Navigating (mis)assumptions in exploring teachers' knowledge and practice of multiliteracies pedagogy

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Abstract

My research aims to explore teachers' literacy experiences and teaching practices in New Zealand intermediate schools through the lens of multiliteracies pedagogy (MLP). However, upon the initial semi-structured interview, I realised my (mis)assumptions and learned that it could be demanding and challenging for teachers to narrate their literacy teaching beliefs and practices. Consequently, I reworked my interview protocols and switched from semi-structured to unstructured interviews. Then I conducted them in conjunction with the collection of observational data. I also extracted the key elements of MLP – diversity, multimodality and a repertoire of pedagogy – and substituted them with terms and practices more familiar to the teachers. Through this experience, I discovered that honesty, flexibility and adaptability are some of the essential characteristics when conducting research as a novice researcher.

Keywords

Multiliteracies pedagogy; navigating (mis)assumptions; intermediate-year teachers

My research aims to explore teachers' literacy experiences and teaching practices in New Zealand intermediate schools through the lens of multiliteracies pedagogy (MLP). That entails gathering teachers' stories of their experiences and practices in addressing diversity, multimodality and engaging a repertoire of pedagogical moves in their literacy teaching and learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). However, the concepts of multiliteracies and multiliteracies pedagogy are complex, academic and theoretical (Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018; Kulju et al., 2018). Additionally, Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) highlight that researching with and about people could be a "messy endeavour at a practical level" as people's lives are "unique, complex, and unpredictable" (p. 4). Within the context of my study, I only appreciated the full breadth of these complexities when – upon the initial semi-structured interview – the teacher participants found it challenging to narrate their literacy teaching practices. Against this background, I draw on my experiences in this reflexive-narrative piece to illustrate some of the

unexpected tensions and challenges I faced in data gathering and how I mitigated them. Before proceeding, it is necessary to explore the assumptions that I had as a novice researcher.

I had an established career as a language teacher and teacher-trainer prior to pursuing my doctoral study in the field of language and literacy (specifically multiliteracies) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Reflection of my practices and interactions with other teachers prompted me to notice how we – teachers – continuously develop knowledge about teaching from our experiences and classrooms and then apply them within our contexts. This background underpins my two main reasons for engaging narrative inquiry as my research methodology. First, the process of self-reflecting and making sense of my own experiences through narratives has allowed me to understand my teaching practices and the knowledge I held as a teacher (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Clandinin, 2020). Second, and in relation to the first, I have a strong sense of seeing teachers as "knowing and knowledgeable individuals" (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 438). Collectively, this means I gravitated towards documenting teachers' literacy learning and teaching practices through their perspectives, and envisaged researching *with* rather than *on* teachers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, I soon realised that these reasons carried with them these underlying assumptions:

   i.   Aotearoa New Zealand, being a developed and Anglophone nation, has adopted multiliteracies pedagogy in their national curriculum (like Australia, Finland, and the United Kingdom).
   ii.   As holders of the knowledge they developed, the teachers would be able to fluently articulate/narrate their literacy teaching and learning experiences.

Following these assumptions, I formed the expectations that the teacher participants could and would eloquently articulate their knowledge and experiences of practising multiliteracies during interviews and post-observation conversations. Thus, I anticipated that when I referred to my interview protocol and asked questions such as "What is your understanding of multiliteracies?" and "How do you enact MLP in your literacy classroom?", I would capture delightful tales such as this: "*Oh, our schools advocate that, and I am actually fairly much into it. Multiliteracies is about recognising cultural and linguistic diversity, deliberately integrating multiple cultures into my literacy teaching practices. It's about teaching kids to be critical consumers and producers of multimodal texts, interrogating others and oneself the ideology of the texts. Also, it's about the representations – how we choose those elements of designs (modes) to make meaning. For example, why privilege audio and visual over linguistic modes. They were the seminal work of The New London Group (1996), weren't they? Does that make sense?*" I sincerely wished that had played out in reality, but they were ultimately just figments of my imagination.

The realisation that these assumptions were essentially *mis*assumptions happened at the early stage of my doctoral study through data collection. As my supervisors and I discussed literacy teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand at supervision meetings, I progressively grasped how literacy was conceptualised and taught here. Hence, the first *mis*assumption was rectified by substituting some terms in the research and interview questions. However, the second one was more elusive. In other words, I could not have entirely predicted *what* and *how* the teacher participants would respond to my questions as well as my presence in their classrooms. I said this because I thought I was ready to conduct the interviews and classroom observations with the teachers after months of preparation. As New Zealand went into nationwide Level 4 lockdown and schools moved online, I had taken the time to engage in literature to equip myself with the knowledge of – after multiliteracies pedagogy – New Zealand curriculum, literacy-related documents and teacher guidebooks, literacy studies and teacher professionalism in New Zealand. In brief, I was reading up on anything that might come in handy during data gathering (Maxwell, 2013).

