Socialisation and contestation in an ESL class of adolescent African refugees

PETER MICKAN, KATRINA LUCAS, BRIEN DAVIES, MI-OK LIM – The University of Adelaide

ABSTRACT
This paper examines instances of student contestation in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class of adolescent African refugees. A few students resist or contest socialisation practices in a class community. The study reported in this paper is part of a longitudinal study of refugee students' socialisation from initial schooling in the ESL programme for new arrivals into post-programme pathways. The first stage of the study was conducted in a Foundation Pathway A ESL class over the course of one year. The analysis of spoken interactions in the ESL class illustrate moments of disputation, which challenge school procedures. It is the interaction of familiar with unfamiliar practices that helps to explain the tensions and conflicts in the class. The social practices that newcomers know and that have served to sustain them as refugees come into conflict with schooling practices. The analysis suggests that socialisation – that is, learning to participate in the social practices of communities – involves adaptation and transformation of valued practices, as well as their adoption. Socialisation into communities is a process of making choices, involving acceptance of practices and contesting practices.

Introduction
The purpose of this paper is to examine instances of contestation in the social practices of an ESL class in a secondary school. The changing nature of school populations has influenced social relations in ESL classes in South Australia. Until recently, refugee and migrant students were mainly of Asian and Middle Eastern origin. The ESL students' attitudes and classroom behaviours, their learning skills and cultural experiences were more-or-less attuned to school procedures, classroom management and educational expectations. The recent arrival in Australian schools of refugee students from cultural contexts of deprivation has challenged school management procedures and teachers' pedagogies.

Refugees from Africa, particularly Sudan, are at present a major group of refugee arrivals coming to Australia under the humanitarian immigration programme (DIMA 2006). The number of Africans settled in Australia has
been steadily rising since 2001, in accordance with recommendations from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. In 2003–04, a total of 13 851 visas were granted under the humanitarian programme; 63 per cent of those assisted under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy were from Africa, an increase of 20 per cent compared with 2002–03 (DIMIA 2004). Refugees from Africa may face more complex barriers to settlement than non-African humanitarian arrivals due to higher levels of poverty, larger families, and lower levels of education and English proficiency (DIMIA 2004). Many have spent up to 12 years living in refugee camps before coming to Australia, and women who have had limited access to education often head large families arriving from areas in East Africa that have been affected by war and civil unrest. Such experiences of instability and disruption have wide-ranging implications for humanitarian entrants. Outcomes in terms of employment, education, income and health are generally poorer for humanitarian entrants than for other groups of migrants (DIMIA 2003; Miller, Mitchell and Brown 2005).

Adolescents from unstable and disrupted social contexts are particularly vulnerable, as they are at critical stages in their physical and mental development. Students’ experiences during settlement in Australia influence attitudes, behaviours, senses of identity, and emotional and mental health. Teachers find some students withdrawn, aggressive, unable to concentrate, anxious and hyperactive (Coelho 1998, cited in Miller, Mitchell and Brown 2005: 20). The students need to make major adjustments to a new educational system and new social conditions (Miller, Mitchell and Brown 2005: 20). Initial schooling experiences impact upon their wellbeing. They are multilingual, but face the need to learn English discourses for participation in multiple social practices in Australia.

This paper examines instances of student contestation in an ESL class of adolescent African refugees. Recorded spoken exchanges between the teacher and students comprise the data for analysis of disputation in the class. In routine management of the class of new arrivals, an experienced teacher comes into conflict with one or two students. The students’ assertiveness is in tension with the teacher’s apprenticing role for the development of literacy skills in English. The students’ resistance to social expectations threatens study conditions in the class, but the class functions within the wider environment of the school so that school regulations impinge on decisions made at the local level of the class. This contributes to stress and strain in relationships in class.

Experienced members of a community have expectations that newcomers will adapt to and adopt customary and established social practices in processes of apprenticeship and participation in their practices. Newcomers at the
margins and periphery of communities face changes and transformations that are challenging and potentially troublesome. Socialisation of newcomers into a society and into its communities is not uncontested. In the process of apprenticeship, participants have choices – to adapt and adopt social practices, or to resist and reject, or to recreate and transform. This paper highlights contestation in a class of refugees from Africa who have lived at length in refugee camps and who have limited formal schooling experiences.

