Michigan's New Definition of Reading: The Promise of Literacy and the Paradox of Practice

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MICHIGAN'S NEW DEFINITION OF READING:
THE PROMISE OF LITERACY AND
THE PARADOX OF PRACTICE

by

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This study analyzes Michigan's New Definition of Reading, its theoretical foundations and instructional implications as these enter classroom practice. Designed as a qualitative case study of reading instruction in a fifth grade classroom, this study documents the way that a teacher and her students approach and come to understand literacy under the bureaucratic and organizational imperatives of practice. The disempowering effects of such patterns of practice are described in relation to the purported aims of reading instruction.
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Julie H. Kaufman
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INTRODUCTION

The importance of literacy in the modern world has been and continues to be shaped by the perception of goods its acquisition offers to individuals and society (Graff, 1987). Literacy is widely believed to enable persons to better understand themselves and their world, to participate more effectively in our cultural institutions, to be more productive and fully contributing members of our communities, and ultimately to create for themselves “the good life.” Likewise, the development of literacy is widely viewed as fundamental to the continued progress of modern society, its technical and scientific advancement, the strengthening of its democratic institutions, and increased social equity. The spread of literacy, in other words, is understood as an empowering project for individuals and societies alike.

With the publication of Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, Heibert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985), renewed emphasis has been placed on improving classroom practices which more effectively support literacy learning. The report frames this task in light of literacy’s enabling functions: “[Reading] is a cornerstone for a child’s success in school and, indeed, throughout life. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success inevitably will be lost” (Anderson, et al., 1985, p. 1). Literacy is critical in enabling not only school success, but personal and public success as well. The report goes on to outline the enabling function of literacy for society in general: “Reading is important for the society as well. ... Economics research has established that schooling is an investment that forms human capital—that is, knowledge, skill, and problem-solving ability that have enduring value” (Anderson, et al., 1985, p. 1). In part, this enduring value of literacy lies in the
perception of its importance for meeting the challenges of the future: "The world is moving into a technological-information age in which full participation in education, science, business, industry, and the professions requires increasing levels of literacy" (Anderson, et al., 1985, p. 3). Literacy, then, is a key component of both individual and societal progress. And, if the logic is extended, a better understanding of the nature and processes of literacy and literacy learning will allow society's march forward to move with a quicker step.

This sense of the possibility of literacy is founded on new understandings of reading culled from the last decade of research. And, while the understandings set forward are as yet incomplete, the report states that a consensus has been reached by a "majority of scholars in the field" regarding the nature of reading: "Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information" (Anderson, et al., 1985, p. 7). This formulation forms the basis of new policy directions and guidelines for educational practice (Harste, 1989). This is evident in initiatives taken at many levels. One example is the State of Michigan. The idea of constructing meaning from text lies at the core of Michigan's "New Definition of Reading," a reconceptualization of reading adopted by the State's Department of Education and used as a basis for changing the way the State's public schools teach reading. The language of Michigan's New Definition quite nearly replicates the Commission's formulation: "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation." (Michigan State Board of Education, 1986, p. 2). Both definitions reflect a constructivist perspective of learning that situates the reader as an active agent in the creation of meaning. The reader, in effect, is the mediator between text and context in which the readers' history, knowledge,
beliefs, values, and experience of the world provide the basis for deriving and constructing an understanding of a text. Literacy, based on this understanding of reading, requires approaches to reading and pedagogy that are driven by a search for meaning rather than the development of a skill (Willinsky, 1990).

This perspective then supports a shift in intent of what literacy and literacy learning are for. It prioritizes readers as key figures in the interpretation of a text. It values the identities and histories of these readers and extends to them the authority to create understandings and give voice to their interpretations of texts based on their experiences in the world. The New Definitions' emphasis on the reader as meaning-maker suggests parallels to important strands of scholarship centered on the progressive possibilities of educational practice. These include both Freire's (Freire & Macedo, 1987) understanding of the act of reading and Greene's (1988) articulation of a consciousness of authorship. For theorists such as Freire and Greene, the human capacity to create meaning and to become aware of this capacity for creation provides a cornerstone which enables persons to move beyond taking 'what is' as 'what must be.' It allows the emergence of a new perspective which recognizes that current conditions of life reflect in part a constructed reality that is neither natural nor fixed. It is a cornerstone which provides the basis for the reader to envision a different reality and thus to originate and participate in processes of social and political reconstruction of that reality. In this way, the State's New Definition of Reading suggests the possibility of developing literacy as a progressive, even transformative, pedagogical practice. In examples such as Michigan's new initiatives, the promise of literacy for the empowerment of learners is evident in language about practice.

But this promise is not so readily fulfilled. As scholars such as de Castell (1991) have begun to suggest, literacy is not a simple good to be bestowed. In some
forms, literacy can in fact be seen to be disempowering. This paradoxical result stems from how literacy comes in certain instances to be understood and sought in practice. What happens when the best intentions for literacy enter traditional forms of institutional practice? Does the paradox of disempowerment represent a genuine concern, and if so, what contributes to its presence?
QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

To examine these questions in closer detail, I conducted a case study of how the reading process in a fifth grade classroom is influenced by state and local bureaucratic policies regarding reading instruction and evaluation. As this study is conceptualized, classroom reading instruction presents a major avenue through which understandings of literacy are constructed in the schools. That is, classroom instruction in reading embodies a conception of literacy and provides implicitly, if not also directly, definitions of what literacy and reading are, how they are to be accomplished, and the purposes for which they are to be engaged. Therefore, as students and teachers participate in the classroom reading program, they construct both a standard or norm for what literacy means—for what counts as literacy—and literacy as a practice, a way of “doing” literacy and a way of incorporating literacy in one’s life. Furthermore, through this process, students and teachers develop an identity of self as reader, as literate, and self as teacher of literacy, respectively.

