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Adolescent Literacy, Identity and School (ALIAS): Positions, pedagogies and spaces for learning

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to excavate connections between adolescent literacy and identity in post-primary school settings. It will focus on the theoretical framework informing our study as well as a brief discussion of some key findings. The central research aims focusing this part of the Adolescent Literacy, Identity and School (ALIAS) study are to:

(i) Investigate the impact of levels of literacy and learning on the identity constructions of first year students in post-primary school

(ii) To develop guidelines for a cross-curricular literacy and learning intervention programme in collaboration with student participants

ALIAS aims to offer an exposure of intersections between literacy and identity through a sociocultural theoretical lens whilst also forging opportunities for new identity positions to emerge for the participating students in this study through creating a "connected curriculum" space (Fraser, Aitken, & Whyte, 2013). The participating students were invited to take hold of the potter's wheel in order to fashion the curriculum anew in terms of content, delivery and assessment. They were engaged in conversation with regard to their literacy and learning experiences in their daily lives. The underlying belief structure of the project is orientated as a sociocultural approach to literacy and identity. The belief is that learner identities are shifting and fluid entities that refuse to be constrained by fixed views of ability, literacy and learning. The view presented here aligns with the view forwarded by Hall, Curtin and

Rutherford (2013, p. 89) where 'human development [learning] is always positioned within social, emotional and cultural spheres and these spheres need to be considered as part and parcel of how we think and act in the world.' This project aims to explore opportunities where new learner identity positions can be opened up, and taken up, by participant students through foregrounding their life-worlds, passions and obsessions in their engagement with school literacies and learning. A ' funds of knowledge' approach (where student life-worlds are taken as central to the design of learning in school) to literacy and learning is adopted throughout the study with the intention of creating more connections between in-school and out-of-school contexts for learners (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

'Funds of knowledge', identity and integrated curriculum

Cross-curricular integration is not a new concept in educational terms and it features strongly throughout national and international elementary curricula and beyond (Beane, 1993, 1997; O'Grady, O'Reilly, Portelli, & Beal, 2014) as well as being an integral focus of current primary policy statements and curricular documents here in Ireland (DES, 1999). The focus of this paper, however, is upon the post-primary sector in Ireland and there the tradition has been much more formal in terms of subject divisions and upon a summative exam-focused system of schooling (Looney, 2006). One of the central issues probed here is the connection between curriculum content and student context. Indeed, this connection is central to a literacy development context. Daniels (2010, p. 27) comments that 'teenagers both need and want to know how their academic learning connects to their lives and to have the background knowledge to make sense of that context.' This study explores these connections in terms of the learner identity constructs of the students and the developing connectedness between in-school and out-of-school contexts in their literacy development.

There are most certainly examples of good practice regarding cross-curricular initiatives and integration projects in Ireland. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme has used cross-curricular philosophies and interventions throughout its important work in DEIS school settings (DES, 2005). More recently, the Educate Together movement has instigated a genuine emphasis upon cross-curricular integration in its post-primary settings (Cullen-Smith, 2013). A detailed and innovative model of practice is also evidenced through a 'negotiated integrated curriculum' model of intervention at primary and post-primary level emerging from Limerick (Fitzpatrick, 2016). The ALIAS research project remains aware of these important interventions, initiatives and curricular reforms whilst also hoping to add the collective knowledge in the area of literacy development as cross-curricular, integrated and situated in nature. All of the programmes and interventions mentioned above (including this one) would see the current policy of *A Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015) as a rich and welcoming place for expanding democratic curriculum practices in post-primary schools.

