

Karen E. Wohlwend

Dilemmas and Discourses of Learning to Write: Assessment as a Contested Site

A critical look at writing assessment as social, cultural, and political activity reveals how overlapping “discourses of learning to write” set up contradictory expectations for appropriate literacy users that shape how teachers assess children’s writing.

A small five-year-old with a serious expression chews on her thumbnail as she looks over the center choices on the classroom pocket chart. Making a decision, Ashley places her name card in the last empty slot under an index card with “Writing” carefully printed in manuscript letters. She heads for a low rectangular table warmed by winter sunshine and joins a noisy group of kindergarten writers already busy drawing stories. (Fieldnotes, December 9)

At writing tables like this one in kindergarten classrooms across the country, children draw, chat, write, and discover how they are expected to act and who they are expected to become as authors and students, expectations that drive writing assessment and depend upon prevalent, often tacitly held beliefs about how children learn to write. For example, federal mandates circulate a vision of a uniform sequence of writing progress that promotes sets of standardized benchmarks and rubrics to enforce a “one-size-fits-all” set of expectations for the sequence and timing of children’s writing development (e.g., NCLB, 2002). Although pervasive and hegemonic, this explanation of incremental increases in skill proficiencies is only one among many available “discourses of learning to write” (Ivanič, 2004) that teachers actively apply as they make sense of changes in children’s mark-making and storytelling. A critical look at writing assessment as social, cultural, and political activity reveals how each discourse sets up expectations for appropriate literacy users that shape how teachers assess, and ultimately how children participate in, classroom writing experiences. From this perspective, writing assessment is a contested site where competing discourses overlap and invoke conflicting expectations, creating dilemmas for teachers who want to do what they believe is best for children and fulfill their school’s writing targets. I argue that we need to look closely at assessment quandaries to

see surface dilemmas as clashes between overlapping discourses, and to free ourselves to work with and against institutions that create the dilemmas and their immobilizing effects. To illustrate how competing discourses generate assessment dilemmas, I present data examples selected from emergent writing activity by a group of children at a kindergarten writing table (raw data, 2003), looking closely at the students’ and teacher’s actions through the lenses of several prevalent discourses that explain early writing development: maturation discourse, skills mastery discourse, intentionality discourse, multimodal genre discourse, social practices discourse, and sociopolitical discourse (adapted from Ivanič, 2004; see Fig. 1).

WRITING ASSESSMENT AS DISCURSIVE ACTIVITY

The jumble of physical activity at a table full of five-year-olds as they laugh and make colorful marks on paper generates numerous possible interpretations. To assess and respond to students’ writing, teachers interpret mediated actions (Wertsch, 1991)—isolated actions with a literacy tool or material—according to the writing practices they value. Mediated actions are “real time, concrete, here-and-now act[s]” with physical objects that make up the social practices recognized as the accepted ways of doing things in a particular classroom (Scollon, 2001a, p. 25). For example, a young child writing a birthday greeting card might use simultaneous mediated actions: holding a crayon, folding paper, writing a mark to indicate a greeting, scribbling circles to represent a birthday cake, or singing and playing with words in a familiar phrase (“Happy Bir-bird-day”). The action of scribbling circles on a folded paper is construed as “immature prewriting” or “off-task behavior” in some classrooms, while in other classrooms, it constitutes a valued literacy

Discourse	Definition of Writing	Positioning of the Child	Positioning of the Teacher	Assessment Focus
Maturation	Depends on theories of child development that lay out a chronological sequence of internal, mental maturation	Pre-literate subjects who are not ready to write	Prevent premature exposure to literacy practices; teachers substitute prewriting activities such as stencil tracing	Signs of “readiness,” including fine motor dexterity and letter naming and recognition
Skills Mastery	Circulates through government mandates for accountability and standardization that require demonstrations of skill competency and displays of content knowledge	Students who follow directions complete their work using correct letter sequence, expected letter strokes, and body posture	Technicians who diagnose and remediate through repeated practice on letter recognition, name writing	School tasks to fit benchmarks and rubrics that evaluate and rank students according to mainstream norms
Intentionality	Draws on constructivist psychological theories that value children’s intention to create social messages	Active learners who invent graphic forms to suit their own purposes: invented spellings and syllable markers	Kidwatchers who celebrate what children <i>can</i> do, encourage exploration, and facilitate approximation in a print-rich environment	Evidence of repeated hypothesizing in a natural progression toward conventional forms
Multimodal Genres	Examines multimodal meaning-making motivated by the aptness of materials at hand and social interest	Designers who make certain modes or qualities more dominant to best represent their meanings	Mediators who look for meaning within children’s designs and make curricular space for out-of-school literacies	Simultaneous use of texture, color, shape, sound and action to carry messages, including drawings, oral narratives, play, gestures, and gaze
Social Practices	Values two-way mediation and the co-construction of story meanings in a collective zone of proximal development	Novices who write to carry out social functions to participate in culture: engaging peers, creating social bonds	Culturally responsive mentors who actively learn about children’s family and community literacies; peer culture	Uses of writing that enable children to build social relationships and to participate in classroom, family, or community events
Sociopolitical	Challenges the way literacy instruction masks its ideological effects by treating language as an apparently neutral set of objects and rules to be acquired	Children who perform literacy identities (writing friends, rule followers) as ways of belonging in the classroom	Change agents who look critically at children’s interactions for exclusionary practices and who work with the entire group to include marginalized children	Children’s social activity that includes rather than excludes peers; teacher self-critical awareness that challenges literacy routines with isolating effects (e.g., classroom rules, pull-out flash card drills)

Figure 1.

practice, “approximated writing” (Whitmore, Goodman, Martens, & Owocki, 2004).