Entry to a new society confronts us with new experiences. When we enter unfamiliar contexts we need to orient ourselves to the local environment. The orientation to what is significant and to the meanings in an unfamiliar culture is initially determined by or based on past experiences. Our understanding of what we see and of what is going on is based on socialisation; that is, on our participation with other community members in innumerable social practices in which we have learned to share meanings and to use the communities’ meaning-making resources. From our interactions with experienced members, we gain understandings of ways of doing things. Prior experiences influence our responses and reactions in new situations. In fact, the prior experiences enable us to operate in new contexts as we transfer learned behaviours and meanings to new contexts. People are adept at making changes as they constantly adapt to new circumstances in their lives. But socialisation is not homogenisation. The familiar is in tension with unfamiliar practices. It is the interaction of familiar with unfamiliar practices that helps to explain tensions and conflicts in the class of new arrivals in a South Australian school. The social practices that newcomers know and that have served to sustain them in other contexts at times come into conflict with practices unfamiliar to them.

Before coming to Australia refugee students have adapted to and survived camp life and conflict (Miller, Mitchell and Brown 2005). Entry into Australia exposes immigrants to familiar, as well as new and variant, practices. Formative experiences in the past give rise to local disagreements, contradictions and tensions. At the interface of the recognisable and the new, individuals face pressures to adapt to, and to adopt, local practices. People intent on joining new communities with varieties of practices and behaviours face personal change. They face options that might include the surrender of practices and conceptions of self moulded over time from multiple prior encounters. Or they may contest expectations placed upon them.

Newcomers with different cultural experiences are confronted with experienced members’ assumed meanings and understandings of actions and behaviours. Socialisation into communities of practice is a social semiotic process; that is, the development of understandings of practices with their
resources of tools and spaces and roles and relationships (Mickan 2006). Apprenticeship into a community, whether a sporting team, a science class or an engineering group, involves learning participation in characteristic and customary practices (Mickan 2007). In educational settings socialisation incorporates the inculcation of values and behaviours. Apprenticeship processes in school classes involve behavioural modifications and alignments, which may conflict with students’ habitual practices. It is the purpose of this paper to examine in-class conflict in terms of the socialisation of newcomers into selected practices of a school.

Socialisation in communities of practice

Twenty years ago Schieffelin and Ochs (1986: 163) analysed socialisation through the use of language, and socialisation in the use of language. They described the development of social meanings in the following way:

Features of language that are variable across contexts of use are candidates for carrying social meaning. Members of a social group have tacit understanding of grammatical, discourse, and lexical structures as tools for signalling particular social meanings, for example, that a particular activity or affective disposition is in play. In other words, members of a social group have linguistic resources available to them to construct and interpret social actions.

(Schieffelin and Ochs 1986: 171)

Schieffelin and Ochs (1986: 167–68), focusing on children’s language development, argued that knowing a community’s language entails ‘acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution, and interpretations in and across socially defined situations’. The nature of ‘socially defined situations’ has been given focus by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of community of practice. According to Lave and Wenger (1991: 21), learning takes place when learners move from legitimate peripheral participation to ‘full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community’. Watson-Gegeo (2004: 341) defines the notion of legitimate participation as the ‘incorporation of learners into the activities of communities of practice, beginning as a legitimated (recognized) participant on the edges (periphery) of the activity, and moving through a series of increasingly expert roles as learners’ skills develop’. Participation becomes ‘both the goal as well as the means of learning’ (Kong and Pearson 2003: 88).

Lave and Wenger (1991: 98) describe a community of practice as ‘a set of relations among persons, activity, and world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’. A class that studies a specific curriculum subject over time forms a community in order to learn practices for participation in that community (Mickan 2007).
According to Beckett, Gonzalez and Schwartz (2004: 164), newcomers need to 'function in the discourse acceptable for the community' in order to obtain membership of a community. Iddings (2005: 166) argues that learning in a community entails 'picking up the jargon, behaviour, and norms of a new social group as well as adopting the group’s belief systems'. Knowing a language entails familiarity with the discourse resources, which differentiate and define the practices of communities. In class communities of practice, students respond to and appropriate discourses needed for daily work and are apprenticed into uses of language for participation in and understandings of specialised social practices defined by curriculum subjects (Mickan 2006, 2007). This is in essence a meaning-making process (Hodge and Kress 1988). Johnson (1995: 133) considers the learning process to be socialisation into certain ways of making sense and perceiving one's experiences, and the acquisition of 'new cultural frames of reference'. When people enter a new community, they gradually appropriate the semiotic resources, the language, actions and perspectives of the community in order to join in its activities (Willett 1995).

