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**The Early Intervention Solution:  
Enabling or Constraining Literacy Learning**

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## **The Early Intervention Solution: Enabling or Constraining Literacy Learning?**

### **Abstract**

Current policy, media and curriculum initiatives across Western nations are drawing literacy and literacy pedagogy toward enticingly simplistic understandings of literacy as commodity. Increasingly they focus on ‘fixing’ perceived literacy problems by assuming the primacy of early years literacy and ‘top-up’ intervention programs. In the wash-up of these narrow policies failing in their primary mission, it is important that literacy researchers and educators consider expanding notions of literacy rather than returning to ‘old’ solutions for new issues. This paper revisits a prior critique of Reading Recovery as a solution to failure to learn school-based literacy. Using data collected as part a larger study into constructions of literacy failure, we analyse the shifting ‘ways to be a reader’ required of one student during a Reading Recovery lesson. We argue that the competence required to negotiate various literacy learning contexts across one morning of learning adds to the complexity of school-based literacy learning as much as it might provide support.

## **Introduction**

In educational contexts within Western nations, the rise of neo-liberalism with its expectations for ‘market-based efficiencies’ (Hill, 2005, p. 270) has been accompanied by policy, media and curriculum initiatives offering simplistic understandings of literacy and literacy pedagogy. In the US No Child Left Behind Act (United States of America, 2001), the UK National Literacy Strategy (United Kingdom, 2003) and Australia’s conservative moves to review the teaching of reading (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005), literacy has been represented as a commodity. This implies that literacy is a set of neutral skills, able to be generalised across contexts and unrelated to the purposes and practices of engaging with text. With a strong focus on the early years of schooling and ‘top-up’ intervention programs, large-scale approaches to literacy policy have implied that ‘quick fixes’ to difficulties in learning literacy are both desirable and attainable. As Comber and Nichols (Comber & Nichols, 2004) point out, getting literacy ‘into place’ in early childhood contexts has been assumed to be effective as a way to promote future educational success as well as to guarantee ‘a smart workforce for the contemporary global economy’ (p.43).

Within this context, governments have moved to manage, regulate, supervise and monitor ‘flows of discourse, human and material resources to schools and classrooms, teachers and students in particular normative directions’ (Luke & Greieshaber, 2004, p. 7). Teachers working in the area of the early years of schooling have been ‘pressed to deliver’ improved literacy outcomes (Comber & Nichols, 2004, p. 44) and to demonstrate that literacy problems can be eliminated by effective instruction in early childhood contexts. Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence that ‘inoculation’ approaches to literacy learning do not have lasting effects and that a whole range of issues – including gender, behaviour, ethnicity, language and accent, poverty and location along with other social, cultural and environmental factors – impact on students’ literacy learning in complex ways (Woods, 2004). This is a foundational concept within an understanding of literacy as social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Comber, 1997; Gee, 1999; Luke, 1994; Street, 1998, 1999, 2003)

Indeed, discussions of a range of literacy issues – including the simplistic approaches taken by the media (Doecke, Howie, & Sawyer, 2006), evidence of a ‘fourth grade slump’ (Gee, 1999), and indications that some national initiatives are barely making a

difference – highlight the problems of unrealistic expectations for a literacy ‘quick-fix’ (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). They also raise important questions about what literacy is, how it is defined within educational contexts, and how literacy instruction and interventions work to produce literate subjects (Armstrong, 2006).

In 2002 we published a critique of Reading Recovery as a program (Woods & Henderson, 2002), as a way to begin problematising early intervention as a solution for literacy failure. Having both been accidental tourists in Reading Recovery in past lives, we called upon our insiders’ knowledge of the program to consider the disciplinary practices of the institution of early intervention. We commented on the uncomfortable sense of vulnerability that was produced by our attempts to present a version of critique open to so few. By interweaving our own narratives of training as Reading Recovery tutors with our analysis of the training of teachers and children within the program, we explicated the regulation of bodies, time and knowledge of all involved in the program.

However, we also set ourselves as visible and in fact ‘in relief’ within the research. Such an unnerving experience is not one that we intend to duplicate in this paper. Nevertheless, we are aware that our past experiences remain implicated in the reading we make of Reading Recovery specifically and of early intervention more generally. We remain cognisant that the reading presented here is but one of many possible readings.

