

**I Hope it Still Counts as Reading:  
The Cultural Production of Reading(s), Social Relations  
and Values in a Research Interview**

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**ABSTRACT:** Using a form of analysis that sees talk as social interaction, this study examines how a teacher-librarian-researcher and a parent of elementary-aged children construct reading, readers and social in/equality in the context of a research interview. The analysis suggests that the participants produced equal and unequal social relations and values in and through their talk of reading and readers. Using ethnomethodological tools, this analysis illustrates some of the challenges of transforming unequal social relations through a change in the words we use. The study recommends a greater attention to identifying how we recognize and mystify differences in terms of access to resources and wealth in our talk, so that we can create new narratives of reading/readers that recognize and value marginalized literacies without pretending that all literacies are equally valued in the world.

**Key words:** Multiliteracies, Literacies, Interview, Social Inequality, Ethnomethodology



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Over the past decade, numerous scholars and educators have begun using terms like “readings”, “literacies” and “multiliteracies” in order to emphasize the broad range of activities that can be described as “reading” or “writing” and the situated nature of “being literate”. Talk of readings, literacies, and multiliteracies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Collins & Blot, 2003; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 2001a) have helped to raise questions about what counts as reading/literacy and who decides. In this body of research, there is often the latent suggestion that unequal social relations might be challenged, or changed, through the introduction of these new ways of talking about literacy. As argued by Gee (2000), moves towards speaking of literacy as plural, or talk of multiliteracies, can be seen as part of a broader movement that aims to create less elitist institutions. Similarly, many of the ethnographic accounts of literacy coming out of the New Literacy Studies (Street, 2001b) have focused on the everyday literacies that people use in their work and home lives, effectively elevating these practices by positioning them as worthy topics for investigation. As a literacy educator and researcher who cares about issues of social inequality, I have been attracted to the New Literacy Studies and a Multiliteracies perspective, in part because a commitment to thinking about issues of power seems to be evident in these bodies of work. However, after reviewing many studies associated with a New Literacy Studies/Multiliteracies perspective, I have found a lack of studies that investigate the social construction of terms like literacies, multiliteracies, reading, or writing in close detail. Similarly, I have found an absence of studies that examine how, or whether, broadening our definitions of literacy can actually work to produce egalitarian social relations and values in everyday interactions.

This paper examines what happens when a teacher-librarian-researcher and a parent sit down to talk about multiple forms of literacy or literacies. It illustrates some of the challenges of transforming unequal social relations through a change in the words we use. Through a detailed analysis of two excerpts from a research interview between a

teacher-librarian-researcher and a parent of elementary aged children, this paper raises questions about whether, and/or how, social relations and values can be transformed through such changes in discourse. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the further development of critical scholarship in literacy education research.

### **Constructing and producing reading/literacy**

In the past few decades, anthropological and sociological theories of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 2001a) and learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McDermott, 1993) have recommended an examination of how reading, writing, literacy and learning are socially constructed and produced. Socio-cultural theories of literacy and learning, as well as theories of cultural production (Willis, 1977, 1981) and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu 1976, 1997) suggest that current constructions of reading/literacy in schools and elsewhere, may well be related to the production of social in/equality. Reading these bodies of research together suggests that understanding the cultural production of literacy/ies might shed light on the cultural production of social structures, values and institutions.

In the wake of this suggestion, a recent wave of scholarship has specifically investigated the relationship between reading/literacy and social inequality (see: Bialostok, 2004; Blackledge, 2001; Janks 2010; Jones, 2013; Moje & Lewis, 2007; Prendergrast, 2003; among others). Some studies have worked to explore how reading and literacy are socially constructed (see Cook-Gumperz, 2006) and other studies of literacy learning have drawn specifically on Bourdieu’s theories of social and cultural reproduction (see Rogers, 2003; Compton-Lily, 2003; among others). However, very few studies have approached questions of literacy and social inequality with Willis’ theories of cultural production, or an understanding of talk as social action (See Baker, 1991; Freebody and Baker, 2003; Freebody and Frieberg, 2001; and Green and Meyer, 1991 for exceptions. See Davidson, 2012, for a very useful review). Similarly, very few, if any, have examined these questions within the context of research interviews about literacy, although many