Equally important in the conceptualization of this study is the recognition that the question of how literacy is constituted in the classroom is not solely a matter of negotiation between students and their teacher. Rather, what is negotiated in the classroom is contingent upon the conception and purposes of literacy authorized by local district administrators and state policy makers. The representations of literacy authorized at these levels maintain leverage and power, ultimately since it is in terms of these representations that students and teachers are held accountable.

The choice for using a qualitative case study resulted from this conceptualization as well as from my interest in understanding how the aims of
Michigan's New Definition are approached in practice. The critical juncture of practice lies in the classroom. To gain understanding and insight into this process, it is necessary to understand the experience of students and their teacher engaged in reading instruction premised on the state's reconceptualization. Accordingly, the classroom reading program can be considered a "bounded system" (Smith, 1978, cited in Merriam, 1988, p. 9) and identified as the focus of the investigation. By concentrating on a particular situation, the case study "aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 1988, p. 10). This approach, then, seeks holistic description and explanation, what Cronbach (1975, p. 123) calls "interpretation in context."

The decision to pursue a qualitative case study design and thus use data gathering and analysis techniques characteristic of qualitative research is linked with the philosophical and theoretical understandings of this tradition. The primary interest is to understand the meaning of an experience and it is viewed by this researcher that the assumptions underlying the qualitative paradigm allow the researcher to attend to the complexities of a social world, such as the classroom, in ways which enable a more concrete and contextualized account of that reality. These assumptions are outlined by Merriam (1988) and provide the orientation to this research project:

- Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities—that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting rather than measuring. Beliefs rather than facts form the basis of perception. Research is exploratory, inductive, and emphasizes processes rather than ends. In this paradigm, there are no predetermined hypotheses, no treatments, and no restrictions on the end product. What one does do is observe, intuit, sense what is occurring in a natural setting (p. 17).

The priority given to process and meaning in the qualitative tradition were critical to the design of this study. It provided the means by which to pursue questions of key
concern. The questions of primary importance include the following: How is literacy constructed in the classroom? How is this experience defined and structured? How do students and their teacher make sense of their experiences? How do they interpret these experiences? In what ways are the constructions and practices of literacy instruction in the classroom meaningful from the point of view of those directly involved?

The data gathering and analysis techniques chosen as the means by which these questions could be addressed are grounded in the qualitative paradigm. For this case study, participant observation in an elementary classroom, in-depth interviewing of students and their teacher, and document analyses of state and district policy directives and classroom materials used for reading instruction were methods by which data was gathered. Analysis of the data proceeded inductively. Understandings and interpretations emerged from an examination of these data while the combination of these three data collection strategies provided a means for checking and cross checking interpretations.

These strategies place the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. In so doing, the researcher is able to observe behavior in its natural setting and become intimately familiar with the phenomenon being studied. The researcher is able to notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves and observe things the participants themselves are unaware of. The researcher is also able to be responsive to the context and adapt techniques to the circumstances encountered. Conversations and interviews with participants can be informed by the knowledge of the situation gained through observation and so become more relevant, focused, and meaningful for gaining insight into the particular situation being studied. Finally the researcher can process data immediately, and therefore clarify and summarize understandings and interpretations as the study evolves.
The flexibility, adaptability, and mindfulness of the researcher as primary instrument of data collection and analysis is the strength of this research design. As Guba and Lincoln (1981) state:

In situations where motives, attitudes, beliefs, and values direct much, if not most of human activity, the most sophisticated instrumentation we possess is still the careful observer-the human being who can watch, see, listen ... question, probe, and finally analyze and organize [her] direct experience (p. 213).

While the above named advantages of the qualitative methods employed in this research inquiry are significant, they are not perfect nor without limitations. These limitations have direct bearing on the issues of validity and reliability of this qualitative case study and I would like to address them in this context.

Internal validity deals with the question of how one’s findings match reality. Do the findings convey what is really there? The assumptions underlying qualitative research regarding the nature of reality are important in understanding this criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative studies. From a qualitative research perspective, reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing. It is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to discovered and measured. What is being discovered and observed are people’s constructions of reality or how they apprehend the world. When reality is viewed in this manner, internal validity is considered a strength of qualitative research (Merriam, 1988). Validity, then, needs to be assessed in terms of interpreting the researcher’s experience, rather than in terms of “reality” itself. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) describe four factors which support the claim of high internal validity of qualitative research. First, the investigator of qualitative research is involved in field research for an extended period of time, and thereby has a long period of time in which to collect data. This allows the researcher to be able to continuously review data and modify understandings and interpretations. Second, the investigator is able to converse
and interview informants in terms more concrete and meaningful to them than are instruments that might be used in other research designs. Third, the investigation is conducted in the natural setting of the participants and therefore reflects the lived experiences of participants more accurately than would an investigation in an artificial or contrived setting. Fourth, qualitative analysis uses a process of researcher self-monitoring. This is a process in which the researcher is able to explore each aspect of the inquiry from the perspective of the participants and from the perspective of the investigator. This process is seen to create a tension between insider-outsider perspectives and to preclude delusional interpretations.

