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## Conceptual and Contextual Contradictions: How a Group of Primary School Teachers Negotiated Professional Learning in a Multiliteracies Book Club

Veronica Gardiner

*Murdoch University*, [v.gardiner@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:v.gardiner@murdoch.edu.au)

Wendy Cumming-Potvin

*Murdoch University*, [w.cumming-potvin@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:w.cumming-potvin@murdoch.edu.au)

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## **Conceptual and contextual contradictions: How a group of primary school teachers negotiated professional learning in a multiliteracies book club.**

Veronica Gardiner  
Wendy Cumming-Potvin  
Murdoch University

*Abstract: The need to diversify digital communications for a global twenty-first century has prompted many theorists to reimagine literacy teaching and learning. Although the new Australian curriculum acknowledges multimodality and multimodal texts, professional learning continues to privilege print-focused literacy. Utilizing a multiliteracies' and community of practice framework, this study scaffolded seven primary school teachers in critical and collaborative professional learning. A case study explored the teachers' evolving perspectives and knowledge work during monthly meetings in a multiliteracies book club. Drawing on a qualitative approach, this paper focuses on how the teachers, who were based in regional Western Australia, problematized conceptual and contextual issues. More broadly, the discussion highlights how the teachers perceived and (re)negotiated contradictory constructions of literacy and professional learning. Findings suggest that generating scaffolded spaces for-and-with teachers is important for innovation in professional literacy learning.*

### **Introduction**

In the twenty-first century, global technological innovation has afforded learners with many new ways of acting and communicating. Many contemporary theorists argue that such developments demand transformations in literacy teaching and learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2010; Luke, 2013). In this vein, The New London Group (2000) proposed the notion of *multiliteracies* to explain how diverse learners, in a range of sociocultural contexts, understand and communicate through digital text. The federally mandated *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2012) specified that literacy experiences should include learning concerned with multimodality and multimodal texts, terms emanating from a multiliteracies perspective (The New London Group, 2000). Despite such curricular inclusions, literacy teaching and learning in Australian primary schools has adhered to traditional print-focused paradigms, which contemporary theorists consider insufficient for informed and flexible communication in a digitally enhanced world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013; Luke, Woods & Weir, 2013).

This paper presents data from a study that took place during early implementation of the Australian Curriculum (see also Gardiner, Cumming-Potvin & Hesterman, 2013). The study scaffolded a group of seven Australian primary school teachers to explore professional learning in a *multiliteracies book club*. Selected excerpts of dialogue from the book club are presented to illustrate how these teachers problematized and negotiated emerging

contradictions around literacy, professional learning and policy. After contextualizing teachers' professional learning in Australia, the first section describes the study's theoretical framework. The research design and methods are subsequently explained. Analysis follows, focusing on several contrasts that emerged during teacher discussions. Discussion suggests that teachers' conceptual and contextual re/negotiation in the book club speaks back to current restrictive constructions of teachers' professional learning for literacy education in Australia.

## **Professional Learning and Theoretical Considerations**

### **Teachers' professional learning in Australia**

Recently, findings from Australian empirical studies suggest that policy processes constrain teachers' participatory professional learning (Comber, 2012; Cormack & Comber, 2013; Lobascher, 2011). Participatory professional learning can be described as a sustained, non-linear and collaborative process, where teachers equitably generate and evolve a disciplinary professional knowledge base (Mockler, 2013; Sachs, 2000). Climates of trust and risk taking are ideal for this meaning making, where dilemmas about policy and its intersection with biographical and cultural experiences can be critically discussed.

Still, Connell (2013) and Lingard (2010) have argued that teachers' professional learning and practice in the Australian landscape has been pervasively influenced by neo-liberalist policy, in the form of:

- widespread implementation of 'one size fits all' professional development workshops, which teachers perceive as top-down and transmissive (Doecke & Parr, 2011);
- accountability mechanisms, which require teachers and students to produce competitive outcomes on standardized print-focused assessments (Lewis & Hardy, 2014; Lobascher, 2011).

An increasing number of sociocritical researchers have rebutted the need for these top-down processes (Cumming, Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2011; Cumming-Potvin & Sanford, 2015; Ditchburn, 2012), which amongst other effects coerce print-oriented practices, and limit development of multiliteracies (Hipwell & Klenowski, 2011; Lobascher, 2011).

