The Cultural Practice of Reading and the Standardized Assessment of Reading Instruction: When Incommensurate Worlds Collide

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This article critiques the articles by Connor et al., Croninger and Valli, Pianta and Hamre, and Rowan and Correnti, which appeared in the March 2009 issue of *Educational Researcher,* by taking a cultural-historical perspective on reading and reading instruction. In this paradigm a number of those authors' assumptions are seen as questionable, including the beliefs about reading that it is a self-evident construct, that it is a discrete act, and that it is an acultural act. The author of this critique presents evidence that challenges each of these assumptions and argues that by accepting them, the authors of the critiqued articles institute an order that values the system above relational aspects of schooling and teachers' informed decision making.

Keywords: assessment; cultural analysis; literacy; measurements; reading

The paradigm through which I view literacy development is grounded in the cultural-historical psychology emerging from the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1987) and developed by Cole (1996), Lee (2008), Moll (1990), Rogoff and Lave (1984), Wells (1986), Wertsch (1991), and others. From this perspective, the act of reading is mediated by cultural tools, signs, and practices and in turn potentially mediates readers' concept development (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998), personality (Valsiner, 1998), identity (Lewis & del Valle, 2009), and other dimensions of human development toward a culture's teleological ends (Wertsch, 2000) and an individual's navigation of its pathways.

Using this perspective, I find the conception of reading and reading instruction in the articles that appeared in the March 2009 issue of *Educational Researcher* to be problematic. I was recruited to comment on these articles at least in part because my own work employs various qualitative research methods. My reservations, however, are not grounded in the authors' preference for reducing data to numbers. My difficulty in accepting many of the arguments I find in these articles resides rather in what I view as the authors' questionable assumptions about what it means to read and to teach reading.

My goal with this essay is to examine some of these assumptions and critique them from the perspective through which I view the same issues. I thus attempt to juxtapose paradigms that are grounded in conflicting assumptions about reading, particularly about the degree to which reading is or is not a cultural, situated act.

Before doing so, I will acknowledge that there is something admirable about the comprehensive way in which the authors attempt to outline a whole, interlocking system of policy, assessment, teaching, and learning for the study of reading instruction. Connor et al., for instance, describe a useful observation tool and detail a process for developing such tools, even if the developer bases the instrument on principles different from those I might employ. Someone who studies different phenomena could find this article provocative because it develops a conception of what is possible and provides a model of a process for how to go about constructing a good data collection tool. I think it is especially important to see how the tool has evolved over many years as conceptions have changed, theories have undergone revision, and new ideas and perspectives have become available. This long view is important as people consider their career trajectories and how to manage them. I think that the article by Connor et al. will be assigned in research methods classes because of the clarity and thoughtfulness of the writing and the conceptual patience behind the development of Individualizing Student Instruction.

What I think this set of articles has to offer, then, is a way to think about data collection if the goal is to quantify and make inferences from complex, intersecting phenomena that the researchers are confident affect teaching and learning. At its best, such research can help to document the degree to which certain variables are present in classroom instruction and how associations among them might generate insights for the astute data analyst.

Even with this exceptional virtue, these articles in many ways operate from assumptions that I question. Although not all of the articles include each of the assumptions that I consider next, on the whole they present a view of reading and reading instruction that I find one-dimensional. In the remarks that follow, I hope to identify these assumptions and argue that they are insufficient both for classroom teachers as guides to their instruction and for the broad policy arena in which the authors are attempting to institute their ideas.

The Assumption That Reading Is a Self-Evident Construct

One thing that puzzled me as I read the articles was the prima facie manner in which the notions of *reading, literacy,* and *reading instruction* are presented by the authors. By and large, the authors talk about reading, literacy, reading instruction, reading comprehension, and "understanding" of reading without going into any detail about what these constructs might mean. At times it appears not to matter, because the authors are not studying reading; rather, they are studying how "reading instruction" is parceled across the demands of the instructional day and how standardized reading scores correspond to specific distributions of instructional time. At the same time, the authors' work appears designed to orchestrate and assess the teaching of reading in schools, and so it matters very much what they think "reading" and how to teach it are all about.

