Book Review

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Hicks, Deborah. (2002). *Reading Lives: Working-Class Children and Literacy Learning.* New York: Teachers College Press. 192 pages. Clothbound. ISBN: 0807741493.

Reading Lives: Working-Class Children and Literacy Learning is a richly theoretical book that represents narrative research as literary text. Deborah Hicks reports on a 3-year ethnographic study of the lives of two working-class children in which she was both a teacher and a researcher. Her central argument is this: White working-class children are often not represented or are misrepresented in educational research. Working-class students often have different values and literate experiences than their middle-class teachers. Consequently, the lens through which they are evaluated is shaded by middle-class values. They are often seen as lacking proper school behaviors even though they come from a background that encourages schooling, even school reading, and a strong work ethic. White working-class children are often forced to incorporate middle-class language and values at the expense of the values learned at home.

Hicks presents two case studies of primary-grade children, Laurie and Jake, and demonstrates the disconnect between their social practices at home and at school—what Hicks describes as a "dissonance between institutional practices of schooling and working-class values" (p. 99). The book is both a thick description of the cultural and narrative ways of being of two White working-class children and a hybrid theoretical contribution. Hicks' book is relevant for educators and activist-oriented researchers.

Melissa and I read the book with great interest as we conducted a research project on how White working-class children accelerate as readers and writers within a critical literacy framework and the trade-offs associated with such a framework (Rogers & Mosley, in press). There are few books that examine the literacy and language learning of primary-grade White working-class children (see Finn, 1999 and Heath, 1983 for exceptions) or the educational lives of working-class children in general (see Foley, 1990; Weis, 1990; Willis, 1977 for exceptions). In this review we comment particularly on Hicks' use of the construct *situated histories of learning*, her treatment of class in the literate lives of

two primary-grade children, and her analysis of the movement from cultural to critical literacy.

Situated Histories of Learning

Hicks defines situated histories of learning as the context in which language and literacy practices emerge as well as the conditions that lead to their emergence. She carefully points out that even in longitudinal ethnographic research projects—such as her own and Shirley Brice Heath's research—there is a history of practice that predates the researcher's documentation. These histories are made possible through the texts available to people in their immediate contexts and the larger social, cultural, and political texts that are operating. Locating such situated histories calls for the researcher to be responsive to local, institutional, and societal contexts in which the research project is situated. When researchers do situate their work within such contexts, it becomes difficult to avoid stepping over the line from what Hicks refers to as "cultural" to "critical" literacy, a point we will discuss (see Chapter 2).

Connected to situated histories of learning, Lemke (1997) writes,

> We interpret a text or a situation in part by connecting it to other texts and situations that our community or our individual history has made us see as relevant to the meaning of the present one. Our community, and each of us, creates networks of connections (and disconnections) among texts, situations, and activities…These networks of connections that we make, and that are made in self-organizing activity of the larger systems to which we belong, extend backward in time as well [as] outwards into the social-material world. (p. 50)

Similarly, Rogers (2003) writes,

> Histories of participation are the sets of values, beliefs, and network of practices that people bring with them from their experiences in a range of discursive contexts. People have histories of participation that are networks of practices that may either conflict or be in alignment with the network of practices that constitute various contexts." (p. 128)

Jake and Laurie, for example, are proficient with using language and literacy in their everyday lives to get things done, but the school does not notice these literacy practices. What is deeply problematic is that despite proficiency and competency in a great number of contexts, children (and adults) often do not see themselves as competent and carry a negative sense of self. This sense of self is shaped by their history of participation with schools and learning environments and shapes their own education and the education of their children (Rogers, in press).

Further, both Laurie and Jake had parents who did not have successful histories of participation in schools. Yet both parents continued to value and believe in the institution of school and the associated social practices. In addition, each of the children had a literacy tutor—a college professor and educational advocate (Deborah Hicks)—and yet both children were labeled as struggling readers. We can trace the construction of counterproductive literate histories through the narratives in this book. Histories of participation include not only the people but the institutions and the social movements that inform the contexts in which they work and live.