At the time of this study, Australia's national curriculum appeared to foreground traditional rather than new notions of literacy teaching and learning. For instance, although Australian teachers were presented with instances of contemporary terminology, it was accompanied by only minimal explanations (Tonkin & Wilkinson, 2010). Further, new inclusions were set amongst long lists of print-focused literacy descriptors (Sawyer, 2010). This construction of the curriculum seemed to obscure new literacy emphases within established understandings and practices (Luke, 2013; Murphy, 2011). While top-down policy frameworks may orient teachers to replicate traditional practice, Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) argue that teachers may also interpretively enact educational policy. As such, amidst a multiplicity of contending power relations, educational policy can be implemented through creative and bi-directional processes, whereby teachers become actors as well as subjects. Creative negotiations and re-interpretations are also a hallmark of the multiliteracies' approach for knowledge generation (Kress, 2010).

## **Multiliteracies: meaning-making for the twenty-first century**

If teachers and students are to participate critically and equitably in twenty-first century democracies, an increasing emphasis on multiliteracies is pivotal (Kress, 2010; Luke, 2013; The New London Group, 2000). The multiliteracies' perspective encourages teachers to recognize literacy learning as collaborative, ongoing, and situated in complex cultural practices (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Rogers, Mosely & Kramer, 2009). To describe multiliteracies practices, The New London Group (2000) conceptualized a dynamic pedagogical framework. *A pedagogy of multiliteracies* suggests how learners (teachers and students) can co-construct communication and design practices through four recursive and interdependent dimensions of knowledge:

- *situated practice* unveils learners' existing knowledge-base, experiences and interests;
- *overt instruction* facilitates co-development of metalanguage and explicit understandings about diverse texts;
- *critical framing* encourages learners to ask critical questions about designs of meaning and how they are vested with sociocultural and sociopolitical agendas; and
- *transformed practice* involves informed creation and re/design of texts and practices.

To integrate multimodal meaning making for contemporary times, communication practices must include but go beyond the printed text (Bull & Anstey, 2010; The New London Group, 2000). In fact, Kress (2010) argued that inherent in digital environments, multimodality's meanings layer and interact through several sign systems. Drawing on the work of Kress, Cope and Kalantzis (2013) referred to relationships between seven modes: print (alphabetical and numeric); oral (spoken language); visual (still and moving images); auditory (sound); gestural (movements of beings or characters); tactile (perceptual); and spatial (layout in time and space). From this viewpoint, to design and re-design with purpose and flexibility, learners must understand how multimodal texts are embedded within sociocultural and sociopolitical agendas (Bull & Anstey, 2010). Traditional print-based procedures remain insufficient for understanding how digital texts can be manipulated from different sociocultural and sociopolitical vantages (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Kress, 2010; Luke, 2013).

Although several Australian studies illustrate how teachers and researchers have explored multiliteracies practices in classrooms (Hesterman, 2011; Hill, 2010; Walsh, 2011), these projects do not describe teachers' perspective taking and dilemmas about professional learning and the policy environment. Aiming to extend descriptions of teachers' learning through this lens, the present study details how teachers in the book club struggled to critically frame and (re)negotiate professional learning and literacy. This knowledge work was supported within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

## **Community of practice and the book club context**

Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory has attracted considerable interest in the field of education and professional learning (Levine, 2010). According to Wenger, communities of practice emerge through three fundamental conditions or domains:

- mutual engagement in negotiated action or practice,
- joint enterprise in relation to a recognized goal or problem, and
- sharing of cultural resources, language repertoires and stories.

Within these domains, four interdependent participant processes give rise to learning:

- doing things together,
- negotiating meaning,

- asking questions about knowledge and perspectives, and
- creating social relations and identities.

Wenger (1998) asserts that learning is a natural feature of changing social participation in community practices and shared goals. Each community is situated in bi-directional relationships with wider discursive and structural arrangements, as diverse learners affiliate-with and participate-in the knowledge, practices and resources of different communities. This wider participation impacts negotiative and sociopolitical processes in the community, where “a community of practice is neither a haven of togetherness nor an island of intimacy insulated from political and social relations” (p. 77).