Croninger and Valli provide the only definition of reading that I could find in this collection. They reference Pressley's account of reading as "the ability of students to understand what is in text." There is a lot about this definition that I find problematic, at least as far as the authors use it in this article. But because they do not elaborate on it in any way, I must assume that they find it sufficient and imbued with self-evident meaning. Even in its brevity, it includes a number of contested terms that call for explication if the authors are proposing that their assessment of reading instruction is to provide information and insights.

First, students are not the only people who read, and children do a lot of reading outside their role as students. So limiting the notion of reading to "students" suggests that the conception driving the instrumentation described in this collection is one grounded in how reading tends to get treated in school: as a discrete and measurable act. And yet a number of studies show that young people read a great deal outside their role as students: playing video games (Smith & Wilhelm, 2009), navigating online environments (Black & Steinkuhler, 2009), participating in after-school programs (Cole, 1996), engaging in everyday cultural exchanges (Majors, Kim, & Ansari, 2009), and being involved with texts in countless other settings. These studies reveal far greater levels of engagement and strategy use than students demonstrate in classroom reading lessons, suggesting that what happens in school would benefit from an understanding of children's experiences with reading that they undertake for purposes other than being taught to read in school.

A second problem is the reference to what is read as "text." The abundant scholarship in semiotics (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2001; Witte, 1992; and many others) has expanded the notion of *text* to account for all manner of sign configurations. Research journals that focus on reading are currently publishing articles on such representational and constructive acts as the composition and interpretation of architectural texts (e.g., Smagorinsky, Cook, & Reed, 2005). Given this well-documented expansion of what literacies comprise (Street, 1984)—ranging from ancient media such as sculpture (Smagorinsky, 2009b) and drawing (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994) to newer digital multimodal forms (Hull & Nelson, 2005)—the term *text* requires some explication to be useful in any discussion of reading instruction.

Finally, it is never clear what the authors mean when they say that a text is something that a reader is able "to understand." Understanding, as I understand these essays, refers to the degree to which students can correctly answer multiple-choice questions on reading assessments; other ways of engaging are presumably not critical to what might emerge from a reading transaction. For instance, Rowan and Correnti remark disapprovingly that on some assessments students "were more likely to be asked to make personal connections to text, construct a literal interpretation of a text passage, or sequence information from passages, rather than analyze or evaluate textual passages or compare and contrast texts" (p. 126). I see this critique as founded in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives, one in which such acts as making a personal connection to a text might be categorized as low-level cognition (although I would argue that it could just as easily be treated as a comparison-and-contrast action). Other studies, however, have found that, for the reader, inscribing oneself in a text can help construct a meaningful reading transaction (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995), contribute to identity development (Gee, 2003), provide a cognitive and emotional template for interpreting action (Beach & Hynds, 1991), and provide other means of access to both content and material for generating meaning as part of a reading experience. Such inscriptions involve not just decoding but *encoding* a text with meaning (Smagorinsky, 2001) and *emplotting* a reading (Ricoeur, 1983) by placing it in dialogue with and in extension of other readings of texts, including those written and those conceived through other sign systems.

"Understanding" in these articles appears to be operationalized in students' ability to answer questions posed by someone else about information in texts that they have not chosen but were required to read (for a myriad of examples of such questions, see http://www.testpreview.com/). Because I find it questionable that Bloom's (1956) taxonomy provides the only possible way of evaluating a question's potential for prompting high-level cognition, and because I think that "comprehension" and "understanding" are obsolete constructs in light of the broader possibilities for interpretation and meaning construction that have emerged from recent studies of textuality, I find the purported emphasis on students' understanding of texts to be a questionable vehicle for evaluating the quality of reading instruction, especially when the assessment of this instruction comes through bubble-filling standardized tests that in no way resemble young people's authentic transactions with texts of their choice.

