life when away from school. Researchers have argued that the socialization processes in which children are engaged have a strong influence on the ways in which they participate in the pedagogical routines of school classrooms (see also Baker, 1991; Comber, 1993; Dyson 1993, 1997; Luke, 2000); in addition, the social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of children influence success in school literacy learning (Freebody, 1992; Luke, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1989). This may suggest that how children identify in school as different kinds of readers is more complicated than solely a feminization of schooling explanation suggests. Hence, more radical solutions may be required than those intended to connect with more masculine literacies.

This article explores the discourse about reading encountered in three English primary school Year Three classrooms (seven- and eight-year olds), which is examined in relation to the children’s perspectives about their social worlds of reading and, for one school in a ‘hard pressed’ neighbourhood, in relation to classroom pedagogic cultures. In England, Year Three coincides with the start of Key Stage 2, which is underpinned by an assumption that most children have sufficient literacy skills with which to access the curriculum. In particular, the article identifies two qualitatively different discourses held by the children and explores whether in some circumstances children’s discourses about reading can influence classroom pedagogic culture.
Children’s reading practices, identities as different kinds of readers, and schooling

Studies such as Clark and Foster (2005), Croll and Moses (1985), Hall and Coles (1999), Mullis et al. (2003), Nestle (2003), Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) and Smith and Noble (1995) have shown that the majority of children in Britain regularly participate in reading, have various reading practices and, on the whole, have reasonably positive attitudes towards reading. However, on the other hand, these studies have identified that a significant and concerning minority of children (a long tail) do not report reading for pleasure and that many of these children perceive reading in a negative way.

Typically, boys report reading less frequently than girls and more frequently express negative attitudes towards reading, as do older children compared with younger. Indeed, participation in reading has been found to decline steadily from school age onwards (Clark and Foster, 2005; Kush and Watkins, 1996; McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth, 1996; Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004). It has also been confirmed that children from lower social economic status backgrounds are significantly more likely to express negative attitudes towards reading and to read less often (Alloway and Gilbert, 1997; Clark and Foster, 2005; Hall and Coles, 1999; Millard, 1997; Nestle, 2003). Clark and Foster (2005) provide a comprehensive overview of children’s attitudes towards reading and how these differ according to uptake of free school meals. They confirm that children in receipt of free school meals more frequently express negative attitudes towards reading, describing reading as boring or hard work. Furthermore, this broad pattern of interaction has been identified for several decades (e.g. see also Whitehead, 1977) although there have been distinct changes in the kinds of reading preferred by children and in other aspects of their reading practices (Hall and Coles, 1997). There is now a recognized demographic interaction effect between gender, social class and age for participation in reading.

As gender differences are typically found in research in children’s reading, literature relating to reading and identity has primarily focused on children’s gendered identities and the social construct of reading as a gendered behaviour (Alloway and Gilbert, 1997; Collins, 1997; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1996; Lewis, 2001; Millard, 1994, 1997; Pidgeon, 1994; Telford, 1999). Millard (1994) described the outstanding finding of her research (conducted in secondary schools) as the wide variation between boys and girls both in attitude to reading and the willingness to share books with others. Collins (1997: 34) firmly concluded that in school ‘girls are
expected to like reading, no surprise if they sit around discussing books . . . Young boys are expected to share goal triumphs, not the latest Robin Jarvis title'; they concluded that boys' reading habits are shaped strongly by peer pressure, with girls taking a hand in this, by suggesting that boys reading 'is a joke' (Collins, 1997: 43), thus helping to censor their reading to fit established gender positions (Collins, 1997: 44). In addition, Telford (1999) found that boys in Year Six (10- and 11-year olds) had no desire to belong, or to be seen to belong, to a group of girl readers. She concluded that 'boys are constantly pushed towards a particular model of masculine behaviour which, although valuing academic achievement, does not value reading for its own sake, partly because reading is essentially a private activity which falls into the feminine zone' (Telford, 1999: 95).

It is also widely recognized that the meaning of gender-appropriate behaviour will vary according to social class, ethnicity, age and parental expectations (Alloway and Gilbert, 1997; McGuffey et al., 1999). Clark and Foster (2005) found that boys from lower social class families were the only group significantly more likely to describe reading as being more suitable for girls than for boys. This suggests that children from lower socio-economic families are more likely to perceive reading as 'gender-appropriate' (Pidgeon, 1994).

Authors now recognize that social class is strong in influencing learner identities, including children's identities as readers (Hicks, 2002; McGuffey et al., 1999). Hicks (2002), in particular, argues that identity is shaped in many contexts, and family values, relationships and social practices are part of the identity that each child brings to school. Pupils connect their own histories, which are formed through interactions with others whom they value and love, with institutional modes of literacy (school/classroom literacy). 'When school literacy practices do not afford "spaces for belonging", and when children are unable to place the cherished identities that they live at home in dialogue with new identities they encounter at school, they turn to other values and practices as points of identity and connection' (Kendrick and McKay, 2002: 54).

Hicks (2002: 116) argues that 'until children's complex and "classed" histories are valued in school, home and school will continue to be disparate life-worlds for many children'. Moreover, 'because the forms of action and knowledge that children embrace are strongly tied to the identities that emerge from family and community contexts, conflict can arise between an institutional system of middle class practices and the life world of working class students in particular' (Kendrick and McKay, 2002; Thrupp, 1997, 1998).

Thrupp (1997, 1998) for example, writing about schools in New
Zealand, has claimed that the social class composition of schools influences classroom practices and schools’ organization and management, because of tension between the sociocultural influences on children and the culture or values of the schools. Hicks (2002) explains that this has a particularly negative impact on poor and working-class children’s daily struggles within a middle-class educational system. Yet even the middle classes are not immune as children can be put at risk when their parents’ lives are disrupted and they are not able to fulfil the supplementary literate and emotional work that schools appear to count on (Luke and Carrington, 2002).

Calkins (1994: 17; see also McCarthey, 1998) argues that teachers need to ‘invite children to bring their lives into the classroom’. However, there is considerable research to suggest that boys from some communities may be particularly disadvantaged by identifying with narratives that teachers may not want children to think about, such as violence, sexuality, racism and the like (Schneider, 2001). If uncomfortable and often classed, gendered and ethniced narratives are discouraged in school then those children who identify with these, the literature tells us, are at risk of marginalization. Kendrick and McKay (2002) state that a key insight here is that improving boys’ engagement with school literacies means altering classroom practice so that there is more ‘room to move’ for boys in terms of their ways of being in the classroom and operating with and on texts (see also Newkirk, 2002).

However, girls are not immune from sociocultural influences. Much has been made of the priority to learn to ‘do romance’ and how girls from some of the working classes, even in primary school, may find it more difficult to combine romantic success or particular models of womanhood, to which they aspire, with academic success (Gonick, 1997; Mallet, 1997; Murphy and Ivinson, 2003). These narratives, though less widely discussed in the literature, may also run contrary to many teachers’ sensibilities, dealing as they do with the sexual portrayal of women. This suggests that we need to alter classroom practice so that there is more ‘room to move’, not just for boys, but also for all children from a diversity of communities whose lives do not accord so well with the sociocultural values of school as institution.

