“The Culture of Reading” in a Public School

Ethnography, Service-Learning, and Undergraduate Researchers

BY CAROLYN BEHRMAN
Scores from a 2002 standardized Reading Proficiency Test for fourth graders surprised the principal of Wensleydale Elementary School (pseudonym). Her school is typical for its urban Ohio district, sharing all the issues of funding, staffing, unions, uneven student background and preparedness, and decaying facilities faced by other urban, public schools in the U.S. The principal knew that a statistical “race” gap in student scores might indicate socioeconomic differences within the school’s catchment area. She also expected a gender gap—on average, girls perform better than boys on tests like this one. Both gaps were indeed present in Wensleydale’s fourth grade test score data. However, the principal was taken aback by two things. First, the gender gap was much larger than expected—boys demonstrated proficiency at a rate 34% lower than girls. The second surprise came when she compared Wensleydale with other schools in the district. Wensleydale boys were 9% below the district average for boys, while Wensleydale girls performed on average 19% higher than other district girls. These findings were confirmed when the principal examined her teachers’ classroom evaluations of students’ reading—as a group the girls were racing ahead, the boys lagging behind.

Several years earlier, in response to declining test scores in the public school system overall, district officials had asked schools to develop improvement plans. The staff at Wensleydale focused their energies on improving their reading and math programs, adding writing and science as a second tier of emphasis. This involved implementing several new reading-enhancement plans. They hired a reading specialist with Title I funding and adopted 100 Book Challenge™, a commercial reading program described below. They joined OhioReads, a state initiative in which community volunteers assist children who read below grade level. They hosted authors and storytellers, and students and teachers participated in read-a-thons. The school’s PTA also developed a highly successful annual book fair that aimed to put at least one new book in every child’s hands. Reading gained an enormous profile in the school’s public spaces: walls were covered with reading recognition notices as were lockers and designated spaces in each classroom. Just after the Pledge of Allegiance each morning, the loudspeaker announced those students who had reached individual 100 Book Challenge™ goals.
Given all this attention to reading, the test scores and evaluations were especially troubling. When the scores were made public I approached the principal and proposed a collaborative service-learning research project to describe the school’s “culture of reading” and examine the ways it might be emphasizing differing behaviors based on gender. In the spring of 2003 undergraduates taking my advanced course in anthropological research methods teamed up with fourth graders and their teachers to study the “culture of reading” at Wensleydale Elementary School.

STUDYING THE “CULTURE OF READING”

A culture, broadly speaking, is an integrated pattern of behavior, practices, beliefs, and knowledge. These constitute the operating rules by which people organize themselves. Though all members of a culture do not do exactly the same things, play the same roles, or understand their culture in precisely the same ways, they do all participate and thereby create and maintain the basic rules of the culture.

In studying the culture of reading, our aim was to describe the integrated pattern of reading behavior, practices, beliefs, and knowledge, and to understand how the staff and students actively created and maintained this pattern. To do this we needed to examine the physical space, the shared activities, and the individual behaviors and beliefs of the participants as they related to reading. Our goal was to describe these features and examine how they varied, and specifically to see how gender operated as a variable.

The undergraduates began their semester studying ethnographic and other research methods and learning about relevant issues in literacy and the teaching of reading. During this
time they met with the Wensleydale teachers’ planning committee. Together they agreed on three main tracks for the research. These are characterized by the methods used and types of data collected, and were undertaken by separate teams of undergraduates.

PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION

Participant-observation is the foundation of ethnographic inquiry. On the surface, the term participant-observation seems like an oxymoron. On closer examination, however, this technique makes researchers into particularly well-informed observers by providing them with an insider’s view of cultural activity. Although the researcher is clearly an outsider, by participating in cultural activities, the people being studied ideally will interact with her or him as a legitimate group member. The goal of participant-observation is to enter into the setting to such a degree that the researcher can appreciate the inner workings of the culture—the operating rules, metaphors, and symbols.

