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New roles for literacy teachers in the age of multiliteracies:

A sociocultural perspective

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Abstract

The classical definition of literacy ‘the ability to read and write’ presupposes that literacy is something individual, static, universal, and solely cognitive. However, the new literacy approach of the post-structuralism underscores the significance of texts in context, differing values, meanings and the notion of multiliteracies. Traditional conception of literacy privileges some and marginalizes some others in the society and in the classroom which is a social space. This study aims at redefining the term literacy and multiliteracies in the postmodern world and presenting new roles for literacy teachers for the practice in Turkish literacy classrooms.

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Keywords: Literacy; multiliteracies; teacher roles; sociocultural approach; Turkey.

1. Introduction

Sociocultural literacy studies underscore the fact that there exist different literacies- different forms of reading and writing in relation to speaking and reading (Gee, 1996, 2000; New London Group, 1996). The classical definition of literacy- ability to read and write-, which privileges some individual learners and marginalizes others, has lately been challenged by Vygotskian approaches to thought and language. Political issues such as identity, power and status are highly considered in the classroom context, where meaning is socially, culturally and historically constructed. Thus, sociocultural approach to literacy education pinpoint the pedagogical significance of new literacies unveiling the binary between a universal print-centric literacy and “the intersection of people, texts, modes, practices, and the varied meanings of literacy learning in different situations and cultural contexts” (Alvermann & McLean, 2007, p. 3).

That is, new literacies present us new ways of thinking, valuing and practicing. The digital revolution introducing the hypertext, the poststructuralist meaning making process and the outside classroom learning are some examples of the new forms of social practices. In multiliteracies, a classroom is a social place which “contains and produces

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resources for identity that come to it from many directions” (Leander & Zacher, 2007, p. 139). Therefore, it should be considered to be a milieu for learners in which they could negotiate their beliefs, values and identities. In this context, the teacher’s role should be defined as “the socially and culturally determined nature and commonly held expectations of an individual’s professional self” (O’Connor, 2008, p. 118). With a sociocultural approach in mind, this study aims at discussing new roles for literacy teachers in the socially situated practices of teaching and learning.

2. New Roles for Literacy Teachers

2.1. *Teacher as co-inquirer*

For a strong social worlds membership, students are expected to develop a thinking practice in which they could understand how social worlds are built through actions and words. This practice could help them better analyze the relationships, identities and values in the society (Beach & Myers, 2001). According to Beach and Myers, teacher-student relationship in content-focused curriculum is defined as an expert-novice relationship. In student-centered curriculum teacher is an expert guide and student is an explorer. However, a practice-oriented curriculum, with an understanding of multiliteracies, the teacher and the student are co-inquirers, which could provide both teachers and students with “social and symbolic interaction” (p. 25). This role definition is also backed up by the notion, *teachers as border-crossers*, which emphasizes the fact that teachers are learners who continuously develop themselves in their transitions from a sub-culture into a new one (Giroux, 1992).

2.2. *Teacher as mediator*

For Dewey (1963), it is the responsibility of teachers to help learners create a worthwhile educational experience. Teacher is neither a transmitter of knowledge nor a facilitator. A teacher’s role “is best described in terms of the mediation of knowledge, where the teacher is actively involved in getting her hands dirty with the messiness and unfinished business of pragmatic knowledge” (Mason, 2000, p. 346). In Vygotskian psychology (Vygotsky, 1978), the analysis of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is essential to understanding the role of others in problem solving. This zone accounts for the zone of child’s interaction with the social environment and this social system is mutually formed by teacher and students (Moll, 1990). Thus, teachers, who are knowledgeable others in their interaction with students, could act as mediators in appropriate social contexts between knowledge and student through speech or writing.

2.3. *Teacher as intellectual*

Giroux (1988) believes that teachers should be intellectuals rather than implementers of prescribed instructional programs. Therefore, teacher needs to have a strong initiative in resisting against the programs which they think are useless and in adapting the instruction to the contexts. Teachers and students, in their efforts to reach a democratic society, could master critical thinking in order to empower themselves and have a say in policymaking. Freire and Macedo (1987) name this role as *teacher as initiator of change*.

2.4. *Teacher as liberator*

The difference between mediation and intervention (Goodman & Goodman, 1990) foregrounds another role for literacy teachers: teacher as liberator. If the teacher intervenes, they become the controller of things and the determiner of social conventions. The *banking* model criticized by Freire (1970) is an interventionist model of pedagogy in which the teacher puts the knowledge into the students’ heads. In contrast, in the liberal model students should be empowered in order to see their literacy development as a dimension of liberation and to question the social reality around them.

2.5. Teacher as kid watcher

According to Goodman and Goodman (1990), literacy teachers cannot create zones of proximal development for students. However, they can observe their students to determine what they are ready to do with some support. A successful teacher can trace for appropriate zones so that students will make good use of opportunities for learning. In addition, Gee (1996) believes that teacher should pay attention to student's on-going practice and point to the appropriate aspects of experience within the culture so that their students could exceed their models of home culture and school culture.

2.6. Teacher as researcher

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) make a distinction among three approaches to knowledge development in teacher education: knowledge *for* practice, knowledge *in* practice and knowledge *of* practice. The first one, knowledge *for* practice, refers to the content knowledge that might be necessary for the teachers in teaching settings. The second one, knowledge *in* practice, emphasizes that teachers learn through their practice, narratives and reflection. The third one, knowledge *of* practice, underscores that knowledge teachers need is gathered through systematic inquiry in communities of practice and this knowledge can be used by the teacher himself, by the immediate teacher community and finally by the larger community of educators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). This researcher role of teachers creates an ongoing practice-research-practice chain in the classroom.

3. Conclusion

Gee (2000) emphasizes that meaning is situated in experiences of learners and situated meanings help students "recognize and act on the world in specific ways" (p. 204). Therefore, literacy is about assembling those situated meanings in Discourses (forms of being in the world, identity kits), not merely an ability to read and write. Literacy teachers, therefore, should help their students be able to make meanings in different Discourses.

In Turkey, like in many countries, we make a classical definition of literacy and hardly talk about multiliteracies and its pedagogical implications. The constructivist and student-centered curriculum takes literacy as an individual reality rather than a social one. Despite our recent reform in education, we still use measuring sticks and predetermined norms to evaluate the growth of our students. What we are experiencing in our schools is a mixture of knowledge-centered and student-centered practices. Teachers have the power to decide about activities and practices. Intellectual and liberal teachers are needed in our classrooms so that students could easily negotiate meanings in their language development. Teachers who can mediate, conduct research and inquire will provide better environments for their students. Therefore, sociocultural considerations in teaching and learning should be introduced into Turkish education settings and new teacher roles in new literacies need more attention.

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