literacy researchers make ample use of interview data in their research (see for example: Bialostock, 2004; Brandt, 2001; Compton-Lily, 2003; Rogers 2003). This study specifically addresses these absences in the literature by analyzing research interview data via theories of cultural production and an ethnomethodological understanding of talk as social action.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by a number of theoretical frameworks including: socio-cultural theories of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 2001a) and learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McDermott, 1993), theories of cultural production (Willis, 1977, 1981) and ethnomethodology (Francis & Hester, 2004; Garfinkel, 1967, 2002). Used in tandem, these theories recommend an examination of how reading, writing, literacy and learning are socially constructed, or produced, and how the production of these phenomena may be related to the production of social in/equality.

### Socio-cultural theories of literacy and learning

Socio-cultural theories of literacy and learning, sometimes known as “situated theories”, suggest that an examination of the social construction, or the cultural production, of literacy is necessary for the creation of effective literacy pedagogies. These theories assert that the social construction of particular phenomena/practices play into the ways that people use specific tools and participate in specific activities. In this way, socio-cultural theories advocate an understanding of how people construct literacy/ies as an essential step towards effective pedagogies and practices. In addition, this perspective of literacy/ies suggests that the cultural production of literacy/ies reflects and creates specific social relations and values. In other

words, that the study of the cultural production of literacy/ies can provide insight into the cultural production of larger social structures, values, or institutions such as gender, race, socio-economic class, print literacy, and schooling among other things. In coming to understand the cultural production of literacy/ies in local contexts, such as how literacy is produced in “a research interview”, we can learn how social structures, values and institutions, like those noted above, are created, maintained, challenged and changed.

### Theories of cultural production

Theories of cultural production share with traditional Marxist, feminist and anti-racist analyses of schooling, a concern with social in/equality. However, theories of cultural production focus specifically on the day-to-day ways that social in/equality is created, maintained and/or challenged. In contrast to traditional approaches to culture that describe culture as a kind of static property of various groups, theories of cultural production describe “culture” as a “continual process of creating meaning in social and material contexts” (Levinson & Holland, 1996, p. 13). This conceptualization of culture places focus on the processes through which social relations and values are created, maintained and challenged. Rather than attempting to document what people with particular (pre-determined) identities or people from particular (pre-determined) cultures might say or do in certain situations, this perspective recommends the investigation of how identities and cultures are produced locally in social interaction. This perspective also recommends viewing local productions of culture and identity in relationship to larger social, historical and political events and ideologies.

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In addition, in contrast to theories of cultural reproduction, associated with scholars such as Bourdieu (1976; 1997) which have emphasized the conservative nature of schooling, as well as other institutions, or the ways that these institutions reproduce social inequality, theories of cultural production associated with scholars such as Willis (1977, 1981) assert that institutions like schools, can also create, or produce, new social relationships and challenge traditional ways of being.

This body of work reminds us that educators are cultural workers who are constantly creating culture through their interactions with their colleagues, students, curriculum documents, etcetera. Similarly, this body of work reminds us that children, curriculum leaders, directors of education, parents and researchers are also cultural workers and that we all produce, reproduce and challenge different ways of being, along with creating different cultures of schooling and education through our everyday interactions.

Approaching literacy with theories of cultural production opens up a range of questions about how literacy is produced in social interaction and how it is related to the production of un/equal social relations and un/egalitarian values. This study investigates one aspect of the cultural production of literacy – the cultural production of “reading”. While many researchers may not see “reading” and “literacy” as equivalent terms, many would see “reading” as part of being “literate”. In this way, talking about “different kinds of reading” can be seen as talking about “different kinds of literacies”.

### **Ethnomethodology**

Ethnomethodology is the study of “practical activities”, “common sense knowledge” and “practical organizational reasoning” (Lynch & Peyrot, 1992). Informed by the work of Garfinkel (1967, 2002), Goffman (1981) and Sacks (1992), ethnomethodological analyses focus specifically on how people produce particular identities, phenomena and activities in social interaction (Baker, 2000; Francis & Hester, 2004). In this way, ethnomethodology can be seen as a good fit for a study of the cultural production of specific

phenomena and identities. While some researchers have attempted to use the tools of ethnomethodology to look at visual representations (Goodwin, 2001; Lepper, 2000; Macbeth, 1999), for the most part, the existing research pays close attention to spoken discourse as data. Ethnomethodological studies have documented the myriad of ways that talk can be seen as social action. Scholars working with these tools are interested in showing how people perform specific identities through talk, or talk different phenomena into being.

