

Chapter 6

Confessions from a Reading Program: Building Connections, Competence and Confidence



Jennifer Rennie

Abstract As students move from primary school into their high school years there is an expectation that they can read. Coupled with this expectation are the increasing complex demands that are placed on them as readers. The challenges facing these adolescent readers are many and varied. In this chapter I describe those challenges and report on one case study of an Indigenous reader from a regional school in Queensland who participated in a program designed to improve the reading outcomes of a group of Indigenous students, all of whom were assessed as being from 12 months to 4 years behind their peers in reading comprehension. In the research reported on here in addition to developing various strategies and skills to help these students improve their reading performance there was also work done to build relationships, re-connect these students with the practice of reading, build confidence and help them to understand what it looks like to effectively participate in the discourse of school reading experiences. Through a careful analysis of the discourse in a reading event with one student, I demonstrate the principles that underpin this work, why it requires careful thought and why it is paramount to improving the reading competence of these students.

Introduction

As students move from primary school into their secondary years, there is a growing expectation they can already read. In secondary school, students are required to read increasingly complex texts in the various disciplines, which deal with new and difficult concepts and contain many technical words and sophisticated grammatical constructions that are uncommon in everyday conversation (Cummins 2007; Moje et al. 2000; Whithair 2009). The emphasis on reading to learn in secondary school (in contrast to learning to read in primary years) means that reading support is rarely provided (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012). Students who continue to struggle with

J. Rennie (✉)
Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia
e-mail: jennifer.rennie@monash.edu

their reading in the secondary years find it almost impossible to cope with the demands placed on them as readers. This was the case for the readers in the study reported on here, which focuses on one Indigenous reader, Millie. Over a period of 12 months, Millie was 1 of a group of 12 students (6 Indigenous and 6 non-Indigenous) who received reading assistance from me and from Lei, an Indigenous teacher working in the school at the time. The reading assistance provided to the students aimed to reconnect them with reading and build their confidence through a program based on understanding and connecting to students' interests, experiences and reading histories with enough scaffolding and support so they felt competent (Rennie 2016). In this chapter, I describe the key ideas that were foundational to the development of this program through an analysis of one reading event with Millie.

Setting the Scene

As discussed in the Introduction to this volume, there has been a number of inquiries at state, territory and Commonwealth levels addressing the gap in literacy outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school-aged children since the 1970s. Despite a range of initiatives to address this gap, as has been stated elsewhere in this volume, there have only been small improvements in reading literacy according to the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In 2008, 70.7% of Indigenous Year 9 students were at or above national minimum standard compared to 94.2% of non-Indigenous students. In 2016, 73.6% of Indigenous students compared to 94.0% of non-Indigenous students were at or above the minimum national standard (ACARA 2016).

There have been a number of explanations put forward in relation to the gap between the literacy outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Distal factors such as poor school attendance, teacher shortages in remote areas, adequate teaching skills, poverty and the disconnect between Western school systems and Indigenous community life have all been suggested as possible contributing factors (Mellor and Corrigan 2004; Prior 2013; Rennie and Patterson 2010; Purdie et al. 2011; Rennie 2006). In 2010 the Australian Council of Educational Research conducted a study that tracked the literacy and numeracy development of a group of Indigenous students from 13 schools across Australia from sites that had been nominated as demonstrating 'good practice' in terms of Indigenous education. The study found that effective school leadership, parental involvement, access to professional development and good teaching characterised by high expectations, positive relationships, meeting individual student's needs and provision of targeted intervention when required all contributed to positive learning experiences (Purdie et al. 2011, p. 72). In addition to identifying a range of factors that characterised effective practice, the study also reported that whilst Indigenous students generally continued to improve their literacy skills throughout primary school, the gap that existed between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the beginning of Year 3 remained relatively consistent until the final year of primary school (Purdie et al. 2011). The study pointed the need for early intervention and ‘quality preschool education’ to lay strong foundations for achievement in the later years of school. However, focussing on the early years does little to address the large numbers of Indigenous students who continue to enter high school with reading literacy achievement that is well below their non-Indigenous peers.

There is a growing number of secondary students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who need assistance with reading and writing more generally. As has been reported in other chapters, there have been a number of whole school approaches to the teaching of literacy adopted in various primary schools including Accelerated Literacy, MULTILIT and Direct Instruction to name but a few. What has been largely lacking are programs designed specifically for students who struggle with literacy in the secondary school. In *Beyond the Middle*, which reported on a study investigating the perceived efficacy of middle years programs in improving the quality of teaching, learning and student outcomes in literacy and numeracy, Luke et al. (2003) found that many of the 23 secondary schools observed in this study took a ‘whatever is available’ approach in relation to literacy frameworks and assessment practices. Specific initiatives put in place to assist students who were struggling with reading and writing were at best ad hoc, based on ‘deficit’ or ‘remedial approaches’, and were not aligned to the pedagogies of the mainstream classroom. In addition, the schools drew from relatively outdated education materials not designed for adolescent learners. The program discussed in this chapter was developed with the specific needs of these learners in mind.

The Study

The research took a sociocultural view of reading which defines reading as a socially, culturally and historically located practice where readers engage in a range of other practices in addition to decoding as they engage with and make meaning from texts (Bloome 1985; Gee 1996; Heap 1991; Heath 1983; Luke and Freebody 1997; Street 1993). Readers not only need to decode texts using various cognitive skills and strategies, but they also need to make sense of what they read. This involves an understanding of the context of what is being read and how this relates to other things readers know and have experienced. Reading is something that is done for particular purposes, and reading-in-school is a particular kind of reading practice (Rennie and Patterson 2010). Instructional reading practices in school are collaborative and involve complex interactions that occur between the reader, the teacher and the text (Patterson et al. 2012; Ruddell and Unrau 2013).