In terms of the conduct of this case study, the four aspects related to internal validity described above were factored into this inquiry. Observations of reading instruction in the classroom were conducted daily for a semester (September through December). Formal and informal interviews were based on observations of the classroom and directly related to the students’ and the teacher’s experiences. Continual reflection on both what I, as the researcher, was doing and what I was observing took place and was enhanced by having discussions of my observations and interpretations with my supervisors on this project.

Reliability, which refers to the extent to which one’s findings can be replicated, is a more problematic construct for qualitative research. This is due to the fact that human behavior is never static. That is, in qualitative research, particularly in education, what is being studied is assumed to be in flux, multifaceted, and highly contextual. Thus, replication of a qualitative study might not yield the same results. Since the traditional notions of reliability seem inadequate when applied to qualitative research, it is suggested that a more useful construct is needed. Rather than measure a qualitative study on grounds inappropriate to measure its worth, Lincoln and Guba
(1985) suggest assessing qualitative studies in terms of their dependability or consistency. Thus, the aim here is that outsiders, given the data collected, would concur with the results. There are several techniques Merriam (1988) describes which enhance a study's dependability. These include identifying or delineating the following: the position of the investigator in relation to the group being studied, the selection of participants in the study, the social setting from which data is gathered, and the methods by which data were collected and analyzed. Likewise, consistency can be established through low inference descriptors, multiple researchers, peer examination, and mechanically recorded data. To address these issues of dependability and consistency a more detailed description of the context and design of the study is needed.

This case study took place in a fifth grade classroom in an area school. This school had approximately 350 student and included a Kindergarten and grades 4-6 only. It is one of 18 elementary schools in a district which serves about 9000 elementary students (K-6). Students within the district come from a wide variety of ethnic and social class backgrounds, and as the district is under a court-ordered desegregation ruling, the student population at each building approximates a 40-60 balance between minority and non-minority students. The choice of schools was made in part by its locale and in part because access into the school to conduct this research was graciously extended by the principal. The principal also helped to identify a teacher who would be willing to participate in this study. I indicated to the principal that I was interested in any grade 4-6, but wished to locate a classroom that could be considered typical within the district. That is, I was interested in observing in a classroom with an experienced teacher who was confident and secure in his/her own abilities, who would be willing to talk with me about what he/she does in the
classroom, and who would not feel uncomfortable or unduly anxious about having an observer in the classroom. The principal then talked my project over with her teachers. As a result of this process, the principal informed me that a fifth grade teacher in her building would be willing to work with me though the teacher had a few questions about what actually I would be doing in the classroom.

When I met with the teacher, I described my research project as focused on classroom reading instruction. I conveyed my interest in understanding the teaching of reading from a teacher's perspective and in understanding how her students view reading instruction in the classroom. I also described my role. I was most interested in observing and understanding what happens during instruction—what she does, what her students do. Additionally, I told her that it would be very helpful to my understanding if we could spend a short time after my observations to talk about what I observed and later in the semester, after I had become familiar with what was happening in the classroom, I would want to talk in greater depth about her own views regarding reading instruction and the practices she used in teaching. Also at this time, I would be interested in talking with each of her students regarding their views of reading and their experiences in her classroom reading program. The teacher seemed quite willing to have me in her classroom and share with me her perceptions of classroom teaching. She also was a bit humble and perhaps intrigued by the focus of my study. She conveyed to me that she was not specialist in reading and was not sure what exactly she could offer me.

This comment helped me to define my role as a naive practitioner. That is, as a graduate student working on a Master's degree in reading education, it was not credible to pretend to know nothing about reading instruction. The fact of the matter was, I knew alot about different perspectives and approaches to the teaching of reading.
However, what I didn’t have was experience in classroom teaching. This is what I conveyed to her. I wanted to understand how it all gets puts together in practice. What I didn’t convey to her was my interest in how forms of reading instruction may be empowering or disempowering for teachers and students. The main reason for this was because I wanted to know how such practices are constituted in classroom reading instruction and thus avoid influencing her teaching with constructs not arising from her everyday practice. Additionally, the role of passive participant observer was taken. Observation would be the major part of this study while my presence in the classroom would only minimally affect the situation.

My introduction to the students proceeded in a similar manner as did my introduction to the teacher, though with less depth. I simply told the students that I was a student at Western Michigan University and I was working on a degree in reading. Additionally, I said that I would be observing in their classroom because I wanted to understand how they went about learning during their reading time. Lastly, I told them that after I got to know more about what they did in the classroom for reading, I would like to talk to each of them about their own ideas and feelings about their experiences in reading. Students were also told that I would not share anything they told me with anyone else, though I might put it in a report that I had to write.

Reading instruction was observed daily for a semester. The stance taken for the duration of the observation period was that of the observer as participant. In this role the researcher’s activities as observer are known by the group involved in the case study. However, the researcher’s participation in the group is secondary to the role of data gathering. Notes were taken openly during my observations and great effort was extended to record everything that was said during reading classes. For the most part, I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible during reading lessons. Yet, I wanted to extend
a cordial and curious manner. While I did not initiate interactions with students or the teacher during instruction, there were a few instances when students approached me to ask a question or show me something they had done. In these cases, I tried to respond in ways which communicated interest and affirmation in what they asked or in what they showed me. Though these interactions were few in number, my responses to students were an important way to build rapport. In fact, these few interactions combined with the daily presence of my warm, smiling face in their classroom were the only ways to build a connection with students prior to the interviews. The teacher, however, was much more likely to initiate a brief conversation with me during the reading period. This would occur during times when students were working independently on an assignment. Her comments at these times varied considerably. Sometimes she referred to a particular aspect of the lesson just completed, sometimes she would comment on a frustration, and other times she would comment more generally on a school issue, upcoming event, or matter of personal interest. These conversations were welcomed, in part because they often were quite revealing of the teacher's perception of classroom events and in part because they were refreshing to a weary-handed observer.