A second-language learner, viewed from the community of practice perspective, is seen as 'a newcomer beginning to participate in the practices of a particular community' (Toohey 1996: 553). Willet (1995) points out that new community members and language learners do not blindly appropriate the language and culture of a new community, nor is it only the newcomers who work in the community at shaping and reshaping. From a socialisation perspective, 'people not only construct shared understandings in the process of interaction, [but] also evaluate and contest those understandings as they struggle to further their individual agendas' (Willett 1995: 475). Socialisation is not trouble-free, and refugee students with stressful and distressing personal histories struggle with becoming members of new communities of practice. The work of Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) reminds us of the importance of language in signalling and exchanging meanings. The role of language in signifying meanings is central to socialisation in education. For students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the use of language for expression of meanings, for explaining actions, for responding to instructions, is unavailable or only partially available. The inability to use a shared semiotic system of language contributes to the potential for conflict.

Although there has been some research into contestation in the classroom, such as Pavlidou’s (2003) study exploring patterns of participation in classroom interaction, there has been very little study into ESL classroom contestation and non-compliance. Pavlidou (2003) compared boys’ and girls’ non-compliance in a Greek high school and found that traditional
gender roles were reproduced, although different discursive patterns were evident amongst members of the class. Markee’s (2004) study of university-level ESL classes in the United States used conversational analysis to describe the structural properties of zones of interactional transition, the loci of potential interactional trouble such as challenges and misunderstandings that involve talk occurring at the boundaries of different classroom speech exchange systems. The study revealed that challenges by learners legitimately occurred in the answer slots following counter question and question turns, while teacher challenges occurred in the question, counter question or comment slots of zones of interactional transition. Yu and Mickan (in press) describe English as a Foreign Language college students’ defending and contesting of speaking rights in small group interactions as they negotiated speaking turns in preparation for doing a task. Power relations were acted out in students’ spoken contributions and orientations as they positioned themselves for a group work task.

The research context

This report is part of a longitudinal study documenting the experiences of refugee students in initial English classes and in subsequent mainstream schooling or other programmes. Over the course of a year, the researcher visited and worked with the teacher in class, noting events and teaching approaches and video-recording selected lessons at intervals. The speech extracts in this study have been transcribed from video-recordings of lessons. While observing lessons and analysing the recordings of the class in action, we noted the frequency of disruptive incidents with which the teacher had to deal. Hence the topic for the discussion in this paper.

The students in this study attend a specialist ESL high school, which is part of the New Arrivals Programme (NAP) that provides intensive English language support for students who are newly arrived in Australia. The aims of NAP centres are (a) to prepare students for success in the mainstream school curriculum and (b) to develop their confidence to live in the Australian community (DECS 2006). The programme employs a number of strategies to support students, including:

- intensive English language support with specialist ESL teachers
- involvement in the whole school curriculum
- small classes
- a variety of activities within the school and greater community, including excursions and social events
- bilingual classroom support (DECS 2006).
Interpreters, bilingual school services officers and community liaison officers support communication between students and their families and school staff. Students enrolled in the NAP course are migrant and refugee/humanitarian status students. All students are enrolled on a continual basis, and on completion of their studies are expected to transfer to a mainstream high school or senior secondary school. Students can stay at the school for up to two years, depending on their level of English and previous education.

Students are assessed soon after starting at the school and are placed in a level appropriate to their English competence. The curriculum is delivered at four language proficiency levels – Foundation, Intermediate, Advanced and Transition – and across three Learning Pathways – A, B and C. Pathways A and B offer those students with little or no previous schooling, severely disrupted schooling or special needs extended time (that is, two years) at the school. Pathway C students have not had disrupted schooling and spend up to four terms at school, depending on their English abilities.

This study was conducted in a Foundation Pathway A ESL class over the course of one year. The course consisted of 30 lessons per week, 16 of which were allocated to ESL, while the other half was allocated to other subjects including mathematics, science, society and environment, computing, home economics and physical education. The study focused on the ESL lessons and Home Group sessions. Home Group is held every morning before lessons. It consists of 20 minutes for housekeeping matters related to school management. The Home Group teacher informs students about events in the school and about rules and behaviours. The ESL teacher administered most of the Home Group sessions, in addition to teaching 15 ESL lessons a week.

The ESL course comprises core grammar, which is linked to specific topics designed to ‘teach students about life and culture in Australia’ (School curriculum guide 2004: 12). At the Foundation level, topics are chosen so that the ‘essential knowledge and skills learners need to manage their new school and local environments can be developed’ (School curriculum guide 2004: 12). Topics are designed to ‘value and build on students’ previous knowledge and form linguistic links to their home language’, and are also chosen to ‘prepare students for their transition to high school or other educational or work opportunities’ (School curriculum guide 2004: 12). Communication skills and grammatical functions are revised, developed and contextualised across the curriculum so that students can meet specific outcomes as they progress through proficiency levels. Students are also ‘encouraged and supported to develop and maintain a positive self concept, to be responsible for their own learning and to develop English skills for social and educational purposes’ (School curriculum guide 2004: 12).
Assessment is both formative and summative and covers the four macro-skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The development of study skills, which are considered essential for success at high school and in further education, is also assessed.