So far in this sequence of research, our argument has been that the contemporary literacy context - which seems focused on valuing basic early literacy training - may constrain whole groups of children to the acquisition of a narrow set of normalized literacy practices and leave them ill-prepared for literate futures in a multimodal world. There is a resilient false hope in current policy that our perceived ‘literacy crisis’ will be solved by pursuing the goal of basic functional literacy for all by the end of three years of schooling. However ignoring understandings of literacy as a set of rich and complex practices narrows and marginalizes access to literacy for at least some students. We may indeed end up involved in a futile chase for ‘the answer’, able to be likened to the inoculation of children against chickenpox as an attempt to hold back a plague epidemic.

The solutions to the issues raised in the following sections of this paper cannot be simple replacements of one method with another, one teacher with a ‘better’ one, or one school with parental choice. We work within this paper to (dis)solve (Woods, 2004) – to lay bare the common-held assumptions of early intervention as a solution to ‘failure’ to learn literacy by problematising the ambiguities of its practice. Consequently we do not set out to replicate the work of the many researchers who have investigated early intervention as successful or otherwise (Australian Council for Educational Research, 1993; Center, Freeman, & Robertson, 1996; Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 1999; Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2001; Clay, 1990; Clay & Watson, 1982; Crevola & Hill, 1998; Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 1999; Deschamp, 1995; Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000; Hiebert, 1994; Hurry, 2000; Moore & Wade, 1998; Morris, Tyner, & Perney, 2000; National Diffusion Network, 1991; Pikulski, 1994; Pinnell, 1997; Pinnell, Lyons, Deford, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Rasinski, 1995; Reading Recovery Council of North America, 1999; Smith, 1994; Swanson, 1999; Trethowan, Harvey, & Fraser, 1996) to offer up alternative programs as replacements for those like Reading Recovery, choosing instead to suggest that the basic assumptions of early intervention as a solution necessitate troubling.

### **Contextualising this analysis**

In an analysis of a Reading Recovery lesson involving a year two student (Sam) and his Reading Recovery teacher (Woods & Henderson, 2002), we found that there was evidence of disciplinary techniques, of setting up binaries of what is and isn’t ‘reading and writing’, and of the regulation of bodies, time and knowledge. The program that was making claims about encouraging the development of independent readers was in fact based on pedagogical relations that controlled and constrained what was said, done and thought by ‘apprentice’ independent readers. Our claim was that such an environment would seem unlikely to produce independence in students’ reading behaviours. Students, we suggested, might be learning ways of ‘doing’ literacy within the constraining and disciplining context of Reading Recovery and that might not serve them well in other literacy learning contexts such as their classrooms (Groves, 1994; Woods, 2004).

In this paper we conduct a discourse analysis of one component of one Reading Recovery lesson, to suggest that there are shifting subjectivities required of students

even within Reading Recovery lessons, and not just between Reading Recovery lessons and other literacy learning contexts as we detailed in our first paper (Woods & Henderson, 2002). The Reading Recovery program (Clay, 1993b) is conducted by teachers trained by Reading Recovery tutors and supervised by trainers. Based in a cognitive theory of reading acquisition, as theorized by Clay (1991), Reading Recovery involves daily, individualized instruction of students. To receive this instruction, the child is removed from the classroom and instructed in a quiet, isolated space. Children are trained to develop and use strategies which Clay (1993b, p.39) describes as fast in-the-head reactions of the brain which seem to be automatic rather than conscious. While Reading Recovery continues to receive support in some contexts, it is a program which throughout its history has been dogged by relentless dichotomy(For a review of these debates see Woods & Henderson, 2002; Woods, Wyatt-Smith, & Elkins, 2005).

According to Clay (1993b, p. 14) a typical Reading Recovery lesson includes set activities conducted in a predetermined sequence. The thirty minute lesson is divided into three slots of 10 minutes each. The daily lesson format and timing follows guidelines as presented in table 1 below.

Place Table 1 about here.

Although Clay (1993b) states that ‘individual variations in lesson plans are always possible, providing there is a sound rationale based on a particular child’s response to lessons’ (p. 14), Reading Recovery lessons closely follow this structure, timing and sequence in the many contexts in which they are delivered.