Both informal and formal interviews were conducted with the teacher. The informal interviews occurred on a fairly regular basis. In a typical week, three days a week I could talk with the teacher informally immediately after the reading lessons were concluded as students left for lunch at this time. The other two days such interactions were precluded due to other obligations of the researcher. These were important conversations as they offered a means by which I could gain insight into the teacher's perceptions of the events which occurred during the reading lessons. It also was a time when I could check out and clarify my own understandings of what I observed. These
informal interviews ranged in length from 10 to 25 minutes. A more formal and in-depth interview with the teacher took place towards the close of my study and after all student interviews had been completed. This interview was tape recorded and took approximately 2 hours over the course of 3 days. Once the interview was complete, a verbatim transcription of the interview was made. The following set of questions guided the conduct of this interview:

1. Can you describe your understandings of what reading is? How would you define reading? How would you define literacy? How would you characterize a literate person?

2. In what ways is reading important? What do you feel are the most important purposes of reading? What are the least important? Which do you think are most important for your fifth grade students? Why? Which the least important? Why?

3. How are stories or narrative prose important? How would you describe the purposes of stories? How is expository prose important? How would you describe the purposes of expository writing? Which is more important? Why? Which do you think are more important for your students? Why?

4. What must a person learn to become a good reader? How would you describe the differences between a good reader and a poor reader? How would you describe the differences between ____ and ____? What factors affect students’ development as readers? What are the positive influences? What are the negative influences?

5. Can you describe your role in teaching reading? What do you think should be the focus of instruction in reading? Why?

6. What do you like in particular about teaching reading? Why? Are there some things you don’t like about teaching reading? What? Why?
7. Can your briefly describe the elements of your reading program? Which do you feel are most important? Which do you feel are the least important? Which would you categorize as part of the formal KPS reading curriculum?

8. In your view, what is the intent of the Grade Level Objectives (GLOs)? [GLOs are student objectives focusing on discrete reading skills.] How successful or important is this element of the program in helping your students become better readers?

9. A number of different G.L.O.'s have been taught since the beginning of the year, which do you feel are most important for your students? Why? Which do you feel are less important? Why?

10. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the G.L.O. element?

11. What impact has this element had on your teaching? How would you describe the role of the teacher in teaching the G.L.O.?

12. Describe your perceptions of the basal series you are currently using. What are its strengths and weaknesses? How important is the basal to your students' development as readers? Describe your role as teacher when you work instructionally with the basal readers?

13. Which element do you feel is more important, GLOs or Transfer and Application (i.e., basal or textbook reading)? Why?

14. Are there any other elements of your classroom reading program? In what ways do you think these elements are important?

The teacher's responses were first categorized according to the questions. However, the questions focus on particular aspects of the teacher's experience. These include her perceptions of the nature and purpose of reading, her perception of her students as readers, her perceptions of her role as a teacher of reading, her perceptions
of the district's reading curriculum and instructional designs, and her perceptions of her own classroom reading program. The teacher's responses were further classified by these categories. Across these categories, several themes emerge that will be further analyzed. The rich descriptions of each of these aspects are crucial in enabling the researcher to understand the teacher's perspective. However, these descriptions are one part of a larger picture, and it is in placing the story she told here in relation to that larger context which conveys more fully who she is and what she is about in her work as a teacher of reading.

All students in the classroom were also interviewed in depth about how they understood reading, the reading process, and the instructional practices of the classroom reading program. In order for students to participate in the interviews they needed to return a signed parental consent form and also give their assent. The student interviews were conducted in a small room sometimes used for tutoring individual students. No student interviews were conducted in the classroom. These interview sessions were private and lasted about 30 to 45 minutes. Students were reassured that nothing they said to me would be told to others in the class, their teacher or parents. Students were generally positive and responsive in the interviews. All student interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The following questions guided the conduct of the interviews with students:

1. Are there some things you like about reading? Can you tell me about them?
2. Are there some things you don't like about reading? Can you tell me about them?
3. What things does a person have to learn in order to become a good reader? How can a person learn those things?
4. How would you describe yourself as a reader? Do you think you are a good reader? Why?

5. How would you describe what reading is?

6. Why do people read? Why do you read? In what ways do you think reading is important?

7. Describe your classroom reading program. What kinds of activities do you do? Why do you do these things? What kind of things do you learn about in reading? Why do you learn about these things? In what ways do you think they are important?

8. What activities in the classroom reading program help you the most in learning to become a better reader? Why do you think this helps you the most? What things do you think are least helpful? Why do you think this?

9. In what ways do you participate in the reading lessons in the classroom? Do you like to participate? Why or Why not?

10. If you were asked to create the best reading program in the world for kids your age, what things would you have your students doing? What things would they read? How would they go about reading them? What would they do after they finished reading? Why would you have them do these things?

The analysis of the students' responses was carried out in much the same way as with the teacher's interview. Answers were first classified according to the questions and then according to how they centered on certain aspects of the students' experience. These categories included the students perceptions of what reading is and its importance, their perceptions of themselves as readers and participants in classroom reading instruction, and their perceptions of the activities and instructional methods encountered in reading. Again, across these categories, certain patterns and themes arise which will be further explored. Because all students in the class participated in
these interviews, they provided multiple lenses through which to understand the students' perspective. This allowed comparisons to be made across subjects and thus revealed important similarities and differences among students' perceptions.