The classroom teacher is an experienced ESL and mainstream educator who has worked extensively with Indigenous children and students with behavioural issues. He has been teaching the Foundation Pathway A course for a number of years and has been actively involved in development of curriculum for the school.

The twelve students, aged between 12 and 16 years, were from Africa. They came with refugee status and had experienced interrupted schooling in refugee camps prior to arrival in Australia. Ten of the students were Sudanese, one was from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and one was from Liberia. They came to Australia with members of their extended families, most of them with only their mother as a guardian. We collected data during the first four terms of the students’ two-year Pathway A course. During this period we regularly observed a block of ESL lessons, video-recorded several of these blocks, audio-recorded and transcribed extended interviews with the students in pairs and with the teacher, and collected examples of students’ work and class resources such as readers. This report is part of a larger, ongoing study reporting the settlement experiences of students who have taken part in the NAP. The transcript used for this analysis records interactions in the Home Group session at the beginning of the school day.

**Contestation in class**

The classroom in which the following exchanges take place is busy and quite crowded. At the beginning of the day students come into the classroom, moving to their desks, standing around and chatting amongst themselves and talking with the teacher and researcher. It is a time for housekeeping and for dealing with student and school issues. The social practices are connected with establishing relationships at the beginning of the day and communicating messages and sharing personal experiences. For the students it is an opportunity to catch up with one another and to prepare for lessons. Some students gather around the teacher and talk informally with him, while others talk with the researcher who is video-recording the class. Having worked together for almost a year, there is a casual familiarity amongst them as they prepare for the formal commencement of Home Group and the first lesson. The following extract captures the opening moments of the school day.
EXTRACT 1 FROM TRANSCRIPT 9.11.05: LINES 1–17

Students are coming into class for Home Group, moving around the room and chatting. Student (S) 9, S8 and S1 are seated. The teacher (T) is talking to S7 and S4 about an acoustic guitar he is holding. S3 is leaning on T’s table. S2 is moving around the room. Students are talking all at once.

1 T: [Holding a guitar in his lap and showing S7 the strings] … just right for
guitars, alright. And, ah, therefore you would need to get the guitar
strings off, alright [S3 dances around]. But I have problem, my
problem is
that I play the guitar this way, right [demonstrates], and other people
play the guitar that way [demonstrates], and of course it means
that the
strings [S3 stands next to T] are gonna be in a different spot if I play it
around this way, see if I –
8 S3: I’m gonna bring mine here.
9 T: It’s not mine, it’s S12’s.
10 S3: No, I wanna bring mine.
11 T: Have you got one?
12 S3: Ya.
13 T: Oh, well, bring it in. [To S12] Do you wanna go and put that in the
workroom so it’s nice and safe [holds the guitar out to S12, S3
tries to
take it].
15 S3: Can I?
17 T: No [shakes his head].

S3 attracts attention by dancing to the guitar held by the ESL/Home Group teacher. Addressing the teacher, he bluntly declares: I’m gonna bring mine here [8]. The teacher either misunderstands him or brushes him off, but S3 is insistent: No, I wanna bring mine [10]. The teacher checks that S3 has a guitar and then agrees that he can bring his guitar to school. S3 tries to take the guitar from the teacher and offers to take it to the storeroom for safe-keeping. The teacher rejects the offer. In this brief exchange, S3 signals his wish to relate to what the teacher is doing by dancing to the guitar,
identifies with the teacher’s guitar playing, seeks a place and role in what the teacher is doing through guitar ownership, and physically moves in to take the guitar. In this space S3 asserts individuality, confronts the teacher and expresses identity as a guitar player who wishes to be recognised as an individual member of the class.

S3 is a 15-year-old Sudanese boy who arrived in Australia at the beginning of the year and was enrolled at the school within a week of arrival. He came with his older brother and his brother’s family from Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. S3 spent five years living in Kakuma and attended primary school during that time. Schooling at Kakuma camp is often limited in resources and space, and influenced by the camp situation of poor relations with the local population, a near total lack of economic opportunity, crime, recurrent food shortages and frequent instances of gender-based violence ( Refugees International 2003). While in Kakuma, S3 and his brothers were able to establish contact with S3’s older sister in Adelaide, who then assisted S3 and his brothers to gain refugee visas to Australia. S3 now lives with his brother and brother’s family. Although they have made contact with the father in Sudan, they are still searching for their mother. As S3 informed us:

I don’t like Australia because I don’t have my mother or father, only brothers … my mother is remain in Sudan … I don’t know where is … now always call in Sudan to find, if someone find my mother … we find my father, but we didn’t find my mother [Interview 19.9.05].

