Reading Dis/ability: Interrogating Paradigms in a Prism of Power

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Abstract
The dichotomisation of literacy instruction into phonics instruction versus a whole language approach fails to realise a fundamental tenet of providing equitable educational opportunities to diverse groups of children. Diversity becomes a problem to solve through “inoculation programs” or “special” education expertise. Moreover, children’s individual strengths can fail to realise because they do not fit well with the program of the day. Instead of being appreciated for the value that they may bring in higher-order conceptual and intellectual tasks, these individual strengths may be neglected at great cost to the individual child because they offer cheap reward in the shape of aggregate test scores. This paper is a philosophical piece, which in refusing to prescribe what one should do on Monday morning, joins other strident voices in disability studies in education to question what it is that we are doing today. Whilst not scientific, this is important work – it emphasises the a priori importance of philosophical, moral and ethical questions – reminding science that children are dynamic social beings who cannot be manipulated like genes to “express” themselves in ways more conducive to quick and cheap educational programs.

Introduction
Increasingly the teaching of reading has become more defined, precise and more regulatory, with a proliferation of practices that distinguish between those who make satisfactory progress and those who require further attention. Children exhibiting questionable characteristics are marked as such relatively early in their school lives. This has the constitutive effect of associating difference with disability, and as the stakes are raised with funding being linked to outcomes and improvements in test scores, increasing numbers of children are being ‘treated’ for a wider range of reading deficiencies. As a result of recent government decisions in the UK, USA and Australia, there is now an identifiably ‘proper’ way of learning to read. Here we interrogate this ‘proper’ paradigm of reading and locate it as an integral part of a prism of power which operates in consort with two other dividing practices to ensure that reading
dis/ability is identified. The ultimate goal is to help children learn to read, however, in the process children encounter multiple grids of specification that each threaten to find them deficient (Foucault, 1977). The three parts of the prism work together to not only trap children, but to keep those who do not respond to the proper ways of learning to read within the confines of the prism and in a constant state of flux.

Educational practices that locate and describe children in deficit discourses lead to the conceptualisation and spatialisation of students through ‘a controlling logic of ableism’ (Baker, 2002, p. 675), and the construction of deficit schooling identities based on the ‘dichotomy of ability-disability’ (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997, p. 360). These practices are predominantly comparative; comparing student against student (Cremin & Thomas, 2005), and student against construct through statistically-derived age-based norms and arbitrary benchmark standards (Graham, 2006a; Grieshaber, 1997). However deficit schooling identities are constructions that come to speak to the children involved, impacting both how they come to see their own self (Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003) and how they engage or disengage with the institution and practices of schooling (Slee, 1994). That self-knowledge or subjectivity affects not only what children come to believe they are capable of but also what they come to believe they deserve and where in the social hierarchy they belong.

Further, the formation of a deficit schooling identity comes to speak for the child - it acts as a signifier through which others interpret what is possible for the child to know or to be able to do. In effect, labels obfuscate as well as divide (Foucault, 1977). The abilities or actions of individual children come to be interpreted and perceived through the lens already established by the label bestowed (Graham, 2006b). Moreover, the obfuscatory effects of labelling and grading of ability into hierarchies of ability, inability and disability effectively removes other relevant factors from the field of inquiry; that is, the child is perceived as “the problem” and pedagogy, curricula and indeed the practices of schooling are left unproblematised (Henderson, 2002). Our aim here is to question the implication of particular schooling practices in the construction of learning disabilities, specifically focusing on reading disability.
This is timely work given the current political pressure towards instituting systematic phonics-based instruction “first and fast” following reforms in the US, UK and Australia.

**Teaching “Reading”**

Debates over the merits of phonics against whole-language approaches to reading instruction reflect struggle over what and whose knowledge is of most worth. However, when a dominant paradigm is in place (let us say, for example, that which privileges systematic phonics-based instruction), any child whose strengths lie in the higher-order skills of syntactic and semantic-pragmatic analysis may be short-changed - if they are only exposed to graphophonemic or alphabetic “decoding” methodologies (Martens, 1997) - and this has the potential to impede their literacy learning, self-concept and enthusiasm for learning to read (Long & Meyer, 2004). Our interest is not in fuelling the literacy wars by advocating one approach to learning to read over another. The focus is to elucidate how the comparison of a child’s approach to learning to read against dominant paradigms (Gill & Smith, 2005) operates as a third locus or point in a prism of power; where, in addition to those children not achieving at the rate of their peers (Cremin & Thomas, 2005) and children not achieving to the standards of the day (Graham, 2006a; Grieshaber, 1997), children who fail to approach learning in the “proper” ways (Popkewitz, 2004) can also come to be described as learning disabled. In such cases, theories of reading and learning disability posit neurobiological deficit as the root of the educational problem leading to an alleged cognitive “inability” which comes to be recognised as a disability (Heydon & Iannicci, 2002).

