

I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip: Understanding Who We Are as Language Practitioners

SHARON J. RICH

University of Western Ontario

There are many ways of approaching the theme of identities and the ways in which identity is formed through language and the discourses in which we participate. Everyone has something to say about identity with each individual taking up the notion in a different way. When I was first asked about writing this paper, I wondered whether I had anything of relevance that would speak to the work that language arts researchers are doing. Over the past several years my own research has been eclectic, embracing everything from knowledge dissemination through community building to early childhood literacy. I wondered what threads if any connect who I am now with who I once was as primarily a language arts practitioner. And, since a part of my persona is storyteller, in this paper I share with you a story about my professional trip and about the ways in which I have come to understand identity.

In 1984 I wrote an article entitled *Restoring Power to Teachers: The Impact of Whole Language*. This paper appeared a year later in the journal *Language Arts*. In this paper I re-visit the original document in part because of all that I have written, I have been told that *Restoring Power* has influenced lives and classrooms the most. Members of my faculty and immediate public education community have told me that my belief in holistic approaches to text has damaged a whole generation of children and teachers. I have been told by others that the article inspired them to look at their practice and to think about the power that they wield when they work with children and teachers. Looking back has not been an easy task. The re-visiting brings

Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies
Volume 2 Number 2 Fall 2004

memories of a life and time that was filled with promise. Many of the teachers whose learning inspired the original text have left the public school system, some have retired, others have simply grown tired of the struggle and have left formal teaching altogether. Still others continue in their own ways and in their own contexts to be advocates for children and for learning. What of my original text remains true and right today? What now seems naïf? Is there a message or a cautionary tale for today's teachers and researchers? What might you learn from my story?

Who Am I?

I am a mom, an old mom, but a mom. When I wrote the article, my older daughter was in grade six, my son had just entered school and I had just given birth to a second daughter. My writing reflected an insider knowledge of schools that was influenced by my work with teachers and by my experience as a parent of children who were part of the school system. As I look back over the last twenty years I see that my youngest child has perhaps been the most influenced by the conflicted events in public schooling while the other two benefited from the early promise of the whole language movement. My son did not learn to read until he was in Grade 3, but was sustained because he had teachers who trusted that he would. His confidence in himself, his writing and his ability to be in the world seems unlimited. My older daughter learned that she could ask questions and challenge authority (even to the extent of challenging her mom and leading a strike at her elementary school). She has taken her ability to challenge and question with her in her travels around the world. My younger daughter has learned that the test is everything, that you do not challenge authority but simply tune it out and that schools are places where you mark time until you can get to those things that you love. These are the experiences of children of privilege. What has it been like for others?

Today I work in a university setting with in-service teachers who have been in the profession for a number of years. I know that they often demonstrate a frustration when they are ordered to use a particular commercial language arts program chosen by those outside of the classroom. I worry that like my youngest they do not feel that they can challenge the text or the test. Many of them are demoralized and defeated by a system that devalues their knowledge. They cry that schools have become too politicized yet they do not seem to recognize that schools have always been politicized and that they as teachers have a role in shaping the system in which they work. On the other hand many pre-service teacher candidates seem to feel there is little to learn about teaching. They have been in school, read the papers and know that they can teach without having to learn any pedagogical theory.

Certainly the only thing they really need to know about literacy is which program to teach. I worry too that many of my faculty colleagues feel that we as a faculty do students a disservice by not teaching how to use the commercial language programs. These colleagues suggest that today's teachers need to know how to use the program correctly so that kids can do well on tests.

And in the midst of my worries, I wonder about the children and their learning. Who will help today's students challenge what is and imagine what might be possible? Who will help today's students understand that reading is more than decoding? Who will raise the big questions about privilege and justice? Who will encourage questions rather than provide simplistic answers? What are the lessons to be learned from the past twenty years? What do we know now that shapes who we might become as literacy practitioners who work with learners of all types? Did I write anything in 1984 that may be relevant to teachers and researchers today?