Whether scribbling counts as literacy depends upon the discourses that count in a particular classroom. When children enter kindergarten, they encounter multiple “discourses of writing and learning to write” (Ivanič, 2004), rather than a monolithic vision of school literacy. A *discourse* is a way of using words and actions that indexes a set of beliefs and an affiliation with a particular social group (Gee, 1996), in this case, a way of interpreting children’s actions with literacy tools and

materials according to elementary teachers’ beliefs about literacy learning. For example, in one discourse of learning to write, changes in children’s writing signal progress along a linear continuum in which children naturally and unproblematically develop increasing competence over literacy behaviors; however, in another discourse, the same changes are measured against benchmarks of a standardized literacy in which deviation from the norm signals deficits in learning ability.

Since classrooms are nested in schools, communities, and governments that each circulate particular

discourses, classrooms are also nested in layers of discourses. When overlapping discourses generate opposing interpretations of writing development, literacy teachers are caught in societal dilemmas that are insolvable by individual action (Lundell & Beach, 2002). One dilemma occurs in literacy classrooms when professional literature promotes student-led learning and holistic process-oriented assessment, but accountability mandates ratchet up demands for direct instruction and isolated skills tests (Dyson, 2007; Ohanian, 2002). When what counts as growth and change in writing varies among multiple discourses in a single classroom, individual teachers are charged with the impossible task of resolving irreconcilable ideological differences. In this article, I suggest that dilemmas caused by conflicting assessment expectations open a window that allows us to see how teachers and children are positioned by underlying discourses. Recognition is the first step toward critiquing these sites of teacher frustration and transforming them into sites of teacher agency.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The featured vignettes in this essay are excerpted from videotape data collected during a three-year study of children's literacy and play in early childhood classrooms. Through purposive sampling of three school communities, I located kindergarten classrooms with plentiful opportunities to observe child-directed literacy play and peer-to-peer interactions. This article features one kindergarten class of 25 children in a public K–5 elementary school in a suburban school district in the US Midwest. The selected literacy events involved five European American children—Ashley, Sarah, Lawson, Travis, and Amanda—and one African American child, Jamal. (All names are pseudonyms.) Diane Foster, their teacher, was a middle-aged European American woman with six years of kindergarten experience and a master's degree in early childhood education. She described herself as a developmentally appropriate (Bredenkamp, 1987) constructivist teacher.

In weekly visits to Diane's classroom, I recorded children's interactions during literacy centers, writers' workshop, and free play periods using fieldnotes, photographs, audiotapes, and videotapes. Following these sessions, Diane often

offered her perspective on the children's activity, her analysis of their writing samples, or her concerns about meeting children's developmental needs as well as school district expectations. In one informal interview, Diane viewed and responded to excerpts of children's videotaped literacy-play, discussing the activity in terms of her beliefs about literacy development and constructivist teaching. As Diane openly shared her frustration and concerns, our discussions came to resemble the impromptu problem-solving sessions that pop up as teachers congregate outside

When overlapping discourses generate opposing interpretations of writing development, literacy teachers are caught in societal dilemmas that are insolvable by individual action.

classroom doors at the end of the school day. Our teacher/researcher collaboration was limited and strengthened by our commonalities: race, age, gender, rural midwestern histories, and teaching experiences as kindergarten teachers.

To examine assessment as discursive interpretation of children's writing activity, I located events in the videotaped data that met two criteria: 1) writing activity that occurred during interaction among a group of children and 2) a related action or interpretation by Diane that demonstrated a concern regarding children's writing. Points of conflict and resonance across the dominant discourses were identified through critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) of a videotaped discussion among kindergarten and first-grade teachers in this school (Wohlwend, 2007b). Mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001b) of classroom interaction identified the overlapping discourses that shaped Diane's interpretations of children's writing development and, ultimately, their participation in this classroom.

In each of the following six sections, a data excerpt illustrates how a discourse of learning to write differentially positions children within a group of kindergarten writers at the writing table in Diane's classroom. Next, I identify the local institutional structure that circulated the discourse that shaped Diane's assessments and children's access to literacy practices and classroom participation.

Maturation Discourse: Writing when Mentally and Physically Ready

Picking up a yellow marker and holding it firmly in her fist, Ashley vigorously scrubs a full sheet of blank paper with large overlapping circular motions until the damp paper wears away in several places.