A prime ambiguity of this program is that Clay (1993b) claims to understand the heterogeneity of the group to which she addresses her support, but offers a scripted, set of procedures that detail even the words to be said by teachers as they work with students. The model claims that skilled teachers should ‘select the activities needed by a particular child’ (Clay, 1993b, p. 19), but this selection only occurs from the procedures and ‘problems’ detailed within the model’s source book (Clay, 1993b).

Reading Recovery presents seven lesson components, each with an autonomous explanation of its worth to the literacy improvement of ‘failing children ... whose learning tangles may need quite different programme details to untangle them’ (Clay, 1993b, p. 10).

The intention here is to investigate the structuring of lessons, as detailed by Clay (1993b) and described in the section above, to uncover if it signifies more than different skills and activities related to reading and writing. The analysis calls on a lesson involving Eloise and her Reading Recovery teacher as an instance of Reading Recovery lessons more generally. At the time of data collection Eloise was a seven year old student in her second year of school. She had been identified as requiring extra assistance in learning school-based literacy because her scores on Clay's Observation Survey (Clay, 1993a) had marked her as one of the lowest literacy achievers in her cohort. Eloise attended a small school in a satellite city of a large capital city in Australia. Many of the children who attended this school, including Eloise, had backgrounds marked by poverty. The school took various approaches to providing literacy pedagogy, Reading Recovery being just one of the intervention programs made available.

In the analysis we call on Foucault's notions of the subject (Foucault, 1982) along with the tools of talk in interaction, to make the shifting interaction in the lesson visible and to investigate how this represents the different roles taken on by the teacher and the reciprocal positionings offered up to Eloise as Reading Recovery student. The analysis is focussed on only the first ten minutes of the lesson, as a way to make evident the speed with which these shifts occur. The transcript of the interaction and analysis is presented in two parts. The first section presented in Extract 1 takes place as Eloise reads a section of a familiar text *The Little Red Hen* (Randell, 1997) which she has read many times before in Reading Recovery lessons. The second section, presented in Extract 2, follows directly on from this and is where Eloise reads yesterday's new text, *The Busy Beavers* (Randell, 1997), while the Reading Recovery teacher records her oral reading using the technique of running record.

### **Shifting ways to be a reader and writer**

The theory of Reading Recovery claims there are twin aims for students to read books. The first is to allow students 'scope for practising the orchestration of all the complex range of behaviours' (Clay, 1993b, p. 36) that they must use to read text. This is practised on familiar texts - that is on books that the student has read before. The second is to allow students to use these developing reading 'strategies' on texts



being read for the first time (Clay, 1993b). Both sections of interaction analysed here are instances of pedagogy aimed at promoting the first of these aims.

### Eloise as a watched collaborator

#### Extract 1

(10.04 am)

9. T: have you got one from here you'd like to read (5)
10. Eloise: little red hen?
11. T: yeap
12. Eloise: I love little red hen
13. T: you love little red hen don't forget when you read little red hen it's got to be like?
14. Eloise: talking
15. T: good good
16. Eloise: **the little red hen** *opens book*
17. T: *writing on sheets with head down* lovely start
18. Eloise: **one? upon a time there was a little red hen she lived on a farm** (2)  
oops I forgot to stop there
19. T: *facing Eloise* good girl that's good though *reaches in to move the book toward her* it doesn't matter you noticed that it didn't sound right did it
20. Eloise: no *looking at the teacher*
21. T: cause you said there lived a little red hen she lived on a farm and you went kept going? but then *points to the book* you stopped because it didn't ss quite ss did it
22. Eloise: no
23. T: did it sound no it didn't (2) ok that's great keep going (2)
24. Eloise: **she lived on a farm with a duck and a (2) a dog** *looks to teacher*
25. T: that's ok

26. Eloise: **and a pig (2) one day she fo found some sh one day she found some (1) wheat**
27. T: good you stopped at that full stop (3)
28. Eloise: **I will plant this wheat who will help me (2) ops aah I**[I read that line
29. T: [you missed a line that's ok just take a deep breath and settle [down/
30. Eloise: [I went
31. T: /that's a girl
32. Eloise: **I [will**
33. T: [let's start the page again that's it (1)
34. Eloise: **I will plant this wheat (4) said the little read hen who will help me not I quacked the duck and she went away to swim in the pond not I barked the dog (2) the dog and he went away to run in the field (2)to run in the field/**
35. T: /that's right keep going *looks at watch*
36. Eloise: **not I (2) grunted the pig and he went away to roll in the mud**
37. T: do you know what that sounded really good that's the best reading I've heard from you since before you lost your tonsils *points to Eloise's tonsils*
38. Eloise: haha
39. T: haha cause you said not I barked the dog and he went away to run in the field that's how that's how *touches Eloise's arm* it sounded did that sound exciting
40. Eloise: (nods head) *Teacher and Eloise look at each other*
41. T: and it sounded like you'd want to listen to it? it did and *turns back page* I like the way you sat here and you read and then you all of a sudden you said oh that sounded really terrible good girl let's read this page and then we'll go on to our beaver [book