Of particular interest to researchers in education is the related work of applied conversation analysis that looks at talk in institutions, as talk that produces, reproduces and challenges the norms of that institution (Antaki, 2011; Heritage, 2005). Of interest to literacy education researchers is the work of scholars such as Baker (1991), Freebody and Frieberg (2001), and Heap (1980, 1985, 1990, 1991). These scholars have investigated topics such as how children are introduced to institutionalized ways of reading and talking about texts (Baker, 1991), what counts as reading in homes and schools (Freebody & Freiberg, 2001; Heap, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1991), and who might be considered “reading disabled” (McDermott, 1987). These scholars assert that during discussions of reading and literacy, children are simultaneously introduced to local literacy practices, social relations and social order. In this way, they offer a unique way of looking at literacy and literacy education. Approaching talk as social action allows us, as teachers, and as researchers, to slow down conversations and listen to how the people involved negotiate meaning and social relationships in moment-to-moment ways.

Given the continued need for an understanding of how to challenge social inequality and create an egalitarian society, and given the slow progress towards this end, educators and researchers need to know more than just how social inequality is reproduced; we also need to know how it is challenged and transformed and how social equality may be produced in day-to-day social interactions. Theories of cultural production and the tools of ethnomethodology are well suited to these tasks.

Approaching reading/literacy with theories of cultural production and theories of talk as social action opens up a range of questions about how people produce literacy and how this production is related to the production of social hierarchy and power. For example, one question that presents itself is: does talk of reading/literacy as plural (readings/literacies) work to construct egalitarian social relations and values? And if it does, how does it do this? Similarly, we might ask, if it doesn't, why doesn't it? In order to investigate these questions, I analyzed data that I had generated with some adult research participants via one-on-one interviews. In the next section, I outline the data generated and my analysis. I then walk the reader through a brief analysis of two short excerpts of the data with these research questions in mind.

### Data Generation

The data presented here represents a small part of a much larger study. The data for the larger study consists of eighteen transcripts of semi-structured individual interviews between myself, a teacher-librarian-researcher, and parents and teachers living and working in an urban Canadian neighborhood. The parents and teachers in the study were all in some way related to a single school known as "Stony Creek". Participants were teachers at the school, staff who worked at the school and had children, or parents who had their children at the school. All of the participants knew me as a former teacher-librarian, as a graduate student and as a researcher.

The interview protocol used to generate data for this study was based on a protocol created by Purcell-Gates (2003) for The Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS). Dr. Purcell-Gates designed her original protocol for adult participants and it focuses primarily on participants' current and historical literacy practices via questions about reading and writing such as "When you were a child, what kinds of things did people in your family read regularly?" and "When you were a child, what kinds of things did your family write regularly?" All of the participants in this study completed consent forms prior to being interviewed. While I did not continue my involvement with Purcell-Gates' study, I found the data I generated with the protocol to be

immensely valuable for tracing the production of reading, writing, literacy and literacies in talk.

The analysis presented here focuses specifically on two excerpts from one interview: an interview with Michelle, a parent who was a long time resident in the neighborhood and was the mother of two elementary aged children. I chose this interview and these specific excerpts because they provide succinct illustrations of the cultural production of reading and the production of social relations and values. In addition, these excerpts directly speak to the research questions, as Michelle and I specifically discuss the idea that there may be many forms of reading, and multiple ways to be literate.

### Analysis

Analysis for this study was greatly influenced by ethnomethodological forms of discourse analysis, including Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis, that suggest talk, including talk generated during research interviews, can be analyzed as social action (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Baker, 2000, 2002, 2004; Garfinkel, 1967, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2004; Silverman, 2001a, 2001b; Talmy, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Wooffitt, 2001). Like theories of cultural production, approaching talk as social action begins with an understanding of culture and identity as phenomena that are performed. This approach highlights the processes through which identities, cultures and phenomena are brought off and enacted between people. This approach is significantly different from most interview studies and most interview studies found in literacy education research. The majority of interview studies and interview studies in literacy education research tend to focus on the content of the interviewee's responses without attending to the co-construction of meaning between the interviewer and the interviewee, and rarely include the interviewer's questions, interjections, or back channels. In this way, most interview studies, as well as those in literacy education could be seen in Roulston's (2010) terms, as grounded in a neo-positivist, or romantic theory of interview data. In contrast, this study began with a constructionist/post-modern theory of interview data.