At the time of this study, participating students were in their first year of a regional Australian secondary school (Year 8). Students were previously assessed as

1 to 4 years behind in their reading age as shown through reading tests of accuracy, comprehension and fluency (Neale 1997). All of the students reported receiving reading assistance throughout their schooling, and all described being with groups of other readers who found reading difficult. Given the students had been struggling with the task of reading for an extended period of time, their reading histories were complex. Research suggests that it is not uncommon for students who present as struggling in the early years of school to continue to struggle throughout their schooling despite being afforded reading assistance (Brozo and Simpson 2007; Sanacore and Palumbo 2009). The reading assistance these students described was highly variable. It ranged from having an adult listen to them read and helping them to decode unknown words to participating in programs such as Reading Recovery, a program designed to develop decoding strategies and comprehension (Clay 1982). This assistance invariably occurred outside of the classroom using texts that were below their level of maturity. Historically, many reading programs have tended to focus on the mechanics of reading and are grounded in cognitive theories of skill acquisition (Allington 1998). Whilst these programs may help in improving various skills associated with reading, they tend to ignore the importance of the social and cultural contexts in which reading occurs.

The program discussed was designed with the reading identities and histories of these young people in mind. Lei (pseudonym), an Indigenous teacher, worked with me to help design, implement and refine the reading program over a 12-month period. I worked with Lei on-site at the beginning, middle and end of the study for a total of 6 weeks. In my absence, she continued the program working with each student two or three times per week.

Lei and I held a series of discussions prior to working with them. During these discussions, we worked to gain a sense of who these readers were. We wanted to understand their personal interests, their reading habits, how they described themselves as readers and their prior experiences of reading both in and out of school. Following the interview we also administered the 'Motivations for Reading Questionnaire' (Wigfield and Guthrie 1997), a student-rated assessment that measures the extent to which each student is motivated to read. Finally, students were tested in terms of their reading rate, comprehension and fluency (Neale 1997). We found that all of these students struggled with many aspects of their reading including monitoring comprehension, vocabulary and reading fluency. We also found that the students generally lacked confidence in their abilities as readers and that most had given up on the task around Year 4. In short, they had made the decision not to read and developed a number of reading avoidance behaviours. With this in mind, we knew that we had to reconnect these students with reading and work on developing both their confidence and competence. We also both knew that building and developing positive relationships with these students would be fundamental to working successfully with these readers.

In the following sections, I will outline some of the principles that underpinned the program: first, the importance of relationship work; second, making connections to students' experiences and interests; and third, the need to develop confidence in order to improve readers' competence.

Laying the Foundation: Building Relationships

Establishing, building and maintaining relationships was at the core of the thinking in the design of this program. Research talks about the importance of relationship work with Indigenous students, families and communities (see for example, Santoro et al. 2011). Of particular significance in this study was the inclusion of the Indigenous teacher, Lei. In the post-program interviews, students commented that Lei made an effort to get to know them and their families and that their families 'trusted her'. One student talked about the fact that having 'anyone' do this work would be a 'bit weird because they don't know about us'. Finally, they all said this aspect of the program made them feel 'comfortable'. The students in this study were confident that their teacher 'knew who they were'. There was a real sense that part of the success of this program was the knowledge and understanding that Lei brought to the program in terms of these student's social and cultural worlds and in the careful relationship work that she did with the students and their families. In this paper, it is argued that relationship work is necessary, foundational, ongoing and pivotal to the success of other pedagogical work such as making connections, building confidence and achieving competence.

Making Connections

Taking a sociocultural view, learning is enhanced when we acknowledge, respect and respond to the various cultural, socio-economic and historical contexts of learners (Boon and Lewthwaite 2016). Making connections to students' lifeworlds and experiences has long been seen as a means to help students to access the mandated curriculum (Moll et al. 1992). Moll et al. (1992) talk about funds of knowledge which are 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being' (p. 133). These funds of knowledge result from people's lived experiences through their social, cultural and working lives. Skilled teachers traditionally recognise and use these family and community resources for teaching as a means to bridge the gap between curriculum knowledge and students' lives. Whilst much of the earlier work in this area tended to focus on the lives of adults, in recent years, there has been more of an interest in children's social worlds at home, school and community and in cyber space (Subero et al. 2017). Subero et al. talk about 'funds of identity', a concept based on the premise that we not only accumulate these households 'funds of knowledge' but that we also partake in a number of life experiences that help to shape and reshape us as individuals. They define 'funds of identity' as 'significant people, institutions, cultural artefacts, geographical spaces and meaningful practices, passions and interests encrusted in a learner's self-definition' (Subero et al. 2017, p. 253). Some suggest that we can enhance the academic achievement of students from diverse groups if we utilise, and build upon, the knowledge, skills and

languages they acquire in the informal learning environments of their homes and communities (Moll and González 2004). Llopart and Esteban-Guitart propose the principle of contextualisation as an effective pedagogy for working with diverse learners. This principle states that:

(a) Academic content should be integrated with other knowledge that the children assimilate in the home, school and community; (b) learners need to be guided and supported so that they can make connections between their personal experiences and previous knowledge, and the knowledge or concepts acquired at school; and (c) learners need to be helped to fully understand academic content through solid personal connections. (Llopart and Esteban-Guitart 2017, p. 256)

Making these connections though is not simply about using topics that might interest students. It is also about understanding the skills and strategies students use and knowing what students know in terms of the knowledge and concepts required at school.