Lastly, a document analysis was conducted on state and district policy directives and classroom materials used for reading instruction. This review of materials provided the major avenue for understanding the district administration's perspective of reading, reading curriculum and instruction, and the roles of teachers and students. With the inclusion of this analysis, the perspectives of the the district administration, the teacher, and the students can be set in relation to one another so as to provide a comprehensive portrayal of the dynamics involved in the construction of literacy in this classroom.

Through the above discussion, I have tried to set out the key features of this study's design and setting so as to allow an outsider to form a judgement as to the dependability and consistency of this inquiry. With regard to dependability, I have outlined the social position I took as investigator and the factors influencing the selection of this particular classroom as the focus of my study. The social setting of the classroom was also described and the methods used in data gathering and analysis explained. Additionally, the assumptions underlying the qualitative framework of this case study were identified. To meet the demands of consistency, low inference descriptors were used in the recording of very detailed and verbatim accounts of classroom interactions while all interviews with the students and the in-depth interview with the teacher were tape recorded. There is a very rich data base by which an outsider could examine the findings presented in this report. A 'peer' examination also took place in which a supervisor of this project examined transcripts from student interviews and checked the fit of the categories I constructed from them and used in the
analysis. With some discussion and reworking of the initial categories identified, the fit of categories with the data was determined to be appropriate. The limitation in this design related to consistency and dependability stems from the lack of multiple researchers. The possibility of engaging other researchers in this particular research was largely nullified by an implicit understanding of the conditions under which a thesis project is to be undertaken. The particular condition constraining this possibility says that a research study undertaken for a thesis project must be solely the work of that individual.

One last criterion of a research study’s value must be addressed. That criterion is the issue of generalizability. Generalizability is concerned with the extent to which the conclusions of one study can be applied to other situations. Again, this issue provokes a paradigm clash. In part this stems from the aims of a qualitative case study approach. That is, one chooses this approach because one is interested in understanding a particular phenomenon in depth, not because one wants to know what is generally true of the many. (Merriam, 1988). Hence, the term has been reframed to reflect the assumptions of qualitative inquiry. Stake’s (1978, cited in Merriam, 1988) notion of naturalistic generalization shifts the notion of generalization in important ways. He suggests that in-depth knowledge of the particular, allows one to see patterns of similarity and difference in novel and foreign situations. These generalizations can guide but not predict action. To enhance the possibility of a case study’s findings to be ‘generalized’ in this naturalistic formulation, the researcher needs to provide a detailed description of the study’s context. Context in this case refers to the nature of the group or social situation studied and the research methods and categories used. The preceding description of how this case study was conducted and the social situation in which it took place provides the basis by which patterns of similarity and
difference can be recognized in other situations and a “working hypothesis” can be formulated. This kind of generalization provides a heuristic function rather than a predictive one.
The political and institutional contexts within which this classroom is located had immense influence on the practices of literacy which developed. The district’s curriculum parroted, in many cases word for word, the State’s Department of Education’s reconceptualization of reading, and its requisite guidelines, goals, and objectives which had been adopted and disseminated as a blueprint for reading instruction throughout the state in 1986. The mandates handed down by the state became the district’s justification for the reading curriculum in effect at the time this study occurred.

The local school district, having adopted the state’s mandates, created policies to implement them throughout the system. These policies reflect the district’s interpretation of the state’s mandates and represent an interpretation which suggest its institutional ethos. The local district is organized as a rigid, hierarchical bureaucracy. The locus of power is the central administration which maintains tight control over all facets of the educational enterprise and demonstrates a pervasive instrumental and industrial rationality (Bullough, Goldstein, & Holt, 1984; Giroux, 1983; Habermas, 1971; Young, 1990). This rationality became the lens through which the state’s initiative to radically change the nature and practice of reading instruction in schools was perceived while the district’s bureaucratic structures provided the avenue for implementation.

The central administration became the principal interpreter of the state’s directives as these entered practice. As interpreter, it exerted extreme control over the literacy work of the classroom. This control was exerted through policies which
specified the demographic composition of the classroom, the content and organization of content to be taught as reading, the instructional procedures that were to be implemented by teachers, the pacing of instruction, and the manner, mode, and frequency of evaluating student learning. In effect, the central administration’s power gave it the authority and the means through which to shape the practical definition and pursuit of literacy within the culture of the classroom. In this sense, the administration rewrote the story of literacy embedded in the state’s new conceptualization of reading.
LITERACY AND THE ROUTINES OF PRACTICE

The culture of this fifth grade classroom was potentially rich as a result of policies governing student membership. District policy mandated that students were to be grouped heterogeneously according to race, gender, and achievement. This resulted in bringing together 24 students with quite diverse backgrounds, experiences, needs, and talents. Containing as it did such diversity, this class of students offered enormous possibilities for exploring the unique range of experiences and understandings it embodied. This facet of classroom culture was marginalized, if not entirely irrelevant, however, in view of the radical standardization of the district's official curriculum.

This standardization was brought about by the administration's mandates regarding the content and instructional procedures through which this content was to be taught. All reading lessons were to be conducted using a direct instructional format in which all students participate as a whole group. The daily reading period consisted of two kinds of lessons: Grade-Level Objective (GLO) lessons and Transfer and Application lessons. The GLO lessons focused on specific reading skills identified by the district as essential for developing reading abilities and thus required mastery by all students. The central administration created all materials the teacher was to use for instruction of these objectives. The Transfer and Application lessons included the reading of basal stories from a textbook or sections from a content area text. This reading was to provide students with the opportunity to apply the skill developed in the GLO lesson to longer pieces of text and thus to simulate "real reading situations."