In 1984 I wrote about whole language. Whole language has been at times condemned for advocating the use of the child's own language. Some suggest that those who advocate letting children bring their own language and culture to school fail to ensure that minority groups of children have access to the language of power and privilege. Others suggest that by paying insufficient attention to the basics of phonics and spelling other children get left behind and will not be able to contribute to the economic well being of the country. The point that seems to be missed by both groups is that whole language and its advocates were and are about restoring power to teachers and children. This power is about making choices. It is about understanding the human being as an active, socially constructed knower. It is about building a community of learners that has the freedom to make decisions about what will help the community to grow.

Today instead of trusting and respecting learners and teachers we purchase "balanced" programs that reflect proven approaches to literacy. Yet we as researchers know that there are few certainties in any classroom. When children and adults are together in a closed space, many things get done and a number of other things are not accomplished. In classrooms where teachers have a good understanding of language teaching and learning, many good things will happen as teachers make choices that reflect student needs. And, as I write that sentence, I am taken back into the 1984 paper in which I have highlighted a number of sentences. I realize that my identity as teacher, researcher and teacher educator is reflected through those statements. I share them with you now and reflect on what they mean to me today. Each one of these statements I believe provides a way for us to think about our own journeys towards becoming the language practitioner that we hope to be and that we hope future generations will encounter.

Statement 1

The answers to the theory-to-practice question do not reside in a text but within the self.

Today there is an incredible amount of information about language and literacy available and as researchers and teachers we have to read and evaluate it. As Manguel (1996) and Adler and Van Doren (1972) suggest we still have to do the hard work of learning something on our own. Since information is only as good as its authors, discriminating language users know that careful dwelling in text is essential. Knowledge can be disseminated easily but whether it is taken up, learned or applied is a different issue. Too often we simply parrot prepackaged notions then spew them as our own. To be informed is to know that something is the case...to be enlightened is to know why and to recognize its connections to other parts of our lives.

It was not in 1984 and still is not today a matter of taking theory and putting it into practice. We must be theory builders and our work with children and teachers has to be informed by our close observation of literacy practices. Once we know what good literacy teachers do we can share our knowledge with others. Pressley's (2001) study of classroom teachers' practices has taken us a long way in that direction. His research reflects a practice that involves partnerships with those who work daily with children and parents. That form of practice has to be respected and acknowledged for what it teaches us about teachers and about literacy.

Statement 2

Like the children, the teacher has become a learner. It assumes that everyone is a learner and everyone can become an expert.

If the answers to theory to practice questions reside within the self then it is critical that the teacher be a learner. In 1984 when I worked with teachers they had taken control of their classrooms in that they questioned what they were asked to do. They read research and thought about what that research might look like in practice. Influenced by the work of James Britton (1970), Marie Clay (1978) and Donald Graves (1978), they experimented, acknowledged and shared each other's good practices. The curriculum documents that they worked with acknowledged them as professionals who were capable of modifying programs to meet individual needs. Today all too often the teacher is not seen as a learner but as a technician who ensures that the children in the classroom can meet the demands of the next round of assessment. The teacher's task is all too often simply program delivery rather than development or refinement. When the teacher does not have the freedom to learn and to challenge the nature of the programs that are imposed, the best practices may be lost. Cambourne (2003) suggests that children

learn through demonstration and modeling. Children whose teachers do not ask questions of their own learning will come to understand that accepting received knowledge is the only legitimate way of being in the world. Researchers, who see literacy practices through only one lens, do not recognize what alternative perspectives may offer. Bochner and Ellis (1996) have suggested that academic researchers all too often reject new ideas because they have committed a lifetime of work to a particular way of doing research or a particular form of knowledge. Accepting that the next generation will take knowledge to a new place is also a part of developing expertise. Having the wisdom to foster expertise is a challenge for those of us whose professional (and personal) egos get too involved in our work.

Statement 3

The priorities have been firmly established as being supportive of language and children. We choose people over programs.

