A Multiliteracies Pedagogy: Exploring Semiotic Possibilities of a Disney Video in a Third Grade Diverse Classroom

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Abstract   Disney videos are used across the US as important materials for teaching language arts and literacy in elementary schools. However, how pupils make meaning of the videos has not been sufficiently investigated in educational research. Twenty-five third-grade pupils were taught comprehension skills using *Sleeping Beauty*. The students created their understanding in visual images. Their drawings and explanations were analyzed using a social semiotic theory. The findings indicated that the students' interpretations of *Sleeping Beauty* were not a decontextualized practice; rather, they used the specificity of their gender, social-cultural experiences and available multimodal resources at their disposal to construct interpretations of the video. The implications of the findings were discussed.

Keywords   Critical literacy · Cultural identity · Cultural model · Multiliteracies

Introduction

The notion of literacy continues to evolve and expand in the light of emerging digital multimedia technologies that are not only profoundly changing textual forms but fundamentally shifting literacy practices. At homes and in malls and streets children are surrounded by toys, video games, graphic labels (on children's food packages and outfits), computer games, cartoons, and TV programs. Thus, children are increasingly required to use different cognitive mapping and information-processing skills to construct and interpret different texts (A. Luke 2003). In an important way, these multimodal materials are a powerful childhood culture that

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orients pupils toward elementary school literacy practices (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). More importantly, the media-saturated environment in which today's children live suggests that they bring a wide range of prior experiences in semiotics to the classroom that literacy teachers can potentially activate and/or build on. Nixon (2003) observes that electronics and commodity aspects of popular culture have "become integrally bound up with children's and teenagers' affiliations, identities, and pleasures" (p. 407).

At the same time, the changing demographics in student populations across the US are increasingly becoming culturally and linguistically pluralistic. According to the 2000 US census, there are 311 languages spoken nationwide. The data further indicate that 14 million US households speak a language other than English. The census also states "one in five people over age 5 speaks a language other than English" in the nation and that "more than one language is spoken in 40% of California households" (US Census 2000). The data here suggest that the students in California and the nation come from diverse racial, ethnic, language, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is not surprising that pupils come to school with a wide range of proficiencies in English.

The shifting demographics and the multimodal demands of students suggest that researchers, teacher educators and classroom teachers need to pay more attention to cultural-linguistic diversity and proliferation of different textual forms as important and critical issues in classroom pedagogies. For teachers and teacher educators, the role of instruction, particularly in diverse classrooms, should be to create learning conditions where all students can fully participate in the learning process (New London Group 2000). However, existing conceptualizations of literacy in the elementary school appear to focus primarily on print-based literacy; that is, instructional strategies that emphasize students' ability to encode and decode print texts. Hence, literacy instruction and assessment tend to emphasize skills that provide mechanical responses to multiple-choice tests and a few paragraph-essay writings (Gee 2003, 2004; Nixon 2003). There is little surprise when Swanson's (2008) report on high school graduation rate in 50 cities nationwide indicates that as many as 1.2 million students (that is, 7,000 per school day) yearly fail to graduate.

Gee (2003, 2004) argues that there is a connection between students' abysmal performance in literacy and school instruction/assessment practices as formal literacy curricula tend to focus exclusively on print-based texts. Some curricula shortcomings are worth discussing. First, school literacy appears to privilege English-only students and marginalize the representational cultural and linguistic resources of English learners in diverse classrooms (Swenson et al. 2006). Second, print-based literacy practice does not appear to teach students multiliteracies needed to negotiate proliferation of text-types they encounter on daily basis as a result of emerging multimedia technologies (Ajayi 2008, 2009). Third, the school literacy curriculum seems to discount pupils' background experiences in the use of multiple modes of communication and multimedia. Kress and Street (2006) put these issues in perspective: "How these school literacies relate to those of everyday social life, with its multiple literacies across different and cultural and institutional contexts, is a key question raised by NLS [New Literacy Studies] and for which, at present, school literacy advocates are not providing answers" (p. viii).

Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine how elementary school pupils understand *Sleeping Beauty* and the cultural knowledge and interpretative resources they bring to the video. Specifically, the study explored how grade three pupils used the specificity of their social-cultural experiences and semiotics at their disposal to engage with and construct interpretations of *Sleeping Beauty*. This is an important study for a few reasons. First, there is a need for an understanding of underlying principles that guide children's interpretation of semiotic media in today's changing communicational landscapes where meaning-making is intensely multimodal (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Second, such a study will shed light on how non-linguistic visual semiotics provides elementary school pupils an alternative resource for representation and a more representative platform for participation in classrooms. Third, the study will bridge the gap between the students' shifting literacy practices at home and the school linguistic-, print-based texts at school. Last, the study bridges the gap between theories of multimodal literacies and classroom practice.