Theoretical framework: a critical sociocultural perspective of literacy and identity

ALIAS approaches intersections between literacies and identities from a critical sociocultural perspective (Moje and Lewis, 2007). This means there is an implicit understanding of the socially and culturally entwined nature of learning and identity as well as the centrality of power to these relationships. The key theoretical concepts informing our work here draw on sociocultural theories of identity (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998); third space literacies (Gutiérrez, 2008); funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992); funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) and funds of pedagogy (Zipin, 2009). Funds of knowledge and the connected concept of funds of identity emerge as central lens during the study as participants were engaged in the daily identity work of connecting the or out-of-school

experiences with their in-school literacy experiences. The consonances and dissonances between these worlds often carries a social class-based, socio-economic element as the world of the school is often far more compatible with middle class life experiences and ways of being in the world (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Funds of knowledge research seeks to move beyond the stereotype of students form marginalised groups in order to learn about the nuances and complexity of their out of school knowledge and learning in order to connect their worlds more effectively with that of the school and the curriculum. This perspective is central to this study also as we seek to build bridges between these lifeworlds and school contexts here in Ireland. These theoretical perspectives shape the sociocultural framework of our engagement with data and with our growing conceptualisation of democratic curriculum and assessment design with student participants in the study. The particular theoretical framework of this study draws upon the concepts of figured worlds and positional identities as configured by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998) as we seek to understand how literacies contribute to the positional nature of identities. Figured worlds are defined as 'as if' worlds where 'people's identities and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically' (1998, p. 49). School is a figured world and one that is formed differently from different positions as will be discussed in the data section of this paper. Therefore, we use positional identities which are defined as 'a person's apprehension of her social position in a lived world…..of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all' (Holland et al., 1998, pp. 128-129). Moje and Luke's (2009) typology of metaphors connecting literacy and identity is relevant here also as we focus upon the 'identity-as-position' in the fluctuating interplays of in-school and out-of-school experiences of adolescent learners in Ireland and the centrality of dialectical

positioning in school through undemocratic process such as ability grouping in school (Banks, Byrne, McCoy, & Smyth, 2014).

Adolescent Literacy and Identity

As indicated above, the identity work of school-going adolescents is intricately constituted through the sociocultural constructions of their experiences and interactions. We also focus upon the affordances and constraints of their literacy experiences and how these experiences are central to the identities made (un)available to various participants in the school environments. We draw upon Moje and Luke (2009) to inform these conceptualisations as we recognise the intensely social and interactive nature of both literacy development, learning and the identity work of young people. As Moje and her colleagues have recognised, there has been ample attention from the research arena for intersections between in-school and out of school literacy practices amongst primary aged, or 'elementary' students and not enough within the secondary school sphere (Moje et al., 2004). They refer to the intersection of school literacies with out of school funds of knowledge and discourses as the development of a "third space" where the less privileged discourses of home and community move from marginalisation to centre stage in the school context (Moje et al., 2004, p. 41). There are certainly possibilities for change regarding this third space in the context of junior cycle reform in Ireland where there seems to be possibilities for more flexibility in terms of curriculum design being afforded to schools. Gutierrez (2008) defines the 'third space' of literacy in terms of vertical and horizontal progression. Vertical progression represents the developmental progression of literacy development through standard school measures such as tests and scores whereas the horizontal element represents richness and breadth to developing literacy experiences as living practice and activity. This notion of horizontality allows us to

re-imagine literacy to include and indeed foreground such concepts as out-if-school literacies and culturally specific literacy practices that may have been previously discounted or ignored by the narrow measures of literacy development in formal school environments. This broader horizontal perspective allows the celebration of the literacies of students who may be on the margins of school practices due to their positions on vertical literacy development. This paper hopes to shine a light upon the experiences of some of these students as well as interrogating opportunities for expanding the 'repertoires of practice' (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) in relation to literacy learning in post-primary school settings.

Methodology

The ALIAS project focused upon two cohorts of twelve first year (aged 12-13) students from two post-primary schools in Ireland. These sites offered contrasting settings to the project. The first school is an urban post-primary school in an area of social and economic deprivation (School A) whilst the second school is set in a rural town with a more mixed intake in terms of socio-economic status (School B). Students were selected for the project on the basis of meetings between two members of the school staff and the researchers. The students were selected as a purposive sample where there was consideration of gender and general school ability. The researchers wanted a mix of students from first year with a variety of abilities and experiences in relation to literacies. The twenty four students were initially engaged with through focus group interviews on the two school premises by two researchers from the ALIAS project. The focal points of these interviews were on: the life and school

experiences of the students; understandings of literacies in school; understandings of literacies outside of school and future life pathways and literacies. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach where segments of text were highlighted and coded, categorized and developed into themes. Illustrative vignettes were then drawn from the coded transcripts to represent the various emergent themes in deeper discussion and analysis.