Although there is a very considerable body of research conducted with older children, and there is indeed a literature relating to younger children’s attitudes towards reading and reading practices, we still do not have a sufficiently detailed picture of the complexities of younger children’s identities as readers (Comber, 2002), or of the meaning that reading carries for them in various aspects of their lives, especially for those from working
class communities (see Hicks, 2002). However, we do expect that even from an early age many children, especially boys from particular working class communities, will already be disengaging with reading. Brooks et al. (1996) found that, in England, about a quarter of eight-year olds expressed negative attitudes towards reading.

**Theoretical framework**

An understanding of a recursive relationship between children’s cultural resources and classroom pedagogic culture enables a view of children’s meaning construction as embedded in their social and cultural milieu (Gregory et al., 2004: 86). As Rogoff (1990: 89) says ‘this involves a relation between the individual and the social and cultural environments in which each is inherently involved in the other’s definition. None exists separately. Raban (1991: 16) argues ‘literacy is a social and cultural practice, experienced by children long before they start school’.

Gee (1999) refers to the everyday theories (i.e. storylines, images, schemas, metaphors and models) that people use to make sense of their lives as cultural models. For example, a child may conjecture that reading is ‘for girls’, ‘for when it is raining’, or ‘for bedtime’ because this is as he or she experiences, or has experienced, materially. ‘Cultural models are not static . . . and they are not purely mental but are distributed and embedded in socioculturally defined groups of people and their texts and practices’ (Gee, 1999: 23).

Thus, cultural models tell children what is ‘typical’ or ‘normal’ and mediate their actions, not universally, but from the perspective of their experiences. According to Holland, it is this ‘stuff of existence’, what is real to the children and has meaning for them, which ‘grant[s] shape to the co-production of activities, discourses, performances and artefacts’ (Holland et al., 1998: 51). Revealing a repertoire of cultural models promises a powerful analysis, and may indicate collective ways of sense-making among particular communities. This commonality of sense-making as articulated in practice is referred to in this article as discourse and is meant particularly in the tradition of Gee (1999: 24) for whom discourse signifies language integrated with ‘other stuff’, so as to enact a particular type of (however negotiable and contestable) socially-situated identity.

However, identity processes are no longer seen as connecting individuals in homogenous or fixed ways; our identity work is never ‘done’, it is always ongoing (Holland et al., 1998). Although a person’s identity is not determinable, neither is the meaning-making involved in identity-work entirely free but, instead, is mediated by the discourse and practices of people’s
social activity systems (Engestrom, 1995; Gonzalez, 1999). Situated human creativity exists not despite, but because of, social structures and concrete activities (Marx, 1867) with particular tools, social rules and division of labour (Engestrom, 1987; Engestrom and Cole, 1997; Leontev, 1978). Thus, talk about identity in social terms does not deny individuality but views the very definition as something that is part of the practices of specific communities (Gonzalez, 1999). ‘From a social practice perspective it is through cultural practices as people “do life” that social identities are constructed’ (Nasir and Saxe, 2003).

Reading straddles the boundary between the classroom and the local community, even though the meaning and function of the term may vary and perhaps be qualitatively different depending on the contexts/practices in which children participate, including different pedagogic cultures in school. Discourse about reading may be viewed as a boundary object (Star, 1989) carried to and fro across settings as children engage in various life activities. In this way, children’s identities as readers may be seen in relation to the materiality of their experiences, and, since reading carries considerable significance in school, children’s discourse about reading may also be relevant when examining classroom norms and practices (see also Moll and Gonzalez, 1994). Reading may be expected to provide a discourse rich in cultural models. How children position themselves in relation to cultural models about reading in a particular discourse is taken in this article as identity (i.e. this provides a model of their identity).

Calls have been made for more ethnographic studies of practice at the local level (e.g. Erickson, 1996; Nasir and Saxe, 2003) to understand processes of socialization, which emphasize both variation in perceived ways of being or of doing and also commonality among group members. Suggestions have been that two constructs – discourse and practice – could serve as tools that can carry some of the theoretical weight previously shouldered by the term ‘culture’ (Gonzalez, 1999). For example, Erickson (1996) advocates going beyond the level of micro talk to a focus on cultural norms and how these provide a context for considering patterns of inequality within society. He calls for a ‘top-down inductive approach’ in which social actors are viewed as both constrained and enabled by social structures.

The design

Participants and settings
In this article I draw on partial findings from a comparative case study of three primary school Year Three classrooms, for seven- and eight-year-old
children in the North West of England. The study focused on children with white British and mainly ‘working class’ heritage. A focus on white British children is justified on the basis of the attainment in reading of this group. ‘White pupils on free meals do poorly at Year 2, only a little better than the Bangladeshis, almost all of whom come from non-English speaking backgrounds. By Year 6, white pupils on free meals have a lower average score than any of the other ethnic groups (this applies to white girls as well as white boys)’ (OfSTED, 1996: 57), and this pattern continues. A cultural analysis of the reading of children from different minority ethnic groups was beyond the scope of this study.

The three case study schools were selected to provide contrasting local sociocultural contexts. Two of the classrooms were in different kinds of working-class communities and one was in a more affluent (lower middle-class) community. These were by no means communities with homogenous families and it is fully recognized that there is no one kind of middle-class or working-class community. As Reay (2002) points out it is a misnomer to talk about ‘the working class’ and the phrases ‘working classes’ and ‘middle classes’ are used from now on in this article and are intended to signify such social diversity.

The three schools were all located within a one-mile radius in a predominantly ‘white’ working-class market town. The first school (Rushford) was situated in the heart of a social housing estate, classified by ACORN as a hard-pressed neighbourhood, the second (St Joseph’s RC Primary School) was in a ‘working class’ area of moderate means, with close terraced housing, and the third school (Beckensby School) was situated in a relatively modern private housing estate in a more affluent part of the town, classified by ACORN as comfortably off. Beckensby was an estate attracting the ‘aspirational middle class’ (Ball, 2003) (see Table 1).

The cases were not selected for typicality; indeed, the school which is referred to as Rushford (pseudonym) was selected as an extreme case, being as it was in a community considered of high deprivation with many social characteristics associated with urban areas in need of regeneration.

