

## **Professional learning in a scaffolded ‘multiliteracies book club’: Transforming primary teacher participation**

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In response to rapidly changing communication practices in an increasingly technological world, evolving literacy concepts such as multimodality, are now acknowledged in the new Australian Curriculum. Ironically, primary school teacher professional development in Western Australia remains closely tied to a mono-modal, print focussed paradigm. This study integrated the multiliteracies and communities of practice frameworks, aiming to generate participatory professional learning about new literacy concepts. This qualitative case study explored how one group of seven public primary schoolteachers from outer metropolitan WA, collaboratively transformed their literacy learning during a scaffolded ‘multiliteracies book club’. Spanning six months and including five book club meetings and two focus groups, teachers collaborated with the researcher-facilitator (first author) in multimodal practices using diverse text formats and resources. This paper presents early thematic analysis of book club discussions, finding evidence for teachers’ shift towards multiliteracies’ perspectives, within a community of practice. The study highlights how the participative features of a multiliteracies book club model can support literacy transformation.

### **Introduction**

Australian public schools have recently been mandated to implement national curriculum and standardised testing, overseen by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) (Green, 2010; Lingard, 2010). Rationales of the newly launched curriculum argue the need for all school students to engage in heightened collaborative, creative and critical thinking for 21st century learning. The Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2010) acknowledges some of the changes needed for literacy in a digital age. For the first time, primary teachers are required to teach both about-and-with multimodal texts. But multimodality is only broadly defined in the curriculum documents, and no rationale is given for its relationship to existing practice (Walsh, 2010). Because of the simplistic way multimodality is collaged into the curriculum, it is unclear how teachers might come to understand the concept, and underpin their practices with new theory (Murphy, 2011; Walsh, 2010).

Under current educational reforms, professional learning in Australian public schools is impacted in a number of ways. Due to wider policy processes, teachers are positioned as technicians who must implement externally prescribed curriculum imperatives (Hardy, 2009; Smyth, 2006). At one-off expert-run professional development events, teachers are often further positioned as technicians (Hardy, 2009). These workshops are customarily linked to rationalistic school-based planning, for improved results on standardised print assessments (Lingard, 2010; Luke, 2010). These initiatives are increasingly geared towards training teachers to improve student performance in relation to the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Lobascher, 2011; Luke, 2010).

Professional development is therefore commonly a system-initiated process, in service to top-down curriculum and policy initiatives (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hardy, 2009). Rather than transforming literacy practice, new curriculum inclusions are likely to be subsumed into teachers' existing print-based literacy paradigms (Hipwell & Klenowski, 2011).

Given the current Australian educational context, the purpose of this study is to scaffold teachers in their inquiries into multiliteracies and multimodality, through collaborative professional learning in a teacher 'book club' community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The project aims to further our notions of the ways that WA public primary school teachers can develop new understandings about multimodality. The broad research question is: "How can a group of WA public primary school teachers, engage with professional learning via a 'multiliteracies book club'?"

The four sub-questions asked:

- What are teachers' perceptions and knowledge of professional literacy learning in the current context of public primary school education?
- How do participant perceptions and knowledge of literacy develop over the course of the book club meetings?
- How do participants articulate engagement with multimodality over the course of the study?
- How can the book club format contribute to the development of a community of practice?

A further aim is to make an original contribution to knowledge by inter-relating multiliteracies and communities of practice frameworks. In doing so, the study seeks to identify factors that these teachers perceive as enhancing or inhibiting their professional learning in the current context. This informs how book clubs may contribute to a multiliteracies shift. This article represents early analysis of themes emerging from teacher dialogue in one such book club.