The Assumption That Reading Is a Discrete Act

The authors in this collection appear to accept the premise that "reading" is a skill that can be taught apart from any connection to the content, genre, and cultural conventions that others believe are implicated in efforts to read specific texts in particular settings. They appear to assume that learning to "read" involves a single set of transferable skills or abilities that can be taught as an isolated part of the curriculum. I am reminded of the old dispute regarding critical thinking, in which some treat thinking as a situated practice sensitive to what is being thought about by whom under what circumstances (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) and some conceive thinking as a general practice (e.g., Ennis, 1989). Croninger and Valli appear to regard

"reading" as an act that occurs on its own and so can be taught irrespective of situational factors. Because the "texts" to which they refer in reading lessons all have the same general properties, reading can be taught as a general skill.

Yet it has been known for some time that reading not only involves a general set of skills but is differentiated according to task and community of readers (Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992). As Duke (2000) has argued, learning to read informational writing relies on different schematic knowledge than does learning to read narratives. McCarthey and Raphael (1992) have further found evidence that readers are oriented to discourse communities quite early in life.

Heath (1983) demonstrates this second point in her 10-year ethnographic study of how children develop abiding orientations to reading before entering school (cf. Lee, 1993). Heath's study has been referenced so many times that it is near shocking that its insights have not made headway in policies that govern reading instruction; a Google Scholar search reveals that it has been cited roughly 3,600 times in published scholarship as of this writing. The White, fundamentalist Christian children in the community that Heath studied, for instance, were exposed almost exclusively to the Bible as a verbatim statement of truth that was not to be questioned. Such children, upon entering school, struggled with reading in which questioning the text was appropriate. They suffered academically as a consequence of this cultural orientation to reading. In contrast, the children in the African American community she studied were taught at home that solitary reading was an antisocial activity and were discouraged from reading quietly, which was the behavior expected in school. Instead, they were urged to get outside and engage with their neighbors socially (cf. Delpit, 1995).

The students best socialized to reading in school were the children of middle-class parents, particularly teachers. These children's early reading experiences reflected the sort of question-and-answer exchanges that formed the basis of reading instruction in school. Heath's (1983) study identifies the ways in which young people are immersed in communities of practice that embrace them quite early in life. Cole (1996) argues that such socialization begins in the first moments of life, finding that "when neonates enter the world they are already the objects of adult, culturally conditioned interpretation. . . . They come bathed in the concepts their community holds about babies just as surely as they come bathed in amniotic fluid" (pp. 183–184). Although most research on discourse communities is concerned with academic disciplines (Bazerman & Paradis, 1991) and professional writing genres (e.g., Beaufort, 2009), Heath demonstrates that orientations to reading originate in the emerging web of social relationships into which children are enculturated from their earliest moments of consciousness.

The authors' focus on reading as a discrete area of instruction amenable to isolation for teaching purposes is evident in Croninger and Valli's claim that "even when teachers carry out their instructional responsibilities without major absences, student mobility can interfere with the one-to-one relationship between students and teachers, necessitating some unintentional sharing of teaching responsibility" (p. 103). Yet the quest to find such one-to-one relationships and other variables is futile given the theoretical work in intertextuality (Hartman, 1992) and intercontextuality (Floriani, 1993). From this perspective, any discourse arguing that any discourse act is

historically and culturally linked to prior acts that rely on related speech conventions and social practices.

Croninger and Valli acknowledge that they found their effort "to isolate the sources of reading instruction in schools far more complicated than we had anticipated" (p. 104). From the perspective of sociocultural literacy research, undertaking such a quest is inherently futile because no social action is isolated to begin with. Indeed, the authors' realization serves to confirm the sociocultural axiom that literacy development is a complex phenomenon that is grounded both historically and contemporaneously; literacy practices emerge from prior literacy practices and are implicated in a host of concurrently occurring phenomena that defy isolation. I find it striking that even though some interesting findings are available in these articles, at times the authors' epistemology leads them to interpret them as illustrations of the difficulty of their quest rather than as signs of a need for rigorous interrogation of their assumptions.

