From individual to group:
changing discourses in the teaching
of reading in England

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Introduction

In England as elsewhere, the teaching of reading has long been at the heart of the primary curriculum. The ways in which reading has been taught have been subject to change over the years and have led to heated debate and political intervention. However, most children have learnt to read regardless of approach taken, and the pressing need is to understand how teachers can develop a fuller, more principled and flexible range of approaches which will enable all, rather than most, to become successful readers (Hall 2003). This is likely to extend beyond identifying ‘best methods’ into the dynamics of interaction, as, according to Alexander (2000:551), the real power of pedagogy resides in what happens between teachers and pupils.'

In this paper, the practices of individualised reading and group guided reading, which effectively replaced it as the principal context for teaching in England, are reviewed in relation to analytic constructs devised by Bernstein (1996), to expose some of the less visible shifts in practice and thinking that were required of teachers when pressurised into changing their ways of teaching by the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998. As illustration I draw on selected data from three case studies constructed as part of a small-scale research project exploring primary teachers’ understandings of guided group reading.

Perspectives on the teaching of reading

Learning to read in school is by definition different from reading as an out-of-school cultural practice. As it is relocated from real-world activity to the school, knowledge is transformed - selected, fragmented and reconstituted – to be reshaped and sequenced to make it teachable (Bernstein 1996). Traditionally in England, debate has centred on best ‘methods’ for teaching reading, reflecting a recontextualisation of reading as a set of cognitive or psycholinguistic skills that can be taught, acquired and evaluated, the pedagogic context appearing of little relevance - Street’s (1984) ‘autonomous’ model of literacy. An alternative, ‘ideological’, perspective situates reading in its cultural context, as a discourse into which children are inducted through co-participation, their learning often invisible as they engage together in authentic cultural reading practices. Using Bernstein’s (1996) terminology, discourse participants become proficient in, firstly, the recognition rules (identifying the discourse) and secondly, the parallel realisation rules (performing the specific behaviours that mark them as participants in that discourse).

As the ‘skills’ perspective was dominant in the teaching reading in England both before and after the implementation of NLS, my subsequent discussion focuses on alternative classroom pedagogies which aimed to develop children’s reading skills.
Individualised and group teaching in England

In the second half of the 20th Century, the principal approach to the teaching of reading for children aged 5-7 in England was oral individual reading to the teacher, typically from a graded reading book, followed up by practice at home (Cato et al. 1992; Weinberger 1996). This enabled the teacher to respond to the child’s reading, by prompting, providing strategies to address miscues and engaging in questioning or discussion about textual content. Meanwhile more proficient readers typically selected texts from a colour-coded selection of books matched to their proficiency level (Stannard and Huxford 2007) and for the most part were expected to read independently, and to read in the service of other learning. The vehicle for monitoring and instruction, however, remained the one-to-one reading encounter with the teacher termed by Moss (2007) ‘proficiency reading’.

Such individual practices were in tune with the individualist ethos of primary education in that era, and align well with what Bernstein (1996) terms an invisible, or competence-based, pedagogy. Such a perspective assumes that children develop towards some inherent potential, given appropriate circumstances, which it is the teacher’s responsibility to orchestrate. The emphasis is on identifying and developing capabilities rather than dealing with deficits, and assessment focuses on the individual’s trajectory rather than comparison with peers. By contrast, a visible, or performance-based, pedagogy (Bernstein 1996) emphasises outcomes over process, and privileges the teacher as instructor and evaluator, rather than facilitator. It assumes that knowledge can be taught, acquisition evaluated, deficits identified and remediated. Evaluation enables the construction of standards and the definition of what counts as normal and what does not, hence comparison and standardisation are of the essence (Bernstein 1996). Although the non-interventionist culture of the 1980s and 1990s enabled elements of the more traditional visible pedagogies to coexist with more invisible, ‘child-centred’ approaches, the teaching of reading tended towards the latter. It is important to note that there is no inherent correlation between social context and pedagogic mode; for example, Reading Recovery tuition is highly individualised but exemplifies a very visible pedagogy.