## **Theoretical perspectives**

### **Multiliteracies as an emerging literacy perspective**

In 1994, a group of leading literacy specialists met in the United States to discuss the necessity of adapting literacy teaching to modern times. From these discussions emerged a manifesto (New London Group, 2000), which argued that 'multiliteracies' are required to account for the increasing sociocultural diversity and broadening of text forms in the twenty-first century. The multiliteracies framework asserts that a repertoire of literacy practices need to include but also go beyond attention to the printed word; thus this framework involves multimodal meaning making processes, through interdependent visual, aural, oral, gestural and spatial modes (Hipwell & Klenowski, 2011; Kress, 2010). These modes of communication feature prominently in everyday Australian texts, accessed ubiquitously through television, the Internet, mobile phones and *iPads*. As such,

literacy can be viewed as a multidimensional meaning making process: it activates knowledge and practices for understanding and creating spoken, visual, multimodal and print texts (Wing, 2009).

Multiliteracies (New London Group, 2000), is concerned with critical practices relating to the diverse array of texts now available, and the modal layering of meaning within these texts. This may include overlaying print and images, and/or moving and still forms, and need not be interpreted in a linear way by the reader/viewer (Mills, 2011). In digital environments, genres also overlap, generating a plethora of text types (Kress, 2010). The need for conscious understandings and critical literacy practices is paramount, to enable readers/viewers/ writers/performers to recognise and link formats and meaning to contexts of use (Bull & Anstey, 2010).

Multimodality, is concerned with sign systems (semiotics) and the way that meaning is constructed and interpreted by participants via their bank of meaning making understandings (Kress, 2010). It specifically refers to the range of 'possible' meanings in the modes of a text, that contribute to simultaneous, dynamic and interdependent effects on the potential meaning making process (Kress, 2010; Mills, 2011). Traditional print paradigms are not concerned with the diverse cognitive, affective and social character of multimodal meaning making (Kress, 2010; Mills, 2009). Kress argues however, that an increasing focus on these concerns is pivotal for a relevant 21st century English curriculum.

A pedagogy for multiliteracies suggests both a metalanguage and a learning sequence for designing relevant 21st century learning around multimodal texts (Healy, 2008; New London Group, 2000). This pedagogy lays a path between what learners already know and can practise with print, towards more sophisticated practices with complex digital forms of communication. The New London Group offers four possible dimensions for active and recursive participation in these knowledge processes: 'situated practice' where known experiences and knowledge form the base for bridging to new learning; 'overt instruction' where learners work with explicit and relevant metalanguage to articulate and conceptualise the available meanings in text; 'critical framing', where different possible interpretations of text meanings are provoked and problematised; and 'transformed practice' where learners redesign and transform their original practices by creating responses to the social, economic and cultural agendas in text.

This cycle is aimed to deepen and expand existing repertoires of literacy practice, through responsive educational experiences (New London Group, 2000). In doing so, the socio-critical elements of multiliteracies pedagogy are brought into being, through active citizenship and authentic connections to lived experience. Collaborative dialogue and equity are important factors in this active process. However, for those teachers previously immersed only in a traditional print paradigm, the foregrounding of 21st century authenticity and multimodality requires new learning and pedagogy (Kress, 2010).

A core tenet of the multiliteracies paradigm is that pedagogical transformation requires a life-long response to evolving global and local environments (Healy, 2008; New London

Group, 2000). This socially situated view of professional learning resonates with Wenger's (1998) 'community of practice' (CoP) model.

### **CoP: 'Multiliteracies book clubs' as a metaphor**

As we participate and communicate in an increasingly digital world, the importance of theorising social learning has become apparent (Anstey & Bull, 2006; New London Group, 2000). Social participation in professional learning can be viewed as a process of enacting particular group memberships. Wenger's 1998 CoP framework, locates social learning as participation in community. Definitive features of a CoP are: individuals' participation in shared experiences; learning through inquiry and social interchange; and learning through discussion and 'doing'. These processes of participation affect how participants perceive themselves. Wenger (1998) proposed that mutual inquiry and practice in a CoP supports learners in facing joint challenges as they:

- use the community as a catalyst for change and innovation
- co-create a group culture
- identify as belonging within that culture.

Some caveats exist. CoPs can be more or less innovative depending on their propensity for novel and critical thinking (Levine, 2010). Further, not all social groups are CoPs: CoPs must be referenced against the social learning processes of Wenger's (1998) framework. Also, individuals establish increasing participation in the practices and meaning making of different collectives, so new knowledge and practices can flow between different communities.