A Changing Definition of Literacy

Literacy has hitherto been defined as the ability to read and write print-based materials. However, this is increasingly becoming inadequate in the face of digital, multimodal and hybrid textual forms made possible by new media technologies. New London Group (2000) coined the term multiliteracies to describe the multiple literacies associated with contemporary social-cultural and linguistic diversity and the plurality of texts resulting from new communications media. In this study, multiliteracies is used to refer to the ability to interpret and construct different possibilities of meanings made available by differing text-types associated with digital technologies and multimodal texts such as the Internet, video games, digital video, visual images, graphics and layouts.

Gee (2003, 2004) and Nixon (2003) address the social aspect of literacy. Nixon argues that "literacy is more complex and involves learning a repertoire of practices for communicating and getting things done in particular social and cultural contexts" (p. 407). Gee (2003) further explains the social nature of literacy when he describes literacies as activities ingrained in social practices connected to social groups that contest how a text should be read, interpreted, negotiated, understood, and applied in real-life situations. In particular, there is a pedagogical need for understanding how pupils in diverse multiethnic classrooms in America deploy their cultural backgrounds to interpret different types of texts.

Video and Literacy Learning in Diverse Classrooms

Gee (2003, 2004, 2007), a social semiotic theorist whose work has been very influential in multimodal literacies, has produced substantial research regarding videos "reading" and literacy learning. Gee (2003, 2007) explores the intersection of semiotic practices and effective principles of learning imbedded in videos and concludes that the technology powerfully shapes learners' identity because it allow students to learn in different situational contexts and contexts of culturally meaningful literacy activity. Gee (2003) argues that learning to read is a social,

cultural process and videos are a part of popular culture that orients children to their identities and interests. In particular, Gee (2004, 2007) contends that videos are a site onto which children can project their values, desires, interests, and goals. However, video "reading" makes new demands on teachers and learners because of their multimodal elements. Videos combine language with other modes such as music, gesture, movement, sound, and light effects for meaning-making possibilities. The immediate effect is that knowledge construction becomes a process, a design and a contextual activity that lends itself to interpretations and critique (C. Luke 2003). Gee (2003) argues that when pupils "read" videos they are able to experience their worlds in new ways, acquire cultural models, develop multiple identities, and extend learning. This is because video "reading" provides students the space to think about issues, raise questions and critique different positions (Gee 2003). Videos in literacy classrooms are important because they:

- have the potential to give students opportunities to think reflectively about cultural models available to students in the real world.
- have the possibility of providing students with analytic skills and knowledge for critical analysis of texts.
- offer the potential of building a link between school literacy practices and children's home literacy experience (Gee 2003).

Because of the importance of videos, teachers bear some responsibility for their selection and how they are ultimately situated in the overall classroom pedagogy. Teachers need to ask these important questions: Which video do I choose for which literacy learning activity? How will the video shape student learning? How will it influence their literacy practices? What aspects of multimodality of the video do I want pupils to explore? How do I want to use the video in my classroom context? How does the video promote active and critical learning? How does the video encourage learners to take on different identities? These are important questions as teachers consider literacy theory–practice dynamics in their classrooms.

Interpreting Videos: A Situated Literacy Practice

Gee (2003) theory of Situated Practice posits that literacy is a socially situated practice. Gee suggests that literacy practices are situation-specific and based on situated practice. Gee (2004) contends: "Discourses recruit specific social languages (ways with words) and cultural models (taken-for-granted stories), which in turn encourage them to read context in given ways" (p. 41). Gee (2004) argues that people's interpretations of texts vary substantially depending on social and cultural contexts of practice. Gee (2003, 2004) suggests that because of variations in contexts reading, people deploy different skills to read different text-types. Therefore, Gee (2003) suggests that literacy is multiple.