At a later stage in the study, students were then invited to the university campus to participate in design workshops where they worked together in order to develop interest-specific activities and literacy learning opportunities. There were four specific interest groups: sport, popular culture, the natural world and the human world. Students engaged in discussions and structured design activities in order to agree curriculum content, learning activities and assessments across the aforementioned interest groups. These workshops generated data through various group activities, worksheets, design outcomes and an assessment questionnaire, some of which is drawn upon in this brief paper.

Key Findings and discussion

Funds for learner identities

A central aspect of the data generation of this study focuses upon the possibilities for connecting in-school and out-of-school literacies in order to construct ‘third spaces’ for literacy learning (Gutiérrez, 2008). The participants in this study detail myriad possibilities for creating connections between out-of-school and in-school experiences. The central ideas that emerged from the groups were: sports; animals and the great outdoors; popular culture (TV, music, games, film, social media); our changing world (human issues such as climate change, migration, economic inequalities). The importance of these areas is that they

emerged from the students themselves and therefore draw upon their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992). It was also recognised that different students presented with different funds of knowledge and that the list above could not (or would not) be used as an imposed curriculum but indeed that teachers would engage in a democratic process of engaging students to select and connect their out-of-school experiences and interests with their in-school learning.

Positional learner identity in school

The experiences of learning and literacy evidenced by the data generated throughout the ALIAS project exposes a chasm of difference between the positional identities of learners. Context plays a vital role in the making and unmaking of learner identities, particularly in terms of what became (un)available to learners in the streamed (tracked) settings of school A in comparison to the more democratised mixed ability setting of school B. Consider the following comment from one of our focus group interviews in the school with classes streamed according to academic ability as indicative data:

> *Interviewee (Male- Top Stream): I think it is more difficult than primary school which is kind of better because in primary school sometimes you would be going over the same thing trying to get some people to catch up to it but now they will just move on and they will have to catch up themselves so it is kind of easier if you are able to do it fast.*

This participant is happy about the streamed setting as it allows him to progress with his work without being held back by the others who are trying to catch up. He is an able student who has been placed in the top track in the school. Of course, the setting he describes is a content-driven curriculum where the teacher and students are locked in a content-covering curriculum

relationship as it careers towards an end of cycle terminal examination. It is exactly this content-driven curricular relationship that A *Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015)* is endeavouring to disrupt through a renewed focus on skills, content and ongoing assessment.

> *Interviewee- female (Top stream): you'd be kind of pushed back waiting for the other people, like if one person was good at maths and the other person wasn't and everyone kind of got it but then there was a certain few people who didn't get it then she'd spend extra time with them and you'd have to wait then until she was finished with the subject and then she would move on. But then she would spend extra time on that one as well.*

This female student emphasises the same case. These students are highly influenced by their own positional identities as successful learners where they assume authoritative voices over the space of learning and their position within it. For students like these, the figured world of school is a space for authoring success and distinguishing oneself from one's peers in a highly competitive world. The students are agentic in their learning and benefit from increased freedom and democracy of the 'top class' where they feel their voice and experiences are valued as well as being in cultural collusion with the world of the school.

But what of the others?

In this study, the experiences of those outside of the top stream prove to be in stark contrast to the rich, active, challenging and democratic world of the school. The students in the lower streams report far less engagement through active methodologies and describe classrooms characterised by silences, transcription, lower order worksheet tasks and little or no voice in the design and practice of literacy learning in the classroom.

Centrality of teacher-student relationships

Throughout this study, the relationship between teachers and students emerges as a key point in terms of understanding student motivation to learn and attitudes towards particular aspects of their learning. This is not a new phenomenon (O'Brien, 2016; Smyth, 2015; Smyth & McCoy, 2011) and yet it is important to emphasise here as it remains an important aspect of the relationships that contributes to the identity work taking place in school for students. In fact, the participant students in this study often mediated their views on school, subjects, literacies, pedagogies and assessment through their perception of the connections and relationships which are inevitably central to the practices of school life. In some instances subjects and teachers were subject to an elision to the extent that students could not, or do not, conceptualise one without the other; the teacher and the subject become one and the same.