Diane followed school district kindergarten entrance screening guidelines to interpret Ashley's frenzy of mark-making as an indication that she was not quite ready for kindergarten writing activities.

... she's young. And there were so many social and immaturity things that were in the way before, and now she's just starting to, she's picking it up. (Diane, interview data)

The notion of readiness for literacy depends upon theories of child development that lay out a chronological sequence of internal mental maturation (Gesell 1928; Hall, 1883). Maturation discourse constructs young children as pre-literate subjects who are not ready to write. To prevent premature exposure to literacy practices, teachers substitute prewriting activities, such as stencil tracing or shape manipulation. Although decades have passed since researchers first challenged the notion of biological readiness for literacy instruction (Clay, 1975), traces of maturation discourse still linger in early childhood practice (IRA & NAEYC, 1998/2004), particularly evident in kindergarten entrance screening and grade-retention policies (Graue, 1993; West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000). In this case, Diane monitored Ashley's writing, looking for signs of "readiness"—fine motor dexterity, visual discrimination between letter-like forms, letter naming recognition, and phonemic awareness (Yopp, 1988)—as measured through decontextualized skills performances or standardized tests (e.g., screening tools such as Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning, Mardell-Czudnowski & Goldenberg, 1998). Through maturation discourse, Ashley's writing is interpreted as random scribbling rather than meaning-bearing messages or aesthetic expression. Her use of large print and circular motions are read as precursors to her writing ability and evidence of a prewriting developmental stage, signaling a need for activities with manipulatives or playdough to develop finger muscles (e.g., Marr, Windsor, & Cermak, 2001).

Maturation discourse led Diane to note Ashley's whole-fisted grasp on her marker, documenting it on a school district checklist of signs of developmental immaturity and adding it to a collection of evidence that constructs Ashley as a learner who needs an additional year "to grow" in kindergarten before moving on to first grade. In maturation discourse, teachers identify "develop-

mental delays" and forecast a child's potential to "catch up" during the remaining months of kindergarten. Although Diane believed Ashley could succeed in kindergarten, she felt Ashley would be "just too young" to "sit all day" in a seatwork-oriented first grade. Here, time-dependent duties in two discourses created a dilemma: in order to fulfill maturational discourse expectations, Diane needed to protect Ashley from stress and potential failure by staving off premature skills instruction, but to meet skills mastery discourse expectations, she needed to help Ashley "catch up" to kindergarten benchmarks before the end of the school year.

Skills Mastery Discourse: Writing Correctly through Practice

Snatching a paper from a stack of blank paper at the center of the table, Ashley stabs a short staccato of two-inch letters across the top with a chubby red marker.

As EeL.Y~

She traces a finger across her letters and, satisfied with their arrangement, picks up a green marker and adds several short curved lines.

Diane was concerned that Ashley could not print her name correctly, a September writing benchmark that was months overdue. District benchmarks spotlighted the places where Ashley's writing diverged from the conventional spelling of her name, such as its missing, surplus, and misplaced letters and its errant capitals. Skills

In maturation discourse, teachers identify "developmental delays" and forecast a child's potential to "catch up" during the remaining months of kindergarten.

mastery discourse circulates through government mandates for accountability and standardization (NCLB, 2002), requiring teachers to evaluate and rank students according to the degree to which learners' skill

performances adhere to mainstream norms. In this autonomous view of literacy (Street, 1995), writing is an ideologically neutral school task through which children demonstrate skill competency or display content knowledge, rather than communicate personal meanings or carry out social functions (Bloome, Katz, Wilson-Keenan, & Solsken, 2000; Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Mehan, 1979; Street & Street, 1991). Learners are expected to follow teacher directions and complete their work in conventionally accurate ways. In this discourse, teachers are technicians: Diane diagnosed Ashley's activity as an inaccurate attempt at writing her

name, accompanied by off-task and unproductive scribbling, so she had Ashley repeatedly practice writing her name until she could independently and reliably reproduce the correct letter sequence using the expected letter strokes and body posture.

Failure to reach the report card benchmarks led to material consequences not only for Ashley, but also for Diane. Each quarter, children's writing samples were collected, sent to a central administration center, and scored according to a writing rubric. Scored samples and class averages were compared at faculty meetings for Annual Yearly Progress problem-solving where low scores generated suggestions for improvement for individual teachers and/or their students.

It's frustrating. When you're sitting there with a group of colleagues, and their children are receiving 3s, 4s, and 5s and your children are receiving 2s, it's discouraging. . . . They look at "Are they using capital letters [at the beginning of a sentence] and periods?" (Diane interview, video data, April 20)

Diane felt compelled to "get the kids to the benchmarks," both to help her students succeed and to avoid a reputation as an ineffective teacher or uncooperative colleague. In compliance with recommendations from the "Teacher Assistance Team," a school committee that made retention, remediation, and special education placement decisions, Diane removed Ashley from play activities for one-on-one flash card sessions to practice letter recognition and sessions with parent volunteers to practice name writing; she documented changes in Ashley's accuracy on a daily progress skills checklist. She commented, "I know it's developmentally inappropriate, but I've got to do it."