Based on the theory of Situated Practice, Gee (2004), posits that "learning to read is a cultural … process" (p. 13) situated in students' everyday practices. For example, students in their everyday literacy practices, use different skills to interpret different types of texts and media, including visual images, complex language, video games, the Internet, e-mail, text messaging, Web blog, etc. Gee (2003) insists

that literacy practice is ingrained in social practices: "Knowing about social practice always involves recognizing various distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, knowing, and using various objects and technologies that constitute the social practice" (p. 15). Underlying Gee (2003, 2004) theory of literacy practices is the notion that literacy learning is "fully embedded in (situated within) a material, social, and cultural world" (Gee 2003, p. 8) and that the affordances of tools and technologies (e.g., computer and the Internet) enhance learning. Gee's frame suggests that students' literacy practice is:

- an engagement that entails critical learning where students consciously think, reflect, critique, and situate meaning within the context of literacy practice;
- dispersed, social, interactive, situated, discursive, and technology-mediated;
- situated in social-cultural practices and is distributed across social groups, home practices, and contexts;
- dispersed in diverse modes of communication and multiple media;
- hybrid, as learners rely on intertextual connections to construct an understanding of a given text in relation to other texts; and
- a site of negotiation, contestation, interpretation, and reconfiguration of relationships of alternative frameworks and mindsets (Cope and Kalantzis 2000).

A Review of Related Literature

Buckingham et al. (2005), Gee (2003, 2004), Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004), and Nixon (2003) suggest that children, in their everyday cultural activities, use the resources of the new media to convey messages, make meaning, and represent themselves. They argue that children's digital and multimodal literacy practices and the new media should be integrated into the school literacy curricula. Their argument is premised on a compelling assumption that the new blends of digital and multimodal knowledge afforded children by computers and new media "… are increasingly becoming central to the lives of today's children and youth" (Nixon 2003, p. 407). For example, Sefton-Green's (2006) findings demonstrate that video technology provides more learning possibilities than traditional "schooled" literacies for students who are usually perceived as failing or excluded from success by virtue of their social, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

A. Luke (2003) calls for research which documents students' "new configurations of 'difference' and 'identity' in [their] literate identities, practices, and pathways" (p. 134). He suggests a need for studies that explore learners' identities and subjectivities and how students' *cultural models* and/or home life contribute to a unique understanding of multimodal practices in the classroom. Cultural models are mental schemata of what counts as acceptable practices in a given community (Gee 2003, 2004). For example, a cultural model in a given community defines what counts as literacy achievement and how success is connected to a specific social group that contests how a text should be read, interpreted and negotiated in that

specific context. Put differently, cultural models are taken-for-granted views and assumptions of what literacy is and what it ought to be within a social group.

Understanding cultural mediation in relation to how children learn in new media is important to understanding how diverse students' literacy practices are shaped by their everyday experiences in homes and communities. Gee (2004) traces poor achievement of minority ethnic group children to school literacy curricula and pedagogies that ignore and denigrate their home-based literacy practices. Gee (2004) asserts that literacy as social and cultural processes entails that "people feel like they belong to and are a valued and accepted part of the social group within which their learning takes place" (p. 37). Unfortunately, in many cases, schools do not seem to understand children's home literacy practices that give them "certain values, attitudes, motivations, ways of interacting, and perspectives" (Gee 2004, p. 28), or in short, their sense of home-based practices and identity.

The need to situate literacy in learners' context is even more urgent today as children are surrounded by a proliferation of digital and multimodal materials that not only influence their literacy practices but shape their cultural identities. *Cultural identity* refers to learners' backgrounds and distinctive behaviors with which they may be associated and identified (Weedon 2000). Cultural identity consists of a mixture of norms, values, histories, social mores, and values. Weedon, who has worked extensively in the area of cultural theories of feminism, race, language, gender and class, contends that identity is an effect of relations of wealth, knowledge and power in the society. She argues that definitions of gender identity involve interests that construct its (gender) meanings in competing and often contradictory ways. She views race and gender as sites of political struggle and insists that cultural identity is not fixed, but shifting, dynamic, multiple, complex and contradictory.

Disney videos are an important tool for orienting children to how the dominant cultural notions of race, ethnicity, gender, age, language, and culture operate within the broader socio-cultural and historical framework in America. Giroux (1996) aptly argues that Disney videos "make crucial contributions to (children's) most important discourses of the self" (p. 86) and discourses about others. He further contends:

> If educator and other cultural workers are to include the culture of children as an important site of contestation and struggle, then it becomes imperative to analyze how Disney's animated films powerfully influence the way America's cultural landscape is imagined (p. 96).