A thriving CoP enables teachers to consider pedagogical issues with critical awareness, while they experience multiple perspectives, new knowledge and practices (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The conception of teachers as collaborative and purposeful intellectuals who work in community, sits well with teacher activism as expressed in critical perspectives (Blackmore, 2007). However, empirical studies have shown that in Australian public school contexts, professional reflection and multiple perspective taking are often constrained by the homogenising effects of system wide agendas (Comber & Nixon, 2009; Luke, 2010; Maloney & Konza, 2011). The formation of a professional CoP, independent of the school environment, could shed useful light on the ways in which teachers move into or reconnect with literate worlds in the face of current reforms.

The recent evolution of the book club as a research format represents a new approach to collaborative inquiry (Kooy, 2006; van Veen, Zwart & Meirink, 2012). A small number of research studies have used the popular metaphor of the 'club', including teacher literature circle clubs (Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010), teacher education book clubs (Reilly, 2008) and video clubs for teacher professional learning (van Es, 2012). Kooy (2006) has explored teacher book clubs in Canada, aiming to support novice teachers in inquiry-based professional learning. Using social learning theory and Wenger's (1998) CoP framework, Kooy (2006) elaborates how the conversational culture of book clubs can support exploratory talk and authentic ongoing professional learning for new and

experienced teachers. While reading and conversing about interest-based choices of texts with educational themes, teachers in her studies shared and 'storied' their professional learning. Kooy used a narrative approach, to analyse the emergence of interdependent relationships, dialogue and learning in the clubs.

A 'multiliteracies book club' potentially provides similar opportunities for scaffolded learning. Featuring in the work of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), the term scaffolding is often associated with the 'zone of proximal development', which describes the difference between a child's independent and potential development with guidance from an adult or more experienced peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Numerous researchers have since worked with the concept of scaffolding to better understand the complementary and interdependent nature of guided learning (Comber, 2003; Cumming-Potvin, Renshaw & van Kraayenoord, 2003; Rogoff, 1990; Stone, 1993). More recently, in her research with adult learners, Green (2005) extends the concept of scaffolding to include a complex process of:

Motivating others; understanding and working from people's capabilities;  
engaging learners in the challenge at hand; finding a balance between autonomy  
and independence; and providing demonstrations or examples (p. 3).

Scaffolding in the present book club aimed to include egalitarian learning around: dialogue between participants; recursive opportunities for knowledge building; shared metalanguage; and encounters with related realia and resources. Kooy (2006) reports that scaffolding can also be affective, as peers can provide encouragement and motivation for exploring new knowledge, practices and identities. This study was purposefully designed to empower teachers through these social opportunities and processes.

### **Methodology and research design: The case study, participants and data collection**

A qualitative approach was adopted due to its focus on developing thick descriptions of participants' perceptions and understandings (Patton, 2002). More specifically, a case study method was selected due to its appropriateness for deep relational analysis of an array of qualitative data, emerging from the interactions of a small number of participants in context (Yin, 2012). The interpretations of emergent discussions are framed by multiliteracies (New London Group, 2000), and CoP (Wenger, 1998) perspectives.

Following institutional ethics approval, the researcher-facilitator recruited seven teacher participants from several public primary schools, within a low socio-economic, outer metropolitan area of WA. The project was presented informally to school principals, who granted informed consent for access to staff by letter drop and/or a short information session. Subsequent voluntary teacher participation took place independently of school administrative protocols: this independence was maintained throughout the course of the book club along with the anonymity of participants.

Data in this study were collected over the six months between May and October. To cross-reference interpretations (Yin, 2012), an array of data was collected. These sources included: discussions from two semi-structured focus groups and five book club meetings; researcher-facilitator real time observations of interactions in the book club; teacher produced documents; blog postings and researcher reflections. A researcher journal (Holloway & Biley, 2011) supported the critique of emerging biases and decision-making during the research process. In qualitative inquiry approaches, the subjectivity and positioning of the researcher is always enacted in relation to participants (Carter & Little, 2007; Schwandt, 2000). As the researcher-facilitator was also a participant in the group, and shared an interest in co-learning as an experienced teacher, the journal became useful for creating reflexivity between the researcher's personal tendencies, biases and 'blind-spots' and the research process (Yin, 2012).