42. Eloise: **[then I will do it myself said the little red hen (2) and she did(1) soon the wheat began to grow I must (2) I must water the wheat said the little red hen who will help me**
43. T: yeap *moves the book turns head to Eloise* oh that's sounding so I'm so proud of you Eloise that's sounding so much better yesterday this was you then . I . will . do . it . my . self . that was you yesterday
44. Eloise: hhhh
45. T: this is you today not I barked the dog and he went away *faces Eloise* to run in the field
46. Eloise: haha *throws head back*
47. T: that is wonderful I'm so proud of you (2) *passes book into instructional space* see if you can do it with the beavers

(10.07 am)

Many of the techniques of surveillance and discipline uncovered in our original analysis of Reading Recovery are also evident in this lesson. Note, for example, in turns 37 to 41 how the teacher relays to Eloise what her behaviour has been. Eloise is watched openly as the teacher often faces her, turned sideways in her chair and engaged in Eloise's reading. This surveillance is regularly placed into the public sphere within the lesson interaction, as the teacher tells Eloise what she has done and said. The teacher also controls the resources and materials of the lesson, bringing them in and out of the instructional space as required. The section of the lesson is marked by relatively equal length of turns by the teacher and Eloise. It proceeds with an IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) (Mehan, 1979) patterning that consists of relatively short responses by Eloise and initiations and evaluations provided regularly by the teacher. Note how in turn 17, for example, as Eloise turns the cover to open the book, the space is filled by the teacher with an evaluation 'lovely start'. These regular evaluations are part of the collaborative fashioning of the reading of text in this section of the lesson.

What is interesting for this analysis though, is the collaborative fashioning of the reading that goes on 'between' Eloise and the teacher. Notice, for example, how both

the teacher and student have rights to select the next speaker. So while the teacher does determine the pace of the lesson and present Eloise with the next turn through the use of continuas such as “keep going” (turns 23 and 35 for example), Eloise also controls when her turn will end, when she stops reading to comment on her own reading (see for example turn 28). In this way, she seems to equally determine that the teacher will take a turn and is often rewarded, as in turns 18 and 28. Note also how she has mastered the skill of disciplining bodies and behaviour without speaking. In turn 24 she successfully seeks and receives (in turn 25) evaluation or perhaps confirmation of her reading behaviour by looking to the teacher and waiting for her response.

This practice of providing a commentary on her own reading demonstrates that Eloise has internalized the gaze (Foucault, 1978) of the institution. For while Eloise uses it as a practice to create a space to become involved in determining when her turn will end, it can also be seen to be part of the disciplining practice of the Reading Recovery lesson. In turn 18 Eloise reads a small section of the text, and then stops reading to comment on her reading thus far. This commentary has become a confession (Foucault, 1978). Eloise displays her understanding of what reading is in Reading Recovery. She must read so that it ‘sounds like talking’ (see turns 13 to 14) (Clay, 1993b, p. 52), and the fact that she has missed reading a full stop somehow means that this has not been achieved. The teacher approves of Eloise’s confession and mimics it in her own behaviour when she provides a more developed commentary in turn 19.

This practice, which continues throughout this section of the lesson, places what is done well, and what is not, into the public sphere. It thus acts as part of the disciplining practice of the pedagogy. However, it also helps to mark what ‘good’ reading is and, by default, what it is not. The ease with which Eloise moves between reading text and providing commentary and confession about her literacy practices is a display of competence in ‘doing’ reading within the Reading Recovery context.

However, Eloise does not achieve this without the close supervision of the teacher. The teacher works in this section of the lesson to mimic this process of confession, through the practice of detailing what Eloise has done, said and thought, as in turn 19. The teacher does more than discipline through surveillance. She is also involved in providing pardon. In turns 19 and 21, Eloise is told it is acceptable to have made a

mistake as long as that mistake is followed by a public or private ‘in-the-head’ confession of what was done.