While this theoretical knowledge had been useful, I discovered that a more nuanced understanding of literacy teaching and learning in schools could only be obtained on sites. Following the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2007) and literacy handbooks such as the Literacy Learning Progressions (MOE, 2010), the participating schools officially referred to literacy as *reading* and

writing. This had a trickle-down effect on classroom curricula and teachers' literacy teaching practices and activities. Although I wanted to believe otherwise, the teachers understandably expressed unfamiliarity with the terms *multiliteracies* and *multiliteracies pedagogy*. In particular, they related that:

> I guess multiliteracies is like all the disciplines within literacy – you have all the disciplines within literacy? Is that like reading, writing, communicating? Not sure. I'm not really familiar with the term, no. (Petunia)

> Not really, no. What's the brief discussion? Oh, they talked about that a lot in the university actually. Those are big words. (Magnolia)

> I don't think it's a term that is used often here … but the idea of multiliteracies is something that we are practising. But I think we don't call it that – I don't know what we would call it – just our practice, I think – rather than multiliteracies. (Lily)

I further realised my misassumption after the introductory semi-structured interview with the teachers. Upon filling in my *reflection sheet* of contextual information – summary of the meeting, peculiarities of the interview, things to probe further in the next meeting – about the interview, I noticed that the teachers had responded to some of my planned questions with "Oh, that's tricky!" or "Oh, I don't know." I wondered whether the teachers had reservations about divulging certain information (which was understandable) or that the questions were indeed tricky. To ascertain, I replayed the audio recordings of the interviews and concluded that it was more a case of the latter. This was because some of the participants had actually asked to clarify what I meant, and I found myself reformulating those questions or putting them in another way. Then I recalled how the teachers had received me warmly, generously spared their after-school hours or even weekend for the interviews, and seemed relaxed throughout the session. More importantly, the teachers' responses had illuminated the distinction between academic language and language used in schools. To mitigate this language barrier, I needed to rethink my research instruments – replacing those potentially *complex* terms and reorganising the interview questions – and interviewing strategies during data collection.

I have previously learned – as pointed out by one of my candidature confirmation panel members – that researching requires researchers to engage in *reflexivity*. What this means is that although I needed to defamiliarise myself with prevailing assumptions (Maxwell, 2013), I could engage my experiential knowledge as a language teacher to enhance my understanding of teachers' literacy teaching practices (Wells, 2011). After that first interviewing experience, I improvised following the steps recommended by established researchers. For instance, Borg (2003) states that "teachers' prior language learning experiences establish cognitions about learning and language learning which form the basis of their initial conceptualisations of language teaching during teacher education, which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives" (p. 88). Further to this, although teacher knowledge may be implicit or hard to articulate (Meijer et al., 2001), it is nonetheless embodied and expressed in practice (Clandinin, 2020).

Based on these understandings, I knew that I could (and should) capitalise fully on the agreed four whole-day classroom observations and the ensuing post-observation conversations. Therefore, instead of a dedicated interview session meant to collect data about the teachers' literacy beliefs and practices, I reallocated the questions and asked them over multiple sessions. During observations, I paid close attention to details and fervently noted all instances that provided glimpses (or those that held stories) about their literacy experiences, beliefs and teaching practices. I also, in particular, matched them against the three tenets of multiliteracies pedagogy. For example, how did the teachers attend to student diversity? And how did they engage multimodal texts and new literacy practices in their literacy lessons? Then I used them as references and prompts during the post-observation conversations, careful to engage terms that the teachers were familiar with. For example, instead of *teaching philosophy*, I used *beliefs* and *values*. I substituted terms like *multimodality* with *words, spaces, images* and *audio*. I also quoted their practices in which they could further elaborate. Those included their literacy activities and choices

of teaching materials, such as their use of videos, slides and student presentations. I also inquired whether they thought their literacy practices of engaging *new texts* (for example, creating class websites and multimodal presentations) had indirectly influenced or inspired their students to do the same. They reflected and were delighted when it struck them that, yes, they actually did. In summary, this re-strategising of data gathering had successfully yielded rich data. As the teachers could relate better to the questions, they became more immersed and expressive in sharing their stories.

This journey of navigating my misassumptions has consequentially taught me to acknowledge my feelings of apprehension and anxiety when gathering data. For example, it helped to embrace that going to schools and interviewing teachers was a fairly new and terrifying endeavour. Further to this, when researching *with* teachers, I gathered that building trust and relationships were determinant to them speaking more relaxedly about themselves as well as their teaching philosophy and practices. One way to achieve that was through sharing my experiences of teaching and conducting research as an emergent researcher. I also upheld the teachers' *narrative authority* in which they were seen as the holders of the "authoritative source of their experience" and the knowers of their knowledge (Olson, 1995, pp. 122-123). All things considered, I was grateful to have met participants who were accommodating, welcoming and collaborative, which made the process pleasantly memorable.

To encapsulate, I have learned that honesty, flexibility and adaptability are among the essential characteristics when conducting research as a novice researcher. As Maxwell (2013) affirms, "You can't just develop a logical strategy in advance and then implement it faithfully. You need, to a substantial extent, to *construct* and *reconstruct* [emphasis added] your research design" (p. 3). Therefore, I ensured I took on board the participants' feedback and responses (verbally and non-verbally) and (re)designed the data collection methods and instruments. Through this piece, it is hoped that other doctoral candidates will be encouraged to (i) seek the academic and/or emotional support they need, and (ii) recognise that a research design is inductive and flexible. In doing so, this not only helps the candidate to care for their own wellbeing, but also allow room for modification of research design "in response to new developments or changes in some other component" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 2).

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