EXPLORING THE 'ASIAN PRESENCE'

IN CHILDREN'S DISCOURSES

WHAT EXISTS? WHAT IS POSSIBLE?

Julie Hamston

Department of Language, Literacy and Arts Education

Faculty of Education

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

Introduction: Questions of identity

Australia finds itself in a shifting discursive space in respect to its

relations with Asia and in confronting the 'Asian presence' (Singh

1995a,b) in j ETiUast,h

remap its future trajectory. Giving students access to a language in

which to talk about this history now seems important (Singh 1995 p.10)

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The Asia Education Foundation (AEF) has been established to support

teachers and students in imagining a 'different kind of future' with

Asia. The goals of the Foundation, outlined in Studies of Asia: A

Statement For Australian Schools (1995) are stated:

To develop:

•Informed attitudes and behaviour towards Asian people, events, issues

and lifestyles and the ability to communicate these appropriately and

effectively towards others.

•An understanding of the diversity of values and an awareness raised

beyond cultural stereotypes

•Skills that will enable them to interact effectively with the peoples

of the Asian region and contribute to Asia related activities at school

and beyond

•A commitment to the principles of friendship, peace, social justice

and mutual respect among all peoples and nations

The emphasis on curriculum design and classroom practice , supported by

the AEF, has been complemented by the contributions of academics who

have argued strongly for a focus on Asia, whilst at the same time

reminding us, importantly, of the 'Asian presence' in Australia (Rizvi

1994; Singh 1995a,b; Williamson-Fien 1994b). However, once again a

tension emerges. Calls for studies of Asia to assist students in

developing understandings of diversity, pluralism and tolerance

contrast with what Williamson- Fien (forthcoming) sees as an over

emphasis on economic objectives. She is critical of the motives behind

some of the changes in education, arguing that they have tended to

reflect the preoccupation of Australian governments with Australia's

economic role in the Asian region and she draws on the recent Rudd

Report (1994) as an example. This report, she says, "unashamedly based

its claims for the extension of studies of Asian languages in schools

on the need to enhance 'Australia's economic and export interests' and

as a means of creating an 'export culture'." (p. 2)

One interesting perspective on the 'Asia question' and its relationship

to constructions of Australian identity comes from Allan Patience

(1996). Patience invests much hope in the possibility of closer and

more positive links between Australia and Asia, but interestingly

argues that in searching for an alliance, searching for a sense of

'belonging', Australia finds itself alone in the world. In addition to

this, Australia must deal with its own cultural realities, namely that

it is a "hard culture", hardened by its secular and populist nature,

its profound racist and masculinist history. In contrast to this,

Patience claims that "Australia is the world" - its multiculturalism is

its future and given this, the primary school has a fundamental role in

undertaking the "reframing" of discourses that speak of an Australian

identity as exclusionary and selective.

It is this world of "ever changing, transforming, and emerging

(d)iscourses" (Gee in press) that children bring with them into their

classrooms. Young children live amidst competing and contradictory

constructions of Asia and the 'Asian presence' in Australia: "the Asia

as threat" "the Asia as trading partner" "the Asia as exotic" "the Asia

as future", "the Asia as not like Us" and so on. Whilst this moving

terrain poses particular challenges to teachers and students when they

undertake studies of Asia, there exists much possibility in this

dynamic space. I argue that it is important to uncover the multiple

discourses children bring to studies of Asia. The discourses that

children speak through, and speak through children (see Gee in press)

are a central part of any study of Asia and this is what must be worked

with; and worked with in the aim of developing better forms of 'human

relationships' as in the goals outlined above.

A Theory of Discourse

Discourse is a protean concept, as Lemke (1995) argues. It can be seen

as something as specific as spoken language or something as general as

the social process of communication, and also as a general phenomenon

of communicating through language or to particular kinds of things we

say (Lemke1995). Here Lemke touches on Gee's theory of Discourse (with

a capital D) (1990, 1992, 1993a,b, in press) which defines Discourses

as more than language; rather Discourses are ways of valuing,

believing, acting, thinking, that include discourse - or language (see

also Lankshear 1994). Gee states:

A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using

language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that

can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful

group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a

socially meaningful role (1990 p. 143).

More recently Gee (in press) has talked of humans as multiple beings

who enter multiple co-ordinations and hence are constituted as

different situated selves.