Because of the pervasive influence of the media in children's identities, Buckingham et al. (2005) call for studies that explain how pupils make judgments in relation to new media genres. Gee (2003), Nixon (2003) and Giroux (1993) argue for *critical literacy*, that is, pedagogical practices that provide learners the knowledge to relate multimodal materials to the complex sociopolitical contexts of their production. They argue that such knowledge should help students gain critical understandings that they can deploy to transform reading materials and in the process learn to value, think, and interact in specific ways. Gee (2003) argues that critical literacy allows learners to experience the world in new ways and acquire

new identities as they bring to bear—their voices, identities, languages, perspectives, experiences, and cultures—on interpretations and meaning making of digital and multimodal texts.

Sleeping Beauty: The Video Used for this Study

Sleeping Beauty, an animated fairytale video produced by Disney, is about Aurora, a young princess. Her royal background provokes the jealousy of a witch. The efforts of the three kindhearted Good Fairies cannot save her when she is bewitched and consequently falls into a deep slumber. The action of Prince Phillip saves Aurora after a fierce battle with a fire-spitting dragon. Giroux (1999) argues that the video produces representations of cultural and gender differences in a framework that provides "dreams and products through forms of popular culture in which kids are willing to materially and emotionally invest" (p. 89). For example, Aurora is presented as a sexual object—with porcelain skin tone, tiny waist, slender legs and arms—like a Barbie doll.

The treatment of characters raises the issues of gender and age. For example, while the witch is an old woman, Aurora is a young, beautiful lady. While Aurora is dependant, Phillip (the prince) is a hero who rescues her. Zhao (1996) contends that Disney films historically and socially constructed young females as sexual objects and that such a view of being female influences their construction of gender identities. In particular, Giroux (1996) suggests that the cultural models produced by Disney have dominant cultural representations with children from minority and marginalized groups.

The Social Context of Participants

The student population in the school for 2006/2007 academic year was 909. The students were in K-5 grades. The demography of the school showed that 96% of the student population was Hispanic or Latino and 4% African-American. Fifty-seven percent of the students were classified as English language learners (ELLs) and they all spoke Spanish as first language. Also, 82% of the student population came from low socio-economic background, as indicated by the number of pupils participating in the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. The school is in a small city near Los Angeles with a population of 72,984 people. The demographics of the city showed that it was a predominantly Hispanic/Latino community with 86.36% of the total population. Other racial groups included African–Americans (10.20%), Native Americans (1.32%) and Asians (1.02%). The median income for a household was $40,886.00. Furthermore, during the pre-teaching survey, 87% of the students noted that their parents spoke only Spanish and 13% suggested that their parents spoke English.

English was the medium of instruction for all students. However, English learners were classified according to their English proficiency levels: Advanced, Intermediate and Beginning. The remaining students were categorized as English-only and FEP (those that had tested and met the required English proficiency).

The Participating Teacher

The participating teacher was an intern teacher who had taught third grade for 3 years. Intern teachers are degree holders contracted to teach in schools while completing their credentials in education. They are assigned university supervisors as well as certificated and experienced cooperating in-school teachers who provide support and guidance. I had worked with this intern in the same school for nearly 8 months prior to this study. I introduced her to the notion of multiliteracies pedagogy. I developed teaching strategies, methods and materials for this study. I subsequently met with the intern teacher once a week for 3 weeks to discuss what her role would be during instruction in this and one other study. I served as the lead teacher while she assisted me.

Methodology

Sample

Twenty-five third-grade students—14 boys and 11 girls—participated in the study. There were 22 Hispanics and three African–Americans. Seven students were classified as English-only, five as English proficient (EP) and 13 as English learners (EL). The ELLs were sub-classified according to their English proficiency levels: one student was in Early Intermediate, eight in Intermediate, three in the Early Advanced and one in Advanced. The data provided by the teacher indicated that 63% of the students were reading below grade-level.

Data were collected from students' drawings, written explanations of their drawings, teacher–student dialogue, and fieldwork observation record. Students whose annotated drawings were analyzed for the study met specific criteria: (a) they attended all the teaching sessions, (b) they completed one drawing, and (c) they used words to describe their images. Images that best represent the key findings of the study were analyzed.