Analysis for this study included transcribing the interviews using a simplified version of the notation system developed by Jefferson for Conversation Analysis (Woolfitt, 2001). This approach meant that the researchers' questions and backchannels were as important to the analysis as the participants' responses and were thus included in the transcription. In this way, I followed Baker's (2002) suggestions, and transcribed the actual rather than the planned delivery of my questions (e.g., the interview protocol) as well as the interviewee's answers. Baker (2002) suggests that one of the ways that researchers can analyze talk as social action is to create "actional" sketches of sequences of talk and to look at the kinds of accounts and categories that are available in this talk. Similarly, I followed Baker (2002) and repeatedly asked myself what function a specific feature of talk might serve, what accounts of reading were being mobilized and what kinds of reader identities and categories were being produced.

In addition, as part of my process, I participated in numerous peer and mentor debriefing sessions and reviewed my analysis with other scholars familiar with the tools of Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis. After a particularly important mentor debriefing session, I also began to examine how the data could also be seen as "Institutional Talk" and to pay close attention to "recipient design", or to how the utterances were designed for particular audiences, settings and interlocutors (Heritage, 2005; Lynch & Peyrot, 1992). Again, following Baker (2002), I asked myself what kinds of social relations and values were being assumed through this interview about reading and readers and what kinds of social relations and values were being created. In the following section, I illustrate some of the ways that talk of readings/literacies can be seen as a move towards egalitarian social relations and values in this instance, and yet, how unequal social relations and un-egalitarian values can also be reinforced even while speaking of readings/literacies.

### **Talk of readings/literacies**

In recognizing that Michelle and I frequently spoke of "reading" but almost never spoke of "literacy", my

analysis here focuses specifically on how Michelle and I constructed "reading", rather than on how we constructed "literacy" or "literacies". While many contemporary researchers do not see "reading" as a synonym for "literacy", given that reading is generally seen as part of being literate, and given that Michelle and I discussed various "kinds of reading", I feel this focus is a useful one to help answer the research questions concerning Literacy/Multiliteracies and social relations.

Negotiations about what counts as "reading" and who is a "reader" presented themselves throughout my interview with Michelle. Through a close examination of our talk, I saw that Michelle and I repeatedly proposed candidate descriptions of reading and readers for each other to affirm or refute. In addition, through analysis I found that Michelle and I repeatedly returned to ideas of reading as multiple, or as made up of various "kinds". These moments provided useful data to examine what kinds of social relations and values were being produced when we spoke of readings/literacy as multiple. In examining these moments, I found we could often be heard to be both championing and undermining egalitarian social relations and values while we spoke of readings/literacies. In addition, I saw evidence of both Michelle and I positioning ourselves and positioning each other as specific kinds of people, enacting specific roles as we performed various social actions in and through our talk.

In the following section, I examine some of the ways that Michelle's and my talk of readings/literacies can be heard as trying to enact egalitarian social relations and values. I then examine some of the ways that Michelle and I worked to reinforce unequal social relations and un-egalitarian values, while we spoke of readings/literacies. I also include a few examples of how Michelle and I positioned ourselves, as well as each other, as different kinds of people, or how, as Goffman (1981) might put it, we shifted our footing.

### **Literature and boxes of macaroni: Talk of readings/literacies as a move towards egalitarian social relations and values**

One of the clearest examples of the cultural production of reading in my interview with Michelle exists in the first few turns of our interview. As can be seen below, Michelle and I began our interview with a series of conversational turns concerning how we were going to use the word “reading”. My analysis of this excerpt follows.

**Extract 1 Michelle (6:31) (li 98-176)**

L: okay so the first part (of the interview) is about what kinds of things that you read in your life (.) right (.) now, um, and it can be for anything, like you know, in-at work, for the kids, for entertainment, for, you know, shopping, whatever, like the whole gamut of things (.) um, and I've only done one interview so far, I just did Jolene, and one of the things that seemed to help was if she just sort of, start at the beginning of her day and goes through her day, then she can get kind of a sense of all of the things that she would be reading in her day

M: oh reading

L: yeah

M: oh what kind of literature I I read?