By the 1990s, however, the teaching of reading was under fire in the post-NC regime of inspection and testing, on grounds of inefficiency and the inadequacy of instruction (Ofsted 1996; Stannard and Huxford 2007). These criticisms were hotly contested, but resonated with Bernstein’s (1996) comments regarding the inherent lack of economy in a competence pedagogy, and its intensive demands on the specialist subject and pedagogic knowledge base of teachers.

NLS, established in 1998 with the explicit intention of maximising direct instruction and raising standards in reading and writing, effectively imposed a performance pedagogy on schools, and the introduction of guided reading was part of this. Group reading practices had been relatively uncommon in most English schools and where they existed tended to take the form of pupil-managed reading events (Ofsted 1996). Guided reading, as an explicitly instructional small-group context, was long-established in New Zealand, Australia and the United States, and has as
key credentials efficiency along with a pedagogical promise of ‘a more propitious learning experience for each child’ (Stannard and Huxford 2007). In fact, guided reading in its source countries benefits from a well-articulated theoretical rationale, following Vygotskyan principles (Biddulph 2002), which has been to date largely absent from the more structurally oriented official guidance in England.

Introduced as part of the daily ‘literacy hour, guided reading effectively replaced individualised reading as the officially endorsed main pedagogic approach. In practice, however, it proved challenging. Some four years on, Ofsted (2002) reported that teachers had taken a long time to get used to guided reading, commenting on ‘persistent weaknesses in its teaching at both key stages’ (§151). Recurrent criticisms referred to teacher insecurity with their new ‘guiding’ role:

...many teachers did not fully understand what their role should be. Frequently they heard individual pupils read within the group or pupils simply took turns to read aloud. (Ofsted 2002: §26)

It appeared that some teachers, at least, had essentially transposed traditional interpretations of their role from individual or whole-class contexts into the small-group situation (Fisher 2008). Additionally, teachers’ management of group discourse was found wanting:

...teachers too often fail to strike a judicious balance between timely demonstration, instruction and explanation on the one hand and pupils’ collaboration, discussion or independent work on the other (Ofsted 2003: §45).

Surprisingly, very little research has taken place in this area, but it would appear from a small-scale study by Fisher (2008) that even some ten years after the introduction of guided reading, and despite further Strategy guidance, some teachers’ understanding of their guiding role remained in question, with consequences for children’s access to specialised knowledge. Additionally, opportunities for exploiting group interaction in the service of learning has remained under-developed.

The issue of why the transition to guided reading proved problematic for many teachers is of interest, not merely as a historical curiosity, but in terms of its significance for future pedagogical change. Bernstein’s theoretical constructs provide a useful framework for considering the interactional dynamics and relationships of individualised and group guided reading, demonstrating the magnitude of the change which teachers were required not merely to manage, but to undergo.

**Exploring interaction using Bernstein’s constructs**

Bernstein’s (1996) partner constructs of ‘classification’ and ‘framing’ are useful analytic tools which expose the undercurrents of difference between the individualised and group discourses relating to the teaching of reading. All pedagogic discourse, according to Bernstein, comprises a regulative discourse (RD)
of teacher-learner relations, within which is ‘embedded’ the instructional discourse (ID) that embodies the intended content of learning. This is not necessarily a clear-cut or consistent relationship (Bolton 2008; Christie 1995), but can be useful in distinguishing the ‘what’ of teaching (ID) from its interactional vehicle (RD).

In brief, according to Bernstein (1996), classification, reflecting power relations, refers to the strength of boundaries between categories, such as, for example, lesson types, participants, or subject areas. Classification is created and maintained by way of framing (control) relations, operating across the dimensions of selection, sequencing and pacing; evaluation criteria; and the hierarchical rules of regulative discourse. Framing ‘regulates how the discourse is to be transmitted and acquired in the pedagogic context (Bernstein 1996:100, his italics). In the classroom, strong framing (F+) is characterised by strong teacher control, with correspondingly little opportunity for learners to influence the course of the interaction, although with the possibility of ‘space for negotiation’ (Bernstein 2004:198). Although weak framing (F-) accords greater responsibility to learners in terms of what they do and how they do it, Bernstein (1996) notes that learner control remains limited – ‘apparent’ – because of the power relationships integral to schooling. However, framing relations may vary within and across lessons, and can in principle vary across the various dimensions of discursive activity, creating a fluid matrix of possibilities within any given interactional context.