S3 goes on to describe his experiences living in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya:

Kenya is, ah, it’s too bad, when you walk around at 6 o’clock or 7, if they can find you, can kill you … throw in the road … because it’s their country … Turkana … in the camp there are some people fight with Turkana, they fight always. We don’t have gun, they have a gun, we have a knife … they come at night with a gun and shoot the people and take everything in your room [Interview 19.9.05].

At the time of the recording, S3 has almost completed four terms of schooling. He is familiar with the teacher and is confident and secure in talking with him. He is keen to reveal aspects of his life outside school and at the same time is learning about acceptable behaviour in class. The instability and uncertainty that has coloured much of S3’s past experiences and current family circumstances may be a contributing factor to the behavioural issues that S3 experiences in the school. At the time of the recording of the above transcript, S3 has been suspended on two occasions, and on two separate occasions has been given warnings by the vice-principal. Each incident involved physical altercations with other students and conflict with
school management. S3 is aware of the conflict management issues, as we see in this excerpt from an informal report written by the vice-principal on her discussion with S3 after one incident:

Advised S3 to stop and think before getting so angry so quickly. S3 agreed that this was a problem for him [Student Records: viewed March 2006].

S3 belongs to a class community, which needs to work together. Membership in the class is signified through individual, as well as communal, activities. Through his actions S3 seeks to secure his place in the class, even though he has been in the class for almost one school year. S3 displays a need for personal recognition and does this by physically engaging the teacher’s attention. He is able to do so because there is time before the official commencement of Home Group, and because the teacher is casually talking about the guitar with S7 (a 15-year-old Sudanese boy) and S12 (a 13-year-old Sudanese girl). In fact, S3 distracts the teacher to gain his attention. It could be argued that S3 does not feel secure in the class community, but it could equally be argued that because he feels secure he wishes to reveal additional aspects of his life to the teacher. He wants the teacher to relate to him personally. Seeking recognition through personal assertion is part of S3’s search for affirmation of his place and role in the class community. Before formal instruction commences, S3 is able to gain the teacher’s attention. But the teacher also needs to maintain order in the class and does not accede to S3’s request to put S12’s guitar away. The tension between freedom and authority, testing teacher limits while asserting self and individuality, is a fundamental feature of joining a community, as new members respond to the community’s practices and adjust to its values.

In the next extract there is the potential for disturbing the whole class. The researcher (R) is video-recording the class, which attracts students’ attention. The exchange takes place immediately after Extract One.

**EXTRACT 2 FROM TRANSCRIPT 9.11.05: LINES 16–25**

( ) indicates unclear utterance

16 R: [S6, S4 and S7 come over to the camera] Everybody’s got short hair now!

17 S4: Yes [rubs his head], because –

18 R: Because it’s summer. Especially S7!

19 [S7, S4 and S6 and then S3 play up to the camera, talking. S4 makes a rude sign.]
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21 T: Right, S4? Yeah, we knew that that'd happen, yeah.

22 S4: [laughs] Hey, there are ( ) [He sits down.]

23 S7: The camera on? [He kisses the camera.]

24 S3: Teacher I do homework

25 T: Oh, good boy.

The students are crowding around the researcher whom they know well by this stage of the year. She talks casually with them, as the lesson has not yet officially begun. S4 responds to the researcher’s remark about hair and then acts up to the camera by making a rude sign. The deliberate attention-seeking behaviour gains the teacher’s attention and he directly admonishes the student (Right, S4? [21]), but overlooks the misbehaviour with a dismissive comment: Yeah, we knew that that’d happen, yeah [21]. The teacher shows disapproval without fuss and in the next breath responds approvingly to S3, who announces completion of homework. The individual students vie for attention, with the potential for disruption, but the teacher’s restrained responses attuned to individual students discourages inappropriate behaviours while maintaining order in the class and valuing relevant practices – in this case, homework. Against the backdrop of a series of misdemeanors, S3 again seeks approval by telling the teacher that he has done his homework. He has internalised the importance of homework as a valued social practice in this community and the teacher reinforces that perception: Oh, good boy [25].

Immediately the teacher has to attend to a new incident. S7 responds to the researcher’s comment, kisses the camera and receives a blow from S6.

EXTRACT 3 FROM TRANSCRIPT 9.11.05: LINES 26–29

26 R: You got your ear pierced!

27 S7: Yeah. Just let me, I want to do something [kisses the camera again] [S6

28 slaps him on the back of the head].