Confidence and Competence

The readers in this study had experienced many years of perceived reading failure. This led to a steady decline in their confidence as was evidenced through their interviews and how they responded to the various questions in the ‘Motivations for Reading Questionnaire’ (Wigfield and Guthrie 1997). Alvermann (2001) suggests that reading identities are decided for students via the various reading practices they participate in at school. School reading practices help students to understand what reading is and to construct how they might define themselves as readers (Rennie 2004, 2016). These students reported routinely being in groups with like-readers who found reading difficult. They talked about the fact that they were given books that were ‘babyish’ and well below their level of maturity. They discussed having difficulty with various skills such as ‘sounding out’, not being to read ‘quickly’ and about not ‘knowing words’. The reading practices these students participated in throughout their schooling were predominantly about learning to read rather than reading to learn. In the first year of high school, these students still self-identified as ‘learner readers’. Further, they found themselves in a context where ‘learning to read’ help was not provided.

I now introduce you to Millie, one of the students who participated in this study, and present an analysis of a 40-min reading session with Millie, to explicate some of the design principles of the program.

Meet Millie

As mentioned earlier, understanding who these students were both in and out-of-school was important in relation to making connections, establishing common knowledge, building confidence and ultimately their achieving competence. Prior to

doing any reading work with students, we held discussions with them individually and as a group to help us gain a sense of who they were as ‘readers’.

At the time of this study, Millie was a 12-year-old Indigenous student in Year 8 in a regional area in Australia. Millie loved to play sports, in particular rugby league. She told us how she had travelled to other Australian cities to play rugby and that she was in awe of the Indigenous Women’s All Stars football team.

Millie described herself as a reader who had always struggled. She talked about receiving assistance throughout primary school and said that her previous teacher put students into groups based on ability for both spelling and reading. Millie explained that there were four groups and that she was in the lowest one. Millie described this reading practice in the following way:

The smart group would have like eight in it, six in the next group, like four in the next group and there was like five of us in our group and we were all reading the same thing. Miss would sit there and she would read the first paragraph. Then the next person would read the next paragraph. And just go round the big circle. And we used to read about like true stories on Alaska and stuff, like all the ice and stuff.

Millie had difficulty remembering books that she had read for pleasure. However, she did recall reading a book from the *Zac Power* series (Larry, 2009–2010), chapter books that are specifically designed for lower readers with large print and fewer word counts. She did not enjoy these books. She said she liked *Harry Potter* books. Her Nan’s neighbour, who is a teacher, had all the *Harry Potter* books, and she could borrow the last two, which she had not yet read. She described JK Rowling as her favourite author and an author whose ‘mind was outside the box...she comes out with all these really good ideas. She lets her thinking go.’ Millie said she had read the first two books in the series and was looking forward to reading the third, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling 1999). The most recent book she recalled was one they were studying in their English called *Nanberry: Black Brother White*, by Jackie French.

When asked to discuss the things that gave her most trouble with her reading, Millie talked about the fact that she was not very confident and that when she read chapter books, as they were expected to do in high school, she found it difficult to figure out what the book ‘was actually about’, particularly ‘in the first few pages’. The other issue she identified was her lack of vocabulary knowledge. She explained:

I have trouble with the words. I put the book down, take a deep breath and pick it up again. I’ll be reading and it really annoys me cause I don’t know the word. Like I’ll be reading and then I don’t know the word. And I go ‘Come on, just figure it out!’ And then I start guessing and when I guess it ... and then I keep reading, I go ‘No, that’s not it’ and I have to go back to it and keep reading and try again.

Later in our discussion, Millie talked about the fact that her mother felt it was important she learn about her culture. She talked about her clan group and said that she liked ‘stories about the Dreamtime and stolen generation and stuff cause it like it gets me a lot more in my culture and my heritage.’ She also talked about a number of added responsibilities in the home context such as looking after her siblings due to her mother’s work commitments.

Millie was tested for reading accuracy, fluency and reading comprehension (Neale 1997). In reading accuracy, she was 1 year and 6 months below her age level; in reading fluency, she was 4 years and 1 month below her age; and in reading comprehension, she was 1 year and 5 months below her age. Similarly, in 'Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading' (ACER) in a Level 7 test aimed at Year 7 students, she scored a stanine of 2 and was in the fifth percentile which meant she was in the low range compared to her peers. A stanine of 4, 5 or 6 is considered average. Like the other students in this study, Millie also completed the 'Motivations for Reading Questionnaire', a student-rated assessment that measures the extent to which each student is motivated to read (Wigfield and Guthrie 1997). The questionnaire comprised 53 questions designed to reflect 11 different constructs of reading using a Likert scale from 1 to 4 with 1 meaning 'very different to me', 3 meaning 'a little different to me', 2 meaning 'a little like me' and 4 meaning 'a lot like me'. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) reported the reliabilities for all the aspects of the 53-item MRQ ranging from 0.43 to 0.81 (Guthrie 2010). Amongst other things, this revealed that on items that measured the construct of reading efficacy, Millie was low, scoring 1.6 out of 5, and that on items that measured the construct reading avoidance behaviours, she scored high with 4 out of 5. Generally, the results of this testing were commensurate with her other various reading tests and the ways in which she presented and talked about herself as a reader.

With this information in mind, we found an article on the Internet that reported on a successful rugby league game played by the Women's All Stars (Australian Womens Rugby League 2011). The article was 689 words in length and contained some unfamiliar vocabulary. The article was one that a lower secondary student would be able to read with some assistance. The following section analyses the 40-min reading session with Millie.

Pre-reading: Connections, Confidence and Competence

Understanding who these students were, both in and out of school, was important in relation to making connections, building confidence and ultimately their achieving competence as readers. At the beginning of the reading session, I wanted to help Millie connect to the reading we were about to work with. I wanted to understand what she knew about the Indigenous Women's All Stars and the game of rugby more generally.

Transcript 6.1: My Coach 'She's Awesome'

- 1 R: Tell me what you know about the Women's All Stars.
- 2 M: My coach plays in it.
- 3 R: Ah your coach she played for them?
- 4 M: Yeah
- 5 R: Do you ever watch them play?