Guided reading therefore presented teachers with a complex process of imposed change to deal with. This not only challenged their subject and pedagogical knowledge, but their ways of working and knowing, as the conceptual, spatial and temporal boundaries of their established and taken-for-granted practices were altered. Minor classificatory changes which break the cycle of everyday familiarity can create difficulties as rhythms are altered and dissonance created with existing beliefs, attitudes and assumptions (Connelly and Clandinin 1999), and in this case the changes were substantial.

**A Bernsteinian analysis of individualised ‘reading to the teacher’ and group guided reading**

Clearly no analysis can take account of the full variety of interaction occurring in either approach, and no value judgements are implied; both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ are used as shorthand for particular control weightings within pedagogic relationships. The purpose of this analysis is not to support one teaching approach as ‘better’ than the other, but to argue that the task facing teachers in adapting from one to the other was more challenging than was immediately apparent. Figure 1 provides a summary of the framing relations (F+, F-) which are discussed below.
Individualised reading typically varied from stronger framing in the early stages, as graded texts were matched to children’s developing word recognition skills, to weak framing as children became more experienced readers, choosing reading books from (usually) levelled selections. Despite a degree of learner choice, this remained limited – Bernstein’s (1996) ‘apparent’ weak framing - as children could not opt out, and the texts on offer were limited. Instruction was responsive to the child’s demonstrated needs during reading, rather than following a sequence predetermined by the teacher. Indeed, it was possible for there to be no instructional discourse, for example where pupils read with no teacher intervention, as noted in a different context by Hoadley (2006).

In Strategy guided reading, framing was by default strong throughout, as teachers (themselves subject to strong policy framing) selected objectives and text considered appropriate for each teacher-determined group. In order to address the objective in the time available, the teacher controlled the learning sequence and pace. This in some cases was found to entail rigid adherence to a planned series of readings and questions, at the expense of dealing with learner misconceptions or establishing purposeful collaborative dialogue (Fisher 2008; Skidmore et al. 2003), resulting in a predominance of regulative over instructional discourse. However, within an overall climate of strong framing, it was possible for confident teachers to vary framing strength, weakening pacing and sequencing to provide time and discursive space for children to contribute to the lesson.
Evaluation criteria

In individualised reading, as teachers tended to respond to children’s miscues, hesitations or answers to questions, the emphasis was on supporting successful activity in ways that brought about or reinforced new learning, and explicitness may have been present, but was not required. The particular features that made for reading success may have therefore remained invisible to learners, regardless of their teachers’ judgements of their learning, and so framing was typically weak. What was always visible, however, was the levelled reading book, which provided a prominent marker of progress for children and their parents as they ‘finished a book’ or ‘moved up a level, but also an equally salient marker of status as book levels clearly stratified learners (Moss 2007). In this respect, the structures of the system provided tacit evaluation criteria which were part of the regulative, rather than the instructional, discourse, and which could exert far-reaching effects on children’s positioning of themselves as readers (Moss 2007; Anderson 2009).

Objective-led teaching, a marker of a performance ideology, was a crucial element of NLS (Stannard and Huxford 2007), and was fundamental to the Strategy view of guided reading, and evaluation criteria were extremely strongly framed. The official Strategy take on guided reading left no-one in any doubt of what they are learning, as the learning objective was reinforced from start to finish. Although guided groupings could in theory fluctuate according to the lesson focus, the traditional classroom culture of stratification by so-called ‘ability’ makes it likely that reading groupings would have contributed to how children perceived themselves as particular kinds of readers.