*Figure 1: Reading prism of power*
A prism is used for three purposes: to refract light, to reflect it and to break light into the colours of the rainbow. Dispersive prisms are used to break up light into its constituent spectral colours. It is this type of prism with which we are drawing an analogy because in our estimation children’s reading abilities are split into a myriad of components, just as white light is broken into its spectral colours. The reading prism of power (see Figure 1) is characterised by the location of pupils at the centre of a maelstrom of assessment methods that involve comparison with others and measurement against constructs that are generally normed. Their reading abilities are split and dispersed endlessly around the prism: to be measured, assessed, compared, evaluated, and tested, and the results quantified and reported. There is no escape – only more intensity for those whose abilities are questionable as a result of being compared with others and with constructs.

**Reading the ‘Right’ Way**

Proper approaches to reading are increasingly defined in new times by the proponents of phonics-based instruction who are leading the return to ‘criteria for literacy narrowly defined as discrete psychological “skills” internal to the subject’ (Luke, 1992, p. 107). The problem here however is not that phonics or “whole-language” approaches are locked in a superior/inferior binary relationship, as is popularly characterised in the literacy wars. Our concern is not even so much with disputing neuro-psychological accounts of how children might learn. Instead we question the political and constitutive effects of cordoning children into deficit identity groups: those who do not progress at the rate of their peers, those who do not attain normative standards at the “correct” developmental stages and those who fail to approach learning to read in the “right” way.

In what follows, we illustrate how certain children identified for any of these reasons can come to be trapped in a negative prism that despite rhetoric about accommodating different learning styles functions to punish children who approach learning to read in novel ways. Practices that aim to throw light on different facets of learning progress (or lack thereof) can also work to trap and re-trap children on the intervention roundabout. By this we mean that examination of learning behaviours or styles becomes a very real problem when used in tandem with normative and prescriptive understandings of
one best way of learning to read. As Thomas and Loxley (2005, p. 176) so aptly describe, ‘phenomena as we “discover” them are shaped by our methods of discovery’.

In this way, highly visual/spatial children who may otherwise draw on their word recognition skills to become strong and avid readers can find themselves pathologised and treated for “poor phonemic-awareness” when assessment is restricted to testing graphophonemic decoding in word attack strategies. Likewise though, at the other extreme, children who prefer sequential rule-based methodologies may find themselves in a sea of words with whole-language immersion techniques. Julie Allen (1996, p. 226) describes these opposing foci as deficit versus curriculum models: the former ‘attributes difficulties to within child factors and could be located within an essentialist perspective’, the latter ‘looks for features outside the child’ such as pedagogy and attitudes. Touching on each of these models, this paper progresses with a discussion of discourses and practices that function as mechanisms of visibility within regimes of light (Deleuze, 1988, 1992) which serve to highlight, contrast and magnify individual differences in learning to read.

**Prism Apex #1: Comparison of Student vs Student**

Beliefs about appropriate rates of learning progress are socially constructed but such “normative individualisation comes about without reference to any nature or essence in subjects… it is purely comparative” (Ewald, 1992, p. 172). Although the idea of “normality” has become commonplace, Ewald (1992, p. 173, added emphasis) argues, in relation to the construction of normative ideals that ‘it is not the exception that proves the rule. Rather, the exception is within the rule’. There is however, no definitive rule defining what it is to be ‘normal’, precisely because there is no singular manifestation of either normal or abnormal. Not only is normal typically described by what it is not but what it is to be normal is defined through the juxtaposition of culturally-specific, dominant codes with minority ways of being that subsequently come to be known as Other. This doesn’t just happen by magic, although dominant conceptualisations have become naturalised to the point that we think things are the way they are because that was the way they were always meant to be. Discourses emanating from powerful knowledge-domains such as medicine and psychology (see Figure 2 below), perpetuate this intellectual
inertia by producing the discursive fields that dominate and delimit what is possible for people to say and think (Foucault, 1972). These discourses also produce constructs that cohere with and codify practices that link back and confirm the diagnoses and knowledges in which they are embedded.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 2: Discourses informing mechanisms of visibility within regimes of light*