As Eloise completes reading the short section of text in turn 44, the book is moved by the teacher, who then proceeds to display the surveillance that has occurred by commenting on the quality of Eloise’s recent reading. Eloise receives an instant replay of her performance, and is even told what she did and said during the previous day’s lesson. This section of the lesson is brought to an end when the teacher removes one book from the instructional space and places a second, *The Busy Beavers* (Randell, 1997), into this same space. This action by the teacher marks a shift in the lesson’s processes. With no other sign to mark the shift, the texture of the lesson transforms from a collaborative fashioning of what the reading will be to an independent display of singular behaviour. Eloise is no longer watched openly and supported as she was in Extract 1. Instead, as demonstrated in Extract 2 below, she is now offered a space to act as a solitary performer.

### Eloise as a solitary performer<sup>1</sup>

#### Extract 2

(10.07 am)

47. T: that is wonderful I’m so proud of you (2) *passes book into instructional space* see if you can do it with the beavers
48. Eloise: *points to book on other side of Teacher’s space* oh [I know that one
49. T: [the busy beavers  
do you [hooo *takes on surprised expression faces Eloise*
50. Eloise: [I
51. T: well we’re going to do that one next

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript notation

voice:	talk	voice:	reading from text
<i>behaviour:</i>	movement, action and behaviour	V O I C E:	letter names pronounced
<u>voice:</u>	emphasis placed or spoken loudly	/	latched turn
?	raised intonation	.	lowered intonation
(2)	timed pause	[	overlapped talk
		[	

52. Eloise: they um they go over the bridge and they say who's g the man says  
[who's going
53. T: [ ho well let's see later you keep it *slaps hand several times on the  
Busy Beavers book* keep it to yourself
54. Eloise: **the**
55. T: the busy [beavers remember
56. Eloise: [beafers beavers *turns pages of the book looks at teacher* can  
I start the one where I was starting before
57. T: *turns pages back to front of the text* well let's wo
58. Eloise: **the busy beavers**
59. T: *faces table and gives attention to her sheet* I just wanta see how well  
you can read this
60. Eloise: **a father beaver and a mother beaver hh (2) teacher looks at her own  
sheet and the f fower beavers the (6) the** I know that says the
61. T: where
62. Eloise: there
63. T: well keep going
64. Eloise: **the (3) the looks to teacher T H E R E I R (5) looks to teacher the**
65. T: their *doesn't look up*
66. Eloise: **their F their F ow fowl little beavers their f ow fow**
67. T: how many were there
68. Eloise: four **little beavers (1) lived (3) in a home (2) in a (1) lake** there's two  
ins in that one
69. T: that's very good keep going
70. Eloise: **they?** *looks across to the teacher's sheet (3)* **their their home was a  
little (3) looks to teacher's sheet a island island**
71. T: keep going (3)

72. Eloise: **little island** (3) **with a** (2) (whispers sounding) **ssecret secret tunnel** (2) **that? Went down into the water they were fast?** (4) *looks to teacher's sheet* **fast** (3) **f s:a safe** (1) **on the island the beavers and the fox** (1) **foxes** (2) **and the great** (8) *looks to teacher's sheet* **w** (3) **w:I ld wild cats called** (6) **cowd** (2) **called not** (2) **get** (2) **not get them** (5) *teacher turns sheet over Eloise looks* **the beavers** (2) **had m:ade a island from** ah is that a island *points to book and looks to teacher*

73. T: yeah

74. Eloise: **island from sticks** (1) **and** (1) **stones and mud they had made a long** (2) **dam to** (1) **the** (3) **dam (k:ept) kept the (lake) lake (filled) filled with water plap plap** (1) **plap** (1) **went the** (2) **went the water all** (2) **down day along day** (1) **day all all day all day long** (3) **as the beavers slept** (4) **one spring then sits back the**

75. T: *moves into instructional space*

10.11 am

In this section of the lesson, the teacher is a 'second version' of the Reading Recovery teacher. No longer providing regular evaluations of Eloise's reading, in fact seeming to avoid providing evaluation at all, she now sits facing the table and mostly directs her attention to a sheet of paper (the running record sheet) in front of her, only glancing occasionally at the instructional space. The teacher's body is now closed to Eloise and this is in contrast to her bodily positioning in the earlier section of this lesson, as presented in Extract 1. Eloise still looks to the teacher, but this technique has ceased to work as a way to engage the teacher in a collaborative endeavour of reading. The text read by Eloise in turns 60 to 72 is:

A father beaver, a mother beaver  
and their four little beavers  
lived in a home in a lake.  
Their home was a little island  
with a secret tunnel

that went down into the water.