At the beginning of the first focus group, a short questionnaire garnered background information about the teacher participants. All participants spoke English as a first language, with one teacher also speaking sign on a regular basis. Six were born in Australia, and one in the Middle East. Six teachers had over ten years teaching experience, with one teacher having practiced between five and ten years. Collectively, the participants had worked in a wide range of teaching contexts in metropolitan and remote Western Australia, including: K to 7 classroom teaching; policy development; English, Science and Early Childhood Learning Area Co-ordination; Aboriginal Education; Special Needs Education Support; First Steps Getting it Right for Literacy Co-ordination; and Co-ordination of Students at Educational Risk. The current placements of these teachers were primarily in pre-primary (alternatively called pre-school) and the early years of primary schooling. Five teachers located themselves as between 46 to 55 years of age, with two teachers being between 36 and 45 years of age.

To explore participant perspectives and knowledge about literacy and professional learning, the study began and ended with semi-structured focus groups (Patton, 2002), as part of the first and last meetings. During these focus groups, participants were prompted with six questions in a semi-structured format. The body of the study involved five collaborative book club meetings, lasting one to two hours. Each meeting included light refreshments in the comfort of a local community centre, convenient to participants. Meetings were designed to support conversational discussion and knowledge sharing (Kooy, 2006). A multiliteracies pedagogical learning sequence (New London Group, 2000) provided a loose guide for structuring the five meetings. Over the span of the study, activities were planned to shift from focused researcher-facilitator support, to interest based and group initiated encounters with metalanguage and a wide range of multimodal texts and resources. The resources were selected to draw on the teachers' interests and specialty areas. In the first meeting for instance, the group viewed a tailored collection of a dozen early childhood postmodern picture books, to situate multiliterate discussion in textual enjoyment and reflection. The researcher-facilitator had found that in her prior professional learning with early childhood teachers and students, postmodern picture books had generated significant discussion. These texts are useful conceptually because they feature multimodal, meta-fictional and multilayered meaning making in a format that is recognisable and familiar to primary and early childhood teachers (Bull & Anstey, 2010).

Throughout the book club, the researcher-facilitator also shared other textual resources, such as videos, websites and *iPad* applications, sometimes with scaffold sheets to aid concept and metalanguage building. Digital audio recorders were used to record all discussions, which were subsequently transcribed and annotated with real time observations (using participant pseudonyms). The teachers produced some written and drawn texts, including a collaborative planning document, reflection sheets and individual story-maps. For additional discussion and sharing of resources throughout the study, all participants had access to a private and password-controlled online website and blog.

Given limitations of space, this paper focuses on the early analysis of emergent themes from the book club discussions. These themes represent insights into the development of teacher perspectives, knowledge construction, and relational learning. Early analysis involved manual open coding of patterns in the discussions (Yin, 2012). Real time observational notes were considered important in this process, as they provided contextual and interactional details, such as notes on facial and gestural responses. Interpretation through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011) is expected to further elucidate the research questions. Future analysis will also aim to cross-reference data sources.

### **Data analysis: Teachers' development over five meetings**

This analysis represents early insights into the development of teachers' perspectives and knowledge building, during the 'multiliteracies book club'. Four research sub-questions are used to organise processes and emergent knowledge that emanated from discussions over the course of the five meetings. The sequencing of these questions facilitates the flow of analysis from early teacher responses and perspectives, through to shifting teacher practices and understandings.