We are, according to Gee (1990, 1992, 1993a,b) apprenticed into

Discourses. Discourses are inherently ideological, and we can make

conscious choices about which Discourses to be in at which times;

'(a)nd these choices are very often moral choices" (Gee in press). Gee

adds that all Discourses are historical, and historically and socially

defined Discourses 'speak to each other' through individuals. One

important aspect of Gee's theory of Discourse worth highlighting, is

that some Discourses are uncritical and may cause harm to others. Lemke

(1995) also approaches this, albeit in respect to language per se:

The language we speak to ourselves decides whom we will help or hurt,

and why. The language we speak to others can enlist their aid or

provoke their enmity. The language others speak to us, from childhood,

shapes the attitudes and beliefs that ground how we use all our powers

of action" (p 1).

To illustrate these elements of Gee's theory: I am sometimes acting

within an academic Discourse, at other times within a feminist

Discourse, or inside a 'familial' Discourse as sister, aunt, daughter.

I may choose to operate within a particular political Discourse and so

"marginalize (the) viewpoints and values central to other Discourses" (

Gee in press); in this case the Discourses of opposing political

parties. At all times, I am a multi-situated self and my Discourses are

multiple and overlapping. This theory of Discourse, I believe, is a

useful heuristic for analysing students as multiple discursive selves.

In respect to studies of Asia then, young learners are apprenticed into

Discourses about Asia and the "Asian presence in Australia" through

their experiences in families, their membership of the broader

community and certainly through engagement with various media.

Unfortunately, some of these Discourses reflect fear, resentment and

exclusion and show strong links with Discourses of times gone by

(Hamston 1995a,b, 1996a,b). Rizvi reflects on this in respect to media

representations:

Australians are often told that their future is now linked with Asia,

yet most media reports represent Asians in a homogenous manner,

positing them as the radical other as constructed within the discourses

of colonialism." (1993a p 126)

Theory into practice:

One opportunity for students (and teachers) to meet the challenges

posed by the existence of multiple Discourses, and explore the

possibilities therein, is to engage in a critical literacy/critical

discourse approach that investigates how competing discourses of Asia

and 'the Asian presence' "frame and "reframe" the various elements that

constitute them. The aim of this approach is to develop new discourses

"in the name of social justice" (Gee in press).

My research has focussed on assisting young learners in the upper years

of primary school to unveil and examine the Discourses they bring to

studies of Asia (Hamston 1995a,b, 1996a,b) and to engage with

alternative Discourses; with the ultimate goal of developing informed

attitudes and viewpoints on the 'Asia question'.

The 'curriculum backdrop' for these projects has focussed on

problematising Australian identity through examining questions such as:

Who is Australian? Is Australia part of Asia? How does the 'Asian

presence' figure in Australia's past and future? and providing context

to these questions through an historical study of the Chinese in

Australia. Here students have been exposed to the juxtaposition of

racist and orientalist Discourses with Discourses of inclusion. To "get

at" Discourse (Lankshear 1994), therefore, much attention has been

directed towards the language used to construct the Chinese presence in

Australia. Students have examined a range of written texts (eg. oral

histories, diary extracts) and visual texts (eg. photographs and

documentaries) and analysed these texts for the ways in which the

Chinese 'presence' was constructed. This critical analysis of

historical Discourses has been undertaken after students have revealed

their constructions of the 'Asian presence' in contemporary Australia.

Finally, students have been encouraged to critique their own Discourses

Asia. Grace, as I articulate her position 'says'

I am part Asian and I want to be included in any definition of

'Australian'. My father, although born in the Philippines has chosen to

live in Australia and he must be included in this definition as well. I

believe that Australia is a multicultural society and that we should

respect other cultures. Australia is a part of the Asian region.

Some examples of this are shown here:

Grace: People can become citizens by signing documents- why do we still

call them "look at that Chinese guy over there?

Grace: An Australian is someone who chooses to settle there, or a

country you feel comfortable in

Grace: ...but there's just like so many people, you can't sort of

generalise the Australian identity

and in discussing her Filipino-Australian heritage, she later revealed

in interview

Grace: No I don't want to be seen as different it's sorta funny because

when I went to (new school) 'cause everyone knows my Mum everyone goes

"Oh your Dad is he Chinese? I said "No he's not Chinese ... "is he

Japanese then? I said "No he's not Japanese. So they kept on naming

these actually they kept on saying "Oh he's Australian" because he is

and someone thought he was Aboriginal... like one time because they got

really puzzled but yeah

JH: yeah and you weren't making it easy for them either

Grace: No! (laughs)

JH: Can you tell me why?