Teaching Procedure

Because of the pressure of the Open Court program, we had the lesson once a week for 60 min over 5 weeks. The Open Court program is a structured English curriculum adopted by California for teaching reading/language arts in elementary schools (Lee et al. 2007). During the first week, I activated students' prior knowledge by asking them to share with the class videos they had watched in the previous year. Some students shared their experiences with the class, including details such as the title, summary of the content, characters, settings, and their personal views—what they liked or disliked about the videos. I provided an overview of *Sleeping Beauty* to prepare the students to watch the video. From the picture on the TV screen (Fig. 1), the students made predictions of what they expected from the video and wrote those in their workbooks. The teacher, using self-prepared flashcards, posted the following words on the whiteboard: jealousy,

Fig. 1 Aurora and the three
fairies

kindhearted Good Fairies, magic, evil, witch, hardship, sadness, slumber, dragon
and sleeping beauty. The students brainstormed on the meanings of the words and I
asked them to make an educated guess of their meanings and write their answers on
their worksheets. They later shared this with the class.

I selected the words because they were used in the video. In addition, the pre-
teaching activity prepared the students to "read" the video. I asked them to explain
how they learned some of the words. A student explained that she used her
knowledge of the ancient Egyptian civilization from the social studies class to
understand "princess." Another explained she learned the word from a documentary
titled *Princess Nefertiti* on the Discovery Channel. A student told the class that he
understood "magic" and "evil" from the video *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.
The students appeared to deploy their academic knowledge (what they learned
previously) to construct intertextual understandings (from one video to another and
TV to video) of the meanings of these words.

The students watched the video for two lessons (weeks two and three) because it
ran for 90 min. The teacher stopped it periodically for students' comments. Later I
modeled the analysis of Fig. 2 in terms of color, physical appearance, and overall
message of the frame. During week four, the teacher replayed the video while the
students watched it and also worked on the questions posted on the screen through
an overhead projector: (a) What do you think the maker of *Sleeping Beauty* wants
you to learn from it? (b) Who are the important characters in the story? (c) Who
makes important decisions in the video? (d) Who do you like in it and why? (e)
What does the look of Aurora mean to you? (f) Should all girls look like this?

Fig. 2 Aurora and the three
fairies

Pupils studied in small groups to answer the questions. The teacher and I went from group to group to assist the students; we answered their questions and ensured they stayed on task. At the end of the class, the pupils shared their answers with the class. The activity was designed to give the students the opportunity to discuss the video as a story [a social artifact] they have heard, read or discuss before either at home or school. This is important as Gee (2001) contends that instruction in reading should be "rooted in the connections of texts to engagement in and simulations of actions, activities, and interactions—to real and imagined material and social worlds" (p. 716).

I asked the students to use the cues from Fig. 2 and the list of words and expressions on the whiteboard (beauty, blue color, and "a dream comes true") to write a paragraph to summarize their understanding of what they had learned so far. They later shared their answers. The teacher, during the post-teaching interview, reflected on the lesson: "I like the way we encouraged the students to share their answers; it allowed them to negotiate individuals' interpretations of the video." She further noted that the activity "helped the students to understand that it was okay if they come up with different interpretations of the movie." I noted that when students discussed "which answer is acceptable and which is not, they learn that knowledge is not fixed." For students whose answers were inadequate, we asked them to reflect on why they were wrong and do their corrections.

The teacher assigned the following questions for homework: (a) What does the visual image of Aurora mean to you, (b) What do you think of how Aurora is presented in the picture? Explain your answer. (c) Do you like the role of the prince in the video? Explain you answer. (e) What does the use of color suggest to you in the two pictures? (f) What does this video tell you about the society in which we live? Each student was also given Figs. 1 and 2 (taken with a digital camera on the TV screen and printed in class) to take home. The teacher later explained the purpose of the homework: "It is not only for students to get help from adults around them, but also they and their parents can talk about the video within their own cultural experiences."

At the beginning of week five, the teacher played the video again as students worked on the following questions on the overhead projector: (a) Draw a picture to tell me what this video means to you. (b) On a separate piece of paper, answer each of the following questions in a full sentence: (i) Describe what you have drawn in four to five sentences? (ii) What does this picture mean to you? (iii) Why do you draw the picture? (iv) Why do you choose the colors you use? (v) What do the colors mean to you? (vi) Pretend that your picture can talk; what will it say to you? The teacher stopped the video from time to time for the students' comments, clarifications, and questions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using social semiotic approach to multimodal texts developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001). They theorize that individuals use a variety of modes to represent their interests and that a visual image is an expression of cultural meaning. Based on this frame, the students' drawings were "read" to understand

how they used images to convey their interpretations of *Sleeping Beauty*. Their written descriptions of the drawings also were examined to explore their discursive practice. Multimodal analysis allowed me to examine how the students juxtaposed their limited English language with visual images to present their understanding of the video from their own perspectives. This approach allowed me to examine the students' choice of modes for literacy practices and further explored the affordances of multiple modes. The original drawings of the students were scanned and resized to make them acceptable for a journal publication. All the participants were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how third-grade pupils in diverse classrooms use their cultural-linguistic prior experiences and semiotic resources at their disposal to construct interpretations of *Sleeping Beauty*. The findings indicated that the students deployed color to express their interpretations. In addition, the students used visual images to represent their understandings, and finally, they created new meanings from the video. These findings are further explored below.