This comment is obviously related to the previous one. If we choose people over programs we demonstrate an interest in the ways in which people learn. We recognize that there is an intimate relationship between people's identities and the language they use to represent their learning. Thus we accept that the child and the family have a language that has a place in school. We build on the strengths that our students bring and let them know that we are interested in who they are now and in who they might become in the future. For example, Farhan is much more than leveled text orange. He is a member of a family that has just left Pakistan. He is not certain about his place in this new country and culture but he knows that he loves soccer and that big thick book about soccer is his favorite thing. The sensitive literacy practitioner recognizes Farhan's passion for soccer and even though the principal and the ESL teacher are agreed that Farhan needs leveled texts, his classroom teacher knows that she will have much more success with him if she assists his struggle to read the words in the soccer book. More importantly, she knows that Farhan will learn to read and at the same time earn the respect of his peers because of his knowledge of soccer. As researchers, in our meetings with teachers we do not just go into the school to talk about our new way of teaching writing that we have developed from our own theories. We go to the school and we listen to teachers talk about the practices that they have used. We share success and failures. We talk about something that we have tried and present our understandings not as the definitive method of teaching but as a way to learn. If instead of being the authority, the expert, we as researchers enter the classroom to share, to get to know, to understand the other then perhaps our theories and our practices will be taken up and evolve as teachers themselves learn to dwell

with us in our expertise as we dwell with them in theirs. There is then a negotiated understanding not just of theory but also of practice and of persons. That is what choosing people over programs means. That is what being supportive means.

Statement 4

Trust, security and interaction.

These three words define what makes a supportive environment for teachers, children and researchers. If we are to be effective we create a community of learners in which we learn through and with each other. Today we need to have once again a community of literacy practitioners who come together to share knowledge, to learn and to get to know each other. Such communities are not new. In 1984, they seemed to be popping up all over the country as teachers met with researchers to talk about literacy practice. They talked, shared ideas (and a few bottles of wine) and engaged in a healthy debate. There was mutual respect in a context where each member of the community was respected for the contribution made. Then, as time passed, perhaps in response to a leaner, meaner, political arena, we hunkered down in our individual academies and teachers hid in classrooms for they were under attack. Only occasionally, like prairie dogs poking heads out of holes did we emerge to defend our territory or to check to see if the coast was clear. We were told in Ontario that you could not use the word equity in curriculum documents. We protested but not too loudly because it was dangerous and perhaps we had been hurt once too often. We continued to work quietly, alone in our offices, our labs or our classrooms. We learned to talk about how our work could contribute to the new economy-even though some of us weren't sure that the new economy was much different from the old. Now, perhaps because we are beginning to recognize that being alone is not much fun, we are again looking outward and seeking the community that we need if we are to revitalize our practices.

We are knowledge workers and as Wenger (1998) suggests we need communities in which to share our knowledge. We need the trust, security and interaction that we lost. We need to reignite the passion that drove us to want to understand more about literacy learning in the first place. If we think about and design our own practices, we engage in a social reconfiguration in which we take information and negotiate with it. As a community when we think about our learning we necessarily reach out to share with other practitioners in other communities. When we share our learning we integrate information about best teaching practices into our own identities as literacy practitioners.

Statement 5

Language teaching can be seen as a political activity. Whole language returns power where it belongs: to the children and the teacher. There is a community of co-learners who believe in political action if political action means restoring power to children.

Carol Edelsky (1988) wrote about the political nature of the debate that emerged in the US surrounding holistic approaches to teaching and learning. She characterized the debate as one that pitched conservative elements against more liberal ones and suggested that the positioning was having an impact on funding as well as practices. Certainly in Canada one could see the political nature of the debate. In 1984 school districts discussed language policies that would enable learners to use personal language. Reading polices that included the radical comment that there should be at least 30 minutes a day of uninterrupted reading in classroom were commonplace. Then in a movement that perhaps began in Britain but rapidly spread to other countries, such polices were suddenly off the books as testing for basic skills became the norm (Proctor, 1990). Increasingly conservative proponents suggested that the world was inevitably damaged when teachers and children had voices in what was taught. The corporate world demanded accountability. In Ontario, teachers and children at grades three and six were evaluated in literacy and mathematics. Children's scores were published in newspapers and suddenly real estate values in areas around the "good" schools increased. Research funding agencies paid attention too. How can we find a magic bullet to increase literacy scores? We have to be competitive. Can we find a magic pill that will finally get the genetics fixed so that everyone can read? Few people dared to raise an alarm. Solutions that considered people as individuals were too costly. After all, what did poverty have to do with literacy? *The Early Years Report* by McCain and Mustard (1999) confirmed the suggestion that middle class kids were just as disadvantaged as kids below the poverty line and although Stooke (2003) suggested that the report was little more than a fractured fairy tale, many researchers accepted the McCain/Mustard road map as a way to be funded. After all, Mustard has impeccable credentials as a physician and a neurologist who understands pedagogy. And as we look for a quick fix, the medical model of evidence-based practice enters schools. Once again real expertise is seen as residing outside of the classroom. Certainly from the report there are interesting findings and several studies that have come from it have made valuable contributions to our knowledge. The problem is that all too often the findings do not make it to the classroom because the teachers who must use them do not have a stake in the research.