- 6 M: Yeah I've watched them play a few times.
 7 R: Yeah
 8 M: Yeah
 9 R: Is your coach good?=
 10 M: =Yes she's awesome
 11 R: Is she?
 12 M: Yes. She don't take no crap from nobody. She just runs at them.
 13 R: She runs at them.
 14 M: Yeah she hits them.
 15 R: Do you take crap from anyone?
 16 M: No not when I play.

In this excerpt from the data, Millie made the connection between her coach and her knowledge of the Indigenous Women's All Stars' team. She explained that she had seen the team 'play a few times' (Line 6) and said how her coach who plays for the team was 'awesome' (Line 10). She then proceeded to tell me how she, also like her coach, isn't deterred by other players (Line 16). In the beginning of the conversation, a link was established between what Millie knew and had experienced and the reading she was about to begin. Further, Millie was given the opportunity to position herself as an expert in relation to what was being discussed. She knew someone who played for this team, and more importantly this person was her coach. Following on from the discussion where she makes the point of saying how 'brave' her coach is, I asked her a question about tackling in women's rugby as a means to give her the opportunity to tell me more about the game.

Transcript 6.2: It's Hard

- 23 R: =Do you tackle in women's rugby?
 24 M: Yeah. You have the hooker. It's hard.
 25 R: So what does a hooker do?
 26 M: Hooker. It's like. It's like. You get tackled and you have to play the ball and the
 27 hooker picks up and passes to half back ((moves hands like passing a ball))=
 28 R: =Ah=
 29 M: =You pass it to half back and half back passes it to whoever is next to them=
 30 R: =Oh ok=
 31 M: =It can be first row, second row, um or five eight or anyone like that ((demonstrating their positions on the desk by drawing with her hands))

In response to my question, she told me that 'yes' you do tackle in the game and then proceeded to explain the role of the 'hooker' in this tackling process. What was interesting in this whole excerpt and many others during the reading session was

how Millie used gesture (Line 27) and drawing on the desk (Line 32) to help me to understand. Through this multimodal explanation, there was a real sense that she was reliving the experience as she explained the different moves of the game.

In the remainder of the pre-reading discussion, Millie talked about her training schedule and about a previous and upcoming trip, her team had to Brisbane.

Transcript 6.3: Playing with the Dolphins

- 37 M: =yeah we go away in October for a real big one=
 38 R: That's right Brisbane.
 39 M: Yeah Brissie and Toowoomba=
 40 R: =Toowoomba=
 41 M: =Yeah it's good=
 42 R: =Have you done that before?=
 43 M: =Yeah last year but the year before we went away I think it was in
 44 October but
 45 we went away for the Brisbane one. It was under 14s that was my
 46 one that I
 47 got to go into. Like we went away and played at the Dolphins. Do
 48 you know
 49 Redcliffe?
 50 R: Yeah yes I know where that is=
 51 M: =The Dolphins place that's where we played. It was good. It was
 52 good fun.

In Transcript 6.3, Millie was excited to tell me about her interstate trip in October to play a match which was obviously of great importance as it is 'a real big one' (Line 37). In this excerpt, Millie came across as being very articulate. She was very precise and explicit about the information she gave me and also felt comfortable to check for shared understanding (Line 45) demonstrating that she was attentive towards the listener.

Further on in the conversation, I wanted also to understand what she felt made a good women's rugby league player as the text we were about to read made reference to the importance of 'passion, team work and determination'. From a pedagogical point of view, I felt this would further assist Millie to connect to the text we were about to read.

Transcript 6.4: 'Talk Is the Key'

- 49 R: So what do you think makes a good rugby league player?
 50 M: You've got to run with all your heart=
 51 R: =run with all your heart. What does that mean?
 52 M: Like you got to put all your effort into the game that you are playing.
 53 You can't
 54 be side-tracked or anything. And um you have to commit to the
 55 game.
 56 R: Mm

- 55 M: And=
 56 R: =sounds like you'd be a good coach=
 57 M: =Yeah ((Laughs)) you got to commit to the game and you kind of
 like (.) you got
 58 to talk lots on the field=
 59 R: =talk=
 60 M: =talk=
 61 R: =so how does that work?
 62 M: Talk is the key. If you talk talk about the game and like where there
 are holes
 63 ((demonstrates by drawing with her hands on the desk)) and you'll
 get through.
 64 You'll score a try.

Millie's passion, enthusiasm and knowledge about the game were very evident in this short excerpt. Like Millie, who sought clarification from *me* in the previous example at Line 52, in this excerpt, I asked her to clarify what she meant by 'run with all your heart' to ensure I had a shared understanding of the meaning being conveyed. She made the point of repeating and giving greater emphasis to words such as 'commit' and 'talk' (Lines 53 and 62). She also used gestures to help me understand the concept of finding the 'holes' in the play on the desk. Millie was confident and clearly the expert during this exchange. In the entire opening discussion that lasted for approximately 8 min, I deliberately posed questions that I was confident she would be able to respond to and in doing so tried to position Millie as the expert in this space. Her confidence to respond, provide animated descriptions to my questions and lead the discussion in parts clearly showed that she felt competent and comfortable in this space.

Setting Up for Success: Connections, Confidence and Competence

In the next phase of the reading session, I read the rugby league passage to Millie, initiated a discussion around the reading to help her understand unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical constructions and discussed some of the main ideas in the text. The purpose of these discussions was to continue to develop the relationship with Millie, to make further connections to her experiences and knowledge through the explanation of new and difficult vocabulary, to establish shared understandings around the meanings in the text, to develop her confidence and to set her up for success so that she might develop competence to read the text independently.

When I explained to Millie that we were going to read the text in front of us, she was taken aback by its length, and I had to reassure her she would be able to do this. I began to read the passage to Millie stopping at several points to ask questions as a

means to check that she was continuing to make some personal connections to the text as the following excerpt from the data show.