During one of our data generation days, Jordan, a fourteen-year-old boy who had been diagnosed with various psychological disabilities such as dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and emotional issues around anger, described the centrality of the student-teacher relationship to his experience of learning and school as he stated that: 'I don't get on with the teachers so I don't get on with their subjects. I don't help them but they don't help me either. We just don't get on.' The elision of the relationship with the subject is obvious here and deeper discussions with Jordan revealed his own sensitivities and esteem were being construed by himself, and others, as incompatible with school. Gradually, Jordan is positioning himself out and away from school and formal learning. 'School is no good for me when I have these things [referring to various diagnoses of ADHD, dyslexia, anger issues] so I don't do it very well- I'm not like the others in that way.' Jordan's school identity is being chipped and chiselled by the various day-to-day experiences of his life; through interactions with teachers; with external professionals' with school management and with

other students. He is positioning himself, and being positioned 'dialogically and dialectically' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 49) through actions, interactions and words. Of course, there are idiosyncrasies and complexities to Jordan's experiences that are in no way typical and yet there are also elements of his story that are echoed and performed throughout the data generation phase by many other students.

Jordan's story illustrates the complexity of learning, teaching and school. Literacy development is an intensely social and cultural experience uniquely situated in contexts and practices. The intricate human relationships embedded at the core of learning are formative of learner identities, positions and dispositions. They are constantly shifting through the sands of experience as particular trajectories are formed and re-formed through learning encounters framed as social experiences.

Pedagogical preferences and streamed placement

The pedagogical preferences of students is an important consideration for us as we strive to engage learners in their literacy development, therefore we asked students about how the liked to learn. The findings here revealed that student pedagogical preferences drew upon the following:

- Active learning
- Talk-based learning
- Project-based learning
- Inquiry-based learning
- Experiential learning
- Games-based learning

- Digital learning
- Collaborative group work

What was most interesting in terms of the discussions around literacies and pedagogies is the differential experiences of students in tracked (ability grouped) settings. The top tracks report myriad engagements with active learning pedagogies where teachers experiment with, and extend, the boundaries of curriculum experience (although with an eye trained upon the terminal examination at almost all times). Students report enjoyment of school and give accounts of the many opportunities they have to engage in an enriched curricular environment where they: talk freely with other students and teachers to construct knowledge; they engage in experimental enquiries in science; they participate in role plays in English, History and French; they research and present research projects in collaborative groups; they go on numerous class trips and experiential learning events throughout the school year and they use technology (particularly at home) to assist them in their learning.

The alternative experience in lower tracks within the school is contrasting. International research informs us that students who are less engaged with learning are the very students who benefit from active pedagogies and interactive engagements between their in-school and out-of-school worlds (Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy and Wearmouth, 2009). The children tracked into lower streams in this study report a far more restricted learning environment than their peers in the higher tracks. The school world they describe is dominated by didactic teaching methodologies; rote learning; transcription from the board and classrooms that were characterised by silence and control. The rich literacy experiences of their ‘able’ peers signifies a considerable difference in experience amongst cohorts of students in the schools engaged in the ALAS study. These findings reflect similar reports on differential experiences

of teaching and learning in Irish contexts (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Smyth, McCoy, & Kingston, 2015)

Conclusion

This study has revealed several other significant themes, namely: cultures of assessment and literacy experiences; emergent conflicts of in-school and out-of-school literacies and digital contexts for literacy development. These themes will be developed in further future papers. Finally, it is important to recognise the situated and distributed nature of curriculum and the current nexus point in post-primary Irish curriculum reform has allowed for a prising open of opportunities for the discussion of more democratic and genuinely student-centred engagements with developing literacies through curriculum. The literate experiences of students uncovered throughout this research evidence differential classroom experiences in terms of pedagogies, relationships and opportunities to learn. Attention to these different experiences of literacy and learning if we are to develop not only high achievement but higher equity in our post-primary schools.

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