The real challenge for us today is first discovering literacy practices that matter and second, understanding that what we do in our classrooms mat-

ters. Darling-Hammond & Youngs (2003) have noted that the single element that makes the most difference to student achievement in any area is teacher professional development. What does that mean? It means that together with the teachers with whom we work we have to take back control of the classrooms. We have to argue for teachers working beside us in our research. We have to listen to what they say and we have to respect the knowledge of practice that they share. Then in a collaborative environment, we can as partners, become involved in the political action of taking control of learning. Teaching literacy matters. It matters not because we want to have the best test scores but because we want to raise children who ask questions and challenge the way it has always been.

So Where Are We?

After twenty years I still believe that people matter more than programs. I still believe that identity is formed through and with language and I am even more convinced of the value of community in creating strong identities. I know that in communities meaning is negotiated, a sustained history of practice is created and members can let each other know about emerging opportunities for on-going development. New members to the community infuse it with new practices and knowledge and at the same time learn from the established members about the practices of the past. The tension between new and established forms of knowledge creates a dynamic learning context. Wenger (1998) has suggested that any creative work requires personal investment and social energy. I suggested in 1984 that a literacy community if facilitated appropriately, could provide a space for personal investment and social energy that enriched the lives of participants and became a site for knowledge construction.

I suggested too that identification with an active group of practitioners went beyond the borders of the local and enabled connections with others in different physical locations. As connections are made, the community of practice alleviated the loneliness and stagnation that sometimes occurs when there are few local practitioners. Perhaps we can go forward as a community of practice that values and respects the teachers and children for whom we are working.

So I have taken you on my journey of reflection and from my reflections I have learned that the principles that I articulated in 1984 still have value for me today. I know that my belief in these principles has shaped my interactions with my students and with the teachers with whom I have worked over the years. It hasn't been a bad trip from then until today and from this vantage point I can see that the journey has just begun.

References

- Adler, M. J. & Van Doren, C. (1972). *How to read a book*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bochner, A. & Ellis, C. (1996). Taking ethnography into the 21st century. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 25(1), 3–5.
- Britton, J. (1970). *Language and learning*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Cambourne, B. (2003). Taking a naturalistic viewpoint in early childhood literacy research. In Hall, N., Larson, J. & Marsh, J. (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 411–423). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Clay, M. (1978). Reading acquisition: Do you get what you plan for? In Ridsdale, A. M., Ryan, D. & Horan, J. (Eds.), *Literacy for life* (pp. 1–12). Melbourne: Australian Reading Association.
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Youngs, P. (2003). Defining highly qualified teachers: What does “scientifically-based” research actually tell us? *Educational Research*, 31(9).
- Edelsky, C. (1988). One more critique of testing-with two differences. *English Education*, 20(1), 24–12.
- Graves, D. (1978). *Balance the basics: Let them write*. New York: Ford Foundation.
- Manguel, A. (1996). *A history of reading*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- McCain, M. & Mustard, F. (1999). *Reversing the real brain drain: Early years study, final report*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.
- Pressley, M. (2001). *Learning to read: Lessons from exemplary first-grade classrooms*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Proctor, N. (Ed.). (1990). *The aims of primary education and the National Curriculum*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Stooke, R. (2003). (Re)Visioning the Ontario early years study: Almost a fairy tale-but not quite. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 19(2), 91–102.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wharton-McDonald, R., Pressley, M. & Hampston, J. M. (1998). Literacy instruction in nine first-grade classrooms: Teacher characteristics and student achievement. *The Elementary School Journal*, 99(2), 101–125.