Croninger and Valli claim that "even when we as researchers seek to develop designs that capture complexity, our theories and methods often prove inadequate to the task" (p. 103). I agree that if the effort is to isolate variables that cannot be disentangled from others in order to measure their effects, then the theory is indeed inadequate. But other theories are available with different assumptions that would lead to a different set of research questions and related methods and that have provided the field with investigative principles and tools for many decades now.

The Assumption That Reading Is an Acultural Act

Although they are attentive to issues facing educators in high-poverty schools, the authors appear to view the normative setting for reading instruction to be the affluent suburban classroom. Pianta and Hamre condemn the "high degree of variability in classroom quality" without considering why one class might be different from another. They also value "productive instructional activities with caring and responsive adults who consistently provide feedback and challenge students to think critically" (p. 115) as the sole criterion for a quality classroom, with no consideration of what else might be valued in a school setting.

By imposing the qualities of affluent suburban schools on all classrooms, they overlook the ways in which, for many students, school is a place—unlike home—where a hot meal is regularly and dependably available and so a place to go for purposes other than learning (D. Kirkland, personal communication, January 5, 2009). The authors deplore the inequitable education provided to disadvantaged students but appear to believe that the problem resides in teachers who choose to spend time on discipline instead of on challenging students to think critically about topics preferred by the researchers. As Lee (1993) has shown, urban students living in extreme poverty have vast untapped potential that can be cultivated by teachers who are sensitive to their backgrounds and who develop strategies that enable students to link their home experiences and discourse practices to school-based reading. Doing so requires teachers to rethink instructional models developed for middle-class populations and pay careful attention to the ways in which different populations are enculturated to textual exchanges through home and community life.

Teachers thus cannot teach as if their students are acultural. In her narrative of learning to teach Haitian children whose

behavior was often incomprehensible to her, Ballenger (1999) recounts her initial impressions of immigrant children who were not socialized to the norms of a U.S. school experience. At home, for instance, the parents did not read to the children. As a result Ballenger found a mismatch in expectations, a finding that corroborates Heath's (1983) conclusions about the ways in which cultural orientations to texts shape students' classroom approaches to reading (cf. Gallas & Smagorinsky, 2002). Ballenger positions herself in this narrative as both teacher and learner. She could not simply begin posing high-cognition critical thinking questions to students whose cultural ways of knowing did not correspond to such questioning techniques. Rather, she had to understand what she did not know about the children as a first order of business, and then shape her instruction in relation to the students' cultural practices.

Her students, she understood, were not receptive to traditional question-and-answer instruction as were the children of the middle-class parents studied by Heath (1983). Like other culturally responsive teachers (see, e.g., the many educators described by the contributors to Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009), Ballenger dedicated her teaching to understanding the cultural practices of her students and adapting her teaching accordingly. Rather than being the recalcitrant and thus low-quality instructor that Hamre and Pianta believe is impeding the quest toward educational quality, Ballenger was the sort of culturally aware, reflective practitioner whom many believe to be critical to educating diverse populations during what many forecast will be a century of demographic transformation in the United States (see, e.g., the publications listed at http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLBookClubs.htm#Menu).

The Assumption That Reading Instruction Is Best Managed by Policy and Assessment Experts

The authors' orientation to reading instruction encourages uniformity in which students' responses should follow a single path. Variation from the script undermines the system. Among the research goals of these articles is to place, as Pianta and Hamre state, "validated, standardized observational assessment of teachers' classroom instruction and interactions more squarely in the realm of large-scale education science. . . . [Such assessment] could have tremendous *downstream* consequences in terms of traction on questions that vex the field" (p. 109; emphasis added). The metaphors employed by the researchers suggest their hierarchical view of educational systems as they seek to shift the focus to "how inputs produce achievement through debate about effective or qualified teachers" (p. 109).