Grace: um because it's like it's they thought like if someone was of a

different background not exactly an Anglo-Saxon from Australia or

something they couldn't be Australian or something like that

JH: yeah

Grace: They'd have to be Chinese or Japanese or Greek or something like

that yeah

JH: ...and you really wanted to make them work at their own narrow

definitions

Grace: yeah of who was Australian and who wasn't

Beth:

Beth was born in Australia as was her mother. Her father was born in

Asia, but is of British origin. Beth, as I read it, 'says';

I am an Australian and I do not want Australia's identity to be changed

by having too many people from the Asian region living here. I would be

hurt if what as I know to be my culture and my lifestyle was to be

changed against my wishes. Australia is Australia and it should stay on

its own. Asia will take over Australia.

Beth: ... I really need to get this out ... I really need to get this

out, but every time I tried to say it... when you were talking about if

Asia came over, (sic) like if Asia became a part... I think I'd get

really hurt if Asia became a part of Australia ... our sort of country

would be broken... they are going to take over, they are, they really

are

and later

... well I think if they came over here it wouldn't be right, I don;t

think it would be right at all, it, this is what it would change for

me- it would change my country's identity, it would change my identity

, completely, it would change my lifestyle, it would change my looks

Tessie:

Tessie was born in Australia and both of her parents were born in the

Middle East. Tessie, according to my interpretation, 'says'

I am an Australian and I enjoy being part of the British Commonwealth.

I feel as though Australia and Britain are aligned and Asia is 'out

there. I do not want to entertain the thought of the British traditions

being undone by a move towards an Asia- related future. I do not like

Chinese people and I have a 'physical' reaction to them when I see

them.

Tessie: ... I don't see what's wrong with them (Chinese people), but I

still don't like them sort of thing (smiling). It's just an English

thing...

JH: How does that relate to what you were telling us... that when you

see Chinese people you don't feel comfortable (and you) feel mad

inside?

Tessie : I don't know really. Oh I've changed it, but I still got hot (

in my head) and... I just touch my head and my temperature rises. I

don't know what happens. I'm just acting normal and I see someone and I

feel like I want to break a pencil... um I think that it's something

that we can learn or we're born with really, because if A- Asian people

just get that, you can just get that spark when you see them, I think

it's when you're born with, when you're born with it, but it comes

alive, kinda like that

It can be seen, then, that the Discourses about Asia and the 'Asian

presence' that young learners are apprenticed into may conflict

directly with the Asia-related content that they encounter in schools.

To clarify this point with an example: students may be engaged in

meaningful and innovative curriculum about the history or culture of a

particular country in the Asian region, whilst holding onto orientalist

or racist viewpoints about the group of people in question.

However, the possible existence of racist or orientalist Discourses in

the primary classroom is contentious in that "the proposition that

young children perceive and interpret the world through (an)

ideological lens sits uncomfortably with commonsense understandings

about childhood innocence (Hatcher & Troyna 1993 p .109). Yet it would

be naive to assume that young learners are not apprenticed into racist

Discourses, as highlighted in Tessie's responses.

To focus on racist Discourse, though, is to provide an unbalanced view

of the Discourses available to young learners. Discourses of

inclusiveness, multiculturalism and social justice exist alongside

Discourses of exclusion, as is evident with Grace. And it is worth

noting Rizvi's argument that whilst the grammar of racism is

compelling it does not determine in any absolute sense the way children

must think and act.(Rizvi 1993a). Rizvi contends that our public

discourses contain canons of criticism that can be used to assist

children to imagine a different way of organising social relations. Gee

(in press) would argue that these public Discourses provide alternative

Discourses for children to access or be apprenticed into. Again, Grace

shows evidence of this. When asked to reflect on racist graffiti (see

below), she reveals an attitude of inclusion and directs some of her

frustration with issues of exclusion to Tessie:

[ASIANS OUT GRAPHIC]

Grace: (People could) develop a questionaire, express their feelings

while remaining anonymous. It (graffiti) makes Asian people feel

threatened because some people don't want them in Australia.

JH: What would you say to them?

Grace: You can't say that. Many Asians are Australians and many are

here for a holiday.

To Tessie: What does she mean by an English country?

Tessie: Like a country with white people. Speak English

Grace: You think not too many of them should come to Australia?

Tessie: No I just don't like Chinese...

and later Tessie indicates that she would not necessarily act on her

racism:

Tessie: I myself do not like Chinese, but I would not do graffiti

At the conclusion of the curriculum project, all students were asked to

draw themsleves as if someone had taken a photograph of them. This

'snapshot' enabled them to reflect on how they saw themselves at that

particular moment in time, having engaged with challenging experiences.

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