Transcript 6.5: ‘Do You Know Her?’

- 86 With halves kept to twenty minutes the pace of the game was
 expected to be
 87 fast and not surprisingly the first points were scored after just three
 and half
 88 minutes when NRL Women’s All Stars centre Lisa Fiola.... Lisa
 Fiola do you know
 89 her? =
 90 M: =Um Mum’s talked about her but I don’t know her in person=

After I had finished the reading, I asked Millie some general questions about bigger ideas that had been explored throughout the text. For example, we talked about women in sport more generally and how it is represented and reported on in the media. Millie felt that women’s sport should receive the same coverage as men, since women can play as ‘good a game as the men’. Following this more general discussion, we worked our way through the text discussing vocabulary and ideas to check for understanding. I deliberately chose both parts I felt she would be able to explain and parts that she would find more challenging. I wanted her to both feel confident of her knowledge about what was in the text and to also learn vocabulary that might be new to her. I also wanted to give Millie the opportunity to teach me more about the game so that she could further demonstrate her knowledge and expertise.

Transcript 6.6: Solid Defence

- 161 R: OK so let’s have a look at this. See in the third paragraph it says,
 162 ‘solid defence from the Indigenous All Stars’. What does that
 mean?
 163 M: Running up a () line ((uses two fingers to imitate running on the
 desk))
 164 R: OK
 165 M: Altogether
 166 R: Uh huh
 167 M: And to () tackle
 168 R: OK
 169 M: Um (2) and if they need help like go in and like just hit just like
 grab them and
 170 put them to the ground ((pointing to the desk again)).

Millie’s response to my question about what ‘solid defence’ might mean (Line 162) shows her again demonstrating her deep understanding by providing a specific example of how this might look in a game of rugby. This is something she had obviously experienced whilst playing. In this example, it was clear that Millie’s personal

connections to playing rugby helped her to understand and make connections to the meanings in the text.

Transcript 6.7: ‘You Need to Help Me Out Here’

- 171 R: So if I go to the next paragraph ((points to her page then points to
the place on
172 M’s page)) You need to help me out here because I don’t really
know
173 the game that well. So when it says they took advantage of the
scrum feed to
174 break the Indigenous All Star’s defensive line and find good
position. What does
175 that mean?
176 M: A scrum feed is where like they all like ((puts fingers on both hands
to form a
177 circle)) bundle up and like a big thing and then say that the half
back all be there
178 and roll it through someone’s legs ((tries to show action using
hands)) gets out
179 the back and they’ll pass it and as it says there ((points to place in
text)) they
180 took advantage of the scrum feed () good position. So they might
have passed it
181 out to a centre or a wing.
182 R: So that put them in a better position?
183 M: Yeah, put them in a way better position because they might not
been able to get
184 there fast enough

In Transcript 6.7, I asked Millie a genuine question about the text (Lines 171 and 172) to help with my own understanding of the game which was quite limited. In doing so, I was also able to determine whether Millie had understood this part of the text. Millie began by explaining to me what a ‘scrum feed’ was (Lines 176–178). Again, she used both words and gestures to do this through a specific example of how it might look in a game (Lines 176–181). During her explanation she also pointed back to the text to show me how her explanation was connected to the meanings in the text and my original question (Line 179) and then read from the text ‘they took advantage from the scrum feed...good position’ (Lines 179–180). This was evidence that she was clearly engaged in the reading process at this time and focused on the question I had asked her. It was interesting how she was able to move effortlessly between her own experiences and the ideas in the text. I then sought clarification after her explanation (Line 182) to ensure that we had a shared understanding of what she had demonstrated and explained. She said, ‘Yeah, put them in a better position because they might not have been able to get there fast enough’ (Lines 183–184).

Similar to Transcript 6.6, Millie's knowledge and experiences of playing rugby helped her to make sense of the meanings in the text, and in this exchange similar to others, she was strongly and respectfully positioned as the expert in this space.

Transcript 6.8: 'Dogs Are Hard Headed Right'

- 199 R: We'll just talk about a few more things. See ((points to text)). 'Solid defence in
200 the second half by the NRL Women's All Stars kept the Indigenous All Stars from
201 scoring despite their dogged determination'. What do you think that means?
202 M: Dogged determination might mean you know, dogs are hard headed right
203 R: Yes ((laughs))
204 M: What they want goes, so they (2)
205 R: A bit like a bull dog yeah
206 M: Yeah
207 R: Determined to do something even if it becomes difficult or dangerous

In the above transcript, I wanted to check Millie's understanding of the phrase 'dogged determination', something that I thought she may have had difficulty with (Line 201). In this example she used morphological knowledge to figure out what the word 'dogged' meant making connections to the fact that 'dogs are hard headed' (Line 202) and 'what they (meaning dogs) want goes' (Line 204). I affirmed her explanation and then provided her with a definition (Line 207). In this instant, I provided information to Millie where she did not have the resources herself. This kind of support is known as contingent scaffolding (Hammond and Gibbons 2005; Wood 1989).

Transcript 6.9: 'Like a Tablet?'

- 281 R: So that's good, is there anything else that might be a bit tricky? Oh there's
282 some words here ((points to text)) 'physical encounter encapsulated so much of
283 what epitomised the women's game'. Passion, you talked about that earlier
284 – passion team work and determination.
285 So what might this this mean?
286 M: Mmm
287 R: 'Encapsulated so much of what epitomises the women's game'. What do you
288 think that might mean?
289 M: ((reads to herself))
290 R: Have you seen those words before?

