

Creating networks – changing cultures

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Forms of schooling have been found to embed patterns of talk that are associated with factors of class and achievement. In a study of schools differing on measures of effectiveness and socio-economic status (SES), Duffield (1998) found longer and more frequent writing and sustained reading in English classes in low SES schools with far less time spent on pupil collaborative/discussion tasks. Moreover, Mercer et al (1999) argued that teachers very rarely offer pupils explicit guidance on ways of using language for seeking, sharing, and constructing knowledge, and that pupils commonly lack any clear shared understandings of the activities they are engaged in and the criteria by which they are judged. They showed how activities designed to develop awareness of language use and promote certain ground rules for talking together improved the quality of children's reasoning. Our previous project 'Gender and special education needs provision in mainstream schooling' gave rise to the crucial suggestion that many boys do not constitute themselves as classroom collaborators (cf. Kramarae and Treichler 1990). The significance how boys do communicate is clearly signalled.

All the above suggests a potentially powerful linkage between questions of difference, the quality of the pedagogic discourse and practice, the type of emergent masculinities and femininities, and impacts on achievement.

Vygotsky developed an account of the social formation of mind within which discourse mediates children's formal and informal learning (Daniels, 1996). The essence of this developmental model is a dialectical conception of the relations between personal and social life. The key concept of 'mediation' opens the way to a non-deterministic account in which cultural artefacts serve as the means by which the individual acts upon and is acted upon by social, cultural and historical factors. Thus the potential for understanding cultural and social factors as they impact on individual understanding and learning is afforded. However, a good deal of post-Vygotskian research conducted in the West has focused exclusively on the effects of interaction at the interpersonal level, with insufficient attention paid to the form of collective social activity with specific forms of interpersonal communication interrelations between interpersonal and socio-cultural levels. There is clearly a need for such a theoretical orientation given that the organisational structure of schools seem to discourage cultures of interaction and knowledge sharing. The ways in which schools are organised and constrained to organise themselves are seen to have an effect on the possibilities for peer collaboration and support at both teacher and pupil levels. However the theoretical tools of analysis of this kind of organisational effect are somewhat underdeveloped within the post-Vygotskian framework.

My presentation regards the discursive construction of masculinities in school settings and ways of dealing with this. I will discuss the creation and maintenance of networks at the level of pupil relations. My focus will be on the creation and implications of collaborative working cultures for the creation of knowledge within the general activity systems that constitute schooling.

Our original suggestion was that boys *could* be encultured to read social practices, including learning, as intrinsically individualistic. There is thus a high likelihood that because they understand/experience learning as solitary working they live it competitively. Help can only be legitimately sought from the ‘non-competitor’ i. e. the teacher. This approach almost *requires* boys to equate success with self-sufficiency. Those boys who cannot be (seen as) autonomous learners are particularly ‘at risk’ of being seen as disruptive given the multiple demands on teacher time. This contrasts with girls, who under this model, were more likely, because of their general collaborative orientation to the social and schooling, to be in communicative and social dialogue with each other. As a result, they are more likely to have acquired the appropriate ‘scaffolds’ for learning.

Vygotsky attached the greatest importance to the formative effect of the school itself as an institution. His particular interest lay in the structuring of time and space and the related system of social relations (between pupils and teacher, between the pupils themselves, between the school and its surroundings, and so on; Ivic, 1989). The studies which will be briefly reported make a case for the need to attend to the broader cultural nature of the activities within schooling in order to provide an analysis with which to inform practice. It will be suggested that changes in school culture in favour of collaborative practice enhance the affordances for knowledge production and learning on the part of both teachers and pupils.