Intentionality Discourse: Writing Individually in a Social Environment

Across the table, Sarah folds a paper in half and picks up a marker. She mouths the words "Happy Birthday," stretching the sounds out slowly as she writes

APEBDD AH.

Ashley copies Sarah's example and some of her letter choices to create a birthday card of her own:

AE~AE~BD~D A

"It doesn't got any H." Leaning over, Sarah adds an H to the string of letters on Ashley's

paper. "You make it like this. I got a H. See." She points to the last letter in her name.

"I got one of those. I got my own." Looking down at her name, Ashley notices that there is no H and squeezes the missing letter into her name.

As^HEel.Y~

Diane appreciated Sarah's independence in writing. In contrast, she worried when Ashley copied other children's writing rather than inventing spellings or producing a text to suit her own purposes. Diane's educational coursework incorporated intentionality discourse that celebrates what children *can* do and values their intention to create social messages over their accurate mimicking of conventional forms. Intentionality discourse draws on constructivist psychological theories (Piaget, 1951/1999; Vygotsky, 1934/1962) that conceptualize children as active learners who invent their own literacy through repeated hypothesizing and exploration within print-rich and responsive environments in a natural progression toward conventional forms. Acting as a kidwatcher (Owocki & Goodman, 2002)—a teacher who closely observes children's meaning-making activity with the literacy environment—Diane noted Sarah's logical reasoning in matching segmented phonemic information to graphic forms (Kamii & Manning, 2002) that resulted in invented spelling of a string of consonants. Careful kidwatching (Goodman, 1978) also revealed Ashley's invention of markers of space between syllables (Owocki & Y. Goodman, 2002), her formulation of a hypothesis that syllables require at least two letters (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Tolchinsky, 2003), the social cooperation that prompted a new topic and exploration of a greeting card format, and the disequilibrium caused by the discrepancy of a missing letter (Martens, 1996; Tolchinsky, 2003).

Early literacy teachers are caught in a tension between accountability mandates and intentionality discourse (Wohlwend, 2008). Diane tried to reconcile the need to meet district benchmarks for phonetic spellings (on the March writing sample, children were to record first and last sounds in words) and her beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice that encouraged exploration. She facilitated Sarah's and Ashley's writing by focusing on phonetic matching in approximated spelling, urging children to "stretch it out" (that is, to say a word slowly in order to record its sounds with representative letters), and to use classmates' names as models.

Now it's internal. And they're making the connections themselves. . . . I gave them the base of, "We're going to learn beginning sounds by connecting with names," and they've carried that through with Heather and the /er/. (Diane, interview data)

Although Diane included a kindergarten writing center and some elements of a writing workshop in her classroom, her assessments focused on documenting children's increasing independence and proficiency in using graphophonic information, rather than children's use of multiple genres or meaningful text-making. Our research collaboration produced a dilemma as Diane began to see a discrepancy between the meaning-oriented learner-driven goals of writing workshop and her phonics-focused assessment.

Multimodal Genres Discourse: Writing Strategically across Modes

Lawson draws a picture of squirrels, "There's squirrels in my attic and they scratch the walls and they were in a cage" The children continue to draw and write as they talk. Lawson adds details to his squirrel drawing, finally pausing to note, "Guess what? I have an attic but it has no floor."

Instantly, Travis suggests, "Put your dog up there then." This incongruous suggestion prompts a joke from Amanda. "Put your dog up and it will fall. It will fall right into your bedroom." The children, giggling at the image of a dog falling out of a bedroom ceiling, burst into full-blown hilarity when Travis adds, "Hey, maybe you could put your dog up on the roof!"

Returning to his paper, Lawson writes bLst Af to caption the mass of squirrels, now flying out of the floorless attic. He stands up to hold out both arms, offering an imaginary object to Travis. "Blast off! Here you go! I'll put a jet pack on you. Bpplppbhh! You're blasted out of the room."

Travis pantomimes his acceptance of the jet pack, "I can float in space. I got space practice. Space practice helps you float in space."

Although Diane recognized drawing as a valid means of recording ideas, she worried that Lawson's interest in drawing prevented him from writing longer pieces of connected text. Multimodal genre discourse offers an alternate view. In our

teacher-researcher conversations, I admired the children's flexible use of mode in their writings or *Designs* (Kress, 2003a). Children simultaneously used texture, color, shape, sound, and action to carry messages (Kress, 1997), making certain modes or qualities more dominant to best represent their meanings (Dyson, 2003; Galas, 1994; Kendrick & Mckay, 2004; Leland & Harste, 1994). Lawson's drawings and oral narratives prompted play that included noise-making to simulate the rumbling of a jet engine, and gestures and gaze to pantomime strapping on a

In [multimodal] discourse, teachers . . . make curricular space for out-of school literacies, including kindergarten jokes, popular culture, toys, plays, and video games.

jet pack—a catalytic moment of dramatization that launched a new story direction. Multimodal genre discourse values multimodal meaning-making over neatly printed forms; children's designs are motivated by the aptness of the materi-

als at hand for conveying their meaning rather than adherence to print-centric genre conventions (Kress, 2003b). In this discourse, teachers look for meaning within children's designs, provide demonstrations of strategies and mediation of multimodal genres, and make curricular space for out-of school literacies, including kindergarten jokes, popular culture, toys, plays, and video games. However, Diane's standards-driven assessment tools did not recognize multimodal activity.