#### **Sub-question one: What are teachers' perceptions and knowledge of professional literacy learning in the current context of public primary school education?**

At the beginning of the study, interactions were slightly formal as the teachers got to know each other. Consequently initial focus group discussion was mainly elicited through researcher-facilitator scaffolding with semi-structured focus group questions. At first, literacy professional development relating to the rollout of the new Australian Curriculum emerged as a dominant topic. The group reported that all teachers in the district, sometimes hundreds at a time, had recently attended Australian Curriculum workshops, orchestrated by school administrations and district officers. The teachers expressed perceptions of these workshops that were consistently negative. For example, Fiona evaluated these events as 'often quite disappointing' in regard to what teachers wanted. Vicki believed that the content was limited because it 'was all so repetitious'. Referring to the delivery of content, Brooke added, 'they [the presenters] rush through' and 'there is no flexibility'.

A few minutes after this interchange, Tash elaborated on how she thought these experiences inhibit teacher literacy learning. Tash believed that in general, primary teachers were getting 'bogged down with the specifics of what's given in the national curriculum'. In support, Anna suggested that this was affected by what she perceived as an overemphasis on some aspects of literacy such as reading and writing in the new curriculum:

The expectations of pre-primary have changed immensely ... we are covering so much reading and writing type literacy.

Later in the session, diverse views on professional learning experiences were revisited. Anna believed that some professional development formats had enhanced her professional learning. For instance, she commented that some of her experiences with oral language development had been 'really good'. For Anna, the positive aspects of this professional learning appeared to be related to these sessions being spaced out, "over 3 or 4 or more sessions with time in between, to think about what you'd done and apply it."

Vicki immediately echoed this belief. However, Fiona reflected on the common situation where a few staff at a time are required to attend one-off external professional development events. She believed that training a small number of representative staff, created a flow-on effect for these representatives, who then had to 'excite the [remaining] staff'. Vicki echoed Fiona's perception of train-the-trainer processes, by commenting that sometimes it is 'dry stuff', but it's still something 'you [as a school professional development representative] just have to do'.

In summary, during the first focus group, participant responses revealed a range of perspectives on professional development. Generally, the participants associated professional development with prescribed curriculum reform imperatives. This appeared to create dilemmas for some teachers, which had remained unresolved. In contrast, active and participatory formats were valued if they were spaced across alternating periods of practice. This was not associated with recent professional development rollout of the new literacy curriculum.

### **Sub-question two: How do participant perceptions and knowledge of literacy develop over the course of the 'book club' meetings?**

In the first focus group, discussions about professional learning led logically into teachers' consideration of their perceptions and knowledge about literacy. Teachers tended to draw on their shared knowledge and literacy experiences (see situated practice, New London Group, 2000), foregrounding their experiences with the Australian Curriculum and specific alphabetical and phonics programs. In association with these approaches, Fiona reminisced on her past pedagogical experiences, when she had known 'exactly what to do', and followed the curriculum 'in tiny little steps'. A repeated theme across participants was an allusion to the importance of content such as phonics, vocabulary work, reading words and sounds, decoding and writing, as the groundwork of literacy. At several different



points in the discussion, other literacy practices were relegated to the category of 'other stuff'.

As teachers later became more confident during this discussion, some began to offer detail about what the category 'other stuff' might include. Anna commented that:

I think for me literacy is about comprehension and expression. So it's not necessarily talking or writing or reading, it can be however you are trying to express yourself.

Vicki introduced the idea of real world relevance when reflecting on the meaning of literacy:

Um, you want children to be literate in society, you want them to be able to function with print, with computers, whatever they need to use.

These utterances again resonated with the concept of situated practice (New London Group, 2000). In these ways, teachers shared the known, the familiar, and aspects of literacy they perceived as precluded by current reforms, providing a starting point for learning in the next meetings.

In general, the first and second meetings involved researcher scaffolded interactions (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) with multimodal resources and texts, and drew on what teachers already knew. However, the third, fourth and fifth meetings, gradually balanced this dependency (Green, 2005) through teachers' increasing participation in active knowledge building and co-inquiry. This was evidenced in:

- a growing presence of spontaneous peer-led sharing
- and peer-scaffolded learning interchanges.