L: It can be anything

M: hmmm

L: it doesn't have to be literature even, it can just be, like, you know, even the directions on, the-you know, the box of macaroni ((laughs)) okay, whatever, yeah

M: right, and I go through my day, and think of all the things I've read?

L: yup

In terms of our interactions, this extract could be sketched as follows: In my first turn, I initiate the interview with a long elaboration about the kinds of things Michelle might “read” or what might be considered to be “reading”. I cast reading as an activity that might be used for a wide range of purposes such as “work”, “the kids”, “entertainment”, and “shopping”. I also invite Michelle to list what she

reads in a typical day. In her first turn, Michelle replies with a request for clarification. Following an affirmation from me, Michelle effectively rejects my candidate construction of reading and offers a re-cast of my inquiry as a question about the “literature” she reads. I then offer a reformulation of my question and attempt to clarify that my question about “reading” is not necessarily a question about “literature”. I suggest that “it” (something that Michelle might read) could be “anything”. Michelle offers a sign (hmm) that she does not entirely understand what it is I am interested in, and I attempt a repair by directly asserting “it” (something she might read) “doesn't have to be literature”. I then go on to elaborate that my question about “reading” includes an interest in activities like following “the directions” on a “box of macaroni”.

A range of accounts of reading, readers and my interests as a reading researcher can be seen in the first few turns of this excerpt. In examining my first question to Michelle, I present a variety of accounts of reading and readers. For example, I offer that reading is something used for a range of activities including work, parenting, entertainment and shopping. Embedded in this account of reading is an account of readers as people who engage in ordinary every day activities. In addition, through my initial question, I provide an account of myself as a “reading researcher” as someone who is interested in a “whole gamut of things”. In Michelle’s reply to this first question, she also provides an account of reading, readers and my interests as a reading researcher. In recasting my question about reading as a question about “literature”, Michelle provides an account of reading as an activity that involves “literature”, an account of readers as people who consume “literature” and an account of reading researchers as people who are primarily interested in what “literature” people read.

In examining our first few turns, Michelle and I can also be heard to mobilize a range of categories. Most notably, my question to Michelle contains a variety of categories of activities that I link to reading (work, parenting, entertainment, shopping) and in doing so I implicate a wide range of categories of people as potential readers (workers, parents, those who seek entertainment, and shoppers). In narrowing her

description of “reading” to something to do with “literature”, Michelle mobilizes a very different range of categories of people as “readers”. In essence, Michelle implies that reading is about consuming literature, which can be heard as a suggestion that those who consume literature are readers while those who do not consume literature are non-readers.

While the word “literature” can be used broadly to refer to any printed material (e.g., pamphlets at the doctor’s office are sometimes referred to as “literature”), it also has a common connotation as being linked to high art, or culture. In this way, in suggesting that consuming “literature” is part of being a reader, Michelle could be seen as describing reading as an activity that is linked to a broad range of people, or as an activity that is linked to a particular category of people – people who consume high art or culture, in other words, people with elite status.

The point of an analysis like this is not to attempt to “mind read” what it is that Michelle meant by her reference to “literature”, and given the relative ambiguity of the word, it is actually impossible to know how she meant me to hear her description of reading. However, as researchers using applied conversation analysis suggest, what is possible is to see how I apparently did hear her description. My reply following Michelle’s question about whether I was interested in the “literature” she reads suggests that I heard Michelle as making a comment about reading and social class. In my attempt to re-assert the possibility that reading could be an activity that is used more broadly and that readers may be people who consume things other than “literature”, I suggest that “even” following the directions on “a box of macaroni” could be considered to be “reading”. In doing so, I invoke a category of people who read, and likely consume in other ways, “boxes of macaroni”. As noted by Baker

(2002, 2004) categories of people can be read off the activities they engage in, as well as by the ways that they are described. In other words, descriptions of activities include descriptions of kinds of people. Baker (2004) also notes that there are some activities that are routinely bound to some categories of people. For example, caring about children’s well-being is an activity generally bound to parents, evaluating children’s progress as readers is an activity generally bound to teachers, and designing fun outdoor activities for groups of children is an activity generally bound to summer camp counselors. Consuming “boxes of macaroni” is often heard as an activity bound to non-elite people in North America, as it is known for being cheap and readily available. In creating a contrast between reading “literature”

and reading directions on a “box of macaroni” and in attempting to re-categorize the latter as “reading”, I can be heard as attempting to counter a description of reading as an elite activity, regardless of whether this is what Michelle meant to convey or not.