Although Diane allowed children to talk and play as they wrote stories, she felt constrained by overpowering skills mastery discourse. She implemented a "draw first, then write" approach to writing: children could draw pictures, but Diane insisted that they switch to print at a certain point. She often urged them to write more but rarely to draw more, keeping a wary eye on district benchmarks that measured the number of words/sentences children produced, punctuation, accurate spelling of "known words" from the word wall, and independent topic selection. Even though Diane valued her students' writing, she felt disadvantaged when administrators compared her class writing scores with other teachers:

. . . because I really felt [children in other teachers' classes] were receiving 4s and 5s based on quantity. . . . and actually my children were [writing sentences] but they only had one sentence. They had spaces, they generated their own topic, they used known words, and they were stretching words

out. They can get anywhere from a 0 to a 6 [on the rubric]. The sentence “I can clen up my room.” received a 2. (Diane, interview data)

Social Practices Discourse: Writing Socially in a Community of Practice

Amanda turns to Travis, “What’s that say?”

Travis clutches his paper to his chest, “You can’t see it.” He looks at Amanda with mock severity. “If you look at my paper, I will be SO disappointed.”

Amanda leans forward, trying to peek at the print on the page. “Can I see it?”

“No!” Travis’s refusal to show his paper seems uncooperative. However, Amanda correctly interprets it as an invitation to play and begins guessing words. “I know . . . Travis!”

Travis doles out a hint. “It’s not just my name on here.” To his delight, a short game evolves that draws in all the writers at the table as everyone tries to guess what is printed on the hidden paper. After the children make several unsuccessful guesses, Travis holds out his paper to show the print, but with the same gambit, “If you start reading it, I’ll be SO disappointed.” Immediately, Sarah reads, “Travis’s book!”

Travis groans, “OoH NO! I’m so disappointed!” and his audience bursts into laughter.

“Travis’s book,” Ashley repeats. She begins printing several letters on her page, which she will later use to engage others in a similar hidden message guessing game.

Diane valued the collaborative learning prompted by this impromptu guessing game at the writing table and provided daily opportunities for peer mediation as well as teacher mediation designed to fit into each child’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1935/1978). Social practice discourse describes a recursive cycle in which two-way mediation between the child and others in the social and cultural environment creates a zone of proximal development, a space where mentors facilitate as novices learn literacy to mediate the environment (Rowe, 2008). In her graduate studies, Diane encountered sociocultural theories of early literacy development that value the co-construction of story meanings (Göncü, 1993) in a collective zone of proximal development (Moll

& Whitmore, 1993), the role of peer culture (Cor-saro, 2003), and (kindergarten) humor in engaging peers and creating a social bond (Dyson, 1989). Social practice discourse holds that even young children write to carry out social functions (K. Goodman, 1986; Halliday, 1975; Wells, 1986) in ways that are culturally embedded (Heath, 1983; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Taylor, 1983; Toohey, 2000). In this discourse, mediators are culturally responsive teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) who actively learn about children’s family and community literacies, encourage children to incorporate their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), and ensure that a variety of storytelling styles are supported.

In past years, Diane organized her curriculum around inquiry themes that actively sought family contributions and parent participation. However, when the school district mandated the use of a commercial reading program that required each child to spend 15 minutes per day working individually on tracked reading software, Diane dropped her inquiry themes to accommodate the increased time for skills instruction and monitoring of computer stations.

In [social practice] discourse, mediators are culturally responsive teachers . . . who actively learn about children’s family and community literacies.

Sociopolitical Discourse: Enacting a Writing Identity in an Ideological World

Jamal, the only African American child in this classroom, is attracted by the laughter and storytelling by the five regulars at the writing table. He walks over to join the group, but there are no empty chairs, a signal that the center is “closed.” Jamal knows from past experience that challenging the “five only” capacity rule will only bring Diane or her teacher associate to enforce the rule and to perhaps remove Jamal for daily letter recognition practice. Instead, he stands by the table and attempts to engage children in a guessing game that approximates a popular classroom letter guessing game, “Hangman.” He picks up a marker and draws a few lines at the top of a nearby whiteboard. Jamal repeatedly calls out “Lookit. Lookit.” But the five children at the table do not respond; no one even glances in his direction. Finally, after 5 minutes, Jamal writes several letters on the whiteboard. “Lookit. Is that a lot?”

Lawson turns around and replies, “No,” and turns back to the table.

Jamal counters, "Yes, it is."

"Whatever." Again, Lawson turns back to the table.

Jamal tries another tack. He draws a series of blank lines along the bottom of the whiteboard and asks Lawson, "What letter is it?"

"M," Lawson guesses.

"Nope. What else?"

"L."

"No."