For instance, Vicki, Anna, Brooke and April gradually explored the interest-based sharing of multimodal literacy resources, which they invoked through longer and deeper periods of collaborative discussion. Anna was the first teacher to spontaneously present and discuss the visual elements of a multimodal picture book, during Meeting 3 (see overt practice, New London Group, 2000). A few minutes later, April demonstrated how she had recently investigated a collection of story-writing *iPad* applications. By Meeting 4 and 5, these four teachers were engaging in extended episodes of peer scaffolding. This included teachers' discoveries and investigation of a wide range of apps.

During Meeting 4 and 5, some teachers began to share how they had changed their situated practices by experimenting with new literacy practices in their classrooms. These interactions became reminiscent of transformed practice (New London Group, 2000). For instance in Meeting 4, Vicki presented her first attempts at working with the gestural mode via photographic representations of Olympic sports people. During these peer-scaffolded episodes, the teachers witnessed each other's different thinking processes about exploratory literacy practice, and also usually shared feedback about how to extend

practices. For example, Vicki's sharing of her Olympic focus in Meeting 4, elicited co-constructive feedback from Tash, thus linking to the concept of critical framing (New London Group, 2000). Tash made suggestions for how Vicki could do 'the [multiliteracies] cycle again' to improve and deepen her planned focuses. As Vicki explored *iPad* apps for this purpose, Brooke and Tash concurrently offered Vicki real-time ICT skill support. In Meeting 5, Vicki re-presented these practices in a more developed form, building on the feedback that was offered in Meeting 4. This core of four teachers likewise demonstrated other examples of transformed practice (New London Group, 2000). In Meeting 5 for example, during general conversation, Anna reflected on her pedagogical shift towards social learning in the classroom, when she introduced new *iPads* to her students:

I've started off um, working with the kids, with them. But I found they actually learnt more working with each other. You know talking about it and just having a go.

By Meeting 5, Anna, Vicki and Brooke were beginning to articulate deeper awareness of literacy as a flexible repertoire, not merely to be spoken about as practices with print and phonics. In the final focus group session, Anna asserted:

It's about broadening your horizons ... making me think about different texts, and studying a text for itself's sake.

Soon after this comment, a lengthy spontaneous discussion ensued about these teachers' new recognition of everyday exposure to multimodal texts. Vicki initiated this interaction, questioning how authors of everyday texts position consumers through particular multimodal choices. Vicki summarised by saying that:

It's really relevant to understand, what is happening with our society ... our literate or illiterate society.

Vicki's articulation of literacy as a social practice at the end of this exchange highlights a collective process of critical framing of literacy practice (New London Group, 2000).

### **Sub-question three: How do participants articulate engagement with multimodality over the course of the study?**

In the second meeting, it emerged that though all teachers had participated in literacy professional development, most teachers explicitly acknowledged little understanding of terms such as multimodality. In the early meetings, Brooke, who was sometimes given to humorous hyperbole, would exclaim that new metalanguage was like a 'foreign' language. This typically elicited supportive jokes, sighs and laughter from the rest of the group.

To support teacher understandings about metalanguage, the researcher-facilitator designed and produced several scaffolds to be used during collaborative activities. For example, in Meeting 2, metalanguage definition sheets were used to assist collaborative meaning

making as the group revisited the collection of children's postmodern picture books. Teachers freely selected a text they felt drawn to, from the researcher-facilitator's professional collection. The following extracts reveal snippets of conversations as teachers engaged with the text of their choice and scaffolds.

Initially teacher comments were expressed as common-sense observations when viewing the picture books:

Vicki: There's information in the pictures.

Jo: I have no idea what the book's about. I'm just looking at that one page. ...  
There's a lot of comedy used in it.

After reading and discussing the linguistic scaffold sheets, teachers began to apply metalanguage in their observations:

Jo: So yeah. There's that many things you could discuss colour, effects and everything, with this, just this one page.

By Meeting 5, changing attention to multimodality emerged in other ways. Vicki, Brooke and Anna remarked that they had begun to notice the multimodal layering of texts in their everyday environments. Anna asserted that 'everything's becoming so multimodal', with Vicki remarking that she had found a health magazine at home with 'bits all over the place, like you would see, on a webpage'. Vicki also shared her burgeoning personal interest in digital graphic novels. She professed that her participation in the book club had changed her 'own reading'.