Given that reading has historically been, and continues to be, constructed as a social good, and that readers have historically been, and continue to be, constructed as morally superior to non-readers (Brandt, 2001; Collins & Blot, 2003), this exchange illustrates how moving talk of reading/literacy to talk of

readings/literacies can be heard as a move towards more egalitarian social relations and values. In this exchange, Michelle and I work together to expand the limits of who is considered to be a reader from a narrow group of people - those who consume “literature” (quite possibly elite people) to a broad group of people - workers, parents, shoppers and others who seek entertainment in things beyond high culture (in other words, non-elite people). In doing so, Michelle and I defined a social good/moral activity as the property of ordinary, rather than just elite, people. In other words, we promoted

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egalitarian social relations and values. However, the following section helps to illustrate how talk of readings and literacies can undermine such relations and values at the same time.

**“Some form of reading”: Talk of readings/literacies as a move towards and away from egalitarian social relations and values**

The following exchange can be seen as another example of how Michelle and I negotiated the meaning of the word “reading” in our talk, and how talk of readings/literacies can promote egalitarian social relations and values. However, as I will outline below, this exchange can also be seen as an illustration of how, even while we expanded our definitions of reading, Michelle and I also reinforced unequal social relations and un-egalitarian values.

When I asked Michelle to tell me about her memories of reading in elementary school she told me that she read “Judy Blume” and that she “did a lot of origami”. At that point, as shown below, I asked Michelle whether she “read” the instructions in her origami books or not. Her reply helped us to continue our negotiations about how we might define reading.

**Extract 2 Michelle (32:41)(li 390-416)**

L: and would you have to read the instructions on how to do the origami?

M: oh yeah

L: okay

M: after a little while you skip the instructions

L: yeah

M: and you follow the picture, but I guess it's some form of reading I hope

L: oh it is, absolutely it is

M: (laughs) I hope it's still recognized as reading (laughs)

L: oh I recognize it as reading absolutely

M: yeah?

L: yeah for sure so you'd read that kind of instruction

M: yeah that's right I spent a lot of time you know doing that kind of art stuff and I think that was the majority of my reading was that

When looked at as an example of talk as social action, this excerpt could be sketched as follows: In my first turn, I present an account of reading as something that could take place while creating origami and of the child Michelle as a potential reader. In her reply, Michelle affirms this account of reading, origami and of herself as a reader. She then goes on to provide another account of herself, of reading and of origami. Michelle asserts, “after a little while you skip the instructions”. In this way, she provides an account of reading as something that “sometimes” happens while a person is doing origami, but often, or habitually, is “skipped” once a person has some experience with the process. In addition, Michelle provides an account of herself as “a normal reader” or as someone who “sometimes” skipped reading in the way that “you”, or people generally, often do. Michelle effectively shifts her position from speaking “as herself” to speaking “as a normal reader” through the simple insertion of the generic “you”.

Michelle then begins to provide a new account of reading as somehow different from “following pictures” as she contrasts following “instructions” with “following pictures”. However, by the end of her turn, Michelle has rehabilitated “following pictures” as “some form of reading” and in doing so she has rehabilitated herself from being a “sometimes reader” to being a reader even when she is “following the pictures”.

For my part, I affirm Michelle’s account of reading and of herself as a reader. I also offer an account of myself as a “reading researcher” who “absolutely” sees “following pictures” as “some form of reading” and who sees “people who follow pictures” as “readers”. Throughout our talk Michelle and I produce a multiliteracies perspective on reading. In

our discussion, reading expanded from “consuming literature” as seen in the previous extract, to reading instructions, to making meaning from pictures. Similarly, the category “readers” expanded from those who read novels or instructions to include those who may or may not have facility with alphabetic print, but use images to make meaning. In this way, Michelle and I effectively bring a huge range of meaning makers into the category “readers”. In light of the historical and contemporary connection between reading/literacy and social value, this move can be seen as another move towards sharing a positive identity amongst a wider range of people than it has historically been shared. In other words, Michelle and I are assuming and creating a world in which people who use images to make meaning are as much “readers” (read: good people) as are those who consume novels (read: “high culture”) or those who use alphabetic print for other purposes such as following instructions. However, a closer look at this exchange also provides insight into how Michelle and I worked to reinforce unequal social relations and values even while we spoke of readings/literacies. In the next section, I examine this aspect of the data.