- 291 M: No.
- 292 R: OK
- 293 M: I've seen encounter before.
- 294 R: OK see this word here ((points to word encapsulates)) If we take off the beginning we are left with (...). If we take off the ending we have something that looks like capsule. Do you know what a capsule is?
- 295 M: Like a tablet?
- 296 R: Yes. The word can also mean that it represents everything about something.
- 297 So much of what 'epitomises' ((points to text)) the women's game.
- 298 So a perfect
- 299 example of the game. I guess like altogether in a capsule.

The example in Transcript 6.9 is an exchange where making the connections between Millie's own knowledge and new vocabulary was more challenging for the student. Millie struggled a little during this exchange, and I made the decision to try and reduce the cognitive load for her. After I did a little work around base words (Lines 294–296), she eventually made the link between capsule and tablets (Line 297). This was as far as this exchange went, and I don't believe in this example we had come to a shared understanding. In hindsight, more pedagogical work needed to be done here. I should have probed further in relation to her saying she had seen the word 'encounter' before (Line 293); I needed to help her to move from her knowledge of a 'capsule' to how 'encapsulated' was used in the text, and should have discussed 'epitomises'.

Following on from this exchange, which was more cognitively challenging for Millie, I wanted to reinforce the fact that she did know a great deal about this text as the following excerpt shows.

Transcript 6.10: Passion and Teamwork

- 299 So much of what epitomises ((points to text)) the women's game.
So a perfect
- 300 example of the game. I guess like altogether in a capsule.
- 301 That's how you described it to me earlier. Before we started reading
- 302 the text you said you've got to be passionate=
- 303 M: =passionate=
- 304 R: =remember I asked you what makes a really good women's rugby league player
- 305 M: Yes
- 306 R: And what did you tell me?
- 307 M: You got to have passion. You got to run with all your heart
- 308 R: Run with your heart
- 309 M: You got to (1.0) you have to have passion. You have to have team work. You

- 310 have to have (1.0) lots of different things
 311 R: So you talked about team work ((points to the text on the page)) and
 you talked
 312 about the passion ((points to text)) So you knew all this before we
 read it. Would
 313 you like to have a go at reading it? Now that we've talked about it

In this exchange I pointed Millie back to our opening discussion where she had talked about what makes a good women's rugby league player (Line 301) and how this connected with the ideas expressed in this text (Lines 311–313). This occurred just prior to when I invited Millie to read the text to me. I felt this was important, as I wanted her to feel confident about her ability to read the text independently.

Reading the Text: Connections, Confidence and Competence

In the next phase of the reading session, Millie read the text to me. During the reading, I offered praise at appropriate points and further discussed the text at particular points making connections back to our previous discussions around the meanings in the text and new vocabulary to help consolidate her learning.

Transcript 6.11: A Confident Beginning

- 317 M: No other male dominated sport in the history of Australia (.5) has
 dared to offer
 318 their female counter counterparts an opp opportunity on such a
 public stage.
 319 There may not have been the widespread pub-licity of the men's
 games however
 320 the female version of (.5) Preston Campbell (1.0) inspired NRL
 versus Indigenous
 321 Indigenous All Stars rugby league match took place on Saturday the
 12th
 322 February. For the first time in the history of Skilled Park women's a
 women's
 323 rugby league game entered the Gold Coast crowd and set the tone
 for a
 324 spectacular afternoon of rugby league
 325 R: Very good.

Millie attacked the opening paragraph with confidence and ease demonstrating fluency that was above and beyond what her test scores had revealed. During this part of the reading, she had difficulty pronouncing only two words (Lines 318 and 319) which she solved independently. This was generally characteristic of the way in which she read the whole text. In total there were only five words where she used

phonological strategies to help her sound them out, three words where she needed my assistance to help her pronounce words and two instances where she repeated a word that she had already said.

Transcript 6.12: Hard and Soft Sound

- 392 M: intercept a risky pass by the NRL All Stars ((turns over page
laughs)) and cross
393 the white line. Captain Tracey Thompson added another two points
having the
394 Indigenous girls having the indigenous girls chasing (.5) a four
point (1)
395 R: Defic
396 M: Defic Ohh
397 R: Deficit
398 M: Deficit
399 R: OK sometimes the c has a s sound
400 M: Yeah yeah it has a hard and soft sound
401 R: Yes that's exactly right do you remember that from primary school?
402 M: ((nods head))

In Transcript 6.12 Millie has difficulty decoding the word 'deficit' (Line 395). Since this was the second word in the passage containing the soft 'c' sound that she had difficulty with I decided to talk the fact sometimes 'c' sounds like 's'. She then connected this to what she had learned at primary school (Line 399).

Transcript 6.13: Dogged Determination

- 403 M: Deficit at the half time break as the NRL Women led ten to six.
404 'Solid defence in the second half by the NRL Women's All Stars
kept the
405 Indigenous All Stars from scoring despite their dogged
determination'.
406 R: You remembered that when we talked about it didn't you?
407 M: ((nods head and smiles))
408 R: Great.
409 M: 'Despite their dogged determination to break the blue defensive
line. Taking
410 advantage of a field position with ten minutes remaining five-eight
Erin Elliot
411 regathered their own kick to score the third All Stars try and push
the lead to
412 fourteen to six following a failed conversion attempt. Fullback
Tegan Sullivan (1)
413 crossed the line for the final try of the match seconds of the match
with seconds
414 to go. Hancock again converted before adding another two points' (2)

During Millie's reading, I also took opportunities to make connections back to what she had learned earlier. Again the reading here is performed with confidence and fluency. I praised her when she read the sentence containing the phrase 'dogged determination' (Line 405) commenting that she had remembered this from our previous discussions. Millie nodded and smiled.

In addition to referring back to ideas we had previously learned, I also seized opportunities to explore new ideas as the following excerpt shows.