Although classroom practice outcomes were not part of this study, teachers sometimes indicated that their independent experimentation with new multimodal literacy practices, as a consequence of book club participation, had been impacted by factors in their schools. In particular, Jo, Brooke and Tash reported finding experimentation difficult, due to limited access to technology. Jo commented on this during a collaborative activity in Meeting 4:

Well to be honest, like regarding computers, I don't have a range of access to them. ... and you know, ... you only get 50 minutes of computer time every week ... And that's what I find really frustrating.

Overall, these discussions reflect teachers' active learning, and some of the challenges they encountered in their desire to put their learning into practice.

#### **Sub-question four: How can the 'book club' format contribute to the development of a community of practice?**

In the month of October, due to the teachers' many commitments, only three participants and the researcher-facilitator could be present for Meeting 5. However, during this

meeting, Brooke, Vicki and Anna, eagerly shared their perceptions of the book club. Brooke offered her perception of the group:

I found the group friendly, sharing, supportive [and] learning from others, informative and funny.

Anna immediately responded:

That was really important wasn't it? Otherwise you wouldn't come.

Brooke later elaborated on her perception of the social format:

You've got the coffee and you've got the chat, which is nice ... almost like a coffee club.

Relational features were revisited later that evening as teachers tried to articulate for each other what they valued most about the book club. Brooke spontaneously shared her insight into why she thought the social format of the book club was successful:

It's almost the connection, the base of people.

During this final session, these teachers also framed their perceptions of learning in the book club format. Anna said she appreciated the 'diverse ideas and experiences' shared by the teachers. Vicki remarked further on the usefulness of the learning:

The information we've got from each other's been really valuable.

Anna added that the book club was 'effective' because it was 'so new, and something we were all interested in'. Some of Anna's later utterances suggest that she believed knowledge was scaffolded collaboratively rather than passively received at the hands of the researcher-facilitator:

It's about coming up with it, as a group [where everyone] gets extended.

At various times in this last meeting, the teachers spontaneously discussed book club in relation to other traditional professional development. Anna suggested she thought there was a 'deep' difference between book club and other professional learning experiences. All three teachers offered further comments:

Brooke: And I think also with the book club, I think it's another way of doing, instead of just sitting down, taking notes, listening and having a quick chat at the end, this is more interactive?

Anna: So it wasn't you sitting for a whole day, you know doodling on your piece of paper (laughing voice) while someone talks at you. So it was ongoing and it was interactive and you had time in between each meeting, to sort of think.

Vicki: And it's more relaxed, and you feel happy to give and share, rather than a static, you know one person there, telling you, and maybe one or two people will be able to throw something back.

Towards the end of the final focus group session, Anna made a telling remark:

You didn't feel like, if you said something you were going to be judged.

Organised around the four research questions, these data point to how teachers perceived professional learning in the current Australian context. The teachers express a shift towards multiliteracies learning, and discuss how they believed the book club was important to this shift. The discussion will consider these points.

## **Discussion of emerging themes**

The presentation of the data gives us a brief glimpse into how this book club emerged as a space for relational learning, and scaffolded teachers in their understandings and perspectives about literacy. The following discussion begins by situating these teachers' perspectives in the context of wider reforms. This leads to a consideration of how important literacy shifts and developments emerged as teachers collaborated in shared opportunities to make meaning with multimodal texts (Kress, 2010; New London Group, 2000). Lastly, the discussion reflects on shared inquiry and relational learning through the lens of CoP (Wenger, 1998).

During the first and final focus groups, teachers shared perspectives about past professional learning experiences. There is a contrast between perceptions of book club participation and system initiated literacy professional development. All of these teachers reported that their opportunities for relevant literacy knowledge building were inhibited in the context of the rollout of imposed Australian Curriculum. Most of the teachers highlighted how they were struggling to engage with externally generated curriculum pronouncements.