For example, the Office for Standards of Inspection in Education (OfSTED) report for Rushford School describes the attainment on entry as below average. It goes on to report that:

The school draws most pupils from the immediate area with a large proportion of pupils coming from backgrounds with social and economic difficulties. There is a very low percentage of parents with higher education and a significant percentage of children in overcrowded households. The children who attend the school are predominantly white and British. The percentage of pupils
eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. The number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and the percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need are also well above the national average. There are no pupils with English as an additional language. (from OfSTED inspection report, report no. withheld for confidentiality)

The school operated a home-school reading school to support parents in sharing reading with children, which was poorly attended. Raising attainment in boys’ literacy especially was a priority for the school. OfSTED described some teaching as unsatisfactory or poor, but school leadership was praised. In addition, the teaching assistant in the class I visited had received a national award for her work with children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.1

On the other hand the OfSTED report for the Beckensby School states that ‘only a few pupils are entitled to free school meals. All of the pupils come from white ethnic backgrounds . . . A below average number of pupils are on the register of special educational needs, and . . . attainment on entry is above average’. Beckensby is described as a very effective school, with very high standards in tested subjects, good teaching, and strong purposeful leadership and management. This contrasts with St Joseph’s School, which is described as providing a satisfactory education for its pupils. ‘At 13 per cent, the proportion of pupils who are entitled to free school meals is above average. Seven per cent of pupils are assessed as having special educational needs; this is below average. Children start school with attainment that is similar to that expected for their age. The

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>No. girls</th>
<th>No. boys</th>
<th>ACORN classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rushford</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Category (of 5) 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group (of Q) N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Type (of 56) 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Joseph’s</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>category 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>group M Blue collar roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>type 42 Home-owning terraces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beckensby</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>category 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>group H Secure families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>type 28 Working families with mortgages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods (ACORN) has been shown to differentiate at least as well as social class on selected outcome measures (Morgan and Chinn, 1983).
pupils have good attitudes to learning and are well behaved’ (OfSTED inspection report).

Furthermore, in the Rushford classroom, on average, children’s reading age (reading accuracy) was two years below national expectations, and in St Joseph’s classroom, children were just a few months behind national expectations, whereas, in the Beckensby classroom, on average, children were reading in advance of expectations.

**Data collection**

The case studies were conducted over a period of one academic year. During the year, one day a week was spent in each of the schools where I was a ‘casual’ teaching assistant; for example, I listened to children read, discussed reading with them and, as is typical of case study research (Willig, 2001), collected other data using a variety of different methods. For instance, data collection methods included the Schonell Graded Word Recognition Reading Test (see caveat later), classroom observation, structured interviews, storytelling interviews and documentary evidence. All the Year Three children participated in the study and data were collected for each child.

The structured interviews asked about children’s attitudes towards reading, reading materials at home, family reading patterns, gender and reading and reasons why people read. All children in the three classrooms (88 in total) were interviewed.

It should be noted that the storytelling interview was a procedure developed in this inquiry. Children were asked to tell (not write) a story called, ‘The child who did not like reading’. A focus on a negative rendition of reading was requested to empower the children should they feel constrained in going against an expectation of school that affords reading a high status. Furthermore, asking a child to tell a story is open-ended, and, as Dockrell (2004) suggests, may be a more appropriate type of questioning for those who may be unduly influenced by cueing (intentional or unwittingly) by professional researchers. This method allows children to position themselves with regard to reading in various ways, positively and negatively or otherwise.

A choice had to be made between tape-recording and writing down the stories in situ. I found that tape-recording was off-putting for some children and so instead chose to write down their responses during the interview.

Prior to the interview the children were informed that:

- The researcher was interested in finding out about their views on reading.
• They did not have to talk about themselves specifically, although they
could if they so wished.
• Their responses would be treated in confidence.
• They did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to answer,
and could stop the interview at any time.

The following procedure was used:

• Children were asked to consider (think about) why they think some
children don’t like reading whereas other children do like reading.
• Children were requested to give reasons why some children don’t like
reading. They are then asked to give reasons why some children do like
reading;
• Children told a story called ‘the child who did not like reading’. (NB the
children told the story verbally.)

The stories promised contextually rich, or in Geertz’s (1973) terms
‘thick’, descriptive data from a group of seven- and eight-year-old children,
many of whom exhibited low levels of literacy. The time taken to complete
the interview varied considerably but on average was about 20 minutes. For
a comprehensive account of this method see Davis (in press).

A measure of reading ages was required to provide comparative infor-
mation about the classes; measures were obtained for all the children in the
three classrooms. I collected these data over a two-week period using the
Shearer and Apps (1975) revised word order version of the Schonell Graded
Word Recognition Reading Test (R1). Given that almost all children were
reading in advance of a reading age of five years, and that the main purpose
of using the test was to provide an indication of reading attainment in the
classes, rather than as a diagnostic tool, the test was considered appropri-
ate for its intended use. As a bricoleur (Levi-Strauss, 1966), I used the tools
at hand and the R1 test could be conducted in the short time period avail-
able to spend with the children on an individual basis. Reading test scores
were augmented with my notes about the children’s reading and their
reading records over the year.

These data were augmented with field notes, written as soon as possible
after the school visits, which were used primarily for analysis of the class-
room pedagogic cultures.

Analysis of the discourse and classroom practice
Systematic content analysis was undertaken, taking a grounded theory
thematic approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to the analysis of cultural
models (Gee, 1999; Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Analysis was of the cultural
models encountered during the inquiry (e.g. in the stories, through observation and from traditional interviews), which in turn were used to identify discourses about reading. How children positioned themselves in the discourse gave access to their identities as different kinds of readers. Concretely, a focus on this ‘positioning’ was via use of pronouns and connections made with or against cultural models. As Harre and Van Langenhove (1999: 17) argue with ‘positioning’, the focus should be ‘on the way in which discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet, at the same time, they are the resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions’. Repeatedly found distinct patterns of identification with a repertoire of cultural models indicated discourses about reading.

Within-case analysis of children’s discourse about reading also built up a picture (a bricolage – Levi-Strauss, 1966) of the classroom meta-discourse about reading. Pen pictures of each child’s relation with reading, based on the data collected, were summarized for each classroom. In addition summary quasi-statistics were produced (see caveat later). This meta-discourse was then considered in a descriptive analysis of the pedagogic contexts encountered in the classroom and was informed by an activity theory perspective on practice (Engestrom, 1987). How this classroom meta-discourse (see Engestrom, 1995) manifested in classroom social practice was examined, e.g. boys and girls sitting on different tables as a result of ability differentiation. For a critique of the connection between use of cultural models, meta-discourse and activity theory see Davis (in preparation).

A microanalysis of classroom talk was not undertaken, which at first may seem to stand somewhat at odds with an interest in understanding the cultural norms of classroom practice, and there is a well-established body of research that does this via an examination of classroom talk (e.g. Edwards and Mercer, 1987; McCarthey, 1998; Mercer 1995, 2000). However, here the main purpose of the study was not solely to understand the cultural norms of classroom practice or classroom talk per se (the focus of the field notes), but was on the children’s discourse about reading in relation to classroom practice. The study is then not positioned solely on the classroom, but sits at the edge or interface between the classroom and other social practices involving reading.

**Reporting on the case studies**

Written consent of the teachers and parents was obtained, and in addition the assent of the children, as advocated in Mahon (1996); see also Lewis and Porter (2004), Maunther (1997), and Morrow and Richards (1996).
The names of the children and the schools are pseudonyms as is the usual convention, to ensure anonymity.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest that case studies should provide a sense of vicarious ‘déjà vu’ experience, make use of metaphor, and allow for use as a basis for re-examining and reconstructing one’s experience of a given phenomenon. ‘Such studies will . . . exemplify the interpersonal involvement that characterize the form of the inquiry’, Stake (1995: 95) argues ‘the reader comes to know some things told, as if he or she had experienced them . . . Knowledge is socially constructed – we constructivists believe – and thus case study researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge’.