Transcript 6.14: 'Reads the Play Beautifully'

- 365 R: Ok what does that mean? You were talking about that before. What does it
 366 mean if somebody reads the play beautifully?
 367 M: It means that you can see where holes are ((points out circles on the desk)) you
 368 can see where like where they all are and then you like say that someone's
 369 getting too far dragged in and this person here's got it they can dummy it and
 370 get it in themselves ((showing how it works on the desk)) ((Puts up hands))
 371 They're reading the play.
 372 R: Great. We can read lots of things. I've talked to fisherman who say
 373 they can read the water
 374 M: Yeah
 375 R: And they can read where the fish are and what is going on. So reading is about
 376 understanding?
 377 M: Yeah
 378 R: So when you read the play it's about understanding what's going on?
 379 M: Yeah

In asking Millie what it might mean if someone 'reads the play beautifully', I saw an opportunity to reinforce the idea that we can read other things besides words and that 'reading' is essentially about understanding. This was important for Millie as in previous discussions about her reading it was clear that she often didn't monitor whether she had understood. When I asked what it meant if someone read the play beautifully (Line 365–366), she proceeded to provide me with one of her eloquent examples complemented by her drawing on the desk (Line 367–371). The explanation was complete with her returning to my original question – 'they're *reading* the play' (Line 317). I then made reference to what others had told me about 'reading the water'. We both concluded the exchange in agreement that reading was about 'understanding'. In this exchange, shared understanding was established.

After Millie had finished the reading, we both reflected on her accomplishments.

Transcript 6.15: They Won't Lose

- 455 R: Wow you did really well. You read some really interesting words.
456 M: Yes
457 R: Words you hadn't seen before=
458 M: =It's hard
459 R: But you did so well you did really well and you knew what it was
all about. You
460 understood so that's even better. So what's important when we
read?
461 M: It's about understanding
462 R: Yes so it's not so much about getting every word right but about
understanding.
463 You should be really proud of yourself.
464 M: Can I take that away and show my Mum what I read. Dad is coming
to visit
465 tonight so I could tell him too.
466 R: Yes. Are you watching the game tonight?
467 M: Yeah
468 R: Who barracks for who?
469 M: All of us barrack for Queensland
470 R: So if they don't win everyone will be sad
471 M: Yeah
472 R: You'll need a box of tissues
473 M: ((laughs)) but they won't lose
474 R: They won't lose is that what you think?
475 M: Yes

After the reading, I wanted to let Millie know that I was proud of her achievements. I reinforced that she had learned some new and interesting words and that even more importantly she had demonstrated understanding of the text. It was also clear that Millie was proud of her own achievements evidenced by the fact that she wanted to 'take' the text away and show her parents (Lines 464–465).

Implications

Throughout this 40-min reading session, I have illustrated how making connections can help to develop confidence and achieve competence for Millie. This reading session and subsequent reading sessions with Millie disrupted the ways in which Millie had experienced reading help in the past.

First, I took time to understand who Millie was and what she was knowledgeable about and interested in. Lei and I had deliberately chosen texts that Millie was knowledgeable about and texts that her peers would be expected to be able to read. We set our expectations high for Millie. Further, by using texts that explored content she was familiar with, she was able to demonstrate her expertise through the various discussions we had. She was set up as the expert during the reading, which was counter to her previous experiences of reading. In this reading experience and subsequent experiences, we were reading *with* Millie and discussing ideas both in and outside of the reading. It was not simply a case of Millie reading to us, which was characteristic of the reading help she had previously experienced.

Making connections in these reading experiences however did not simply mean connecting to Millie's interests. Rather, it involved a constant process of making connections throughout the reading. It was also about understanding the skills and strategies students use and knowing what students know in terms of the knowledge and concepts required at school. Connections were made to things she previously knew and had experienced, and connections were made to ideas discussed throughout the reading. Connections were made to ideas to both within and outside of the text. This process also involved continually checking for shared understanding as we did this work. To establish shared understanding of what was being conveyed required a recurrent process of checking and rechecking. Edwards and Mercer (2013) refer to this as establishing 'common knowledge'. This analysis showed that utilising students' funds of identity as resources in the classroom and as a means for learners to make connections to the knowledge and concepts that are required at school is a collaborative process of building of meaning between students and teachers. Throughout the reading, pedagogical work was employed, to ensure that Millie would be successful when reading the text. There were discussions and instruction around the meanings in the text, unfamiliar vocabulary and decoding.

Another interesting insight as I analysed the transcript from this reading event was the number of Millie's literacy strengths, strengths that the previous reading tests had failed to reveal. In this reading event, Millie presented as being very articulate. Further, she was very knowledgeable about and engaged in the reading of this particular text.

Finally, relationship work was foundational to working with Millie and the other Indigenous students in this program. It was important to take time to understand who Millie was as a learner both in and out of school. With greater knowledge about Millie's funds of identity, I was able to make connections to these funds during the reading event I have recounted here in this chapter. And with greater knowledge of Millie's funds of identity, Lei was able to continue to plan reading experiences for Millie that were strongly connected to her knowledge and experiences that she was passionate about outside of the classroom. Millie herself captured the important of this relational and connecting work as she reflected with pride about her improved confidence and competence as a reader:

Miss [Lei] helps us to read better. I am reading about things that I am interested in. I have improved in the way that I look at a book. I can conquer new words. I understand because I want to read it and we talk about what we read. I keep reading on to try and figure out words I don't know or I ask someone or try and sound it out. I am feeling a lot better than I was at the start of the year.