Notions of what it means to be “normal” come about purely by comparative means. If the majority of babies tend to first sit unaided at the age of 6 – 9 months, then it is considered normal for a child to first sit somewhere within that time. Similarly, if most toddlers begin to walk at the age of 10 – 18 months, then it is considered normal for babies to crawl until 18 months. Concern begins to set in when a child does not do something within the developmental “stages” considered acceptable for the achievement of a particular capability. The comparison of what individual children do and when is the foundational knowledge used to constitute norms of child development and behaviour, however such norms, in failing to encompass genuine appreciation for human diversity, wield much collateral damage. Comparison with others is precisely how we construct more concrete deficit identities around difference.

There are now countless ways in which difference is rearticulated as disability, disorder or deficit. The rush for early intervention has increased the intensity of the clinical gaze in the early years and, as such, the phase in which children are initiated into the literate community and the process of learning to
read has come under increasingly intense scrutiny. The result is that certain behaviours (or the lack of others) come to be constructed as outside the norm and requiring intervention. This “hunt for disability” (Baker, 2002) means that behaviours (strengths, strategies, abilities) that work for the child can be ignored in the rush to fix up those highlighted by blunt assessments that fail to ask the right questions. Here, we restrict ourselves to an analysis of a set of practices used within Australian primary schools in the north-eastern state of Queensland to examine the rates of progress (or lack thereof) in learning to read and examine these as mechanisms of visibility that individuate and contrast in the effort to normalise primary school children. We do not dispute that some children need more specific help in the complicated process of learning to read – instead our concern revolves around the influence that particular knowledge-domains and the biomedical paradigms they produce may have upon the mis/recognition of ability as disability and the effects therein.

The Queensland Developmental Continua is one such construct, developed via the comparison of young children and the learning phase behaviours they exhibit at different stages along the journey of becoming literate. The Queensland version of the Developmental Continua was adopted from West Australia’s First Steps Program (Luke, Freebody, & Land, 2001), however, the aim in the First Steps version was to provide teachers with a reflective practice tool and a way of clearly mapping the different learning stages of individual children in their class (First Steps: Reading, 1995). Whilst the individualistic focus on learning is a culturally-specific and problematic practice in itself (Dudley-Marling, 2004), our concern here is not necessarily with the concept but how the ensuing construct can come to be taken up and used.

**Prism Axis #2: Student vs Construct**

The Queensland Developmental Continua is a charting system that maps a child’s progress through ‘commonly agreed milestones’ that Education Queensland supporting literature states are ‘grouped into phases of development’ considered ‘typical in young children’ (Year 2 Diagnostic Net, 1998). Through this process, children are ‘individually assessed three times by the teacher in order to be placed on a scale for reading, writing and number’ (Grieshaber, 1997, p. 30). This scale, known as the Developmental
Continua, was constructed in response to a review of the Queensland education curriculum and a back to the basics emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic or ‘the traditional three Rs’ (p. 28). With respect to the learning of reading, the Developmental Continua describes what is considered developmentally appropriate learning-phase behaviour in young children. Reflecting a preoccupation with learning progress and the atomisation of learning into discrete skills (Dudley-Marling, 2004), the Developmental Continua facilitates what Thomas & Cremin (2005) refer to as ‘contrastive judgement’ – the comparison of student against student – which they argue is used to categorize and hierarchize children in schools. In combination with the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, an assessment construct used in conjunction with the Developmental Continua, the Developmental Continua/Year 2 Diagnostic Net advances from the level of student to student comparison to mount the abstract architecture of student versus construct.