While early conceptualizations of communities of practice (see Lave & Wenger, 1991) assert that new members gradually move from peripheral to full participation as a consequence of socialization from existing expert community members, this theorizing can be interpreted as linear and hierarchical (Levine, 2010; Li et al., 2009). Consequently, to foreground teachers’ contributions to evolving community practices and goals, the present study utilized processes of *reverse legitimate peripheral participation* (Hung, Chen & Koh, 2006). Such reciprocity can be fostered through proscriptive research design (Hung, Chee, Hedberg & Seng, 2005), involving loose and fading researcher-facilitation.

Overseas, some empirical studies have found that book clubs provide an informal, community-oriented context for professional learning. Kooy (2006) worked alongside women teachers in Canadian book clubs to support critical and reflexive professional learning. Privileging narrative accounts of teachers’ conversations set within a community of learners (Rogoff, 1994), Kooy illuminates how novice and experienced teachers negotiate diverse literacy perspectives during social and informal discussion. A small number of other studies have explored teacher book clubs, for instance in literature-circles (Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010), and graduate-student university contexts (Reilly, 2008). Such work resonates with the democratic and situated ethos of a pedagogy for multiliteracies (The New London Group, 2000), and participatory professional learning (Mockler, 2013; Sachs, 2000). The current study extended the conventional print-based book club format, by incorporating critical focuses on textual diversity, multiliteracies and multimodality.

## Research Design

### Case study, recruitment and data generation

A case study (Yin, 2012) was chosen to generate data for the multiliteracies book club. A qualitative approach was appropriate for thick description of perspectives and interactions of a small number of participants in situ (Geertz, 1973). Strategies for gathering data drew on social constructionist (Crotty, 1998) and participatory perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 2008), which position people as active in social learning. Such positioning aligns with the theoretical framework (e.g. Mockler, 2013; The New London Group, 2000; Wenger, 1998), which posits that knowledge and experience are diverse and emergent within sociocultural and discursive contexts.

After the study was given institutional ethical clearance, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; Saldana, 2011) was used to recruit seven public primary school teachers from five outer metropolitan schools in one district of Western Australia. This strategy allowed teachers to attend meetings in two local municipal community centres. Following informal contact with several school principals in the selected area, potential volunteer teachers were contacted by letter drop or a short information session at the co-operating school. The consent process for

the seven teachers acknowledged that participation in the study would remain distinct from school administrative protocols and teachers' anonymity outside the multiliteracies book club would be protected.

During the early recruitment period, some school leaders expressed contrasting perspectives about teachers potentially participating in the study. Some argued that teachers in their school would not have time to participate, due to intense top-down requirements to rectify poor whole-school performance on standardized assessments. Others suggested that their teachers could participate if the study could be steered exclusively for the benefit of their school. Emerging parallel to data gathered during the five monthly meetings, these school leadership perspectives allude to challenges encountered in recruitment, and the strength, particularly in regional Western Australia, of performative discourses.

To inform description of the group case (Yin, 2012), and assist prescriptive tailoring of activities around teachers' interests, the seven volunteer teachers were invited to complete a background questionnaire. Anna, Tash, Vicki, Fiona, Brooke, April and Jo (pseudonyms), had previously participated in a wide range of educational contexts in Western Australia. These included: teaching in K to 7 classrooms; co-ordination of English, Science and Early Childhood learning areas; indigenous education; and roles involving special needs students and those at educational risk. At the time of this study, the majority of the teachers were practicing at either pre-primary or early primary levels. All seven spoke English as a first language, and one also spoke sign language. All teachers were between 35 and 55 years old and identified as female.

An array of complementary data was generated to inform interpretive claims about the book club (Flick, 2007; Patton, 2002). Data sources included: dialogue from book club meetings; teachers' activity-based writings and drawings; observational notes about non-linguistic aspects of group interaction; and a small collection of entries on a private password-controlled website (designed for sharing information between book club meetings). Although discursive data was given priority, a reflective researcher journal was also an important data source (Holloway & Biley, 2011; Watt, 2007). This strategy facilitated the interrogation of researcher subjectivities and decision-making, and the representation of participants' perspectives and actions (Schwandt, 2000).

The book club took place in five meetings between May and October 2012. Each meeting lasted approximately one to two hours, including light refreshments and social conversation. Meetings were informal, and mainly involved facilitated group discussions about professional knowledge, perspectives and resources. To gradually scaffold peer-led and interest-driven social learning, meetings were designed prescriptively (Hung, Chee, Hedberg & Seng, 2005). To track events over time, the study embedded semi-structured focus groups in the first and last meetings. Below in Table 1, meeting activities are described.