References

- Allington, R. L. (1998). *Teaching struggling readers: Articles from "the Reading teacher"*. Newark: International Reading Association.
- Alvermann, D. (2001). Reading adolescents' reading identities: Looking back to see ahead. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(8), 676–690. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/stable/40018739>.
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). (2016). *NAPLAN achievement in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy: National report for 2016*. Sydney: ACARA. <https://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports> Accessed 14 Apr 2018.
- Australian Womens Rugby League (2011). *Women's all stars a great success*. Retrieved from http://websites.sportstg.com/assoc_page.cgi?client=7-2131-0-0-0&SID=29155&&news_task=DETAIL&articleID=16174508
- Bloome, D. (1985). Reading as a social process. *Language Arts*, 62(4), 134–142.
- Boon, H. J., & Lewthwaite, B. E. (2016). Signatures of quality teaching for Indigenous students. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 43(4), 453–471. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-016-0209-4>.
- Brozo, W. G., & Simpson, M. L. (2007). *Content literacy for today's adolescents: Honoring diversity and building competence*. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Clay, M. M. (1982). *Observing young readers*. London/Auckland: Heinemann.
- Cummins, J. (2007). *Promoting literacy in multilingual contexts* (Research Monograph No. 5). What works? Research into practice. Ontario. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/Cummins.pdf>. Accessed 25 Sept 2015.
- Edwards, D., & Mercer, N. (2013). *Common knowledge (Routledge revivals)*. Routledge: The Development of Understanding in the Classroom.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Guthrie, J. T. (2010). *Motivations for reading questionnaire*. Retrieved from <http://www.cori.umd.edu/measures/MRQ.pdf>. Accessed 16 May 2016.
- Hammond, J., & Gibbons, P. (2005). Putting scaffolding to work: The contribution of scaffolding in articulating ESL education. *Prospect*, 20(1), 6–30.
- Heap, J. L. (1991). Reading as cultural activities: Enabling and reflective texts. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 21(1), 11–39.
- Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Llopart, M., & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2017). Strategies and resources for contextualising the curriculum based on the funds of knowledge approach: a literature review. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 44(3), 255–274. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-017-0237-8>.
- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997). The social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practice* (pp. 185–226). St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Luke, A., Elkins, J., Weir, K., Land, R., Carrington, V., Dole, S., Pendergast, D., Kapitzke, C., Van Kraayenoord, C., Moni, K., McIntosh, A., Mayer, D., Bahr, M., Hunter, L., Chadbourne, R., Bean, T., Alvermann, D., & Stevens, L. (2003). *Beyond the middle: A report about literacy and numeracy development of target group students in the middle years of schooling*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Mellor, S., & Corrigan, M. (2004). *The case for change: A review of contemporary research on Indigenous education outcomes* (Australian Education Review, 47). Camberwell: ACER.
- Moje, E. B., Young, J. P., Reardon, J. E., & Moore, D. W. (2000). Reinventing adolescent literacy for new times: Perennial and millennial issues. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(5), 400–410. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/docview/216910420?accountid=12528>

- Moll, L. C., & González, N. (2004). Engaging life: A funds-of-knowledge approach to multicultural education. In J. A. Banks & C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp. 699–715). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.
- Neale, M. D. (1997). *Neale analysis of reading ability* (3rd ed.). Melbourne: ACER Press.
- Patterson, A. J., Cormack, P. A., & Green, W. C. (2012). The child, the text and the teacher: Reading primers and reading instruction. *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, 48(2), 185–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2011.644302>.
- Prior, M. (2013). Language and literacy challenges for indigenous children in Australia. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 18(2), 123–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2013.840901>.
- Purdie, N., Reid, K., Frigo, T., Stone, A., & Kleinhenz, E. (2011). *Literacy and numeracy learning: Lessons from the longitudinal literacy and numeracy study for indigenous students* (ACER research monograph 65). Camberwell: ACER.
- Rennie, J. (2004). Oral reading: Constructing school readers, learning communities. *The International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, 1, 35–44.
- Rennie, J. (2006). Meeting kids at the school gate: The literacy and numeracy practices of a remote indigenous community. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 33(3), 123–142. org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03216845>.
- Rennie, J. (2016). Rethinking reading instruction for adolescent readers: The 6R's. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 39(1), 42–53.
- Rennie, J. A., & Patterson, A. (2010). Young Australians reading in a digital world. In D. R. Cole & D. L. Pullen (Eds.), *Multiliteracies in motion: Current theory and practice* (pp. 207–223). New York/London: Routledge.
- Rowling, J. K. (1999). *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. UK: Bloomsbury Publishing
- Ruddell, R. B., & Unrau, N. J. (2013). Reading as a meaning-construction process: The reader, the text, and the teacher. In D. Alvermann, N. Unrau, & R. Ruddell (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (6th ed., pp. 1015–1068). Newark: International Reading Association.
- Sanacore, J., & Palumbo, A. (2009). Understanding the fourth-grade slump: Our point of view. *The Educational Forum*, 73, 67–74.
- Santoro, N., Reid, J. A., Crawford, L., & Simpson, L. (2011). Teaching Indigenous children: Listening to and learning from Indigenous teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(10), 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n10.2>.
- Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2012). What is disciplinary literacy and why does it matter? *Topics in Language Disorders*, 32(1), 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.1097/TLD.0b013e318244557a>.
- Street, B. V. (Ed.). (1993). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Subero, D., Vujasinović, E., & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2017). Mobilising funds of identity in and out of school. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 47(2), 247–263., doi-org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2016.1148116>.
- Whithear, J. L. (2009). Slipping through the cracks: Why too many adolescents still struggle to read. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 17(2), 30–46.
- Wigfield, A., & Guthrie, J. T. (1997). Relations of children's motivation for reading to the amount and breadth of their reading. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(3), 420–432.
- Wood, D. J. (1989). Social interaction as tutoring. In M. H. Bornstein & J. S. Bruner (Eds.), *Crosscurrents in contemporary psychology. Interaction in human development* (pp. 59–80). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Dr Jennifer Rennie is a Senior Lecturer in Literacy Education in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. Prior to working in higher education, she worked as a primary and high school teacher. Her research interests relate to Indigenous literacies, students who are marginalised from mainstream schooling and reading pedagogy for disengaged adolescent readers.