Treatment of Class

In Hicks' book, working-class children are defined as having middle-class aspirations: fantasies, wants, and expectations that exist within the heart and are deeply rooted and real. These wants, coupled with the home and prior experiences of the child, influence their literacy development and their self-concept. Hicks presents Laurie and Jake as complex individuals who are set in a context of their aspirations and interests rather than defining them by their parents' level of education, views towards schooling, or trade.

Given the importance of the broader social context, it is surprising that Hicks did not more fully develop the construct of the working class. She also does not address the social movements that may have shaped her life as an educator and researcher, the lives of Jake and Laurie's parents and their community, and the current community in which the research is set. Although Hicks does not develop the concept of class—or even define it—she embeds her discussion of class within the descriptive case studies of Laurie and Jake (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Laurie, the first case study student, was doing well in school when independent, self-guided activities were the focus. She had a great imagination during fantasy play and felt secure at school because she was able to draw on her prior knowledge of play and work. At the writing center, she was able to express herself with words, letters, and pictures. There was a sense of play within the activities to bridge the gap between home and school. Formal writing and reading were not yet a focus of school, but in first and second grades when play was no longer the focus, her self-esteem broke down.

Laurie's working-class identity needs to be read through the narrative of Laurie's literate development. It is embedded in her relationship to the adults in her life, the caretaking roles she takes on at home, her responses to financial situations, and the gendered roles she takes on at school. Her attitudes toward authority and obedience and being good in school are other examples of working-class attitudes and beliefs. So is the resistance she demonstrates at home but not at school. Her literacy practices, too, demonstrate her working-

class roots. There are differences in length and depth of her oral and written narratives (see pages 77 and 90 for examples).

Hicks described Jake's practices at home as learning by doing, not talking about, parts of the task and engaging in tasks where print was connected to three-dimensional objects. Jake and his younger sister learn from lived experience (see pages 18–19 and 102 for examples). Jake views school as a series of performed segmented tasks and engages in activities that include two-dimensional objects (e.g. paper and pencil).

It would be useful if Hicks explained in more detail how Jake's home literacy was connected to the identity of the working-class and the middle-class values within the school literacy practices. Finn (1999), for example, argues that schools teach working-class ways of being, including segmenting tasks, listening to authority, following directions, and learning to be docile. Some working-class values and attitudes surface, however, as Hicks discussed Jake's life. For example, she discussed how the family often teased Jake that someone from school had to follow him home, marking the usual separation of school from home, a relationship that is typical of working-class families (Lareau, 1988).

From Cultural to Critical Literacy

Hicks' book presents the first analysis we have seen of the movement from the cultural to critical in literacy instruction. Connecting with students' home literacy and language practices is often a starting point for funds of knowledge or cultural literacy. From here, many teachers often move into a critical literacy where they examine more closely the relationship between power and language and literacy in and out of school (Delpit & Kilgour Dowdy, 2002).

Hicks writes that cultural literacy theorists and researchers focus on the disconnect between the ways of knowing in working-class and minority homes and school. For critical theorists the disconnection is not a fixed or stable space. They are, instead, "shifting relations *between* discourses, taken up in ways that reflecting *[sic]* the histories and cultural locations of those who practice them" (p. 21). If identities are not stable then classroom practices can help to establish new subject positions, a goal of critical literacy educators. Hicks points out, however, that critical theorists often are distant from the material lives of the people they aim to liberate. She offers a middle ground. Hicks writes, "culturally infused practices, lived in sometimes painful power relations, achieve their meaning and weight because of their connection with particular others in children's lives" (p. 33).

Hicks states that liberatory pedagogies may take a back seat for the moment while we describe the literate lives of poor and working-class children (p. 8). She argues that before we can move to a critical pedagogy, we need thick descriptions of the cultural lives of children from many diverse backgrounds.

Her study offers such a description and lays the groundwork for describing the literate lives of working-class children. She may have brought critical education into her work by situating the lives of herself, and of Laurie and Jake, within the broader social and economic climate of where the research was located. Inevitably, in responding to the real demands of the community and the concerns of both their parents and of themselves, Jake, Laurie, and Deborah would have begun to engage in a critical literacy.