The calendarization of both instruction and evaluation became the most insidious mechanism by which the central administration secured adherence to its
mandates. The administration specified the dates, days, and amount of time allotted for instruction on each objective. It provided one week of instruction for each objective and determined the particular objective to be taught each week. Instruction was also standardized by the calendar. That is, each day of the week certain instructional practices were to be carried out by the teacher. For example, on Mondays the teacher had to introduce the grade level objective and teach the new vocabulary students would encounter in the basal story to be read during that week. This degree of calendarization meant that during any given week, on any given day, students at each grade level across the district worked on the same objective, at the same time, in the same way, and at the same pace.

Likewise, the evaluation of student mastery was also calendarized. Every four to six weeks a districtwide test was administered to assess student learning on the grade level objectives which were to have been taught during that period. These tests, also created by the administration, were formatted in the same way as were the worksheets students used during instruction. The logic implicit in this testing regimen secures teacher compliance. This regimen assumes that teachers would teach the objectives outlined by the administration because that is what students would be tested on. Furthermore, the parallel format of the test with the formats for instruction would provide incentive not only for teachers to teach each objective, but to teach them according to the lesson designs formulated by the administration as familiarity with the instructional tasks would provide familiarity with the evaluation tasks, and thereby increase the likelihood of the kind of student success that would be acknowledged and accepted as such by the administration. Finally, as these districtwide tests are also calendarized, no time is available for the teacher to deviate from the district’s policies. To do something different or to spend longer than the one week allotted by the
administration for instruction on any objective, meant less time could be given to other objectives, and eventually, when the test date arrives, students would end up 'well prepared' for some objectives but not for all. The march of time and tests, governed by bureaucratic controls, structures acquiescence to administration mandates.
TEACHER OF THE MARCH

The pronounced superstructure governing classroom reading lessons situated the role of the teacher as a functionary of the central administration. Her perspective of what literacy and reading are and the practices of literacy informed by her perspective were accorded no value in the development or implementation of the district's formal reading curriculum. Her perspective did not count, and the fact that she had a perspective of her own went unrecognized.

The teacher's view of reading differed in significant ways from the administration's interpretations, particularly as these were translated into classroom practices by the district. From her perspective, reading was something more than what was practiced as grade-level objectives, and reading was something more than what was experienced in reading basal stories. She viewed reading holistically, and felt that while students needed to learn certain skills these skills did not automatically make a reader. From her standpoint as a teacher, the most important aspects of reading include understanding what is read, the reader's interaction with what is read, and the development of readers who choose to read.

Moreover, the primary value of reading stemmed not from the career opportunities it may someday provide literate individuals, but from what it leads to in terms of personal growth and fulfillment. It is in the capacity of reading to nurture the mind, the heart, and the soul that reading obtains its value. For example, the teacher attached great importance to reading aloud unabridged narrative texts to her students in the classroom. She did so because she viewed this form of literacy as a way to enable her students to understand different ways of life, to look at how other people behave.
and respond to each other, and in so doing provide a way for her kids to connect with them and increase their capacity for empathy.

Key to unlocking reading’s capacity for nurturance is the development of interactivity between reader and text. In this teacher’s view, interactivity means that the reader engages the text even as the text may engage the reader. It is the ability to pose questions both of the text and beyond the text, just as the text poses questions of the reader. In a sense reading becomes an interchange, a dialogue, even an argument. The modeling of interactivity is what the teacher believes to be essential in the teaching of reading for it is a process internalized in the practice of good readers.

This teacher’s beliefs regarding the value of reading are significant in that they not only represent a noninstrumental rationality and thus deeply conflict with the administration’s mandates but were overshadowed by them. In the classroom, the majority of the teacher’s time was given to instruction of the Grade Level Objectives and to the reading of basal stories. Because students were tested on the reading skills outlined in the GLO’s and the teacher wanted to insure that her students would do well on them, the teacher would often spend extra instructional time leading students through the district’s additional guided and independent practice worksheets on these skills and forego her practice of reading aloud to her students. In so doing, she surrendered her own beliefs and principles regarding the purpose and value of reading. The two practices were mutually exclusive. Reading aloud meant enabling students to gain an understanding of human motivation and an appreciation of different ways of being; GLO’s meant enabling students to pass a test. As she recognized, when teaching is geared toward tests, kids aren’t using information in a meaningful way and therefore “there’s no reason for them to sort it out.” In other words, there is no reason for them to question what they read for the purpose of the exercise requires students to
believe what is written as true and focus on finding the right answer. Moreover, the right answer is to be found by all student readers for there is only one right answer. Such exercises place new strictures on the nature of interactivity between reader and text. That is, an interaction between reader and text still takes place, but the quality or the meaningfulness of the interaction is severely reduced. The interaction becomes a conversation of small talk. Hence, the role of the teacher becomes that inducting students into the art of conducting small talk.

For example, one objective for fifth grade is for students to be able to distinguish between autobiography, biography, and informational texts. The substance of the articles presented to students was of no consequence. What was important for them to know in order to find the right answer and thus to show that they can distinguish between these three kinds of texts, was to understand pronouns. That is, they first needed to check the article to see if it contained the pronouns I, me, my, or he, she, his, her. If it didn’t, the article could be classified as an informational article. If the article contained the pronouns I, me, or my, then the article was to be considered autobiographical. If the article contained the pronouns he, she, his, her, then the article was said to be biographical. In effect, the teacher engages students in an interaction with text which eclipses its educative potential. The interactivity between reader and text she deems essential to obtaining the goods internal to the the practice, became the mechanism by which those goods were sacrificed.