They were safe on the island.

The bears and the foxes

and the great wild cats

could not get them.

(Retold by Jenny Giles, 1997, pp. 2-3)

Eloise actually reads as follows:

a father beaver and a mother beaver hh and the f fower beavers the the the the  
T H E R E I R the their F their F ow fowl little beavers their f ow fow little  
beavers lived in a home in a lake they? their their home was a little a island  
island little island with a ssecret secret tunnel that? went down into the water  
they were fast? fast f s:a safe on the island the beavers and the fox foxes and  
the great w w:I ld wild cats called cowl called not get not get them the beavers  
had m:ade a island (adapted from Extract 2)

While reading this section of text, and seeming to struggle at both cracking the code and comprehending the text, Eloise does not call on the technique of providing a commentary on her reading at all. This is despite the fact that in the 4 minutes before this section of lesson, the confessional technique worked successfully to allow Eloise to select the teacher as next speaker and thus give up her own turn. The technique also provided her with regular evaluation, pardon and praise from the teacher. Eloise had used this technique to aide the collaborative fashioning of a reading experience, but seems to read the teacher's closed body in this section of the lesson as a sign that this technique will no longer provide spaces for such positive consequences. During the reading of this section of the text (Extract 2), Eloise looks to the teacher at least seven times, but is relatively unsuccessful in engaging the teacher in any collaborative reading. She also issues a direct query in turn 72. The teacher provides a succinct answer to this direct query, and on two other occasions (turns 65 and 67) she provides an answer or a prompt which leads to Eloise saying the word to be read correctly.

In two instances within this extract, Eloise does attempt to display some form of competence by detailing, to the teacher, content knowledge that she has in relation to the text. In turns 60 and 68, Eloise points out to the teacher code-based information



about words in the text. In both instances she is rewarded with a short turn by the teacher who supplies the continua ‘keep going’ to move the lesson along and to resist engagement. This style of commentary is different from the confessional sequences used by Eloise in Extract 1, and its effect affords only a marginal space for resistance. This begins to suggest that the teacher’s level of regulation of the lesson has increased as the level of collaborative practice has decreased.

Supporting this assumption is the fact that the teacher has, in this section, refused Eloise any control over what is read, where-as in the previous section Eloise was engaged in the choice of reading material. Although Eloise does on two occasions attempt to direct this choice, she seems to quickly come to the understanding that it is no longer part of what she needs to do to be competent in this setting. It would also seem that she reads the teacher’s body as a way to come to this understanding. Notice how in turn 56, when Eloise requests to read another section of the same book, it is the action of the teacher turning back pages and positioning the priority text that leads to Eloise proceeding with the reading as requested. This reading is already underway in turn 58 before the teacher has supplied an explanation in turn 59.

This second section of the lesson positions Eloise as a solitary performer, left to read text at word level – or more narrowly at the level of sounds. This reading has at several stages of the reading episode lost meaning and coherence. Yet the teacher rarely steps in to provide support and only in small measure. Evaluation is also held back from the apprentice reader. The continua ‘keep going’ is used when the lesson looks like slowing down, or when Eloise attempts to engage the teacher in some collaborative practice. The teacher rarely looks up from her sheet as she records Eloise’s reading on a running record sheet.

### **Negotiating versions of literate competence**

In less than 10 minutes, Eloise negotiated several versions of literate competence – or at least she was expected to negotiate the same. She left her classroom, where she had been working as a group member with other students to complete a worksheet activity. In this context the students worked collaboratively and were under only random surveillance from the classroom teacher. On arriving at the Reading Recovery teaching space, she spent 3 minutes fashioning a collaborative and collective reading of a book that she chose from a selection offered by the Reading Recovery teacher.