The undergraduate observation-team was trained in observation and recording techniques and then joined the fourth grade classrooms as “helpers.” At first their observations were unguided—they jotted notes, as time permitted, about anything that seemed relevant and wrote extensive field notes after hours. They then met and discussed their basic observations and tried to isolate rules that governed the classroom based on the frequency of certain types of behavior. From this, they created a checklist of observable behaviors to simplify the recording of their observations. They then returned to their classrooms to gather data.

Using the nearly 1,500 observed behaviors and interactions they collected, some conclusions can be drawn about gender and reading in these classrooms. Sometimes these are predictable. For example, given the way the school day was structured, boys and girls spent approximately equal time doing quiet in-class reading.

However, when we looked at interactions that occurred between children during these supposedly quiet reading times, gender differences did emerge. We found that while only 16% of these interactions occurred between two or more girls, 44% involved two or more boys and the remaining 40% included both boys and girls. Therefore, 84% of all interactions during this supposedly solo activity time involved at least one boy, compared to 56% for girls. It was clear that as a group these boys did not settle into the task of quiet reading as completely as the girls did.

Turning to interactions between children and teachers, we noted another gender distinction. While the girls generally sought interaction and assistance from the teacher in the encouraged manner by raising their hands (75% of all hand raising), boys sought and received assistance by getting up from their seats (62% of all seat leaving). This suggests that the girls more readily complied with the teachers’ expressed preference for interaction. In contrast, the boys either needed or felt permitted to move around and approach the teacher more often than girls did.

Another gender difference was seen when the teachers watched over students working at their desks. Boys received over twice as much individual instruction as girls. In contrast, when teachers worked with the full class and called on students to respond to direct questions, girls and boys tried to respond and were called upon in fairly even numbers.

Outside the classroom, gender was a guiding and organizing principle, sometimes imposed by teachers and sometimes initiated by the students. Gym class activities were divided or carefully and deliberately balanced by gender. Similarly, children signed in to homerooms on boys’ lists and girls’ lists and lined up to leave their classrooms in boys’ lines and girls’ lines. The playground, a notorious site for studying gender in elementary schools, was a place where the children chose gender division. Most of the girls congregated near hopscotch patterns along the school building wall while most of the boys ranged widely.

Overall, during our participant-observation we sought out the unstated operating rules that the children and teachers lived by and found that some had observable gender attributes. To learn how the children and teachers thought about gender and reading, however, we needed to talk to them.

INTERVIEWS

While the above observations were being conducted, the undergraduate interview-team began in-depth, open-ended interviews. These are designed to elicit personal history,
beliefs, and practices related to a specific topic. The interviewer has a set of objectives, question options, and prompts to encourage the speaker. We developed these interviews and conducted them with teachers who were not on the planning team, the reading specialist, the school psychologist (one of only two men employed at the school), and a random sample of school children. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

The interviews confirmed that many aspects of the school day were organized in terms of gender. One teacher explained how she arranged the desks in her classroom according to gender. When asked about some of the uses of gender to organize school activities, teachers sometimes explained the rationale for the gender consciousness—the teacher who organized the desks by gender placed girls between boys because she thought that would help control boys' behavior—and sometimes concluded that the use of gender to organize the children, like the sign-in lists, was arbitrary.

The interviews also showed that, in addition to the very public emphasis on reading in the school building, the teachers were deeply concerned with reading. In contrast, the children's interviews, not surprisingly, were less consumed with reading as an issue. However, when prompted to talk about reading the children noted an interesting gender difference. Both boys and girls talked in terms of “boy books” and “girl books.” When asked to elaborate, most indicated that a “girl book” was one about friends, girls, relationships, and/or love, while a “boy book” was one about action, adventure, sports, and/or athletes. “Girl books” were thought to be longer (chapter books) or to come in series in which the reader had to be patient to see what would happen. “Boy books” were more often associated with films, television, and marketing campaigns. Comic books were uniformly considered “boy books.” In one boy’s opinion they were a bridge to other materials that seemed to him to be related to reading, but that teachers and parents generally did not recognize as reading. Cartoons and video games are “like reading, there just aren’t as many words . . . maybe. You’re reading the pictures a lot, though. And you have to do that fast because they change really fast and you can’t really go back like you do in a book.”