Lawson objects, "You got to write the letter on it." Lawson comes up to the whiteboard and shows Jamal where to write "L" to record an errant guess.

They continue the guessing game with Jamal prompting "What else?" and "One more."

As Lawson guesses E, A, C, T, and H, Jamal writes each letter on the blank lines. Finally Jamal asks, "What is that word?"

"I don't know it." Lawson replies.

On the surface, the children were following established classroom procedures, focusing on the writing at hand and not purposely ignoring or excluding Jamal. However, when analyzed within the histories of the local classroom context, the raced effects of the social actions within this literacy practice become clear. Over the course of the year, the other five children seated at the writing table formed an inclusive peer group who regularly met at the writing table to engage in the highly social and collaborative approximated writing described in previous vignettes. The books and greeting cards that they created together held significant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) in the classroom as they wrote friends' names into their books or gave away greeting cards as gifts. On the other hand, it took considerable perseverance and several overture strategies for Jamal to catch even one child's attention and engage Lawson in his approximated guessing game. Further, the letter-guessing goal and the immateriality of his game resembled the remedial isolated letter practice that took him away from the social life of the classroom and out into the hallway each day: at the end of Jamal's hangman game, the board was wiped clean and he had no textual product to use to connect with other children or to share in author's chair.

Literacy acquisition is not a neutral process, especially in school settings (Street, 1995; Bar-

ton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996). Sociopolitical discourse challenges the way literacy instruction masks its ideological effects by treating language as an apparently neutral set of objects and rules to be acquired (e.g., Jamal's pull-out practice session on isolated letters and sounds). Sociopolitical awareness recognizes that children's social status is affected by their perceived literacy abilities or deficits (Christian & Bloome, 2004), so that children who perform well on classroom literacy tasks have more access to learning and more friends on the playground. In this classroom, Jamal's literacy abilities placed him outside the writers' group, phys-

In sociopolitical discourse, teachers look critically at children's interactions to understand how exclusionary practices are enabled by seemingly neutral school routines.

ically and socially: he had to physically leave the classroom for remedial daily letter identification practice, and he was socially shunned at the writing table where phonetic proficiency was highly prized. When he attempted to join their writ-

ing activity, the children exploited a classroom rule to maintain social exclusion. In sociopolitical discourse, teachers look critically at children's interactions to understand how exclusionary practices are enabled by seemingly neutral school routines (Wohlwend, 2007a). A critical look at the children's writing table activity in this scenario detects power inequities in the children's invocation of school authority: children who were perceived to be good students and writers were able to wield classroom rules and even recruit the teacher's help in closing off their group—and access to literacy learning—to an already marginalized child. A sociopolitical lens reveals the raced implications of Jamal's remedial practice (Manyak, 2004; Stipek, 2004), which produced an instructional segregation that kept Jamal, an African American child, at the periphery of the primarily White kindergarten community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Although Diane's early childhood coursework included community-building activities, she did not recognize the children's practices at the writing table as exclusionary. In an autonomous view of literacy, it seemed logical to use play time for practice in letter naming and formation because she felt Jamal needed adult support to learn.

If Jamal had [the word game] independently, it would be play. Because he wouldn't be able to do the work . . . because the goal of the game is to make words. (Diane, interview data)

In this case, there was no dilemma for Diane. She did not recognize that these interventions marked Jamal as less competent than his peers in the children's classroom culture and decreased his access to valued literacy practices with other children (Christian & Bloome, 2004). Sociopolitical discourse expects teachers to work with the entire group to include marginalized children, recognizing that the pull-out drill practice not only privileges a narrow and possibly debilitating schooled literacy task, but also marks specific students' literacy performances as deficient; in Jamal's case, he was deprived of collaborative story-weaving experiences at the writing table and, based on his literacy level, was denied full access to cultural capital in this community of practice.

HOW DILEMMAS KEEP THINGS IN PLACE

The dilemmas that Diane faced consistently emphasized the imperative of reaching literacy skills targets, diverting her attention away from children's social practices and power relationships. Maturation discourse and skills mastery discourse both revolve around the necessity of meeting standards; they merely differ in approach: maturation discourse seeks to protect children from forecasted failure and advocates more time to grow; skills mastery discourse expects teachers to identify targets and for children to reach them with sufficient effort and practice. An awareness of underlying discourses might help teachers like Diane understand how we are recruited to help construct Ashley's "immaturity" and Jamal's "skill deficits." We might see how these constructions keep two children on the periphery of the classroom community of practice by reinscribing *on a daily basis* what they can't do in relation to a set of normalizing benchmarks.

Teachers of young children find themselves "between a rock and a hard place" as they attempt to resolve the impossibility of fulfilling expectations of developmentally appropriate practice and meeting the academic goals of elementary educational systems (Goldstein, 1997). Although Diane encouraged children to play while they wrote and to "draw to get started," she worried that her students were not putting enough print on paper to help raise her class mean score for the second quarter benchmark on the district writing rubric. When teachers face dilemmas such as these, they often feel personally responsible and attempt to fulfill all expectations through a range of compro-

mise strategies (Erwin & Delair, 2004). However, the problem is systemic. Diane, like other frustrated teachers caught in this tension, struggled to deliver time-consuming mandated skills practice *and* provide developmentally appropriate literacy activities, questioning herself and her teaching decisions without turning the lens back on the system to question how competing institutional discourses positioned her and her students.