### **Guessing, hoping and confirming: Talk of readings/literacies as a move away from egalitarian social relations and values**

When I began to look at this data more closely, I began to note specific features of our talk that suggested Michelle and I were not only promoting egalitarian social relations and values, but that we were also simultaneously undermining these ways of relating, and these values. In particular, I began to note how we interpreted our own and each other’s roles as evaluators of reading and how we assumed and created unequal social relations in our discussion of reading(s) or literacy/ies. When analyzed with an eye to evaluations of reading, this excerpt concerning Michelle’s fifth-grade reading practices could be sketched as follows: In my first turn, I offer that Michelle could be “reading” the instructions while she creates her origami and I offer a request for her to reflect on whether this was in fact what she was doing at the time. As can be seen in the transcript, Michelle offers that initially she did “read” the instructions and that later she would “just

follow the pictures”. In doing so, as noted above, Michelle begins to set up a dichotomy between “reading” and “following pictures”. She then suggests that “following the pictures” could actually be seen as “some form of reading”.

At this point, it is interesting to note that Michelle offers a series of pleas that following pictures be seen in this way. The first sign that she is making a plea comes via the hedge “I guess” and the tag “I hope”. Both of these words work to weaken Michelle’s epistemic stance, and in doing so invite my confirmation. At her plea, I immediately provide this confirmation of her description of “following pictures” as a “form of reading”. Michelle then reformulates her plea as “I hope that it is still recognized as reading” and I provide another confirmation. Michelle provides a final request for confirmation (“yeah?”), and I provide it (“yeah”). We then continue our conversation about Michelle’s memories of “reading”.

Michelle’s pleas that “following the pictures” could be considered to be “some form of reading” and my quick and repeated acceptance of these pleas suggest that we constructed reading as a social good and “being a reader” as a coveted identity. (It would be unlikely that Michelle would make such pleas for an undesirable identity, or that I would be so quick to assure her that an activity that she engaged in was “absolutely reading”, unless “reading” was generally considered as a “good thing”). However, Michelle’s pleas that “following pictures” could be considered to be a “form of reading” and my responses, also position me as a person who can tell Michelle what “counts” as reading and position Michelle as a reading subject open for my evaluation. In effect, Michelle has shifted her footing (Goffman, 1981), and I have responded in kind. Through her subtle insertion of these hedges, she took up the role of someone who can be evaluated as a reader, or as a non-reader, and she provided me with the role of evaluating her legitimacy as a reader.

In recognizing this aspect of our interactions, and in analyzing our talk as social action, I began to see that while our talk of readings/literacies could be heard as a move towards egalitarian social relations and values, it could also be heard as a move away from

such relations and values. While Michelle and I were expanding the catchment of reading to create a broad category of potential readers, and while we were making a social good the legitimate property of a vast number of people, we were also maintaining and creating an unequal divide where some people are invested with the power to evaluate other people's literacy practices as "reading" or "not-reading" (me) and other people are subjects for evaluation (Michelle). This division between us makes perfect sense in the light of the history of reading and reading research. While theories of multiple forms of literacy have become commonplace in scholarly journals over the last few decades, the idea has yet to be fully embraced in school settings and remains extremely marginal in popular representations of literacy learning (e.g., news reports or popular media). This division also makes sense in the light of Michelle's and my relationship to each other as a parent and a teacher-librarian-researcher. Given our understandings of each other, it may feel perfectly natural for Michelle to ask me to evaluate her as a reader. However, regardless of why this division makes sense, ultimately it reflects an affirmation of un-egalitarian social relations and values. In these interactions, I am invested with a kind of authority that Michelle does not have to determine "what counts". Within the current context of expanding understandings of reading(s) and literacy/ies, this division between us begins to seem more and more arbitrary. If, as it appears, reading is a term that is increasingly difficult to define, then my role as an arbiter of reading is highly suspect.