Meeting	Main focus	Designed and co-determined activities
First meeting May 2012	Exploring situated perspectives	Welcome and refreshment; respond to semi-structured focus group discussion; consider the multiliteracies perspective; explore provided multimodal texts by focusing on post-modern picture books; discuss the book club format
Second meeting June 2012	Exploring multiliteracies	Informal refreshment; discuss multiliteracies concepts, strategies and resources; make meaning with post-modern picture books and websites; discuss the book club format
Third meeting July 2012	Questioning pedagogy and planning	Informal refreshment; consider the multiliteracies perspective; discuss rotating question prompts; explore teacher-sourced texts and resources, including iPad applications and multimodal texts; collaborate in multiliteracies planning; discuss the book club format
Fourth meeting August 2012	Open-ended discussion and sharing	Informal refreshment; explore teacher-sourced materials including iPad applications and multimodal text; discuss teachers' interests, issues and dilemmas; researcher-facilitator contributes resources and strategies; discuss the book club format
Fifth meeting October 2012	Open-ended discussion and sharing; Reviewing the book club experience	Informal refreshment; explore teacher-sourced materials and discuss interests, issues and dilemmas; researcher-facilitator contributes resources and strategies; teachers story-map the book club experience; respond to semi-structured focus group discussion; researcher-facilitator concludes the book club and debriefs the teachers

**Table 1: Summary of activities for the five meetings**

Dialogue from all five meetings was audio recorded, manually transcribed, annotated with observational notes and audited in accordance with recognized protocols (Gee, 2011; McLellan, MacQueen & Neidig, 2003).

### Data analysis

Drawing on social constructionist and participatory research perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 2008), analysis focused on discursive and contextual data. Represented below in Table 2, the phases of qualitative analysis fit Yin's (2011) iterative five-phased cycle.

Phase	Description
Phase One	Preliminary interpretations emerged during ongoing decision-making about the research process (Schwandt, 2000).
Phase Two	After transcription, themes and categories were identified in discursive data through open coding, with a focus on similarities and differences across transcript segments (Flick, 2007; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2011, 2012).
Phase Three	In-depth analysis of whole transcripts took place using Gee's (2011) critical discourse analysis tools.
Phase Four	Complementary and recurring patterns were identified across data, and connections made to theoretical frameworks (Yin, 2011). Critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2011; Kress, 2010) assisted interpretation of how discursive meanings and perspectives were collaboratively re/negotiated over time.
Phase Five	A holistic and coherent account of patterns in the data was generated to 'story' the research project. This included: reconsideration of fit with theoretical perspectives (Gee, 2011; Yin, 2011); and representation of key processes and discursive change over time (Flick, 2007; Saldana, 2011).

**Table 2: Five phases of the qualitative analysis**

Broadly, the analysis assisted to unveil how participants used dialogue to negotiate diverse professional learning and literacy discourses over time.

## Discussion and Findings

While acknowledging social learning as complex and non-linear (Gee, 2011; Kress, 2010; Saldana, 2011), the discussion focuses on one thread of book club discussions: teachers' struggle to negotiate conceptual and contextual contradictions, which emerged through inquiry-driven professional learning for multiliteracies. The next three sub-sections present chronological transcripts of book club dialogue, illustrating teachers' negotiative work in relation to professional learning, literacy and exploratory practice in the wider context of teaching. Findings affirm that the book club scaffolded a space for these teachers to evolve and reframe situated perspectives, in response to critical and diverse conversations with peers.