The teacher’s response to the administration’s mandates was a subtle resistance. In effect, what the teacher tried to do was to implement two reading programs, the administrations and her own. Yet, because she believed that the district’s objectives did in fact comprise reading skills her students needed, she felt she not only had to teach them but believed she ought to teach them. Her first instructional priorities were
given to teaching the objectives required by administration mandate. In her own words, she was battling for time. That is, because she was a veteran teacher of the system she had a clear sense of the larger picture, including which objectives in the official curriculum tended to be more difficult for students and needed to be emphasized, and which objectives she could afford to give minimal attention to. Thus, what she tried to do was to cut down the instructional time provided by the administration for the teaching of the GLO’s and the basal stories in order to insert literacy practices reflecting her sense of priorities. Time was precious and often she was frustrated because she misjudged the time necessary for students to gain mastery over administration’s objectives and thus had to sacrifice projects designed to meet the goals of her program.

Thus, in this teacher’s view, the district’s program did not provide students with enough time to read for enjoyment or to read for their own purposes, but rather always related their reading back to an objective. What was problematic was not the objectives themselves, but the absence in the district’s curriculum and thus on its calendar for creating opportunities for alternative practices to occur. Practices such as reading aloud to students, providing time for students to read on their own and to read materials of their own choosing, providing opportunities for students to design and work on special projects that are of interest to them, and providing time for students to share their work in meaningful ways with each other and with others beyond the classroom. These practices comprised the core of “her” program. They were not the main focus of her instruction but occurred at the fringes of classroom life, after the officially sanctioned work was complete. Even so, her program, existing at the fringes of classroom life as it did, provided a distinct alternative to the bureaucratic rationalization of reading the administration’s program set forward.
Students in this classroom brought differing perspectives of what reading is and why it is important. The majority of students viewed reading as being able to say the words printed on a page and having skills necessary for answering questions. A very small group of students viewed reading as being able to understand what is read. In their terms, being able to create stories from words. The difference signals differing perceptions of the role of the reader. For the former group, the role of the reader might be likened to that of puppet; the latter group the role of the reader approaches that of the puppeteer.

All students viewed reading as important. Its importance derived in part from their perceptions of readings' normative dimensions in our society. That is, they recognized the fact that people expect you to be able to read. However, students also realized reading's importance because of its gate-keeping functions in our society. They believed that readers are better off than nonreaders because readers are able to gain knowledge and education, jobs, and status while not being able to read signaled stupidity, failure, and unemployment. In terms of the students own reasons for reading, they viewed the reading they had to do in school as more important than the reading they did outside of school. Hence, what students learned in their classroom reading program is significant.

In the daily life of the classroom, the district's official curriculum became the core of the students' experience. The grade level objectives and the instructional practices used to teach students these objectives sought to enable students to become better readers, that is to increase their ability to understand what they read, but in
practice, the district's program resulted not in an examination of the information encountered, but in students' ability to quickly and efficiently find information. Because the district focused on process objectives such as how to identify cause and effect and how to locate information, students' engagements with the GLO worksheet exercises became a matter of looking for structural components in texts or as the students called them "signalers" so as to determine a correct answer. One student gave an example of this process. She said that one of the stories from a GLO paper had a sentence like: "The mother died and so the oldest daughter must take care of her younger brothers." She said she could figure out the right answer because 'so' is the "signaler" and what comes after so tells the effect and the part before it the cause. Students learned how to locate and copy information for someone else's whim, purpose, and use. Good questions were questions whose answers could be found easily. The questions themselves were irrelevant. As one student put it: "We looked that [info] up because, [we] had to, ... because the paper said to. ... They just say to look up something, but ... you're not really trying to learn about what you're looking up, but how to look up." Thus the content of what was read became as irrelevant as the questions. The focus of these exercises was on finding the right information, the information needed to answer a given question on a worksheet. By design, these exercises precluded both an examination of the importance, value, or relevance of the questions, and the meanings, validity, or accuracy of the information gained. The exercises ended with the identification of the right answer.

Also as a result of official structures, students perceived the purpose of reading basal stories primarily as intended for teaching kids how to read. That is, students believed they read basal stories, not because they were "good stories," but rather to learn new words, to practice their skills, and to learn how to answer questions.
Students found little in these stories that were of significance to them. Most students knew that many of the basal stories were shortened versions or single chapters of nonbasal fiction stories. Accordingly, these students said the basal stories left too much out. They thought this made the basal stories harder to understand than the real ones while also changing their experience of the story. Without the details it was harder to “get into the story.” Thus, the reading of basal stories became much like the reading of GLO worksheets, a process of extracting information, though in this case extracting the basic facts of the story (Who were the characters? What happened? How did the story turn out?).

Additionally, students made distinctions regarding the importance of fiction and nonfiction texts. Though students liked reading fiction stories better than nonfiction, they were of less importance. That is, partly because students viewed story reading as instrumental for learning how to read, and partly because they viewed them as “not really real” or “mostly make-believe,” reading fiction stories would not help them to “know more.” On the other hand, nonfiction texts were perceived as bastions of real knowledge and truth and therefore read for the purpose of “getting smarter.” As students saw it, and one student stated quite clearly: “You can learn alot of information from nonfiction ‘cause all that’s in there is true, so you learn everything that’s in there.”