The teachers' perceptions of Australian Curriculum professional development call attention to impacts on literacy learning as a consequence of this reform process. Most of the teachers arrived at the book club with a propensity for common-sense expressions of multimodality. This contradicts policy assumptions that prescribed national curriculum will stimulate professional learning relevant to the 21st century (Luke, 2010). The book club study provides evidence that these teachers could collaboratively change this positioning in relation to new literacy practices.

During book club scaffolding, teachers were able to take their experiences, interests and existing understandings, and use them as resources for further inquiry. Consistent with a pedagogy for multiliteracies (New London Group, 2000), all teachers participated in sharing multimodal understandings with increasing sophistication. Although the researcher-facilitator initially scaffolded the participants, their shared investigations gradually built momentum for 'doing' deeper and broader multimodal meaning making.

Significant in this process was an expansion of the observed textual practices and reflections of four teachers. The data reveal that this core of teachers gradually took a finer interest in the available meanings of multimodal text types, and gained a heightened awareness of the layered and diverse nature of multimodal texts within their environments. Importantly, two of these teachers attributed their new orientations to their participation in the book club. The core group of four teachers also expressed other changes, such as an increasing interest in co-constructive and social classroom learning. These transformations are consistent with shifts towards multiliterate understandings and practices.

A particular aim of this book club study was to make a contribution to multiliteracies shift by interrelating multiliteracies (New London Group, 2000) and CoP (Wenger, 1996) frameworks. Teacher comments provide evidence that they perceived interdependence between their collective literacy inquiries and participation in the book club's social learning format.

As the book club progressed, participative elements of Wenger's (1998) CoP framework became more salient in co-constructive processes. Spontaneous sharing, demonstrating, applying and evaluating of multimodal resources exemplified altered thinking, 'doing', and talking about that doing. As the group developed, teachers also became comfortable scaffolding the knowledge of their peers, and at other times thinking critically about their own learning in context. Sometimes scaffolding functioned through feedback, and sometimes it appeared to support affective motivation. Anna's sense of not being judged is a strong indicator of how trust developed in the group.

As an endnote to discussion, it is interesting how some teachers reflected explicitly on the format of the book club. Three teachers expressed that they had looked forward each time to the 'coffee club' feel of the book club and to relaxed text sharing and learning. The contrast between this perception and the same teachers' perceptions of traditional professional development is informative. In sum, the analysis suggests that the conversational learning space of the book club, anchored in shared goals and engagement, provided an instance of many aspects of Kooy's (2006) book club model. It also elaborates this model through the integration of multiliteracies content and learning processes.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has presented early analysis of discussions, arising from a multiliteracies book club case study. Within a supportive social environment, scaffolded learning opportunities emerged as important factors for the shift of a small group of teachers towards multiliterate perspectives. Data suggest that participants used the space provided by the multiliteracies book club for critical and social learning. It can be argued, against a wider backdrop of curriculum reform and generic professional development, that participation in the book club assisted these teachers to reposition themselves as collaborative literacy knowledge workers. These findings may be of interest to policy makers, researchers and practitioners wishing to pursue innovative approaches to professional learning. The book

club model appears to feature many characteristics important to the conceptual and sustained professional learning that teachers may require, in their quest to equitably access relevant and expanding repertoires of literacy practice.

## Limitations and future directions

The initial findings of this study suggest the value of further development through a longer time frame and multiple cycles of learning. It is important to consider how opportunities emerge out of situated case studies, and how nuances and multiple agendas can be more widely considered (Yin, 2012). We acknowledge that any descriptions of impacts on these teachers' practice are by self-report only. Descriptions are also limited to these teachers' perspectives on learning, and are not evidence of verifiable pedagogical change. Neither can claims be made that changes described in this study were sustained past the end-date of the book club. But the way these teachers might continue to negotiate book club learning in the wider educational environment may be of interest for further study. Future inquiry might also explore the supportive and egalitarian ethos of the book club for scaffolding relational and conceptual development in different professional contexts. For instance, the design of a book club format could aim to support collaborative mentoring of Australian graduate teachers, building resilience for the early years of practice through the sharing of perspectives and challenges.

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