Hierarchical rules

Hierarchical rules regulate the social order within a pedagogic context (Bernstein 1996), and, given that the teacher is by virtue of position the dominant participant, essentially reflect the nature of the control exerted. Strong hierarchical framing supports a strong classification between teacher and pupils, teacher positioned as instructor, manager and evaluator, and children as pupils and learners. Weak hierarchical framing supports a more symmetrical relationship between teacher and pupils, with an apparent dilution of the power differential (although asymmetries can of course occur between learners), which can be instantiated, for example, through modes of talk, non-verbal behaviours and interactional dynamics.

Within individualised reading, a range of hierarchical framing values might be expected to exist. Time pressures, for example, might reduce the scope for negotiation and friendly conversation to complete the business in hand, while individuals who fail to respond to gentle hints might trigger a more directive form of interaction. Individual teachers too were likely to engage in more, or less, directive encounters with children according to their own preferences and habituated ways of working.
In guided reading, hierarchical framing was by default strong. However, as noted above, more weakly framed spaces could be created within an overarching lesson structure, and a weakening of the hierarchical rules could create and support such spaces. An ‘apparent’ weakening could also occur to temper the teacher’s demands, for example by using the language of solidarity (‘let’s’, ‘we’re going to’) or by softening the force of a demand with a smile or gesture. By such means, control could be exercised more subtly.

**Teachers managing change**

Most essentially, teachers shifting from individualised to group guided reading had to grapple with the issue of taking control. Located within a specified time frame, planned and actively managed, guided reading demanded a radically different way of working and thinking, as well as high levels of knowledge about reading pedagogy, learners, text and group dynamics.

In a socio-cultural view of pedagogy, proficiency in a discourse is developed through co-participation with established discourse participants, in the course of which interactional habits with their underlying assumptions are acquired and routinised. Such ‘habits of mind’, often invisibly acquired and not subject to conscious attention, are often enduring and can take on the status of the natural order (Hasan 2006). For teachers, according to Connelly and Clandinin (1999), they may be enshrined in the rhythms of the school day, week and year, so that even minor alterations to such patterns of activity can conflict with existing beliefs, attitudes and assumptions.

For teachers familiar with weakly framed, individualised patterns of teaching reading, involving short, responsive encounters with individuals distributed across the school day, the shift to the intensive, timetabled, strongly framed interaction of guided reading must have totally disrupted long-internalised rhythms. Teachers had to reposition themselves as teachers of reading, renegotiating the identities they wanted to enact in the new discourse and in effect recontextualising for themselves the imposed changes (Troman 2000; Woods and Jeffrey 2002). While adopting the recognition rules of the new discourse might be straightforward, acquiring the realisation rules required to teach guided reading would be less so, as new understandings would be filtered through established dispositions. According to Vulliamy et al. 1997:111): ‘Teachers’ self-identity and educational ideologies are powerful mediators in terms of their interpretation and responses to imposed changes.’
Illustrations from case studies

The case studies

As illustrative material I draw on selected interview data from three case studies constructed as part of a small-scale research project exploring primary teachers’ understandings of guided group reading. The three participants were self-selected, currently teaching children aged between 6 and 9 years of age in different urban schools in the South of England. All taught group guided reading regularly and viewed it positively, and were endorsed by school managers as competent teachers of reading. Additionally, their varying levels of experience and responsibility within their schools afforded insights into the ontogeny of their current practices and attitudes, which incorporated for all a shift from a routinised perception of individualised reading as the norm. Although I make no claims as to generalisability, I believe that the case study material usefully illustrates the theoretical account presented earlier, and that many primary teachers who have lived through the changing educational landscape of recent decades will recognise themselves and the classrooms they have inhabited as both learners and teachers.

Recollections of school reading

The recalled experiences of the three case study teachers, at primary school themselves in the early 1970s (Amanda), late 1970s (Caroline) and 1980s (Bryony) provide a flavour of their times, all three describing scenarios corresponding to a weakly framed, invisible pedagogy. None experienced any form of group reading, and if reading to the teacher was the norm, only Amanda has any specific memory of such a practice. They describe classrooms where children who ‘read’ (and did read at home) were largely left to read independently, either not taught at all, or taught in implicit ways that leave no trace in memory. Even Caroline, who recalls daily, written comprehension exercises which children completed at their own rate from a textbook, observes that these involved no teaching:

…if you were on page 6 that day, that’s the page you did! I don’t remember the teacher standing out in front, teaching you how to answer the questions, and I don’t remember them sitting at the table and working with you, I just remember sitting on my table and doing it myself.