The use of norms aid in processes of individuation. Children can be singled out, remediated and withdrawn from the scene of the “mainstream” – their abilities and strengths becoming invisible in the process. The proliferation of norms has meant that processes of identification have become far more sensitive, however, the quest for the quick fix has meant that our methods for dealing sensitively and comprehensively with difficulties in learning have become far less so. When first implemented in 1995, the Developmental Continua/Year 2 Diagnostic Net was organised around a set of desired ‘benchmarks or standards … established to enable identification of children at risk’ (Grieshaber, 1997, p. 30) of developing ‘inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy’ (Wiltshire et al., 1994, vol. 1, p. xiv, cited in Grieshaber, 1997, p. 29). However by the end of 1996, schools were requested to reduce the number of children identified through the Net via the application of further qualifying criteria, as too many children were identified resulting in unprecedented referral for intervention and a subsequent funding crisis (Grieshaber, 1997). This ‘tweaking’ aimed at reducing the catchment to acceptable numbers in order to fit the ultimate determinant of funding, as opposed to the original imperative of attaining acceptable literacy and numeracy standards, demonstrates the arbitrary nature and artificiality of normative standards applied within the field of education. However, Queensland is not alone in this experience, as shown by Snow’s (1990) historical study relating to the introduction of age–grade–content policy in New
South Wales, and Sleeter’s (1986) work on the social construction of learning disability through educational standards reform during the 1960s in the USA.

In identifying deviance from a normative standard manufactured through political imperative (Grieshaber, 1997), the Developmental Continua/Year 2 Net operates to define the ‘normal’ young child, creating a reified space for children who achieve within the parameters set by the standard of the day (see Figure 3 below). Those children who do not achieve to the set standards are then eligible for intervention through Support-a-Reader.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3: Becoming caught in the glare**

Whilst these support programs are generally regarded positively by teachers, we would caution that there are significant problems associated with pull-out programs:

1. they are stigmatising and, in tandem with deficit discourses, work to produce deficit subject-identities;
2. because they are guided by views of individual deficit and the belief that the problem can only be within the child’s head (Dudley-Marling, 2004), withdrawal programs fail to address what is happening (or more precisely *not* happening) within the classroom (Luke et al., 2001). Pedagogical practices that were perhaps not speaking to some children remain unperturbed and, upon their return to class, the child is squashed back into a space that didn’t fit well in the first place. Thus, the cycle is in danger of continuing.

3. unlike the more expensive Reading Recovery, Support-a-Reader is not conducted by a literacy specialist or even a trained teacher who can provide more specific guidance in the complicated dance steps of learning to read (Luke et al., 2001, p. 59).

Beyond providing supervised practice for reading, Support-a-Reader does little except provide the illusion that “something” is being done. As described by a district officer in regional Queensland:

Support-a-Reader and Reading Recovery are seen as the “fix-it” solution: take under performing kids out of the mainstream class and let someone else take care of the issue - we are not integrating practice into the mainstream class. It’s often teacher aides that take care of the issue. (Luke et al., 2001, p. 45)

Methods that seek to attribute blame or causality for literacy failure (whether the gaze falls on the “deficient child” or on “deficient teaching”) can ensure that the ‘structures and characteristics of school and schooling remain unquestioned’, discouraging interrogation of classification practices.

Problematically, the Developmental Continua/Year 2 Net results are also used as an indicator of school performance and a mechanism to make teachers more accountable for learning outcomes (Grieshaber, 1997). It is interesting to note though that the results of benchmark testing are only invoked when they can be politically useful. Australia’s consistently high performances in national reading benchmarks and international comparative assessments such as PISA (see Luke, Graham, Sanderson, Voncina, & Weir, 2006), are generally ignored or minor aspects sensationalised. For example, the success of Australian students in higher-order analytical skills is bypassed to provide a narrow focus on how well students in
Grade 3 in Singapore do in spelling tests (Macnamara, 2006). OECD comparative analyses in which Australian students do well are also discounted because, according to critics:

PISA tends to be one of those New Age life skills tests, where students are not corrected for faulty grammar, spelling and punctuation. What are you going to do? On your job application at Merrill Lynch, write: 'Look how good I done on the PISA test?' (Ruehl as cited in Gare, 2006, p. 29)

It appears that with respect to the credibility of PISA, the paradigm informing the construct measure is important. We agree and take this opportunity to caution that paradigms informed by particular conceptions of the literate child, find only information deemed important by the paradigm informing the assessment. At the same time, they can fail to recognise and locate other information that still plays an important part in the sophisticated act of reading. In what follows we present two case studies, one of Rose and the other of Georgia, to illustrate how dominant paradigms set up fields of investigation which, in combination with comparative methods of assessment, work to trap children who do not fit the norms promulgated via the accepted paradigm.