29 T: Right, S7. S6 come and sit down, please.

The students are strong and at times act out relationships physically. The slap S6 gives S7 is done playfully, but there is potential for escalation of the misbehaviour with reactions from S7, so the teacher intervenes at once, asserting authority (Right. S7, S6 [29]) and spelling out a practical course of action (come and sit down [29]). He addresses the boys respectfully (please [29]), avoiding intensification of the incident and minimising its impact on other students.
Just as the class is about to settle, S11 walks in late. This is not the first time he has come late to lessons.

**EXTRACT 4 FROM TRANSCRIPT 9.11.05: LINES 42–61**

42 [S3 sits down and S11 walks in the door]
43 T: Quickly S11, you're running late [looks at the clock] *again!*
44 S9: Teacher, something smell.
45 S11: Late for what? I play outside.
46 T: Yeah, but S11, look at the time [points to the clock]. What time you stop and
47 get over to class?
48 S11: T2 say to me like this, you go to office for five minutes, now.
49 T: Who were you talking with over in the office?
50 S11: What?
51 T: Who were you talking with over in the office?
52 S11: I not talking, ah, T2 tell me, go and come back, go and buy a pencil.
53 T: Oh, T2 told you to go and buy a better pencil did she?
54 S11: Yeah [S11 sits down].
55 T: Alright, that's alright. 'Cause what you gotta remember is, as soon as that bell
56 goes in the morning, right, as soon as that first bell goes, that means you need
57 to come off to class, alright? Now [the phone in the office next door starts
58 ringing], uh, most people get here with enough time to do all the little things
59 that they need to do, like buy pencils, and get drinks and go to the toilet [he
60 gets up and points to his wristwatch], that's why buying a watch and having a watch is really
61 important.

**EXTRACT 5 [CONTINUED FROM EXTRACT 4]: LINES 82–88**

82 T: Now, in the big schools, what sometimes happens, depends on what school you go to, ah, as
soon as bells go, they give students two minutes, they give an early bell, and then they have a later bell, which is only about two or three minutes, and every student must be back at their classroom by the second bell. This is after recess, in the morning, after recess and also, uhm, ah, after lunch as well. And students who do get back late, if they don't have a special piece of paper [holds out his hand and pretends to write on it] that the teacher has given them, to say they were late, ah, then those students automatically go on school detentions.

The class is part of the wider school community, which has institutional regulations and requirements governing members’ relationships. Punctuality is necessary for the class to work together within the school. The teacher stresses the importance of punctuality. Individual students need to conform in class and out of class, but S11 does not feel responsible for coming late, so he wants to clear his name. He knows from experience that lateness requires an explanation and that a satisfactory excuse expiates late arrival. The teacher accepts the explanation and continues to instruct the students on the importance of being on time, but this time explaining it in terms of attendance in mainstream classes (in the big schools [82]), in order to raise students’ awareness of what will be expected of them when they transfer to mainstream schooling in high school. He warns students of being put on detention if they come late.

Mention of detention reminds the teacher of some detention notices he has been given by a colleague to hand out to two students (See below: I’m only giving these to you from a teacher [92–93]). This is one of the administrative tasks of the Home Group teacher. He takes out the notes to be handed to the two students: [takes two yellow slips out from his book [91–92]].

EXTRACT 6 (CONTINUED FROM EXTRACT 5): LINES 89–131

(   ) indicates unclear utterance

89  S6: (   )

90  T: [holds up his finger to silence S6] Talking about detentions, I’ve been asked to pass these on [takes two yellow slips out from his
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92 book], now can I ask these two people, I'm only giving these
to you
93 from a teacher.
94 S7:  T2
95 T:  So, please don't yell at me, please do not argue with me. Alright?
96 S6:  But, Teacher, why you –
97 T:  Alright? I'm just passing them on because he's asked me to give
98 them to you. If you've got a problem with it, you need to go and
99 see him [hands one slip to S6], alright?
100 S3:  that one's got your name on it
101 [reaches over to give the other slip to S7, to pass to S3], alright?
102 T:  I don't want to do detention.
103 S6:  Hey, T .
104 T:  … it to you, so don't [get angry] with me.
105 S6:  [T ] ( )
106 T:  How 'bout you sort that out with T2.
107 S6:  Hey!
108 T:  Because that's your business and not everyone else's business.
109 S7:  [picks up the slip] Hey, Teacher, take this Teacher, he won't take it
110 from me say like that, I didn't [reaches out to give the slip to T].
111 T:  [looks at S3] S3. It's not my problem, right, it's between you and
112 T2,
113 right? Like I said, I don't wanna have an argument with you, I've
114 had no problem with you, I didn't give you the detention, I've been
115 asked to give you the detention slip. If you don't take it, if you're
116 angry about it, then we'll just have to take it to T3 [vice-principal].
117 S3:  Ya!
118 T:  Well, give it back to me [reaches over to take the slip from S7]. I'll
119 have – that means that you've made more work for me now
120 because
121 I've gotta go off, and I've gotta see T3 and I've gotta see T2 about
122 it, which means that it's an extra job that I've gotta do.
Detention is a disciplinary procedure in the school. S3 and S6 know the significance of detention. S3 protests loudly (T: please don’t yell at me, please do not argue with me [95]). S3’s protestations are directed at the Home Group teacher, even though he is only delivering the message for another teacher because the student has not reported for detention. S3 resists accepting the note (I don’t want to do detention [102]). What is significant is the strength of S3’s protestations. He claims the right to reject the message. He challenges school procedures and disturbs the whole class. He directs hostility toward the teacher, who has dual responsibilities – the maintenance of good working relationships with individual students within the class community and the application of school rules. Both roles are critical for positive working relationships. He seeks to deflect the hostility directed at him. The students manage to resist acceptance of the detention notes and the teacher accepts them back, undertaking to return them to the teacher concerned. The disturbance created by the confrontation diminishes when the teacher accepts the detention notes back.