### Negotiating contradictory meanings of professional learning

The first book club meeting began with a semi-structured focus group discussion, mainly elicited through informal focus group questions. In response to proscriptive design (Hung, Chee, Hedberg & Seng, 2005), teachers drew on diverse sociocultural, biographical and institutional knowledge to critically frame situated practices of literacy and professional learning (The New London Group, 2000). When asked the first focus question (*If you could describe your past professional experiences using your own words, how would you describe what you have experienced?*), the group commented that hundreds of teachers at a time had recently attended workshops presenting the new national curriculum. During this discussion, Fiona and Vicki remarked on the transmissive character of these workshops, which had been organized by district leadership:



- 215 **Fiona:** I think when you go to a PD you have an idea of what you are going to get out of it? And often it's quite disappointing?
- 216 **Teachers:** (chorus) Yeah, yeah.(a few minutes later in the same discussion)
- 259 **Vicki:** And with our one [event] it was just, it was giving us an introduction to the national curriculum, so there were four, there was an overall beginning part and then there were four different areas. But all of it was so repetitious.
- 260 **Researcher-facilitator:** Yes?
- 261 **Vicki:** And we'd [school staff] already done quite a bit of that anyway,
- 262 **Teachers:** (chorus) Mmmmh
- 263 **Vicki:** Not that they [the presenters] knew that, but you just yawned.

Across the above comments, Fiona and Vicki report on didactic and generic experiences of professional learning, which do not resource these teachers' situated practices (The New London Group, 2000). Vicki in particular associates these formats with roll out of the new national curriculum.

Two months later, during the third book club meeting, some teachers began to articulate alternatives to these transmissive experiences, after several collaborative and critical encounters with multiliteracies concepts, strategies and multimodal resources. The following example emerged late in the third meeting. It illustrates how, in view of their evolving practices with digital devices, Anna, Vicki and Tash began to reframe teachers' professional learning:

- 752 **Researcher-facilitator:** What do you think our role [teachers] will be in that?
- 753 **Vicki:** Learning it [how to use the technology] for a start.
- 754 **Researcher-facilitator:** If they [students] can use it.
- 755 **Tash:** Research.
- 756 **Vicki:** Mmmh.
- 757 **Researcher-facilitator:** Is there a special role for us?
- 758 **Anna:** I think you're gonna start off as a researcher.
- 759 **Vicki:** Mmmh.
- 760 **Anna:** Um, You know you're gonna have to, as well as . . . (short pause) you know finding stuff that you can use in your class, it's um, researching, what you know, how the children are gonna learn. Having some of that theory behind it, so you know why you're doing things, not just . . .
- 761 **Vicki:** Yeah doing it coz you've been told you've gotta use that device. In the above excerpt, these three teachers position themselves as active learners who use professional inquiry processes to develop professional knowledge. Anna in particular, begins to connect her teacher practice with research and theory.

In the fifth and final meeting, after further collaborative learning opportunities, the researcher-facilitator invited Vicki, Anna and Brooke (the three teachers present) to draw individual storymaps about their experiences and perceptions of the book club. Many of these reflections were articulated as comparisons between book club experiences and institutionally organized professional learning. For example, Brooke suggested:

- 1463 **Brooke:** I think it's [the book club] another way of doing [professional learning], instead of just sitting down, taking notes, listening and having a quick chat at the end, this [book club] is more interactive. And that's what I like about it? Brooke presents her book club participation as an alternative to the experience of transmissive professional learning in other settings. Shortly afterwards Anna and Vicki expanded this comparison:
- 1489 **Anna:** So it wasn't you [in the book club] sitting for a whole day, you know doodling on your piece of paper (laughing) while someone talks *at* you (speech emphasis). So it was ongoing and it was interactive and you had time in between each meeting to sort of think.  
(a few seconds later)
- 1497 **Vicki:** Yeah similar. I like to talk about it and look at something and then go away and see what you can do with what you've just talked about (in the group). As I did.

In the comments above, Anna and Vicki emphasize how for them, the book club fostered sustained opportunities to negotiate new practices and understandings, which could be integrated responsively into their classrooms.

Generally, the first section has illustrated how Fiona, Vicki, Tash and Anna set existing professional learning within a transmissive policy context. As the book club unfolded, some teachers problematized transmissive professional learning and the need for inquiry-driven and situated processes. In the final meeting, comparisons offered by Brooke, Anna and Vicki continued to allude to experiences of narrow professional learning in the wider teaching context. The next section returns to discussions at the beginning of the book club, to focus more specifically on how teachers' negotiative processes developed across meetings in relation to contradictory constructions of literacy

### **Negotiating contradictory constructions of literacy**

When prompted with another focus question during focus group discussion in the first meeting (*How do you think literacy teaching and learning is being affected by current curriculum changes?*), Anna expressed dissatisfaction with the prevalence of traditional literacy approaches in the current teaching context

- 497 **Anna:** At the moment we're [teachers] covering so much reading and writing type literacy that I do feel like they're [students] missing out on some other stuff. My goal this year is to work out how to give them all the literacy they need, all the reading and writing, and give them the other stuff.