Our teacher-researcher collaboration provided one means to demonstrate children's writing strengths. I examined the district rubric descriptors and corroborated Diane's impression of an overwhelming emphasis on spelling and punctuation accuracy. This prompted Diane to take a "day off" from skills lessons once a week and to introduce writing workshop with authors' circles, a structure that encouraged children to share their stories with peers. We then analyzed the children's writing samples according to a coding scheme that I devised to enable analysis of more meaning-based elements. Comparison of writing samples over time showed that with peer interest and teacher encouragement, Diane's students' writing increased in length and complexity, with more genre features, novel words attempted, and varied topics (Wohlwend, 2008).

However, our collaboration was less successful in persuading Diane to change her teaching in regard to sociopolitical literacy practices. Despite my attempts to point out Jamal's strengths, Diane continued to read him as "at risk." Her preoccupation with skills mastery discourse meshed with the district's professional development agenda that contributed to this school's cultural dysconsciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Monthly professional development in Diane's district focused on developing rubrics, teaching to benchmarks, reliable scoring of writing samples, and filling out report cards. There were no organized classes or even informal teacher study groups on critical literacy, critical language study, or peer culture that might have raised sociocultural or sociopolitical issues of schooling. Further, Diane's graduate courses did not include readings in critical literacy or culturally responsive teaching that might have made her more sociopolitically aware and prepared to work against literacy practices that limited Jamal's and Ashley's participation.

This examination of dilemmas in discourses of learning to write reveals that literacy assessment is a complex mix of intentional choices and

unexamined compliance. A clear understanding of our simultaneous positioning across multiple discourses will allow teachers to see options and to act strategically with greater awareness. Educational agendas are set at the grass roots level in classrooms as teachers “close their doors and teach.” Dilemmas signal critical sites for teacher choice and agency that afford strategic shifts toward resistance and critique. However, we must first get past our own self-monitoring that can keep us compliant and complicit. Helping teachers and policy-makers to recognize a wider range of early literacy activity as valid participation is a first step in creating early childhood classrooms that are socially inclusive, developmentally appropriate, intellectually challenging, and ideologically equitable.

References

- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Literacy practices*. London: Routledge.
- Bloome, D., Katz, L., Wilson-Keenan, J.-A., & Solsken, J. (2000). Interpellations of family/community and classroom literacy practices. *Journal of Educational Research*, 93, 155–163.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bredenkamp, S. (1987). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Cazden, C. B. (1988). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Christian, B., & Bloome, D. (2004). Learning to read is who you are. *Reading and Writing Quarterly*, 20, 365–384.
- Clay, M. (1975). *What did I write? Beginning writing behaviour*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.
- Corsaro, W. A. (2003). *We're friends right? Inside kids' culture*. Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (1989). *Multiple worlds of child writers: Friends learning to write*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (2007). School literacy and the development of a child culture: Written remnants of the “gusto of life.” In D. Thiessen & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 115–142). New York: Springer.
- Erwin, E. J., & Delair, H. A. (2004). Patterns of resistance and support among play-based teachers in public schools. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 5, 35–50.
- Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy before schooling*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gallas, K. (1994). *The languages of learning: How children talk, write, dance, draw, and sing their understanding of the world*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. London: Routledge.
- Gesell, A. (1928). *Infancy and human growth*. New York: Macmillan.
- Goldstein, L. S. (1997). Between a rock and a hard place in the primary grades: The challenge of providing developmentally appropriate early childhood education in an elementary school setting. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, 3–27.
- Göncü, A. (1993). Development of intersubjectivity in the dyadic play of preschoolers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8, 99–116.
- Goodman, K. S. (1986). *What's whole in whole language?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Goodman, Y. M. (1978). Kidwatching: An alternative to testing. *National Elementary Principal*, 57(4), 41–45.
- Graue, E. M. (1993). *Ready for what? Constructing meanings of readiness for kindergarten*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hall, G. S. (1883). The contents of children's minds. *Princeton Review*, 2, 249–272.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1975). *Learning how to mean: Explorations in the development of language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- IRA, & NAEYC. (1998/2004). Learning to read and write: Developmentally appropriate practices for young children. Retrieved September 2, 2004, from <http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSREAD98.PDF>.
- Ivanič, R. (2004). Discourses of writing and learning to write. *Language and Education*, 18, 220–245.
- Kamii, C., & Manning, M. (2002). Phonemic awareness and beginning reading and writing. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 17(1), 36–46.
- Kendrick, M., & McKay, R. (2004). Drawings as an alternative way of understanding young children's constructions of literacy. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 4, 109–128.
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2003a). *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2003b). Perspectives on making meaning: The differential principles and means of adults and children. In N. Hall, J. Larson, & J. Marsh (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 154–166). London: Sage.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leland, C., & Harste, J. C. (1994). Multiple ways of knowing: Curriculum in a new key. *Language Arts*, 71, 337–345.
- Lundell, D. B., & Beach, R. (2002). Dissertation writers' negotiations with competing activity systems. In C. Bazerman & D. R. Russell (Eds.), *Writing selves/writing societies: Research from activity perspectives*. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and Mind, Culture, and Activity.
- Manyak, P. C. (2004). Literacy instruction, disciplinary practice, and diverse learners: A case study. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 4, 129–149.
- Mardell-Czudnowski, C., & Goldenberg, D. S. (1998). *Developmental indicators for the assessment of learning*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Services.