Amanda likewise refers to the lack of teaching:

…it was just a case of here it is, get on with it, and if you could do it, you could, if you couldn’t, I guess you struggled, and you went to a place which was for Special Needs children called the Work Clinic if you couldn’t keep up.

What was salient for all three, however, was the sense of competition critiqued in Moss’s (2007) research. Here, Bryony describes this:

…I was aware again of moving up a level, so again it was a competitive thing, because you could compare yourself to other people, you knew when you were
improving because you got on to the harder books with a different coloured sticker on the spine.

Expectations on entering initial teacher education (ITE)

All three as children had experienced the individualised culture of their times, in which little explicit teaching occurred, at least for those who were well supported with reading at home. It was clear that home and school reading were strongly classified practices, and that it was the weakly framed home reading that had contributed most to their continuing enthusiasm, offering agency and authenticity - choice, pleasure, freedom to interact with texts as they wished and co-participation with family members. School practices, even if weakly framed, remained part of a separate world which precluded genuine autonomy.

For Caroline and Bryony, when they embarked on initial teacher education, ‘teaching reading’ was largely understood in relation to own lived experiences as successful learners, and reflects the weak framing of an individualistic, invisible pedagogy. According to Caroline, who went to college straight from school:

I thought they sat down next to you, and they read a book to you, you told them the word if it wasn’t right, you helped them along a bit and that was it… I suppose my perceptions of teaching children to read were very much based on what my own - like I said, these brief recollections of when I’ve had, reading to parents at school, nobody actually doing anything with me.

Bryony’s comments were similar:

I guess I did base it on what I experienced, parent helpers coming in, reading with children, reading stories to children, especially to give them the pleasure of reading, giving them time to read, I was expecting that ... I don’t think I ever thought about the actual nuts and bolts of teaching a child how to read. I’m sure I expected it to have been done by the time they got to where I would be teaching, which is upper Key Stage 2.

Amanda’s situation was different in that she had worked for some years as a learning support assistant for children with special needs, and was much more aware of ways in which certain children struggled:

All of those children, all at age seven, with such a disparity in their ability - why? So I started thinking about that, and I didn’t know a great deal about it, but speaking to the teachers, and beginning to understand the different factors that can play a part in reading development.

She also became aware that for some children, at least, a more visible pedagogic approach involving explicit teaching would have been more beneficial:

...one of my roles was to sit with a group of children, or have them one at a time on a chair, and help them with their reading, it was on a one-to-one basis, and they would sit and read for ten minutes at the beginning of the afternoon session, but
independently, which in my opinion didn’t particularly help the children who needed the explicit focusing in on phonics and decoding.

Making the transition to group teaching

The three teachers all went on to develop guided reading as an integral part of their practice, but via different routes. Amanda’s drive to improve the prospects of struggling readers led her to begin an ITE course in 1997. Her critical take on existing provision prepared her to actively embrace alternative recontextualisations of teaching reading, but during her course she was disappointed to find relatively little coverage of early reading skills in particular:

I don’t remember much about the phonics at all... because it was a Key Stage 2 course... and I was a little bit disappointed, because I thought we are going to get into junior schools and have kids who can’t read, can these people now go and teach people to read?

However, Amanda’s own perceived need for a new, more visible pedagogic approach primed her well for the incipient NLS, and on beginning her first teaching post, she launched enthusiastically ‘straight into guided reading from Day 1, and that’s the way I’ve always done it,’ with a strong emphasis on objective-led teaching and evaluation criteria. Convinced of its value with her own pupils, she took responsibility for developing strong school-wide guided reading systems, using test data to persuade more reluctant colleagues of its manageability and effectiveness.