### **Implications of this analysis for educators and researchers**

While this analysis examines only two small interactions between a teacher-librarian-researcher and a parent in an interview setting, it illuminates why educators and researchers concerned with new literacies and social justice may want to think about our roles as arbiters, or evaluators of reading/literacy, in our interactions with students, parents and other stakeholders. In some ways, the analysis presented here suggests that recognizing literacy as an ever-expanding term and suggesting that reading is an activity practiced by all meaning

makers, may challenge the deficit thinking that has dominated talk of reading and readers for decades. However, this analysis also raises questions about how unequal social relations and values are maintained even in the face of new ways of speaking about literacy/reading. As illustrated here, by positioning each other and ourselves as different levels of authority on reading, Michelle and I easily managed to maintain unequal social relations and values even while we spoke of readings and literacies. While we agreed on the possibility that there were "different kinds of reading", in important ways, Michelle took on and was positioned as a subject to be evaluated, and I took on and was positioned as an arbiter of reading.

This aspect of the data highlights how difficult it is to avoid creating social hierarchies in research interviews about reading conducted between parents and teacher-librarian-researchers. However, it also alerts us to the possibility that these kinds of subtle negotiations concerning power, social relations and values may be omnipresent in other social interactions connected to teaching, reading, literacy, literacies and research, regardless of apparently positive relations or stated intentions. It bears noting that throughout our interview I had no intention of creating or reinforcing any social hierarchy between Michelle and I, and yet, when given the opportunity, that is exactly what I did.

This study also adds to the findings of other ethnomethodological studies of literacy, such as those conducted by Baker (1991), Freebody and Frieberg (2001), and Heap (1980, 1985, 1990, 1991), as it provides another illustration of how people produce social relations and social order in and through talk of readings/literacies, albeit in a different setting.

Recognizing this undercurrent of my interactions with Michelle raises questions about how we want to proceed as literacy researchers and as literacy educators. It also raises questions about how we could proceed differently. Future educators and researchers may want to consider how their research choices contribute to, or contest, traditional ideas about reading/literacy, and what kinds of social relations and values they want to produce in their

work. For example, we may want to ask ourselves how our definitions of literacy are operationalized within our research methods and whether, or how, we can we talk about literacy in ways that don't invoke traditional hierarchies between different forms of literacy and different "kinds" of people. Can we do literacy research that produces more egalitarian social relations and values, and if so, what would it look like? Can we teach reading/literacy in ways that challenge traditional hierarchies, including those between teachers and parents or teachers and students? And how can we address issues of evaluation in this context?

Ultimately, this study reminds us that what we are doing as teachers, teacher-educators, teacher-librarians, researchers and policy writers in "small seminar rooms at the back of the library", in "empty classrooms" and full classrooms, in schoolyards, and in offices and libraries, is deeply connected to what happens outside those places, across the street and throughout the cities and countries where we live and work. Schieffelin (2000) reminds us "Every language choice is a social choice that has critical links to the active construction of culture" (p. 327). In doing so, she reminds us our definitions of reading/literacy are "language ideologies" or sets of beliefs that are "partial, contestable, contested and interest laden"(Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). This study helps to substantiate these claims and recommends a deeper consideration of how

particular interests are served by particular methods of producing reading.

The challenge for those of us who would like to continue to conduct research and to talk about readings/literacies, and who care about issues of social inequality, is to think of ways that we can play a part in creating new narratives of reading/readers that include everyone as readers/literate (valuable people) without pretending that all literacies are equally valued. The work of scholars such as Brandt and Clinton (2002), Cameron (2000), and Collins and Blot (2003) can be particularly instructive in this regard. These scholars help remind us that the recognition of multiple forms of literacy and diverse ways of being readers cannot challenge social in/equality on their own. In order to address the production of social inequality in talk of reading/literacy we will need to consistently re-evaluate how our talk is recognizing, or mystifying, differences in terms of access to resources and wealth, and whether, or how, accounts of reading are being used to justify unequal social relations or to challenge them. In doing so, we may learn better how to break down unequal social relations and build up more egalitarian values while we create and re-create our field of study and our work as literacy educators. In this way, our talk of readings and literacies will continue to deepen and will enrich our practices as educators and researchers.

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