Students Interpreted Videos Based on Cultural Models

Interpretations of videos by elementary schools are not a decontextualized practice; instead, they are rooted in specific cultural models; that is, how they think and value from a particular cultural perspective. In this sense, meanings of videos are socially and culturally constructed understandings of the students' realities. In Figs. 3 and 4, Guadalupe and Jaime reflected their cultural model as they interpreted *Sleeping Beauty*.

Both Guadalupe and Jaime (Figs. 3, 4) are twins who moved from Mexico with their parents to the US when they were 7 years old. They used Spanish at home because their parents did not speak English. They were both classified as Intermediate English language learners and reading below grade-level. Also, they
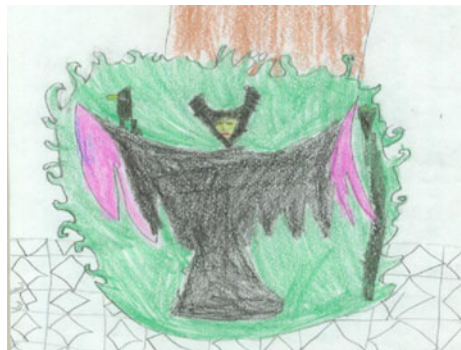

Fig. 3 Black is the color of witches

participated in the federal free lunch program. Guadalupe explained that she drew
the image in Fig. 3 "because I want the wis [witch] to look scari [scary]… Because
I know black color is for bad people like the wis [witch]." Jamie explained his
drawing: "I have drawn the eaveal [evil] wich [witch]". He further explained: "The
black color mean[s] to me the color of dead [death] or something reel [real] scari
[scary]."

The teacher asked Jamie why he portrayed the witch in black color. Jamie noted
that witches were usually caricatured in weird, scary black attire during a local
festival in Mexico. The teacher further asked if Guadalupe agreed that women were
witches as depicted in the video. She narrated a story of how a woman was killed by
some men who feared she was a witch and had supernatural powers. According to
Guadalupe, she thought that men usually accuse women of witchcraft if they fear
them. From their drawings and narratives, it appears that the students: (a) relied on
models of a witch based on their Mexican culture to articulate the cultural meaning
they associated with witches, and (b) recognized that the supernatural power of a
woman could be a threat to men in a patriarchal society.

Even though there is no inherent association between witches and black color or
between witches and women, the students constructed their "model" of a witch
based on their previous understandings and cultural values of the social group in
Mexico where they lived the first 6 years of their lives. In this case, Jaime
interpreted the meaning of black in the light of his socially shared symbolic
meaning of black. Equally important, Guadalupe contested the power relations
between men and women in the video. She rejected the dominant, male-imposed
view of witches as something bad; instead, she interpreted witchcraft as a woman's
power that challenged and exposed the weakness of men's claim of an all-pervasive
power (e.g., men can be intimidated by a woman's supernatural power).

It seems that the students' interpretations are shaped by the tacit, taken-for-
granted, everyday shared cultural conceptions of black color and witchcraft (Gee
2003, 2004). Gee (2003) and Weedon (2000) suggest that meanings of texts are
situated in everyday social, cultural experiences of individuals. Gee (2003) argues
that people think and value from a particular cultural model; that is, images,
theories, principles, and assumptions that capture what a group considers normal
and acceptable regarding a given issue. However, Weedon (2000) contends that

meanings are "culturally produced, plural and ever changing" (p. 102). Hence, meanings are open to contestation and challenge from people with different perspectives.

The finding here raises an important question about cultural interpretations of texts in multiethnic classrooms in America. New London Group (2000) suggests that the challenge of differences is critically important in ethnic, pluralistic classrooms where teachers need to create enabling learning conditions for full social participation. For example, literacy teachers need to ask themselves some critical questions about *Sleeping Beauty*: (a) What does black color "mean" in classrooms with African-Americans? (b) Why does *Sleeping Beauty* represent women as witches while on the other hand portray a man (Phillips) as a prince and savior? Asking these critical questions is central to literacy learning as issues of sexuality, gender roles, ethnic and cultural representations are a site of political, cultural and ideological struggle. Weedon (2000) argues that representations (through discursive practices and visual images) are located in practices that define difference and shape social relations.