Axis #3: Student versus Paradigm: invisible Rose and the very visible Georgia

Rose, her mother and brother lived below the poverty line in rental accommodation in an Adelaide suburb. They would have qualified for much cheaper public housing in another suburb but Rose’s mother wanted her children to attend the local school because of the ‘Students of High Intellectual Potential’ Program offered to all students. Despite living in poverty, Comber and Nichols described the family’s cultural capital as “relatively high” (p. 48), partly because they took advantage of free or low cost community resources such a libraries, galleries and museums. At preschool, Rose was popular and considered by her teachers to be,

…a bright child and even unusually mature for her age. This perceived maturity was not, however, viewed in an entirely positive light for it was attributed to the demands of living with a completely disorganised mother in ‘chaotic’ conditions. Characterizing poor families (particularly those headed by single mothers) as disorderly is not uncommon for teachers. (p. 49)
When Rose started school, she “did not shine” (p. 49). Her teacher described Rose as “shy and quiet” (p. 49), which was vastly different from the preschool child who showed a distinct aptitude for dramatic play by creating stories and imaginary characters from her museum experiences. Rose’s experiences in year one also involved assessment of literacy and the inevitable comparisons with others. The tests used to identify literacy levels,

focused on decontextualized coding…alphabet and sight word recognition. Rose’s performance suggested gaps in her alphabetic knowledge. She also stumbled over simple words when reading aloud and her writing in comparison to other female peers was untidy. (p. 49)

Comber and Nichols concluded that Rose was ‘doing time’, explaining that in one lesson even though Rose’s output “matched the teacher’s required outcomes, her original thinking and her ability to represent it went largely unremarked” (p. 56). As a result, Rose’s “cultural capital and representational resources, though significant, appear invisible at school” (Comber & Nichols, 2004, p. 59). Invisibility had the effect of positioning Rose as un-able. The break between Rose’s knowledge and abilities and what is approved and rewarded in the world of school became apparent in her first year when she was aged six. It left Rose “struggling for a place to be among her peers and searching for recognition as a learner from her teachers” (p. 60).

In contrast to Rose’s invisibility in class, our case study detailing the experience of a 6 year old girl called Georgia shows how a child’s (in)abilities can come to consume everyday classroom talk and mark her as “learning disabled”. By Georgia’s second year of schooling, daily classroom talk had extended beyond the school to Georgia’s parents and other specialists who were called in to help. In this way, difficulty learning to read transcended the traditional domain of literacy teaching to enter the realm of disability and the need for special education expertise. Georgia’s story highlights the curious departure that occurs once a child “fails” to respond to traditional instruction methods and is perceived to require “special” treatment.
Georgia

In her first year of school, Georgia’s class did both Jolly Phonics followed by Thrass. Upon her move into Grade 2, Georgia’s teacher noticed that she demonstrated “poor phonemic awareness” and this was confirmed through running records and observation. The young girl was identified for learning support in the form of Reading Recovery (RR) and spent half an hour every day receiving explicit instruction from a trained teacher through withdrawal mode. From there, discussions about her progress revolved around an apparent deficit in her graphophonemic decoding skills. Towards the end of Term 2, even after six weeks of Reading Recovery and having jumped several reader levels, Georgia was still caught in the Year 2 Diagnostic Net. In consultation with her mother, the school made the decision to delay Support-a-Reader intervention until after Georgia graduated from Reading Recovery. After two terms of intensive support through Reading Recovery, Georgia graduated at a reader level of 20.

The very interesting twist that the RR specialist noted at this time was that Georgia demonstrated fluency in reading but still exhibited similar difficulty with graphophonemic decoding. It seemed Georgia, who was a bright, visually-oriented child, had been busily adding to her sight word vocabulary without deep internalisation of the graphophonemic strategies practiced during RR. Instead, as her RR teacher remarked with surprise, when Georgia experienced real difficulty with a word she backtracked through the story and drew on her comprehension to work out what the word should be. Nevertheless in the final term of Year 2, Georgia was still withdrawn from her regular class twice a week to participate in the rescheduled Support-a-Reader sessions. She then began to experience difficulty in maths. Eventually the ST:LD began the Appraisement Process and Georgia is inscribed with a status of ‘learning difficulty/disability’. Georgia begins to believe that she has a “stupid brain”.