Caroline too claimed to have learned little about how to ‘teach’ children in her ITE course, some ten years earlier than Amanda’s, and slipped easily into her first school’s individualised reading systems. She was, however, eager to observe and experiment, and particularly interested in developing children’s thinking and comprehension. Her critical reflection on routine everyday activity alerted her to certain limitations of the individual approach, leading her to experiment with more social groupings:

I still very much stuck to the individual hearing them read, but then I realised that it wasn’t getting me anywhere, it was one, I didn’t have the time, two, I realised that there were three or four children that might be on the same level, so I tended to hear them in pairs, or maybe threes, and we’d work together on those sort of things... I could definitely see where they could bounce off each other and they could support each other, and that there was this shared focus that we all had, so we could all work on that together and develop it further.

Caroline had embarked on a classroom-level recontextualisation that precursed guided reading, developing a flexible style of framing supporting a stronger instructional discourse, but also allowing spaces within that framing for learners to engage with each other, used as a pedagogic tool to develop thinking. In essence, the recognition and realisation rules of the guided context were at least partly in position before guided reading was introduced, and, despite Caroline’s initial
doubts, she quickly found it valuable, going on to develop her own version of guided reading as whole-school routine practice.

Both Amanda and Caroline, through their critical reflections on practice and principled willingness to adapt, took control of what guided reading meant for them and their schools, and positioned themselves not as passive acquirers of the new discourse, but as active agents of change, and as successful teachers of reading under the new regime, facilitated by their positions of responsibility within their schools.

Bryony had not yet reached that stage. She entered ITE in the early years of NLS, and, anticipating the individualised approaches of her own schooldays, was surprised at ‘the amount there was to cover’ regarding the teaching of reading, and ‘how in-depth it was’. ITE is a specialist context which has a legitimised function of introducing student teachers to new ways of working, and for Bryony, it presented an explicit break from her pre-existing assumptions.

Her first employment school already taught guided reading routinely, and her involvement in joint planning with colleagues shaped her practice substantially, as she adopted her colleagues’ ways of working. The interview context appeared to stimulate a slightly more critical reflection, as she noted aspects of the school version of guided reading – as understood by her – which jarred with her own perceptions as to what the teaching of reading should look like. In particular, she appeared to favour invisible learning through activity over direct instruction, and increased pupil talk within the lesson, which suggested a personal ideological position resonant of a weakly framed, competence-based pedagogy. By beginning to question existing practice, Bryony was perhaps moving towards a more agentic position of taking control over her own practice in a more principled manner.

Concluding thoughts

The case study data illustrate how, from similar beginnings as learners in a competence-dominated system, teachers’ varying experience and their ability to critically question the status quo enabled them to develop their understandings and practice as they adjusted to being successful teachers of reading in a performance-dominated system. Others will have done so differently. Becoming a teacher of guided reading was not an event but a process, which involved significant recontextualisation at the level of the individual, challenging ‘habits of mind’ invisibly constructed throughout childhood and beyond, and creating new rhythms and ways of working.

As policy-makers continue to spin the wheels of change in curriculum and pedagogy, in England and elsewhere, it is essential that they consider the relationship between the intended innovations and teachers’ established practices and their implicit ideological assumptions. Mediation needs to extend beyond mere ‘training’ or procedural guidance to scaffold, at a deeper level, teachers’ reconstructions of pedagogy and their own positioning in relation to the altered
discourse. It also needs to provide the space and legitimation for teachers to engage critically and collaboratively with practices both old and new, so that practice is developed through dialogic negotiation, rather than being imposed and complied with.

Meanwhile, what of children’s experience of what it means to become a reader within the different systems? Both individualised and group contexts represent discourses unique to schooling. From a Bernsteinian perspective, participation in a discourse not only determines access to particular forms of knowledge, but shapes pedagogic identity. For the case study teachers, the outcome of their competence-based schooling was a sharp differentiation between school reading practices and those of home, and they are clear that it is home reading that has shaped their long-term identities as successful and avid readers. For other children, who failed as readers within the individualised system, outcomes would have been different, with lasting impact for many on self-esteem and identity. What the outcomes of guided reading are for children’s development of reading identities, and the factors implicated in such outcomes, has yet to be researched.

References