In this comment, Anna alludes to contextual constraints on enacted literacy practice, and the dominance of traditional approaches. In the second meeting, this tension re-emerged. For example, Tash and Anna made the following statements:

- 522 **Tash:** You [researcher] talk about memem, memulti (stuttering) multimodal, this sort of stuff, and you [teachers] kind of get bogged down with the specifics of what's in the um, given in the national curriculum.
- 523 **Anna:** Yeah there's such a strong focus on reading and writing. There even seems to be less of a focus on the oral language, which we [teachers] feel is really important.

In the above excerpt, Tash and Anna critically frame (The New London Group, 2000) print-focused literacy pedagogy, which they perceive as a response to prescriptive national curriculum. In parallel, Tash alludes to teachers as policy implementers, in contradiction with balanced literacy approaches. These tensions were problematized towards the end of the second meeting, after a collaborative activity involving researcher-modelled strategies with picture books. The following excerpt demonstrates how Fiona and Vicki critically framed curriculum reform as a constraint on multiliteracies practice:

1101. **Fiona:** Is this [multiliteracies approach] going to take more time away from those [reading and writing]. While we get them [students] to figure all this out? Or is it just-
- 1102 **Vicki:** But this [multiliteracies approach] is using reading and writing in different ways. This is using-
- 1103 **Fiona:** (Clears her throat) I just think, it's just about the, you could spend one whole lesson on just that page, that we had there today [activity with multimodal texts].
- 1104 **Vicki:** Hmmm.
- 1105 **Fiona:** I just wonder where all that stuff fits in. I know we still have to do it, but what do we give up to be able to gain that time?
- 1106 **Researcher-facilitator:** Yeah, so you're feeling?
- 1107 **Fiona:** I'm feeling, I'm just feeling that curriculum, the new curriculum is going to dictate so much.

Here, Fiona contextualizes traditional and multiliteracies discourse in current curriculum reform. Viewing the construction of literacy from an established print approach, Fiona demonstrates how teachers in the book club struggled to negotiate competing discourses and demands on their practice and learning.

As the book club developed, some teachers began to re-negotiate how literacy could be known and practiced, as they inquired further into multiliteracies (The New London Group, 2000). By the time of the third meeting, this participation became more prominent, as teachers initiated increasingly frequent and sustained peer-led interchanges typifying reverse legitimate peripheral participation (Hung, Chen & Koh, 2006). In these episodes, the group shared and co-constructed understandings about teacher-sourced objects, stories and texts. As an example of this peer-led co-construction, the following excerpt depicts how April questioned the group's understanding of multimodality:

- 677 **April:** You know when you [the researcher] were saying about multimodal learning? I'm just interested to know. Multimodal, ah when I first came here I thought it was to do primarily with technology? But it's not is it? That's just one aspect of multimodal.
- 678 **Researcher-facilitator:** Ah
- 679 **April:** Is it right or not?
- 680 **Researcher-facilitator:** What would other people say to that?
- 681 **Anna:** I think it doesn't have to be technology. Um, I think a picture book can be multimodal. And an advertisement catalogue is multimodal.
- 682 **Teachers:** Mmmm
- 683 **Anna:** So I think multimodal, technology gives you a very good resource you know using lots of modes at the same time. But I think most things that you're exposed to, with reading and pictures and that sort of stuff, has multimodality nowadays.

In this instance of peer-led overt instruction and critical framing (The New London Group, 2000), Anna and April reconsider situated understandings of multimodality and text. Such understandings continued to develop in the fourth meeting. The excerpt below

exemplifies how Vicki informally engaged the group in exploration of a multimodal iPad application, which she had brought to the meeting:

- 713 **Vicki:** This is the Storykit.  
714 **Brooke:** So 'story kit'.  
715 **Vicki:** You go to, I put them, well I put the photos on. But you just go to edit. So say for example, you go there (pointing)-  
716 **Tash:** Yeah-  
717 **Vicki:** And then you, and record (operating the application)  
718 **Tash:** Yeah  
719 **Brooke:** Pretty nifty.  
720 **Vicki:** 'Lily and the vacuum cleaner' (role plays recording on her iPad) . . and then just go back to edit (the iPad replays 'Lily and the vacuum cleaner').  
721 **Brooke:** Ha ha ha ha (laughing)

The above segment illustrates how Vicki, Brooke and Tash co-participated in meaning making about multimodal text, during peer-led overt instruction (The New London Group, 2000). A few minutes later, Tash reflected on pedagogy associated with the iPad application mentioned above.