The incident illustrates tensions in socialisation. S3 is struggling to establish credibility in the class. His relationship with the teacher is sufficiently strong to resist acceptance of the detention slip. He feels secure enough to voice his objection. The teacher, however, is caught up in the stress created by the objections to a school procedure. He attempts to redirect the protest. As an experienced and skilled classroom manager, he is aware that prolonged insistence may lead to escalation of the tensions in the class and that single incidents impact on the emotions and actions of everyone in the room. The teacher is situated at the boundary between the class and the wider school. An apparently routine act gives rise to resistance, which the teacher needs to deflect and disperse for the class to get on with the lesson without diminishing authority.

People’s practices are filled with personal meanings. Students in the class have lived through distressing and difficult circumstances, with survival dependent on strength of will, self-assertion and resistance. The social practices that enabled survival in the past conflict with behavioral expectations in the present class community. The teacher manoeuvres along a delicate line between acceptance of individual self-assertion and conformity, and established procedures required for cohesive and orderly action. He deflects provocation with skilfully selected directions, instructions and even withdrawal, at the same time signalling the inappropriateness of behaviours. His confident management conducted in a quiet and assured manner creates spaces and opportunities for growth and development rather than sites for contestation with potential for humiliation, rejection and further individual
and group resistance. The teacher created a safe place in which his apprentices trusted him. However, security did not create serenity. Other teachers found the class very difficult to manage, and incidents of resistance and escalation of contestation occurred with other teachers. Movement from one class community to another brought different expectations, management procedures and control measures, eliciting different student responses.

Although the class was an ESL class, the teacher engaged students in a wide range of social practices to enable them to develop the skills to participate effectively in lessons and in the life of the school (Mickan 2007). The focus of instruction was on discourses for participation in routine lesson work and school activities. In this Foundation-level class, students were supported in the development of capabilities ‘to manage their new school and local environments’ (School curriculum guide 2004: 12). Iddings (2005) found that instruction of a class with a strong focus on English proficiency, combined with implicit classroom communication, impeded ESL students’ legitimate participation in the classroom context. Teachers underestimated the abilities and individual competences of ESL students due to a lack of understanding of the sociocultural and linguistic elements that influence learners’ personal and academic development (Iddings 2005: 181). Knowing a language entails familiarity with the social practices and the associated discourse resources, which differentiate and define communities. Socialisation into communities is a process of making choices, involving acceptance of practices and contesting practices.

Discussion

In this paper we have considered instances of confrontation and resistance within a framework of socialisation into the practices of a class community. The analysis has focused on selected interactions of students with their teacher, interactions that are part of the wider socialisation experiences preparing newcomers for participation in Australian culture (Mickan 2007). The interactions characterise a marked feature of newcomers’ apprenticeships into communities. Schooling assumes socialisation into accepted practices for taking on adult roles in society. Student behaviours foregrounded in this paper suggest a general interpretation of contestation, in which young adolescents display anger and the need for personal recognition, as well as the need to establish credibility. Local students develop familiarity with schooling practices beginning in early childhood, from observations of other children, and from the talk and tasks of siblings and adults. They become acquainted with the ways in which things are done and with roles and responsibilities by immersion in schooling’s practices and associated
discourses. They apply their prior experiences in adjusting to a new class, to different teachers and to unfamiliar practices. New arrivals also use previously acquired practices for dealing with new value systems, new practices and new institutional procedures. But their apprenticeships require adjustments to characteristic practices and assumed values and patterns of behaviour.