Hicks describes Laurie's compositions in writer's workshop, and it is clear how this could have become a space for critical literacy education. Laurie composes fairy-tale-type texts where she positions herself as the recipient of male attention, affection, and support. On page 87, Hicks writes, "I wish now that these written compositions (in her writer's notebook) could have become locations for a stronger activist agenda—for pushing Laurie to think about what she was writing and why." Working-class girls express an ideology of romance—the belief that they will marry and have children with a man who will love and take care of them. The changes in the workforce often make going to college more of an expectation, even if it is in exchange for a "good job." Girls also put aside the ideology of romance, in part because there are less "family wages" available, and women are expected to work outside of the home. Hicks writes

> When we think of literacy practices in terms of children's appropriation of linguistic texts, as discourses are sometimes viewed, we miss something crucial. Behind those discourses are attachments with concrete, speaking individuals.…To help Laurie figure out her place within them might have been an appropriate starting point for critical action. (p. 87)

We wanted Hicks to explore the transition from the cultural to critical through Jake's interest in video games, car racing, sports, and mechanical tasks. These areas of Jake's literacy are drawn heavily upon in Chapter 5. Hicks states that Jake's writing shared experiences of boyhood such as being a big brother, racing cars, and playing baseball. These boyhood themes were the focus of Jake's writing, and he thought writing in this context was "fun" because his fictions were situated between his home and school identities (p. 127). It is clear that there is a gap between school and home practices because home experience is not as apparent in the writer's workshop format. However, Hicks argues that even with a concrete bridge between Jake's interests and school practices (i.e., using toy cars as math manipulatives), the systematic and philosophical differences between working-class and middle-class education kept Jake from having success in school.

This is a grim outcome: the school was a place where Jake felt like an outsider. Hicks would have liked to fill in the missing pieces for Jake, to bring in a discourse of working-class boyhood that would be engaging for Jake. As a

researcher, she was unable to implement the critical literacy approach that she advocates. If she was to take up this strategy, the entry point may have been to explore the idea of power, aggression, resistance, and competition through children's literature. Showing Jake characters and themes that represent his struggles might have helped him to resolve his feelings of dissonance with the school curriculum.

The two case studies raise interesting questions of how to approach critical response within a progressive pedagogy. Do progressive school practices (i.e., writer's workshop) prepare Jake and Laurie to enter the workforce? In workshops, children are expected to creatively problem-solve, collaborate with peers, and make independent decisions about the use of their time—all demands of the changing world of work. The space of the reader's and writer's workshops marks a departure from traditional pedagogy that prepared children for factory jobs. We need to think more deeply about how progressive literacy approaches could have worked for Laurie and Jake within a critical literacy framework.

On the other hand, Jake and Laurie were both struggling writers, so moving Laurie towards active questioning and noticing contradictions (habits of critical inquiry) embedded within her story might have shut down her writing processes altogether. Jake also may have resisted critically facing his feelings of being an outsider in school. A possible starting point in moving from a cultural to critical literacy might be to facilitate the habits of critical inquiry within texts that are engaging to students and then move to texts that are closer to home. This allows time for trust to build in the teaching-learning relationship that is essential for exploring uncomfortable issues.

In reading Deborah Hicks' book, *Reading Lives: Working-Class Children and Literacy Learning*, teachers and researchers will gain insight into the process of literacy learning in working-class children. As female researchers who come from working/middle-class backgrounds, we placed ourselves in the space that she created; and as teachers, we came to a new understanding of learning through her views of working-class literacy discourse. When the book is set aside, we are left with a sense of hopefulness. Although Hicks writes about White working-class children, her ideas can be applied across race and class lines when their home experiences cause dissonance between themselves and school practices.

We strongly recommend this book to both teachers and researchers. Hicks writes in an engaging style, one that combines personal insight, narrative of children's lives, and informed research and theory. She writes, "Across the stories and reflective essays in this book, I hope to write in such a way that the reader can see and feel the complex histories of working-class children's engagements with literacy practices and searches for love and belonging" (p. 4). She does just this.

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