- 780 **Tash:** (enthusiastically) See you could redo that again [story making with the iPad application] and talk about what worked well and what didn't.  
781 **Vicki:** Yeah.  
782 **Tash:** And maybe talk about the fact that if they [students] use the same model, and just keep moving it so it actually looked exactly the same the whole way through?

The three previous transcripts point to the way these teachers began to cast each other as co-participants in multiliteracies learning through peer-led overt instruction and critical framing (The New London Group, 2000).

As they considered their future learning needs, during teacher reflection at the end of the final meeting, Vicki, Brooke and Anna acknowledged the ongoing and unfinished character of their professional learning:

- 1708 **Vicki:** I need more information. (Laughing)  
1709 **Brooke:** Yes I need more information. (Droll)  
1710 **Anna:** Yeah and I don't think it's necessarily about being *given* information (speech emphasis), it's about coming up with it, as a group.

Together, the transcripts in this sub-section indicate how teachers in the book club struggled to problematize and negotiate existing literacy knowledge and perspectives. These findings resonate with a growing body of empirical research denoting the challenges of enlarging literacy approaches in Australia (e.g. Comber, 2012; Lobascher, 2011). These results also affirm that some Australian teachers perceive official policy documents as articulating narrowed views of literacy (Luke, 2013), which limit teachers' access to multiliteracies discourse (Cumming, Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Tonkin & Wilkinson, 2010). In contrast, the book club learning space was shaped for-and-by teachers, for negotiating contextual and conceptual issues. The next section illustrates how book club supported one teacher in a different way, as she faced challenges while enlarging her practices in her classroom context.

## Negotiating dilemmas about exploratory classroom practice

As some of the teachers evolved understandings and perspectives throughout book club meetings, some began to recount their experimentation with multiliteracies practices in classrooms. At times, tensions emerged at the interface of these practices with established approaches in schools. During the third meeting, Tash first alluded to this tension, when she critically framed her classroom approach (The New London Group, 2000):

449 **Tash:** I'm in the sort of situation where one of the teachers at my same level is very much about structured sit down, whereas I'm not, so. And I'm in a school where we're doing literacy blocks and XXXX (phonics program name deleted), so it's tryin to do what I'm being told to do at the administration level, but also fitting in with my own philosophy as well.

Contextual tensions between literacy approaches continued to be articulated in the fourth meeting, when Tash problematized challenges to her development of expanded literacy pedagogy in her classroom:

379 **Tash:** So I thought we'd put the books down for them [students] to use, but we'd just keep rotating different books on the whiteboard, so they [students] could, listen to stories and see it there where it's playing there for them (speech emphasis).

380 **Vicki:** Yeah.

381 **Tash:** And then they [students] could go back [to the print texts].

382 **Vicki:** Mmmmh?

383 **Tash:** And a funny comment I had at the staff meeting today, was one of the deputies said to the other deputy, 'do you think that was appropriate?'

Vicki and Brooke responded to this recount with gasps. Tash continued:

391 **Tash:** But because they've [students] had that scaffolding and they've listened to the stories, coz they kept changing them over, they thought it was *great* (speech emphasis) and they kept going, 'Look, I can read this!' And one of the deputies came through and didn't actually *look* (speech emphases).

392 **Vicki:** Oooh Oooh. (in drawn breaths)

393 **Brooke:** Dear me.

394 **Vicki:** *They* (speech emphasis) [deputies] are not being appropriate. They've got no idea what happens in a pre-primary.