By swapping this book for another, the teacher demonstrated a shift in the texture of the pedagogy. Then, for the next 4 minutes, Eloise was left to perform as a solitary apprentice reader, whose mistakes were no longer pardoned quickly and efficiently by the teacher, but instead were placed in the public sphere of pedagogic interaction. They were collected and recorded for use in the next section of the lesson. In 10 minutes, this ‘lowest achieving literacy learner’ was presented with a shifting terrain of positionings and moved within them with a remarkable level of competence.

What though is the consequence of her competence with dealing with this shifting terrain? As she looked to the teacher for support in Extract 2, as she decided that looking would be an unsuccessful technique for this section of the lesson, and as she trialed and evaluated a new technique of asking directly – could she instead have been learning more about the coherence of text, the syntactic structuring or perhaps the semantic signposts, and how to use them to produce a coherent oral reading?

### **Returning to (dis)solve the solution**

The competence with which Eloise appropriated and fell into line with the shifting ground presented to her certainly demonstrated a social and pedagogical competence on the part of a young child, who had been constructed within the intervention discourse of her school as one of the ‘lowest achievers’ in her cohort (Clay, 1993b, p.8). This student and others like her who were marked as least able to achieve, were being expected to negotiate shifting contexts in ways that those who were marked as achievers were not. Furthermore, the time spent by Eloise in learning these different subjectivities and how this might have been taking her away from learning any thing to do with reading and writing text, should become a focus for research in literacy pedagogy and intervention.

In this way, the critique of an intervention program, as presented here has moved beyond the qualitative work reported by others. In our first critique (Woods & Henderson, 2002), we suggested that Reading Recovery was training literate subjects in the display of only a narrow range of literacy skills and processes. We suggested that, rather than being a second chance to learn, the Reading Recovery program might well be a second chance to fail by ‘actively preventing teachers and students from conceptualising literacy as multiple social practice’ (p. 244). In this paper, we have extended the critique to demonstrate how the shifting subjectivities required of

students within Reading Recovery lessons in fact run counter to learning even this narrow band of literacy skills and processes. The critical pedagogy argument – that while ever corporeal processes are foregrounded but not explicitly named, then pedagogy will be about learning the corporeal elements required to display competence rather than learning the competence itself – holds true in this context (Ellsworth, 1989; Gore, 1995; Grosz, 1995).

Systemic intervention programs are complicit in the marking and dividing of student populations. The social practices of identification and remediation, once institutionalized as a ‘program’ or ‘method’, work to set out grids of specification of what it is to ‘do’ or not to do literacy. These grids homogenize the characteristics of a divided student population and pathologize literacy learning as a ‘problem’ for particular students. The grids set out simplistic notions as representation of what it is for these students to engage with school-based literacy pedagogy, thus ignoring the complexity of disadvantage related in sophisticated ways to location, poverty, gender, race, ethnicity, and language and accent.

In this paper, we have extended our investigation of some of the ambiguities related to intervention in an attempt to (dis)solve it as a solution to literacy ‘failure’ in schools. Our sequence of research in this field continues as we problematize the current ‘back to basics’ drive as a narrowing of access for selected groups of children. The argument that we continue to make is that, as Luke (Luke, 2003) suggests, effective literacy pedagogy does not ‘centrally reside in the need for packaged, standardized commodities for the teaching of basic skills’ (p. 101). Instead, such narrow conceptions of literacy constrain rather than enable literacy learning (Woods, 2001), preparing the students – particularly those who are disadvantaged socially, culturally, racially or economically – for neither classroom pedagogical contexts nor broader societal contexts.

A major concern is that the failure of national initiatives to enhance literacy learning – through mandated teaching processes and testing regimes that rely on narrow definitions of what constitutes literacy and literacy learning – will be replaced by the mandating of equally narrow and constraining intervention programs. Not only are we concerned about the destructive potential of ‘one-size-fits all’ programs and the assumed homogeneous nature of student populations across sociocultural contexts, but we are also worried about the potential for such programs to widen the gap

between those who are successful at school-based literacy learning and those who are not.

1. Reading Familiar Texts	10 minutes
Reading several familiar books	
Reading yesterday's text with running record	
2. Writing Stories	10 minutes
Making and Breaking words	
Writing, including hearing and recording sounds	
Cut up story	
3. Reading New Texts	10 minutes
Introducing a new book	
Reading new books	
Total	30 minutes

Table 1: The structure of a typical Reading Recovery lesson

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