However, the issue of cultural interpretations of texts resulting from ethnic and gender difference has not been given sufficient attention in traditional literacy curricula. This is in spite of the crucial role of gender, cultural and linguistic diversity in schools. The finding here suggests that researchers and educators need to address how students' gender identities, cultural repertoires, cultural models, home values, etc. contribute to a unique understanding of multimodal practices in the classroom. It also suggests the need to teach students how to negotiate different interpretations of texts in multiethnic American classrooms.

Visual Images Are Used to Represent Critical Understandings of a Video

The students critically engaged in the analysis of *Sleeping Beauty* as they situated their interpretations in the social context that foregrounded the video. They developed an understanding of the social–cultural context of the video and investigated the possible realities made available to them as readers.

Arturo came to the US from Guatemala while Veronica came from Mexico. They were classified as Intermediate English language learners. They both participated in the federal reduced-price lunch program. They told the teacher that their parents spoke only Spanish. Arturo (Fig. 5) explained his image: "I draw the kingdom that is reel [real] beauty [beautiful] for the king together with the jungle for the witch." The teacher asked Arturo: "Why did you draw the king and witch together?" Arturo explained that he disagreed with the suggestion of *Sleeping Beauty* that good people lived in the palace while bad people lived in jungle. He further explained: "bad piple [people] like the wish [witch] also lif [live] in nice houses and many good people like the king lif [live] in bad house like the tree [the jungle] in the video." Veronica (Fig. 6) told the class: "I have draw [drawn] (a) trees [,] a girl [,] a fery [fairy] [,] (and) a sun [,] (and) clouds and the big palace for the king." The teacher asked Veronica whether she believed only a man could be a prince and live in a big palace. She said no and further explained that she was going to buy her own big

Fig. 5 A King lives in a big palace

Fig. 6 A witch lives in the jungle

house after her education. She said: "My mother say[s] to me, you know, you can become anything you wanted [want] if you work good [hard] in school."

Here Veronica challenged and rejected the patriarchy portrayed in *Sleeping Beauty*. Based on the advice of her mom, she understood that she had an equal chance with any other person to be successful in America, regardless of her gender. She seemed to understand that gender identity is social and cultural and therefore could be contested and rejected. Also, Arturo (perhaps based on his life experiences in a poorer neighborhood of Los Angeles where he lived) reflected, critiqued and rejected the message that good people live in good houses, and conversely, bad people lived in bad houses. He suggested that bad people live in nice houses just as good people (because of their economic situation) live in bad neighborhoods.

The students' interpretations of *Sleeping Beauty* indicate that multimodal literacies have the potential to facilitate literacy practices where students consciously situate meanings of videos within their own experiences, perspectives, and identities (Gee 2003; Nixon 2003). In particular, it shows that elementary school students bring more social and cultural understandings to bear in their interpretations of Disney videos (Buckingham et al. 2005). Gee (2003) argues that semiotic domains engage and manipulate people in certain ways and that the role of critical literacy is to help students understand videos as cultural and social designed spaces that learners can manipulate and interpret in specific ways. Both Arturo and Veronica seemed to understand social and cultural dimensions of videos and how their construction influences children's thinking. This kind of critical reading of

texts, where students view video interpretations as a process of social construction, is hardly the focus of literacy curricula. This is in spite of the increasing need to teach pupils the skills for critical literacy in a world awash with different text-types and discourses.

Multimodal Interpretation of Videos Facilitate Exploration of Social Identity

The students used semiotic resources to explore their social identities in their literacy practices. The students seemed to be more reflexively conscious of their interpretations based on their own backgrounds and perspectives. For example, in Fig. 7, Derrick's interpretation of the video focused on the king, queen and their pet, even though there was no pet in the original video.

Derrick was African–American. He was classified as English-only. His record showed that he was reading below grade level. According to the teacher, he lived with his grandmother. He also participated in the federal free lunch program. Derrick explained his drawing: "I draw when the witch put a cuse [curse] on the baby. The king and pet was [were] scare [scared]." The teacher asked: "Why did you draw a pet in your work?" The student responded that he wanted: "The dog to say backoff [back off] fools to the witch." He further explained: "Grandma has a big dog. That dog is real mean. He [it] keep[s] bad guy[s] off our house."