- Marr, D., Windsor, M.-M., & Cermak, S. (2001). Handwriting readiness: Locatives and visuomotor skills in the kindergarten year. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*. Retrieved February 2, 2009, from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n1/marr.html>.
- Martens, P. (1996). *I already know how to read*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Mehan, H. (1979). *Learning lessons: Social organization in the classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31, 132–141.
- Moll, L. C., & Whitmore, K. F. (1993). Vygotsky in classroom practice: A qualitative perspective. In E. A. Forman, N. Minick, & C. A. Stone (Eds.), *Contexts for learning: Socio-cultural dynamics in children's development*. (pp. 19–42). New York: Oxford University Press.
- NCLB. (2002). Closing the achievement gap in America's public schools. Retrieved May 9, 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/welcome/closing/index.html>.
- Ohanian, S. (2002). *What happened to recess and why are our children struggling in kindergarten?* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Owocki, G., & Goodman, Y. M. (2002). *Kidwatching: Documenting children's literacy development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Piaget, J. (1951/1999). *Play, dreams and imitation* (C. Gatenó & F. M. Hodgson, Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Rowe, D. W. (2008). The social construction of intentionality: Two-year-olds' and adults' participation at a preschool writing center. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 42, 387–434.
- Schieffelin, B. B., & Cochran-Smith, M. (1984). Learning to read culturally: Literacy before schooling. In H. Goelman, A. Oberg, & F. Smith (Eds.), *Awakening to literacy: The University of Victoria symposium on children's response to a literate environment: Literacy before schooling* (pp. 3–23). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Scollon, R. (2001a). Action and text: Toward an integrated understanding of the place of text in social (inter)action. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods in critical discourse analysis* (pp. 139–183). London: Sage.
- Scollon, R. (2001b). *Mediated discourse: The nexus of practice*. London: Routledge.
- Stipek, D. (2004). Teaching practices in kindergarten and first grade: Different strokes for different folks. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 19, 548–568.
- Street, B. V. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literary development*. Singapore: Pearson Education Asia.
- Street, B. V., & Street, J. (1991). The schooling of literacy. In D. Barton & R. Ivanič (Eds.), *Writing in the community* (pp. 143–166). London: Sage.
- Taylor, D. (1983). *Family literacy: Young children learning to read and write*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Tolchinsky, L. (2003). *The cradle of culture: What children know about writing and numbers before being taught*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Toohey, K. (2000). *Learning English at school: Identity, social relations and classroom practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). *Educating culturally responsive teachers: A coherent approach*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Vygotsky, L. (1934/1962). *Thought and language* (E. Hanfman & G. Vakar, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Vygotsky, L. (1935/1978). *Mind in society* (A. Luria, M. Lopez-Morillas, & M. Cole, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wells, G. (1986). *The meaning makers: Children learning language and using language to learn*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- West, J., Meek, A., & Hurst, D. (2000). Children who enter kindergarten late or repeat kindergarten: Their characteristics and later school performance. In U.S. Department of Education, *Education Statistics Quarterly* (Vol. 2): National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved February 2, 2009, from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/quarterly/Vol_2/2_3/elem_kindergarten.asp.
- Whitmore, K. F., Goodman, Y. M., Martens, P., & Owocki, G. (2004). Critical lessons from the transactional perspective on early literacy research. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 4, 291–325.
- Wohlwend, K. (2007a). Friendship meeting or blocking circle? Identities in the laminated spaces of a playground conflict. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8(1), 73–88.
- Wohlwend, K. (2007b). More than a child's work: Framing teacher discourse about play. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 3(1), Article 4.
- Wohlwend, K. (2008). From "What did I write?" to "Is this right?": Intention, convention, and accountability in early literacy. *The New Educator*, 4, 43–63.
- Yopp, H. K. (1988). The validity and reliability of phonemic awareness tests. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 23, 159–177.

Karen E. Wohlwend is assistant professor of Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at the University of Indiana, Bloomington.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS FOR THE CEL CONFERENCE

Whether you're a veteran or novice educator, you have experiences to share to help us become better leaders in our diverse society. We invite you to submit a proposal to tell your story, share your strategy, demonstrate your lessons, or report your research. Our interactive workshops are designed to give our conference attendees insight into ways they can better serve the communities in which we live and work. For more information, go to <http://www.ncte.org/cel/announcements/proposals>