The extracts included in this text generated by the structured interview data were selected for their typicality. On the other hand, the stories used within the article were selected because they demonstrated clearly a particular instantiation of one or more cultural models within the discourse. Frequent reference to the data is intended to provide a sense of the groundedness of the research and to foster my aspiration to provide the reader with a ‘vicarious experience’. Hammersley (1997: 15) says of case study research, ‘the role of the researcher as active participant in the research process becomes clear. He or she is the research instrument par excellence’.

Given this was case study research, generalization was to theory rather than to a population. Summary statistics for the mixed methods research were obtained using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) using the database I put together for the 88 children. However, it should be noted that these were quasi-statistics used to aid interpretation of the case studies. As such a separate analysis was conducted for each case, since pooling the data would be inappropriate.

Cultural models about reading

Two main discourses about reading were encountered in the three classrooms. The one discourse was gendered and feminized, gave less value or status to the activity and portrayed reading as ‘difficult’. It could be described as misaligned with an official schools’ discourse about reading, where reading is ‘for all’ and carries high status within the curriculum. The other discourse about reading prevalent among the seven- and eight-year-olds was in line with this so-called ‘schools’ discourse i.e. reading was regarded as an activity for all, that carries with it status, presence and purpose both in and outside of school, e.g. at home.
Discourse 1: Misaligned with school
In this discourse, reading was gendered. Boys and girls tended to position themselves differently in this discourse, with the boys’ relationship with reading being more marginal and the girls’ relationship with reading, which for them was gender-appropriate, being more participatory. Reading tended to be viewed more as a pastime than as having high status in daily life outside school (see Table 2).

Discourse 2: Aligned with school
In this discourse it was equally acceptable for boys as well as girls to enjoy reading and most of these children believed reading to be important, purposive and an everyday practice that they regularly engaged in at home, either freely or under the supervision of an adult. It was evident that many of the children gained pleasure and satisfaction from reading books; for example, consider Tom’s response to being asked why some children didn’t like reading: ‘When you are at an exciting bit and have to go to bed and stop reading to go to sleep. If you have to start over again – [i.e.] read a section again because you lost the place.’ This extract shows affective connection with reading, very different from the responses obtained from children identifying with the other discourse, who typically gave reading being boring or difficult as reasons.

In the ‘misaligned with school’ discourse (discourse 1) women were perceived to read fiction, magazines and sometimes newspapers, whereas men read newspapers. For example, reading was considered to be ‘for girls’ and ‘for women’. The children’s experience was that women sometimes read for pleasure, for instance ‘lots of women like reading – I see them when delivering Avon magazines’, ‘Mum reads a lot more than Dad does’. Men were seen as more or less confined to reading newspapers, especially the Sun or the Sport and were considered too busy to read: ‘men are normally busy’, ‘men watch TV all the time’, ‘men are always out at the pub’ (from structured interview data).

On the other hand, in contrast in the ‘aligned with school’ discourse (discourse 2), women were considered to read fiction books and magazines for pleasure, whereas men were observed reading technical papers for work, newspapers, books to do with computers and sometimes fiction books. Hence, despite the differently gendered versions of the discourses for the seven- and eight-year olds, the case studies confirm an interpretation that hegemonic cultural norms may operate at a macro level to position certain kinds of reading as feminine (e.g. Simpson, 1998; Telford, 1999). This would accord with the literature, which, typically, has found that gendered models of reading hold for most older children. At seven and
eight years of age, it may be that many children are still ‘doing child’, which for many includes ‘doing reading’, and that their relation with reading may change as they grow older.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural models about reading</th>
<th>Typical responses (based on structured interview data)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For girls</td>
<td>‘Girls like to read and boys are always playing out’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Cos girls can read’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Girls can read lots more and are on lots more higher books’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Girls are in the library and boys like drawing’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Girls like books’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Because girls are a bit more interested than boys’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not for boys</td>
<td>‘Our boys can’t read’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Obviously I don’t like reading’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I don’t think boys like reading’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Some boys don’t bring reading books to school’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Boys don’t read when they have friends round’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Boys concentrate more on football, and almost never read books’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For women</td>
<td>‘Lots of women like reading – I see them when delivering Avon magazines’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Mum reads a lot more than Dad does’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I see women reading when I visit my friends’ houses’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Mum reads a lot more than Dad does’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘My Mum reads’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not for men</td>
<td>‘Men are normally busy’, ‘men watch TV all the time’, ‘men are always out at the pub’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Although men were seen to read newspapers ‘The Sun’ or ‘The Sport’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Dad never reads and I never see my cousins reading’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘All the men I know don’t read very much and the ladies read more’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low status</td>
<td>‘Reading is for when it is raining’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I read when there is nothing else to do’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I’d rather play out, but I like reading’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Mum’s too busy to hear me read’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>‘I can’t read’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I’m not very good’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I like to read to people, but not on my own’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Sometimes I can’t read all of it’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I like reading a bit but some (books) are hard’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pastime</td>
<td>Adults read ‘because they have interesting books’, ‘because they enjoy it’, ‘because they like reading’. A few stated that adults read in order to find out information, perhaps relating to work or hobbies. One child said it was because adults were bored and another said it was so adults could ‘get some peace’</td>
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</table>
Materially, there were differences in the children’s reading activities when outside of school. Typically, children identifying with the misaligned discourse described receiving little support for reading at home. Children seldom mentioned reading at home to their parents. They were more likely to mention reading to either elder or younger siblings or other members of their family. The children usually suggested they had a limited selection of books at home. Some children said that although they had plenty of books these were too ‘babyish’ so they did not read them. A few boys stated that they owned no books. The majority of children could not name an exact title of one of their books. At home, these children’s leisure time tended not to include reading with parents or another adult (based on structured interview data).

On the other hand, in relation to the aligned with school discourse, it was evident that both girls and boys tended to receive a high level of support at home, and that most owned a wide variety of books. From conversations with the children it was apparent that many parents structured their children’s reading time at home. Reading had high status. For many of the children reading was integrated into a daily routine; this took place usually either at breakfast time, immediately after school or before bedtime, or in combination. Some children reported reading aloud to their parents, although, for many of the children, this was something they did regularly when they were younger, before they could read independently. For most children reading was an accepted and valued part of daily life. The message was that many parents had high expectations for their children and were supportive in developing an environment at home that promotes and respects reading as a rewarding and necessary activity (based on structured interview data).

How this panned out in the classrooms, as classroom meta-discourse about reading (i.e. the pattern discourses about reading help by the group of children in a particular classroom) differed: in the Rushford classroom all children identified with the so-called misaligned with school discourse; in St Joseph’s School approximately two-thirds of the children identified with the ‘misaligned’ discourse; however, in contrast, in the Beckensby School classroom, the ‘aligned’ with school discourse about reading was dominant, being identified with by about two-thirds of the children.