Georgia comes to attention via several identification methods and is provided with short-term learning support via withdrawal mode. However, the problems associated with such intervention formats are evident: Georgia is withdrawn from class half an hour every day for Reading Recovery and for a significant part of Term 2 is withdrawn for an Oral Language program as well, for an additional half an hour per week. This amounts to Georgia being away from class for at least three hours per week, which
eventually contributed to her experiencing difficulty accessing other areas of the curriculum and finally, the development of a deficit identity – the belief that she is stupid and has a “stupid brain”. This occurred despite the fact that Georgia is a highly intelligent girl who can complete higher order cognitive tasks, and exhibits logical reasoning considered sophisticated for her age.

Georgia appears to be the (im)perfect student paradox, personifying Thomas and Loxley’s (2005, p. 176) claim that ‘phenomena as we “discover” them are shaped by our methods of discovery’. In other assessments conducted by professionals outside the school, Georgia was considered to be in the superior intelligence (gifted) range, however elsewhere again, her mother was told that it was amazing that she could even function at the level that she was (Year 2 maths, Year 3 reading) because she was apparently missing all the foundational concepts required to do so. The example given was that Georgia had no concept of sequencing and did not even know what “before” and “after” meant. Another suspicion was that Georgia was dyslexic, as she often wrote mirror reversals and mixed up sentence structure.

Specifically during the assessment, when asked which number came before the number 8, Georgia would say 9. Before 7, she said 8. Her mother was informed of this but her mother proved knowledgable in ‘other ways of knowing’ (Reid and Weatherly Valle, 2004, p. 476). Georgia’s mother, Nicole, knew that Georgia understood before and after, arguing that Georgia followed instructions all the time at home which depended on her knowing the difference. The example she gave was ‘You can watch the Simpson’s after you’ve eaten dinner and brushed your teeth’. The value of intuitive knowledge was made apparent when Georgia’s mother asked the question differently and received the correct answer. Knowing how visual Georgia was, she asked while indicating direction and value with her hand: “In a line from 1 to 10, which number comes before 8?” Georgia replied, “Oh! 7.”

**Reading (and) Power**

Debate about the teaching of reading in the first years of school continues to be plagued by literacy wars, which have been dragged over from the closing years of the twentieth century. While the arguments remain much the same, the conditions of learning in the early years of the twenty first century continue to change and pose challenges of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse multilingual students, new
communications technologies and forms of representation, and social inequalities that accompany
globalized economies (Luke & Grieshaber, 2004). Learning to read and the practices of teaching reading
are ideological representations that reflect particular values and beliefs. The selection of specific
approaches by governments, systems, schools and individual teachers thus marks out the territory of
what counts as proper ways of learning to read and proper ways of teaching reading. With government
and systemic intervention, teachers are increasingly restricted as to the choices they have about the
approaches used when teaching reading. And just like the construction of learning disabilities, those
who do not learn to read in the ‘proper’ way are increasingly tagged as being ‘at risk’. In Queensland,
these children are typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, of indigenous background, and
those for whom English is an additional language (van Kraayenoord, Luke, Elkins, & Land, 1999).

Longitudinal studies of children’s literacy in Australia (Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon, & Pitt,
2002; Hill, Comber, Louden, Reid, & Rivillard, 2002) involving children from different socio-economic
and cultural circumstances have shown that the gap between those who struggle initially with school
literacies widens as children grow older, rather than closing. In England, increased use of within-school
assessment of children’s reading has been shown to increase the danger that resources will be diverted
from those in most need to those whose need is not so great (Thomas & Davis, 1997). This revelation
has since been confounded by the publication of league tables that confirm the long held suspicion that
social class in Britain is equated with early school success or failure in literacy and numeracy (Gregory,
Williams, Baker, & Street, 2004). In the USA, children in urban schools are at risk of being under
prepared for the new literacies required in a global economy because of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB,
2001) dictum to standardize and normalize the teaching of reading through mandating the use of
published reading programs. And in Canada, there are suggestions that community based approaches to
literacy do not count in classroom literacy experiences (Kendrick & McKay, 2004).