The researcher-facilitator had noted non-linguistic aspects of this interchange:  
*Tash becomes quite animated, waving her hands around, rocking backwards and forwards slightly in her chair and putting her hands to her head. The other participants are frowning and surprised, giving Tash a lot of focused eye contact and attention.*

The above three excerpts indicate how Tash used book club discussion to negotiate school-based challenges to her evolving literacy practice. In the fifth meeting, while sharing perceptions about their participation in the book club, Anna and Vicki commented on how the climate of the book club impacted on these sharing practices:

- 1509 **Anna:** You didn't feel like [in the book club], if you said something you were gonna be judged.
- 1510 **Vicki:** Yeah.
- 1511 **Anna:** Coz everyone who was there, wanted to be there. A lot of times when you're at PD, there are people who have been sent by the school (laughing voice).
- 1512 **Vicki:** Yes, true.
- 1513 **Anna:** So I felt like we all wanted to be there, and we all wanted to, get something out of it.

In these comments, Anna points to the book club as a context for developing shared purposes, trust and collaboration. This supportive ethos seemed important for teachers' knowledge work and contributions to the book club. Such developments resonate with the democratic principles of multiliteracies (The New London Group, 2000), community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and participatory professional learning (Mockler, 2013; Sachs, 2000).

### Concluding Remarks

In disseminating empirical results, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of any research. Data for the present study were gathered in a limited time frame over a period of six months. Also, given the qualitative nature of this study, which involves thick description of one case study, and a limited number of participants, the translation of conclusions to other contexts must take place with caution. Yet it is reasonable to suggest that given more substantial opportunities to engage with the multiliteracies book club format, these teachers could draw extensively on critical framing (The New London Group, 2000) to intricately negotiate conceptual and contextual tensions.

It has also been argued that the interpretation of case study data can more broadly inform theory and practice (Yin, 2012). In this spirit, evidence of teachers' participatory professional learning (Mockler, 2013; Sachs, 2000) in the multiliteracies book club contests Australian policy and professional learning conditions. Findings critique the notion that teachers should absorb and replicate practices generated solely by system 'experts', which represent traditional sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives. Instead, this case study illustrates that teachers value opportunities to negotiate contradictory aspects of their professional context, particularly when situated in meaning making about their professional experiences and learning needs. This active teacher engagement is central to multiliteracies (The New London Group, 2000) and community of practice perspectives (Wenger, 1998), which locate professional participation in critical and diverse perspective taking. Wenger comments on such processes in communities of practice:

*Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation . . . shared practice thus connects participants to each other in ways that are diverse and complex. (p. 71)*

Reflecting on collaboration with Canadian teachers, Kooy (2006) commented on the effectiveness of the book club format for scaffolding teachers' to translate critical knowledge into classroom discussion:

*In the teacher book clubs, the teachers engaged in rigorous study and critical thinking – qualities and practices that affect and shape their classroom teaching . . . . The book club united the teachers without homogenizing them. (p. 221)*

Similar to Kooy (2006), results from the present study call for expansive, critical and discussion-based literacy learning for teachers. Extending Kooy's book club approach via multimodal texts, this research exemplifies how a book club space can enable experienced Australian teachers to negotiate and struggle with contradictory aspects of their professional learning context, as they move towards multiliteracies (The New London Group, 2000).

While the present study enabled a group of experienced primary classroom teachers to draw on a multiliteracies book club format, these results point to further research applications that may support pre-service teacher education and retention of early career teachers. By including participants who represent broader sociocultural and economic diversity (e.g. early career teachers, pre-service teachers or substitute teachers, especially those who may have migrated to Australia from countries of non Anglo-Saxon heritage and/or those who identify as male), future projects could contribute to multifaceted discussions of:

- transitions from pre-service to professional literacy practice contexts;
- contradictions in current orchestrations of professional learning and literacy;
- accountability to standardized testing outcomes and effects on literacy learning and practice;
- complexities in the role of English and other languages in the Australian literacy landscape.

As a concluding observation about the significance of this study, these teachers' perceptions of a prescriptive policy context reflect a concerning trend in educational discourse. It is acknowledged that this group of teachers was drawn from one Western Australian public school district, where pressures to narrow professional practice and learning appeared salient. However, to the extent that teachers in general may perceive policy arrangements as prioritizing a restrictive status quo, critical and balanced learning is suppressed (Ball, 1993; Luke, 2013; Luke, Woods & Weir, 2013). This contrasts with aims to foster a diverse and multiliterate society for the twenty-first century, through creative and (re)-negotiated conceptual and policy work (Ball et al., 2012; The New London Group, 2000).

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