Thus, it seemed that the status afforded reading by the children was in accord with their material experiences of reading at home and in the community. Arguably, it is no coincidence that reading carried lower status in the heavily gendered ‘working class’ misaligned with school discourse, or that it carried higher status when boys’ marginalization was noticeably less, in the ‘middle-class’ Beckensby classroom. As Davies (1988: 89)
argues, members do not have equal access for affecting the outcome of their interaction. Resources are asymmetrically distributed in accordance with structures of domination and this includes the educationally aligned social and cultural capital carried in families and neighbourhoods. However, this is not to deny the possibility that classroom pedagogy also has an influence on children’s discourse about reading. Indeed, a social practice perspective would suggest that all practices where reading has significance contribute to a discourse. In this study, on the whole, classroom practices seemingly reinforced wider community discourses about reading, rather than providing ‘spaces’ in which the emergence of emancipatory discourses were fostered.

It is, of course, acknowledged that some pedagogies for reading – for instance, reading schemes such as Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) and the Catch-Up Programme (Reid et al., 2004), to name just a couple of examples – have resulted in significant gains in attainment in reading. However, such structured remedial teaching approaches were not in evidence in the case study classrooms and as such are not a focus in this article.

**Positioning**

Although there appeared to be two qualitatively different discourses about reading, I do not mean to imply that all the children associated with one or other of the discourses ‘did reading’ in the same way, but rather that they held to a common dominating discourse.

Some children, such as Liam and Amy (Rushford School), held firmly to a strong version of the misaligned with school discourse. Their discourse was gender divisive: reading was for girls and not for boys. Liam’s story:

There was a child who thought reading was boring. Because he could only get past page one. Because he can’t read all the pages. Miss said read them now – and he said – UMMmmmmmmmmmm. Because he couldn’t read it. Because he reckoned he was the bestest in the class but he weren’t. (Reading age 5 years 5 months, chronological age 8 years)

Liam had already started to differentiate himself, even from some of the other boys, who considered reading to be in the feminine zone, and openly stated that he could not read. Amy identified positively with reading, although she considered reading a difficult activity; perhaps her frustration is demonstrated in her story:

Her Mum told her to read and she didn’t want to. She got stuck on a word and no one helped her. The radio was too loud and was making her not get the words. She said ‘turn the radio off’. Her Mum couldn’t hear because the radio
was too loud. She carried on reading and got stuck on another word . . . and she got angry because she wanted her Mum to listen to her read. (Reading age 7 years 10 months, chronological age 8 years 1 month)

Amy stated that she enjoys reading. She also viewed reading as an activity ‘for girls’ and ‘for women’; ‘I see women reading when I visit my friends’ houses’, ‘my Mum reads’. She told me that girls are better at reading than boys. When I asked her how she knows, she said, ‘our boys can’t read’ (structured interview data).

However, despite this strongly gendered discourse, not all the girls who so identified were themselves positive about reading. For example, Kate (Beckensby School) reported to ‘not like reading’ and seemed to identify better with some of the boys in her class than the girls. She made a point of telling me that she liked playing football and preferred to play outside than read, a subject position that in Rushford seemed to belong to boys.

Most children who identified with the ‘aligned with school’ discourse also held a strong version of their discourse. Rachel’s (Beckensby School) story, for example, is used here to demonstrate a strongly positive identification with reading. The character in Rachel’s story is a competent reader who ‘pretends to be stuck’, even when reading a ‘really hard reading book’. The character ‘Helen’ is also positioned as an avid reader, as can be seen in the use of the term ‘never’ in the final sentence of the text, ‘From that day on Helen would never stop reading books’. On the other hand, the character in Amy’s story ‘was stuck’ and what is more did not receive the help she wanted with reading.

Rachel’s story:

‘Helen’, called Mum, ‘are you still up there watching TV?’ ‘Yes’, replied Helen. ‘Will you come down and have breakfast now’. When Helen had finished her breakfast Mum said, ‘It’s time to read your reading book.’ Helen grumbled and sat down. She thought to herself, I get bored of reading books, I’d like something more interesting. Helen had a plan, she pretended to get stuck on lots of words. So she went to read her really hard reading book, and pretended to get stuck a lot. But, it wasn’t a good plan after all because when she went to school and the teacher looked in her book, she said, ‘I think you will have to start that stage again’. Helen grumbled really really loud. She grumbled all the rest of the day, and later when she was asleep, she had a bad dream. But when she woke up something strange happened. However hard she tried she couldn’t keep away from the book-shelf. She couldn’t stop herself from trying to grab a book and started reading. From that day on Helen would never stop reading books. (Reading age 7 years 10 months, Rachel is one of the oldest year 2 pupils who sits with a small group of Y2 children within the Y3 classroom)
However, some children chose to adopt weaker versions of their dominant discourse about reading. Such children also identified in various ways. One example is given in this article. Jason (Rushford), for instance, provided a good example of a boy who identified less strongly with the gendered discourse about reading. His was a narrative of resistance, as is illustrated in the following vignette:

At first Jason (Rushford School) declared, ‘Well, obviously I don’t like reading’, and he seemed surprised I had bothered to ask him the question. There was no sense that his answer was anything out of the ordinary. When I questioned him as to why he told me it was because he was a boy. He told me that he does own a few books and does have access to some other reading materials. However, he stated he likes to read the newspaper with his Dad, but it became clear that primarily he had experienced reading as ‘something for women’. Jason told me that ‘men are normally busy or are at the pub’ (from structured interview data).

During the interview, Jason stood up and moved to pick a book off the shelf and he began to describe the pictures to me. He appeared quite animated, enthusiastic. It was a book about Vikings and he questioned me about it. He couldn’t read the words, and seemed reluctant to admit that he struggles to read, and so(?) he became distracted and made a joke. However, his interest in the books perhaps could be taken as indicative of a more moderate position. Later I discussed this gendered view of reading with the Head Teacher, and she told me, ‘yes, our boys are too macho to want to read . . .’.

On occasions Jason appeared to be flirting with alternative subject positions. For instance, although Jason’s actions indicated that he identified with the dominant discourse, he sometimes showed moments of resistance. He could be curious about books and once asked me if it was true that boys could not read as well as girls. He seemed to go away happy when I assured him there was no reason this should be the case. But there were only a few girls in the class who were exuberant about reading and Jason did not join with them.

Here Jason’s discourse could be described on such occasions as ‘pulsing’ between competing discourses (see Williams, in preparation). According to Gutierrez (1995), Kendrick and McKay (2002) and others who draw on Bakhtin (1981), it is at these moments when competing voices are present in the words or actions that alternative cultural practices are emerging. However, the dominant discourse in the Rushford classroom seemed to have a stranglehold and the fieldwork period finished without resolution.

For Jason, it appeared as if the act of being part of the research study, of talking with me provided him, in Kendrick and McKay’s (2002) terms with a potential ‘space for belonging’. Although he appeared curious about reading, in addition, subtly he shared with me other aspects of his life. For instance, he let me know that his uncle smoked marijuana. This was not teacher–pupil talk and he knew it, and it would not have been legitimate
talk in his classroom. It was my initiation into his social world. I connected in this kind of way with a few children. Their identity as people seemed primary, with other kinds of identities, e.g. as a reader, relational to the aspects of their identity that carried the most significance.

Schneider’s (2001) point, that children’s real lives can make teachers feel uncomfortable, and avoid the very texts and discourses that can sometimes put children in dialogue with school discourse, comes to mind. But in all three classrooms only ‘safe’ topics of study appeared legitimate, and so there seemed to be little scope for children to bring their ‘deviant’ community dialogue into classroom discourse. It seemed there was perhaps less scope for them to make connections with alternative ways of being. Indeed, had teachers favoured such emancipatory approaches, I suspect they would have been censored by the school and also by parents, had such a pedagogy been brought to their attention.