Students gain insights and understandings of community practices and their meanings through interactions with other members and from teachers’ instructions. Teachers create contexts for learners to participate in classroom practices (Smith 2003). Pryor (2001), in an article on new immigrants and refugees in American schools, emphasises the need for those working with immigrants and refugees to display care, commitment and a willingness to listen to them. The teacher in this study created opportunities and gave explanations for students to develop awareness and understandings of the social meanings of practices. The teacher used the late arrival of S11 as an opportunity, not for the first time, to comment on punctuality. The student understood this and responded by giving reasons for being late. Students took opportunities in class to exercise judgment, to express opinions and to test boundaries. The teacher’s response to the complex emotionality and individuality of students was to allow space for student expression, space with flexible boundaries that permitted individual expression without conceding control. The teacher’s reaction to contestation was non-confrontational, with acceptance of, but not acquiescence towards, behaviours influencing the functioning of the class.

People’s socialisation takes place through participation in the social practices of many communities in society. Entry into different communities requires learning to make sense of and to use resources for participation. Interactions with members of communities are formative socialisation processes. According to Hall:

> our learning to interact with others is better understood as the dynamic and unfinalizable [italic in original] processes of translating others’ words, co-opting some while rejecting others, as we come to understand, engage in, and attempt to bring together and cohere the infinitely varied moments of our daily lives.

Hall (1995: 219)

With changes in membership come changes in interactions and relationships. A community’s practices are challenged every time a new person arrives or a member departs. Socialisation requires both acceptance of practices for maintenance and reproduction of communities, and renewal of practices and transformation in response to new members. These may threaten existing practices and signal the need for adjustments or even transformation. In schools, this may be through curriculum renewal or changes in teaching approaches.
In the class we observed the teacher exercising his authority with sensitivity to individual students’ demands, balanced with the need to maintain working relationships amongst students. In conspicuous interactions with the teacher, a few students exercised individuality through self-assertion, disputation and even rejection of authority. Their actions were evidence of their confidence and assertiveness, apparently developed from experiences as refugees requiring toughness and persistence. In the process of adaptation and adoption of a community’s practices, newcomers face options. Bucholtz (1999: 220) describes students contesting ‘nerdiness’ as speakers ‘struggle over control of shared values’. Bucholtz explains that:

Such conflicts reveal the heterogeneity of membership in the community of practice – its constitution through the work of central and peripheral members alike … actions must be seen as choices … While some actions reproduce the existing local social structure … others undermine it … Linguistic practices, moreover, have no special status in this process. Instead, they work in conjunction with other social practices to produce meanings and identities.

Bucholtz (1999: 220)

Newcomers to a community make choices about their participation and behaviours. Despite strong objections to accepting detention notes, the students did not question participation in and membership of the class.

Duality of acceptance and resistance is a feature of socialisation. Students’ assertiveness was not a cause for teacher’s suppression, with pressure to conform and assimilate. Challenge and contestation were part of students’ learning to make sense of local practices and making choices about roles and actions. The students’ survival skills acquired as refugees created tensions in class, but the exercise of independence, as well as resilience, are essential characteristics for students’ transition to other workplaces where determination in the negotiation of tasks, rights and roles is also assumed to be life or survival skills. Through participation in social practices, learners build the semiotic resources for responding in other situations and for making transitions into new communities (Mickan 2006). The teacher attuned his responses to individual students’ actions to enable adjustment to school requirements. Learning to work in class provided experiences for participation in the social practices beyond school, including learning the reasons for, and meanings of, practices.

Our observations of the students in this class suggest the interdependency of students’ past and present experiences. The socialisation perspective suggests a range of possible responses for exploration in educational programmes. One response is to adapt and negotiate programmes and practices in recognition of students’ acquired skills, experiences of hardship including trauma and their unfamiliarity with school practices. Programmes
that take account of individual students’ oral traditions and cultural resources encourage meaning-making between familiar and new social practices (Lucas 2006). Programmes such as the NAP are literacy-focused but need to be viewed in terms of newcomers’ need of semiotic resources for participation in the practices of specific communities. A curriculum responsive to this need encourages development of discourse resources for negotiating actions and requests within communities such as a class community. Contestation is valued in Australian society, and for successful contestation students need experiences in making appropriate verbal choices. Students’ analysis of their own language use in the form of transcripts and recordings enables critical reflection on their actions and on the social order and values in school and in society. Literacy learning as a form of interpersonal communication is not only an academic endeavour, but also a negotiation of identities and an apprenticeship into practices that can delimit or offer new possibilities for students’ life choices and wellbeing in Australian society.

REFERENCES


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