While the content of the official curriculum significantly impacted students’ experience as readers, so did the officially sanctioned instructional practices. In spite of the administration’s efforts to avoid tracking by grouping students heterogeneously within the classroom and precluding formal reading groups by mandating whole class instruction, students recognized their differences in reading ability. In fact, the structures mandated by the administration, the standardization of
the curriculum and the regimentation of instructional practices, created an environment whereby differences in reading ability became readily apparent to students and provided a means by which they distinguished and differentiated themselves from others in the class. The major criterion on which students determined their status as either a good reader or a poor reader was in the degree of eloquence with which they could read aloud. Reading lessons were performances. For the ‘good’ readers, reading aloud meant an opportunity to “show-off” how well you can read and to see how well others can read. For the poor readers, reading aloud was a time to listen to others and try to avoid embarrassment. As one student relayed of her experiences of reading aloud the basal stories: “Everytime I come to a word that I don’t know, I just sit there and look at it ... and I think ‘what do the class think of that?’”

Differences in students’ reading abilities were divisive and created discontent among students. As one “good” reader said of a “poor” reader: “They take all day to try to figure out one word ... ‘cause you be ready to move on and they still stuck, like you be able to read and you be goin’ at [their] speed and then all of a sudden they stop, and you go ahead and lose your place, and then she call on you and you get in trouble.” Additionally, good readers perceived various reading exercises and recitations (especially, the vocabulary work and reading the basal stories aloud) as unimportant because either they already knew what the lessons were trying to teach, or they could do it better and quicker on their own rather than having to do it with the whole group. Moreover, they perceived this instruction to be intended primarily for the “poor” readers and blamed them for having to participate in these boring, unnecessary, and repetitive exercises.

The “good” readers were also active in trying to negotiate classroom interaction to suit their needs. They knew that getting called on first or at the beginning of the
reading lesson had its benefits. It meant a longer section of the story to read aloud as well as lessening the need to pay attention as others read. Because the teacher wanted to give everybody a turn to read, if the “good” readers read first, they would be unlikely to be called on again and therefore could read the rest of the story at pretty much their own pace. Another scheme for altering turn-taking was told as follows: “When people are taking too long and it's a good story I turn the pages, and I like fake read ahead, so she'll call on me and then I go. ... I got it and I can find it quicker than a snap, 'cause really I keep my place with my one hand and so when I can find it quick like that then I usually get to read.” While the “poor” readers knew they would have to read at least a little bit of the story, they would prefer to avoid it. And, as far as the “good” readers were concerned, they too wished the “poor” readers wouldn’t read. As a result, those who were the “good” readers were able to read the most, while the “poor” readers read the least.

The consequences of the district's program for students are disturbing. Literacy comes to be understood as a kind of “mining operation.” It mattered little what kind of text was read. A “reader's” job is to search and extract the information specified by either the teacher or the worksheet. Moreover, it also does not much matter who the student reader is. That is, while the district brought together a diverse group of students in this classroom, all students were expected to “mine” the same content, in the same way, and thereby derive the same answers. Student diversity was treated as irrelevant. Yet, students' differential social locations and their identities and experiences born out of these locations are precisely the grounds on which literacy, meaning, knowledge, and social relations are constructed. The official curriculum positioned students as objects in the literacy process (Edelsky, 1991). In this position, students’ lived experience was dissociated or bracketed from the practice of literacy.
As a group, their social experience and identities as children were denied. This denial precluded students from recognizing that their experience in the world is a valid basis on which and through which meaning can be and is constructed, and thereby kept students from using their social experience as grounds for reading words or worlds during their reading practice at school.
CONCLUSION

This case study examines how institutional requirements and expectations governing practice make the development of literacy skills the end product of learning rather than the means for expanding or enhancing the experience of learners and the life of the community in the classroom. Such regulations of practice further imply that literacy results from the mastery of a finite and discrete set of skills that are separable from the social, cultural, moral, or political contexts in which both reader and text are situated. In many ways, this literacy work in the classroom parallels literacy work in the economic realm. At one level are those who labor to find, retrieve, and transmit information, at another level are those who control what information is to be located and for what purposes it will be used. The structure of literacy work in this classroom replicates this division of intellectual labor, in effect, naturalizing this division in the consciousness of students and teachers as a condition that simply is. This severed connection between purpose and practice served to maintain a hegemony of the administration over the lives and literacies of both the teacher and the students within this classroom.

In summary, I have examined how the promise of literacy instruction, even under conditions of progressive formulation at the highest levels of state policy making, can be nullified by the manner in which local school district practices are organized and governed. This study documents how it is that a literacy program can function to disempower teachers and students. For this reason, it is evident that conceptions of literacy must be understood not only in terms of their expansive
possibilities, but also in terms of how they emerge in the lives of those embedded in and shaped by routine forms of school practice.
Appendix A

Approval Letter From the Human Subjects
Institutional Review Board
Date: August 7, 1990

To: Julie Kaufman

From: Mary Anne Bunda, Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 90-07-22

Thank you for your letter of August 3, 1990, specifying revisions to and clarifications of your research protocol. In light of these changes, this letter will serve as confirmation that your research protocol, "Michigan's New Definition of Reading: What Does It Mean for Students and Teachers in Classrooms?" has been approved under the exempt category of review by the HSIRB. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the approval application.

You must seek reapproval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

xc: Paul Farber, Department of Education and Professional Development

Approval Termination: August 7, 1991
BIBLIOGRAPHY