Identifying discourses about reading provides for a parsimonious analysis of children’s identities as readers, perhaps better described as different kinds of relations with reading. Three main relations with reading were encountered: ‘misaligned with school’ discourse with reading as gender-appropriate (usually girls, e.g. Amy), ‘misaligned with school’ discourse with reading as gender-inappropriate (usually boys, e.g. Liam) and the ‘aligned with school’ discourse. How these relations with reading played out for the children in their various instantiations of a discourse was significantly mediated by gender. In addition, most children positioned themselves in strong versions of the discourses. How children position themselves in a particular discourse, for or against, provides an appreciation of the variation in their ways of being, while acknowledging that social structural influences can, in some circumstances, act as constraints.

Differently gendered discourses about reading
Swain (1995: 75) has argued that, in relation to primary school children, there are two complementary gendered cultures, sharing the one overall school world, which are further nuanced by social class and race/ethnicity. However, he is keen to point out (citing Thorne, 1993: 104) that it is all too easy to fall into the binary language of ‘boys versus girls’, maintaining that ‘within gender variation is greater than differences between boys and girls taken as groups’.

In the present study, it would appear that greater emphasis might usefully be placed on the interaction between social background and gender. Indeed, the present research indicated that a sociocultural production of discourse about reading related first to neighbourhood and family practices, with gendered positionings within these. This is not to imply that the
social worlds of the children who identified with a particular discourse were all the same – far from it – but they did appear to be party to two distinct ideologies (sharing in distinct commonalities in the configuration of their worlds about reading): a gendered low-status (seemingly working-class) ideology and a more gender-inclusive high-status (perhaps, middle-class) ideology.

These arguably, classed and differently gendered discourses about reading placed reading as marginal for the seven- and eight-year-old boys who identified with the gender divisive discourse, but placed those who identified with the alternative gender-inclusive discourse more centrally. Other research about schooling more generally, e.g. Reay (2002), has pointed out that the normative masculinity for working-class boys does not value academic success, but also demonstrates that not all working-class boys subscribe to normative masculinity. Reay (2002) also argues that middle-class boys can legitimately combine being cool with academic success (see also Skeggs, 1997).

In addition, although in the present study girls tended to identify reading as gender-appropriate regardless of discourse, there were distinct differences between the girls in the contrasting discourses. The girls who identified with the misaligned with school discourse tended to identify with reading as gender-appropriate. However, they also tended to consider reading to have a lower status. This is indicated by Amy’s comment that ‘Mum’s too busy to hear me read’ and by school reading being less supported at home, where they had access to fewer material reading resources and were less likely to be supported in the practice of school literacy at home (confirming Weinberger, 1996). It is argued that variation in these competing macro-level discourses for girls may have been somewhat muted because reading was considered gender-appropriate. However, they were still qualitatively different. Being a girl in the misaligned discourse gave rise to an entirely different relation with reading than for a girl in the aligned with school discourse, and hence, it is argued, also with school.

Furthermore, the data suggested that even as young as seven or eight years of age, for some of the children, these ideologies appeared to have become naturalized and achieved the status of common sense, for instance as demonstrated in Jason’s voluntary start to the interview with ‘well, obviously I don’t like reading’ and even the head teacher’s comments about macho boys. Amy’s comment that ‘our boys can’t read’ appears to make sense in view of her everyday experiences. As Fairclough (1992: 87) says, ‘ideologies embedded in discursive practices are most effective when they become naturalised and achieve the status of “common sense”’.
The present research found much evidence of children’s conformity with a particular discourse. Only a minority of the children (boys and girls) appeared to be at the edge of a discourse or hovered between these ways of thinking and making sense of the world. However, there were moments of resistance; for the misaligned discourse this involved some kind of connection with reading/with a schools’ discourse, whereas, resistance for the ‘aligned with school’ children was in their rejection of the schools’ discourse. This appears to support Reynold (2004), who found that a minority of 10- and 11-year-old white working-class and middle-class boys create and seek out spaces from which they can resist, subvert and actively challenge prevailing hegemonic masculinities within a peer group pupil culture. However, as the example of Kate (see earlier) shows, it is not only boys who can offer resistance.

Given that identification with a particular discourse appears strongly related with community values and practices, this suggests that schools’ values and practices may need to vary. A key question is then under what conditions (if any) may neighbourhood practices produce qualitatively different classroom practices?

In the classroom

In this section I consider how meta-discourse about reading can sometimes influence classroom practices and pedagogic culture. For this purpose, I turn to the case of the Rushford classroom where the discourse about reading seemed least aligned with its school. The case of ‘least alignment’ was selected because this is when the tension between sociocultural influences on children’s reading and the culture and values of the school was (by definition) the strongest. It was therefore the case where discourse and other cultural practices prevailing in the community might be expected to influence classroom practice in the most noticeable ways, and where a cultural explanation of practice might be most apposite.

One example of how the meta-discourse manifested in classroom practice was in relation to the cultural model of reading as gendered. In Rushford, this could be seen in the seating arrangements in the room, which were set up to easily allow the teacher to differentiate class-work according to ability. All girls sat at the unofficial, but recognized by all, ‘top table’, and all boys, with the exception of Della who had hydrocephalus, sat on the ‘bottom table’. The few top-table girls were the only children whose reading was in line with national expectations. The bottom-table boys were just beginning to read their first words. The gendered pattern in the seating arrangements did not go unnoticed by the children, for
instance, by their stating that girls were on the top table or that boys drew pictures, whereas girls could write stories.

Apart from the physical manifestation of the gendered discourse in the physical positioning of the children in the room, there was a marked difference between the reading abilities of the boys compared with the girls (based on reading test scores, observation and listening to children read). The children were aware of this and statements such as ‘girls can read lots more and are on lots more higher books’ and ‘our boys can’t read’ and ‘I like reading a bit but some [books] are hard’ were typical. Thus, the classroom environment seemed to confirm a view of reading as gendered and difficult.

Furthermore, it was in the classroom where children witnessed others struggling with reading. Reading ‘as difficult’ was in the materiality of classroom life. Children’s literacy imbued all other curriculum subject areas and was constraining. The main obstacle for many of the children was their literacy, as demonstrated in the following fieldwork extract:

I circulated in the room, talking to the children and helping them with their work. A middle-ranking table was attempting a comprehension. The children were guarded at first, adept at defending themselves from possible criticism. They did not want to be seen to be wrong and potentially my presence was threatening. I coaxed them into accepting my help and soon they start to ask me questions. The comprehension questions were simple. ‘How many balloons are in the picture?’ ‘What colour is the tractor?’ ‘Where is the post box?’ The children struggled to read the questions and I helped Kimberley sound out the words. Once the children understood the questions, they were quick to supply the answers; the mis-match between their reading ages and chronological ages manifested.