Learning to read properly then occurs in accordance with specific sociocultural positions and
class interests, which most recently have focused on a return to basic skills. In the USA, this is
exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001); in England by The standards site: Rose
review of reading: The interim report (DfES, 2005; Rose, 2005), and in Australia by the document Teaching Reading: Report and recommendations. National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). Currently in Australia, learning to read properly amounts to teachers being required to “provide systematic, direct, and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency” (DEST, 2005, p. 38). In England it means scripted approaches to phonics and “robust monitoring systems” (DfES, 2005, p. 2), while in the USA there is pressure to conform to district mandated literacy instruction (Gatto, 2001). In each country the emphasis is similar: standards, teacher accountability, surveillance of teachers, and technical approaches to assessment that test and drill down in minute detail to identify and classify children’s failings, deficits, and lacks.

National inquiries, systemic approaches, schools and classrooms are framed by discourses that mark difference from proper ways of learning to read. For instance, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005) stated that a whole language approach to teaching reading is “…not in the best interests of children, particularly those experiencing reading difficulties” (p. 12). With whole language approaches denied to those experiencing difficulties, together with the strong emphasis on phonics and the teaching of phonics in pre service teacher education courses (DEST, 2005), proper ways of learning to read for those experiencing difficulty feature a return to basic skills and mark a triumph for technical solutions to teaching reading. Technical approaches focus on means rather than ends. They result in the delivery of a particular kind of knowledge (Thomas & Loxley, 2005) for particular kinds of children and go hand in hand with definitions of literacy as a “set of specified skills” as opposed to “repertoires of social and cultural practices” (Comber & Nichols, 2004, p. 45).

For those experiencing difficulty in learning to read, reducing literacy to a set of government imposed specified skills is as good as constructing a classificatory grid that preys on those who are deficient in the relationship between letters and sounds (phonics), who lack phonemic awareness, who have difficulty reading with fluency, have limited vocabulary knowledge and have difficulty in comprehending texts. It devalues home and community contexts that fail to provide children with rich
oral language and print environments and hence the skills they need to operate phonetically in the
process of learning to read. We know that children who struggle initially in the process of learning to
read are unlikely to catch up with their peers because the gap widens as they grow older (Comber et al.,
2002; Hill et al., 2002). We also know that children who are struggling with school literacy can become
invisible in the classroom (Comber & Nichols, 2004) or conversely, that they become caricatured via
everyday classroom talk and marked as having difficulty (Grieshaber, in press).

Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to illustrate the privileging of certain bodies of knowledge over others (such as
that played out in the literacy wars) and the effects of power that result. The battle over whether
“phonics” is a better way of teaching children to learn to read than “whole language” approaches (and
vice versa) is pointless. We agree with Luke (1998, p. 306) when he says: ‘the question for teachers
should not be: What is the best way of teaching reading and writing? All literacy-based programs ‘work’
to some degree or another’. To this we would add that every child is different. Most children are
orientated towards one or the other approach or are fortunate enough to be able to draw on a combination
of both. Some very lucky kids get along just fine with whatever is served up. However, our case studies
show that when some like Georgia come up with their own strategies they are disciplined and
remediated, and others such as Rose fade into invisibility. If we end up with a situation where one
method is privileged over another then we will see a proliferation of pathologised learners like Rose and
Georgia. Children who are more spatially oriented like Georgia have a good chance of being regarded as
‘reading disabled’ and may come to believe that there is indeed something “wrong” with their brain.
Spirited children like Rose may become further marginalised as the politics of schooling impact upon
them and they are ignored for failing to perform in recognisable ways. For both girls, the ways in which
their parents knew them (see Comber & Nichols [2004] for details about Rose’s mother) seemed to be at
odds with how they were positioned against school literacies and the criteria against which they were
judged. In the end, the message from these two case studies is that those of us who might seek to
respond to calls for higher standards, achievement and quality by looking so carefully for lack, need to
recognise that there are children who come to attention purely because their idiosyncrasies fall outside
the box we have constructed around a normative ideal.
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1 Support-a-Reader is a program where a student who has been ‘caught in the Net’ is withdrawn from class for half an hour of supported reading practice once or twice a week with a teacher or parent aide.
2 During second term, Georgia was also identified by the visiting speech pathologist as lacking oral language skills and enrolled in a withdrawal-mode Oral Language Skills Support program involving weekly half hour sessions for 8 weeks.
3 ST:LD is ‘support teacher learning difficulties’.
4 While moving her hand in an arc from left to right, Nicole held up one finger when saying the number 1 and an open hand when she said 10. Georgia’s eyes flicked from watching Nicole’s mouth to watching her hands.