CLASSROOM AND SECONDARY DATA

The teachers and fourth graders were interviewed and their behavior and interactions were observed. This clearly made them part of the study but not partners in the research. To actually participate in the research, a plan was created to study the classrooms and collect secondary data. This involved data collection-teams of fourth graders overseen by undergraduates mapping, cataloguing, and recording classroom resources.

Maps were made depicting the layouts of the fourth grade classrooms and the placement of boys’ and girls’ desks. These layouts varied between classrooms and the teachers frequently changed their configurations. When asked, the teachers explained their attempts to create workable space and acknowledged that, as mentioned above, gender, along with students’ behavior, figured highly in their reasoning for specific configurations. Although they seemed to be searching for an ideal configuration, the researchers concluded that the teachers primarily used the frequent rearrangements to both enliven and control the class.

To catalogue the reading resources in the classrooms, the teams examined a stratified random sample of books and reading-oriented computer software. They recorded
gendered themes and other attributes like the genders of main and secondary characters and the ways the materials reinforced or broke gender stereotypes. In the final analysis, they concluded that the reading resources did support gender stereotypes, but that a high percentage (63%) of fiction books could be designated “appropriate for either boys or girls.”

Some of the secondary data gathered was generated by the students as they participated in the 100 Book Challenge program. This program rotates baskets of books organized by reading levels through the classrooms. Every day children had the opportunity to exchange books. They carefully logged the titles and the amount of time spent reading these books on record sheets that were prominently displayed in most classrooms, often with the child’s photograph. The newest readers kept a line-item list of every book they read; more experienced readers recorded their “lines” in terms of 15 minute reading time slots. For every 100 lines recorded a child received public recognition over the public announcement system in the morning, a marker with their name and achievement on both the school’s entryway wall and in the classroom, and a small token (a medal, folder, or pencil). The undergraduates copied the log sheets without the readers’ names and the team summarized the data. They found that girls read more lines and more titles and that this gender difference was large. Comparing data across fourth grade classrooms, they noted that students in classrooms with more reading resources also read more regardless of their gender. So, the teacher who gathers and maintains a sizable in-class library is providing an advantage for her students and can go some way toward increasing the boys’ success.
In American society, where equality and opportunity are cherished concepts, test scores and grades reported by gender have significance. School administrators and teachers are keenly aware of the need for gender-consciousness in their pedagogy. The goal of raising a literate, educated child in today’s world of dizzying distractions is not an easy task. By bringing in the uniquely anthropological perspective of these ethnographers-in-training, we hoped to describe more clearly the context underlying the gender gap in reading success documented in the fourth grade proficiency tests at Wensleydale Elementary School.

Our project set out to describe the culture of reading by describing both individual and shared ideas about reading. We also studied the space, resources, and actual behavior that frame this culture of reading, and, in particular, we focused attention on the ways in which gender operated as a variable. The culture of reading we documented was, as expected, governed by specific rules, some of which were gendered and these helped shape children’s experiences. The ways in which boys and girls in this fourth grade setting experienced reading were different in terms of the children’s shared understanding of appropriate book choices, reading behaviors, and general attitudes toward a traditionally reward-structured elementary curriculum. Likewise, teachers and administrators recognized and reinforced gendered behavior during reading and other school activities. While our description does not offer a simple explanation for the gender gap, it illuminates a complex setting in which gender plays an active role in organizing activities, behavior, beliefs, and knowledge.

This illumination offers us a view into the integrated pattern of a culture. We can see the interwoven nature of this school-based culture, and by tracing just one thread, gender, we better understand the means by which it shapes children’s lives. The undergraduates, reflecting on materials they had compiled, asked whether Wensleydale’s culture of reading, with its strong gendered component, produced the gender difference in the scores? Or was the school’s population merely following a path of growing gender differences in American school achievement at large? Bringing these observations back to the teachers led to the formulation of other questions. For example, how can we more accurately and systematically describe boys’ experiences at Wensleydale in order to identify avenues of intervention, and what can we learn from girls’ experience that can be transformed into useful, generalizable practice for broader success? These questions, derived from one semester of general ethnographic research, constitute ideal material to challenge ethnographers-in-training in future service-learning classes.

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For Further Reading


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