Such independent working was not unproblematic, since typically many children needed help much of the time to continue with their tasks. For example, ‘Quiet Reading Time’ (a curriculum requirement) seemed to be invariably fractious and not at all quiet as many children could not read independently and the fidgeting and chatter that resulted frequently hastened the teacher to bring this activity to an untimely close.

In addition, the teacher sometimes showed resistance to spending the suggested time period (e.g. as set out in the National Literacy Strategy) on whole class teaching because she found children often became fidgety or lost concentration to a degree that warranted intervention. Here the teacher can be viewed as brokering the policy in an unspoken negotiation with the children, whose behaviour and actions had the potential to shape practice. The fragility of the settlement between the teacher and children was captured in an episode observed when a supply teacher was ‘in charge’
when classroom practice broke down, suggestive of the main classroom teacher’s considerable pedagogic skill with this class:

On my next visit, a supply teacher is endeavouring to teach Year 3. With the disappearance of the unspoken settlement between the regular teacher and the children, the dynamics of the classroom was on the move and the new equilibrium was up for grabs. Keen to gain order, the supply teacher yelled at the children ‘be quiet’, ‘stop running around’ and ‘listen’. There seemed to be a riot in the making. I felt embarrassed and I wanted to tell the class to stop, to be quiet. Ten minutes passed, then fifteen and then another five. Still the register has not been completed. Eventually the supply teacher attempted whole class teaching. She soon gave up, instead telling the children to draw circles, triangles or rectangles. This they consented to, amidst various misdemeanours and reprimands. The supply teacher was fair game for these children and she was well and truly defeated.

Then there were some other teaching strategies, which the teacher chose not to employ, for example, peer tutoring, despite the social and educational benefits she believed these could bring. This perceived constraint to the division of labour was explained by the teacher in relation to both the literacy skills of the children and their attitudes towards learning.

So far I have given a few examples of how the discourse manifested in relation to the tools and division of labour employed in the classroom practice. However, if children’s discourse about reading can influence classroom practice, given my prolonged observation in the field, evidence might also be expected of the children articulating and imposing rules through the establishment of new norms or subcultures. The main way that children imposed rules was in the status they gave reading. It was not a competitive classroom, indeed it was rather socially inclusive. Children did not appear to gain status from their peers from being academically able. It was as cool to read as not to read, or to act in ways to avoid reading, such as shuffling chairs during quiet reading time. There was not the stigma associated with low achievement that the children with special educational needs in the Beckensby School classroom encountered. I never saw a Rushford child smirk because someone had the wrong answer, as I had witnessed in Beckensby. Instead, social capital was found in comedy and in being good at football or having the latest copy of a favoured magazine.

Often strategies that have been confirmed to work in many schools, including Beckensby and St Joseph’s schools, appeared problematic in the Rushford classroom. (In Beckensby School, for instance, whole class teaching was the norm, but children also regularly worked individually while the teacher discussed corrected previous work with some pupils.) In
Rushford, some teaching strategies commonly agreed as effective were not used, classroom management issues often subsumed more time than is desirable and it was sometimes questionable whether or not children were stretched as much as they might have been. On the other hand, given that the teaching assistant in the classroom had won a national award for the quality of her work and a recent OfSTED report had commended the work of the head teacher on her leadership and policy on raising attainment in literacy, it would be overly simplistic to dismiss the teaching going on in the school as defective, even though the OfSTED report raised concerns about teaching standards in the school.

The Year Three teacher was considered an experienced and effective class teacher by the head, and many times I witnessed her in control of the class and bringing unruly behaviour to a halt in an instant. Furthermore, this discourse about reading was fully acknowledged by the school. A parent-reading scheme was in operation, in order to support parents in helping their children to read. A well-known footballer had visited the school to share his enthusiasm for reading with the children. Visits to the library were organized. The school had invested in providing non-fiction books and other books particularly intended to appeal to boys. Pedagogy for reading came from the National Literacy Strategy as implemented in the Literacy Hour; for instance shared reading of big books on the carpet.

In the case of the Rushford classroom it appeared to me that the children as a group could influence the ways in which the teacher chose to work (supporting Baker, 1991; Comber, 1993; Dyson, 1993, 1997; Thrupp, 1997, 1998). As Metz (1990) says:

> teaching is an interactive endeavour; it requires making connections with students. If their attitudes and skills vary substantially so must the content and style of teachers’ work with them. Accordingly the very nature of teachers’ work varies with their students and so with the social class of the communities from which students come, even when teachers’ own training or initial skills are similar. (Metz, 1990: 99)

Meta-discourse about reading and school-mix effect

From a social practice perspective, the discourse about reading was embedded in socioculturally defined classroom membership and their texts and practices (Gee, 1999: 23). Thus, from this perspective, children’s discourse and practices, including their discourses and practices about reading, are part of the classroom social practice. From this perspective the inability of the children to negotiate nationally expected classrooms norms is not put down to their innate inability or to a sometimes assumed
experience of poor teaching, but is viewed as imbuing from and in irreducible tension with their socioculturally defined group and commonly experienced social practices, both inside and outside of the classroom. This then begs the question: can children’s discourse and practices result in qualitatively different conditions for teaching and learning?

Although the present study cannot provide definitive proof that the Rushford classroom social practice of teaching and learning operated under qualitatively different conditions compared with the other two schools, the possibility that classrooms in some communities, where attainment is poor and teaching is criticized, operate under qualitatively different conditions for teaching and learning is surely worth pursuing. Mac An Ghaill (1996) makes the point that it is no coincidence that sink schools are invariably found in areas of high deprivation. If this is the case there are implications for ‘what works’ research. What works in 9 out of 10 schools may not work in the 1 in 10.

The Rushford Year Three class operated within a curriculum in which there was an assumption that the children would be able to read independently. However, for many of the children this was simply not so, with the majority having a reading age below six years of age. These low levels of literacy shared by most of the children put classroom practice in tension with the curriculum for their age group. The assumption of literacy at Key Stage 2 has been identified as problematic in previous literature, especially in relation to children with special educational needs, and others have come to similar conclusions through a focus on the National Literary Strategy ‘Literacy Hour’.

Based on an activity theoretical perspective analysis, learning the curriculum was in contradiction with both the ‘tools’ (language and literacy skills) with which children were expected to access the expected curriculum and with the collective cultural norms of the children (rules). This appeared to have a knock-on effect in relation to the dynamics of classroom practice and brought other inherent contradictions into the system; for example, ways of teaching and organizing the class (taken here as division of labour) had not been employed as the teacher attempted to negotiate the ‘curriculum contradiction’. If children’s discourses and practices can lead to a qualitatively different activity system for teaching and learning (using Thrupp’s terms there is a school-mix effect), then the present study suggests that their discourse and practice about reading is, at least, a contributing factor (see also Moll and Gonzalez, 1994).

Apart from a need to connect better with children’s classed, gendered, and ethniced home-lives (as Hicks and others have argued, but see in particular McIntyre et al., 2001), this suggests a relaxing of the focus on
learning through media for the literate in classrooms where school-literacy levels are very low. Alternatively visual and aural communication tools, e.g. video recordings or a mixture of visual and sound technology for computers, might provide a means of engaging more children in classroom learning for more of the time, especially when the majority of the class do not have the literacy skills assumed in the design of the curriculum.