Derrick's interpretation of the video showed that literacy is not a decontextualized activity; rather, it is a practice where students use their lifeworld experiences as a basis for interpreting new texts and extending knowledge (Gee 2003, Cope and Kalantzis 2000). Derrick situated the interpretation of *Sleeping Beauty* within his home experiences and the school literacy practice. He extended the meaning of the video by including a pet and the security function the dog performed for him and his grandmother; that is, the use of multimodality afforded Derrick the opportunity to situate his interpretation of the video within the specificity of his social life.

Derrick's work shows that literacy practices in multimodal spaces require active and critical learning, where students relate and reflect on their multiple layers of identities as they interpret new texts (Gee 2003; Cope and Kalantzis 2000). Derrick's different layers of identity (e.g., as a pupil, African–American, young male, child who lived with his grandmother, etc.) are integral to his interpretation of the video. This suggests that literacy practice is contextual, embodied, and situated (Gee 2003; New London Group 2000; Cope and Kalantzis 2000). New London

Fig. 7 The King and his pet

Group (2000) argues that "human knowledge, when it is applicable to practice, is primarily situated in sociocultural settings and heavily contextualized in specific knowledge domains and practices" (p. 31). However, this type of compelling situated practice is not fostered by traditional literacy curricula. If schools are to be relevant in multiethnic societies, they need to situate literacy practices in students' everyday social practices, embodied experiences and cultural identities.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The goal of this study was to investigate the principles that grade three pupils employ to interpret videos and create their understanding in pictorial images. The findings suggested that using multimodality, the students engaged in literacy practice as a process of social construction where they interpreted *Sleeping Beauty* in relation to race, gender, social and cultural contexts of their own lives. Specifically, multimodality allowed them to situate the meaning of the video within the cultural models made available to them through their everyday experiences in the material world. Also, the students used multimodality as a tool to engage in critical analysis of gender and race roles and representations in the video. Furthermore, they situated their interpretation of the video within the specificity of their social identities.

This study suggests that the complexities the pupils bring into play in multiliteracies may well go beyond their capacity in spoken/written English (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). I infer that because of the compensatory potentiality of multiliteracies, pupils in diverse classrooms have opportunities to widen their literacy learning and classroom participation. Equally important, because of the complexity and multiplicity of their literacy resources, there is a need for multiliteracies pedagogy that focuses on the situated practice of students with a view to make stronger, authentic connections between issues of sexuality, gender, race, social status, home and school (Gee 2003; Cope and Kalantzis 2000). This approach is important as English language learners' knowledge is built around specific cultural models, repertoires of social–cultural resources, and identities. Gee (2003) argues that literacy is context-specific, text-specific, and culture-specific because learners situate practice in their embodied experiences.

The study recommends further classroom situated research that contributes to literacy teachers' and researchers' understanding of how young children design meaning and how they situate their practice in their embodied experience (Gee 2003; New London Group 2000). The purpose of research should be to further explore how teachers can best deploy multiliteracies pedagogy to connect the frame of multimodality and diversity in classrooms with learners' situated practice. Specifically, such studies should provide teachers greater understanding of how students in each classroom use the specificity of their social-cultural resources to mediate interpretation of videos. Such research should focus on the following crucial questions: What are the most effective strategies for teaching multimodal texts in classrooms with ethnic, gender, cultural and linguistic diversity? How can content area teachers extend multiliteracies to their fields? How do teachers

integrate the traditional language/literacy curricula with the shifting textual forms made available by the new media? How can teachers receive additional "training" to acquire skills for teaching, analyzing and assessing their students' multimodal work?

Finding answers to these questions through a systematic research effort is important to understand how elementary school English learners develop their knowledge of and skills to interpret and comprehend videos and multimodal materials. But more importantly, teachers and researchers will learn more about situated practices of elementary school students, practices that are becoming increasingly crucial to multiliteracy pedagogies that seek to situate literacy within students' contexts, cultures, situations, practices, experiences, perspectives, and semiotics (Gee 2003; New London Group 2000; Cope and Kalantzis 2000). These are some of the fundamental challenges for semiotic research and practice if multiliteracies instruction is to truly transform literacy education and ensures that learning is "fully embedded in (situated within) a material, social, and cultural world" (Gee 2003: p. 8) of students.

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