Pianta and Hamre argue that

placing direct assessment of actual teaching as a central feature of accountability frameworks and provisions for equity of educational opportunity is likely to accomplish several interlocking aims that in a coordinated fashion could result in substantial shifts in the nature and quality of instruction, socialization, mentoring, and tutelage that takes place in classrooms and a robust science of the *production* of teaching and teachers. (p. 110)

If the mechanistic conception of teaching and learning that I find pervasive in these articles is not evident elsewhere, then the authors' emphasis on the view of teachers and their teaching as products of the larger assessment machinery should be apparent

from the phrasing of this claim. And students appear to have even less agency, serving largely as test-score producers whose performances allow the policy makers to have a measurement by which to evaluate both the teachers' instruction (as conceived by the policy) and their fidelity to the hierarchical system itself.

Rowan and Correnti express concern that well-planned systems for reading instruction may be derailed by teachers who depart from the script they are provided. They make the "dismal observation" that

one of the most extraordinary findings from the study was the large variation that exists in teaching practices—even among teachers working at the same grade in the same school. . . . In many ways, this extreme variability in teaching signals that schools remain "loosely coupled" organizations where teachers have considerable autonomy and function largely as curriculum brokers (Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Porter, 1989). It also suggests that students' opportunities to learn are not particularly orderly or adapted to their prior instructional or learning histories. Instead, students seem to be exposed to learning opportunities that are provided at the discretion of teachers who appear (on average) to be operating largely independently of each other. (p. 126)

I will confess that I do not find the fact that teachers are making their own instructional decisions nearly so "dismal." Of course I do not agree with every decision that every teacher makes. I am happy, however, to see that these teachers have agency and are using it to think about how to teach, even if they make decisions that are not measurable to someone else's satisfaction, no matter how well wrought the instrumentation.

I will return again to the example provided by Ballenger (1999) in her teaching narrative, which falls in the area of reflective practice, teacher research, action research, or however else a teacher's systematic reflection on her teaching might be characterized. Like other teachers who have produced compelling accounts of their work (Gallas, 2003; Hankins, 2003; Michie, 1999; and others), Ballenger is highly sensitive to her students and how they are and are not socialized into the practices of schooling. She is also humble enough to know when something is not working and to address the problem by means of systematic, informed analysis. She is extremely well read and integrates her book knowledge with her experiential knowledge to contribute to her growing conception of how to teach diverse learners. She respects her students and their families enough to adapt her teaching to their ways of knowing, and respects the curriculum enough to maintain its integrity while adapting it to the characteristics of a new cultural group in her school. She consults with a respected group of colleagues who help her think about how to address what she sees as a gap in her understanding of how to teach students from diverse cultures.

As such she is developing a situated notion of best practice, one at odds with the conventional notion of best practice as a set of instructional methods developed by outside experts and superimposed hierarchically (see Smagorinsky, 2009a). If I were hiring teachers, I would want them all to be like Cindy Ballenger: to have the chutzpah, courage, intelligence, and initiative to question norms and teach as they believe is effective and appropriate. I would much rather have teachers like her in my school than the compliant sort that Rowan and Correnti believe should populate the teaching force.

I should stress that in making this point I am not taking the romantic view that all teachers are wonderful. I see Ballenger more as an exemplar than as typical. Like the authors of the articles in the March 2009 issue of *Educational Researcher,* I would love to have a teaching profession in which all teachers are highly qualified in everything they do. My concern is that when the system is built to accommodate teachers who follow directions, then that is the sort of teacher the profession will attract and retain. I would much rather take my chances with the expectation that teachers should make decisions based on their good judgment. This standard would make reflective practice the measure of quality and would help the profession to attract and retain people who have the initiative and disposition to make informed decisions based on their careful and systematic observations of children. In this sense, entrusting authority to teachers inevitably produces considerable variation in instruction; each classroom will be different because both the individual children and their group chemistry will be unique, and one teacher's judgment will reflect that person's makeup rather than following a single path or script. The most effective teacher will thus be one who can observe, reflect, intervene, and teach as she deems appropriate, even if such singular instruction defies the assessment apparatus that surrounds her work with children.

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