I suggest that it is when the meta-discourse of children in a classroom is in contradiction with a school’s discourse (which acts to maintain the hegemonic values of policy makers, and more widely held societal views about school) that a struggle can exist between the children (as representing local community values and norms) and the teacher (as the implementer of policy and upholder of the cultural values and practices idealized in the school), supporting Thrupp (1997). If the teacher remains dominant (the most significant powerful agent in the practice) then this struggle may be obscured and become difficult to identify. In other classrooms the children’s agency in struggle may be noticed more readily.

However, that children may influence the ways in which teachers choose to work, sometimes in ways they say they would rather avoid, has sometimes been reduced to social class. Although the case of the Rushford classroom appeared to support the existence of this often referred to ‘school-mix’ phenomenon, in the present inquiry there was another case study school with a high proportion of children from working class families (St Joseph’s), but yet a school-mix effect was not readily noticed there. So there seems to be a danger in making crude distinctions of social class when describing classrooms. A focus on children’s meta-discourse about something that carries significance in the classroom, arguably such as their meta-discourse about reading, may provide a better fit.

Perhaps a school-mix effect is noticeable only in particular kinds of working-class communities, perhaps where people are especially marginalized and distanced from dominant forms of education, which may explain why research using the available crude descriptors of social class has failed to find school-mix. Perhaps a school-mix type effect only becomes meaningful when the children do not, or cannot, fit with the normal expectations of school as institution; for instance when pedagogic culture remains in contradiction with the demands of the curriculum, and typically used pedagogies, which have been found to work in many schools, such as peer tutoring or quiet reading time, are not believed by those involved to transfer effectively to the learning context in question. The present research supports Moll and Gonzalez (1994) and suggests that children’s classroom literacy may be decisive in mediating
non-dominant forms of classroom pedagogies (which sometimes are considered as inferior, e.g. by OfSTED) when there is an unrealized expectation in the curriculum that most children have access through their school-based literacies. The research of Lauder et al. (2002) is also supportive of this argument and suggests that schools where more than 50 per cent of children are in receipt of free school meals may indeed require different pedagogies to the majority of schools. More research is needed.

The inquiry highlighted that community discourse about reading can, at least sometimes, be reproduced in the classroom. It is, however, stressed that discourse about reading is in part a product of a particular pedagogy. However, the point at issue here is that classroom pedagogy can also be shaped by children in some circumstances. I do not mean to imply that where the social backgrounds of teachers and children differ there can be no common discourse in the classroom. Sites of emergent emancipatory discourse have been identified in the literature (see McIntyre et al., 2001); however, the present research suggested that such emancipatory discourse where a hybridity of community and school discourse is transformative may be rare; certainly I did not witness such practice during my year of observation. I do suggest, however, that radical solutions are required at policy level and that the resources required to tackle crucial problems for education and society for schools operating in difficult and different circumstances may have been underestimated: community discourse can be very powerful and is deep-rooted, even at seven and eight years of age.

Perhaps it was not so surprising that there was little emancipatory teaching in evidence in any of the case study classrooms; such is the stranglehold in Britain of the audit culture (Stronach et al., 2002) and a ‘what works’ agenda for education. Indeed, in the present study, despite the expressed wish of the Rushford School teacher to value the community culture of the children within the classroom, she was reluctant to do this in a radical way. There is a danger that non-emancipatory practices in schools operating in difficult circumstances may contribute to a continuing deficit view of teachers in such schools. Instead, I chose to emphasize the strength of educational policy to mediate classroom pedagogy. It should not be down to individual teachers to resist the norms and so act in ways they may perceive as being publicly non-legitimate or subversive. So long as emancipatory pedagogies are in the hands of non-conformists only a minority of children will gain the benefits, which it is fully acknowledged are also largely untested: more research is needed.
Conclusion

The research found that at least for younger children (e.g. of seven and eight years of age) there are competing discourses about reading. The one main discourse was described as feminized, gendered and misaligned with the expectations of school. The other discourse (aligned with school discourse) appeared not to discriminate against boys in relation to school, and reading was viewed equally as an activity for girls and boys.

The case of the Rushford School classroom provides a counter-example, demonstrating the misaligned with school discourse in some communities. Most of the seven- and eight-year-old boys there did not report enjoyment of reading and some reported not being able to read, significantly above the national average of 25 per cent reported by Brooks et al. (1996). Such negative views about reading were in evidence at a younger age than suggested by much of the literature, which suggests that below 10 years of age children usually enjoy reading. This suggests that discourse and cultural practices about reading are uneven geographically and are polarized in some communities. Furthermore, this case verifies an important gender–social class interaction in children’s reading practices, even at seven and eight years of age.

On the other hand, the case of the Beckensby School classroom (middle-class classroom, 5 per cent free school meals) shows the majority group of boys identifying positively with reading. Thus, an alternative position about reading was demonstrated in the article, supporting Clark and Foster’s (1995) finding that children in receipt of free school meals were the only group found statistically to be significantly more likely to describe reading as being more suitable for girls than for boys.

An advantage of a theoretical stance, which foregrounds discourse and practice within case study research, is that it can capture at least a degree of the materiality of class in relation to reading, more so than in survey studies. Appropriately chosen case studies can then complement larger demographic studies. For instance, although Clark and Foster (2005) usefully detail differences in children’s attitudes to reading based on receipt of free school meals, a widely acknowledged best available but crude measure of social class, such studies cannot capture the mediation of socio-culture on attitudes or behaviours. The present study suggests that the misaligned discourse about reading (at least for seven- and eight-year-old children) is more deeply rooted and extends beyond the least affluent of the working classes. For instance, in Rushford School over 50 per cent of the children were in receipt of free school meals and in St Joseph’s 13 per cent but yet this gender divisive discourse about reading was dominant in both settings.
In addition, prolonged engagement in the field enabled an analysis of classroom pedagogic culture. It was put forward that the intensity of this discourse can in some circumstances influence classroom practices and decisions taken by the teacher, supporting the existence of a school-mix effect. Discourse about reading may be a contributing decisive factor. The existence of school-mix has been widely contested and it is suggested here that a cultural analysis of children’s discourse and practice can contribute to the debate through further case study research.

Survey studies often prioritize their normative findings in publications, and hence there is a danger that the views of those who are more atypical can easily become lost within a process of averaging. If it were so that those with atypical views were evenly distributed among the population under examination then the averaging process would not be so much of concern. However, when views that are representative of localized sociocultural influences are bypassed in research then a very real possibility emerges that views of whole communities go unrepresented.

Larger scale comparative longitudinal multiple case study research is called for (see also Nasir and Saxe, 2003), which tracks children’s developing identities as readers from pre-school and takes account of macro level factors of social difference, such as social class and/or ethnicity. More research conducted in classrooms in our most socially disadvantaged communities is required to understand better the circumstances in which local community discourses and practices can influence classroom processes and practices.

Notes
1. Attention is given particularly to the context of the Rushford School given the prominence of the case study in this article.

References


Correspondence to:
PAULINE DAVIS, School of Education, University of Manchester, Humanities Building (Devas Street), Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.
[email: pauline.davis@manchester.ac.uk]