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# Chapter 3 Research as discursive practice: Whose stories to tell?

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When is a gap in knowledge perceived, and by whom? Where do 'problems' come from?  
(Clifford 1986, p.18)

One studies stories not because they are true or even because they are false, but for the same reason that people tell and listen to them, in order to learn about the terms on which others make sense of their lives: what they take into account and what they do not; what they consider worth contemplating and what they do not; what they are and are not willing to raise and discuss as problematic and unresolved in life. (Brodkey 1987, p.47)

## 3.1 Introduction

Educational research, as is the case with pedagogy, is constructed through discursive and institutional practices. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, poststructuralist theorists, including Foucault, have shaken illusions researchers might have had about producing the truth. Within the academy succeeding paradigms - quantitative, qualitative, critical, emancipatory - have been critiqued in terms of the claims they make for truth (Ellsworth 1992; Guba & Lincoln 1994; Lather 1991). Recognising that research accounts remain constructed and partial, ethnographies have sometimes been described as fictions (Atkinson 1990, Clifford 1986). The researcher mediates what is seen and heard and what it is important to retell and in what ways. In short the researcher decides whose stories to tell (Polakow 1985). Taking on board these critiques of the neutrality or objectivity of any research method, I explain how I constructed this research project. I outline the decisions I made and anticipate the effects of my research practice.

In beginning this work I was aware of ongoing debates about what educational research is for, what it might achieve, who can speak about what and for whom (Comber 1988b). I was aware too of the difficulty of establishing a way of working in these times of 'plodding research and galloping theory', where the thesis appears anachronistic by the time it is completed (McWilliam 1993). In this chapter I locate the study within the current contested field of educational research. My aim is to make my research practices visible. The chapter proceeds in four main sections. I begin by picking up the threads of the story of how I came to this research problem. I follow this with an account of the ways in which I have drawn on qualitative, poststructuralist, feminist, critical approaches

public schools, considerable media and political attention to claims for low educational standards and levels of literacy in particular, criticisms of teachers resulting from these claims of low standards, (sometimes fuelled by conservative academics) known in Australia as 'teacher bashing'. For example, witness the current national moves to improve teachers' judgements about students' academic achievements. Teacher and student competencies were questioned. At the same time the media produced images of delinquent youth, homeless children, abused children, and illiterate children.

Given these discourses how do teachers construct their work and their professional identity? What local rationalities are produced? What possibilities or spaces are created by teachers for making themselves different kinds of subjects, for constructing alternative discourses about their work? The present study examines how educational discourses produce the literacy teacher and the disadvantaged school child both as objects of knowledge and subjects of power. My interest is the ways in which educational discourses produce the child and teacher subject. How does it limit what can be said at this time about children, about literacy, about teaching and about what action teachers and students might take in the literacy classroom?

More recently, in response to moral and social pressures we have seen the emergence of the hyperactive child and we may be about to witness the arrival of the unemployable child and the 'at-risk' child. ...What is required then is a general question about the nature of modern power in the contemporary school. This should be an account that shows the general possibility of the developing child and the at-risk child, as well as other forms of subjectivity. (Marshall 1990, p.24)

The child to be educated is specified across grids, such as disadvantage and literacy; the production of knowledge about the literate child usually is usually done in the school site. The school also uses information produced elsewhere about the child, such as the socio-economic circumstances, health and language background. Professionals associated with specific institutions become the authorities who have the right to speak, to interpret, to judge. Here I examine the possibilities which are constructed for the literate child and the literacy teacher in this school site at this time in history. Through part-time incarceration at school, teachers and children are engaged in the construction or reconstruction of subjectivities. Teachers must produce the literate, well behaved child and themselves as dedicated, up-to-date, self-sacrificing professionals.

My use of Foucault in this study allows what are for me new readings of 'disadvantaged school' literacies at work. I question universal theories and pedagogies which promise to make all students literate and empower them in the process. Instead I examine the ways in which discursive practices construct the literate student in one disadvantaged school. I consider literacy pedagogy as discursive work carried out in particular sites and usually

in constructing a principled practice. Next I outline the decisions I made and describe how I went about the study. In so doing I foreground doubts and dilemmas.

### 3.2 The research problem - Continued?

As I have explained in Chapter One, my concern with how literacy was taught at this time in a disadvantaged school, arose in part out of my family and educational history. Here I explain how these autobiographical circumstances intersected with my current professional position to produce this study. My concern that my work in literacy education had unwittingly produced pedagogical approaches that failed disadvantaged students and their teachers led me to conduct a number of investigations, both formal and informal.

In 1990, with my colleagues, I conducted a statewide survey of professional development in language and literacy in disadvantaged schools. Teachers told us that mainstream programs were irrelevant or unworkable in their contexts (Comber et al. 1991). Inexperienced teachers made comments like, 'I haven't got time for literacy, I'm too busy with behaviour management'. The survey indicated that mainstream literacy programs had low credibility with teachers in disadvantaged schools. Teachers' statements emphasised behaviour management as a priority and the need to modify literacy pedagogies and curriculum accordingly. Teacher responses signalled a growing negative culture in some disadvantaged schools about what couldn't be done with 'these kids'. In the following year I was involved in a national survey of early years teachers in disadvantaged schools and similar trends emerged. The major concern which arose from the two surveys was the production of discourses of disadvantage - deficit discourses whereby teachers blamed children's failures on perceived problems or lacks in the family (Badger et al. 1993). While the surveys were illuminating in worrying ways, they couldn't reveal the complexity of teachers' work in disadvantaged schools, nor how deficit discourses were produced, nor the ways in which such discursive practices might impact on the construction of school literacies.

At the same time as my colleagues and I mulled over the results of the surveys, an education department state-wide audit of literacy performance in South Australian schools confirmed that students who were disadvantaged by poverty were more likely to have lower levels of literacy achievement on mainstream measures of assessment (Education Department of South Australia 1992). In this way, a number of related problems and questions were fermenting in relation to the ways in which school literacies were implicated in the production of failure for disadvantaged students.

Informally, I continued to talk with friends who taught in disadvantaged schools about the nature of their work. Most were fiercely determined that their students should get access to the best possible teaching and curriculum offerings, but that their work was hard. Student absences, illness and poverty, high levels of violence and stress in their communities meant that the students and their teachers had to work twice as hard for high academic results (Connell et al. 1991; McRae 1990; Thomson 1992).

As I listened to teachers they claimed that some practices which had been effective and enjoyed by students in other schools simply didn't work in disadvantaged school contexts. For example, one teacher explained that a counter-sexist collection of fairy tales she had used successfully as part of her approach to critical literacy in another school was not useful in her current workplace because the students were not familiar with the plots and characters of traditional fairy tales. The exploits of Anglo and European princesses and princes, even feminist versions, were of no interest to her five, six and seven year olds from Aboriginal, Vietnamese, Laotian, Chilean, Cambodian and poor white working class communities. The humour and the counter-hegemonic work were lost because they had not been inducted in to the traditional canon of Anglo-European early childhood literary works. She wondered whether she should take them into this world. What kinds of literature could and should she use? Would they be disadvantaged without access to the traditional literacy canon and ways of resisting it? Questions about the production of literate cultures in the contexts of disadvantaged schools became the driving force behind this investigation.

It was clear to me that survey research, one-off interviews, reviews of literature and my own experience yielded limited insights into the problem and served to raise further questions. I decided therefore to locate myself in one disadvantaged school over a period of time. My objective was to learn about how literacy was taught in this context at that time. Given that I understood literacy as a social construct and pedagogy as institutionally located discursive practice, my intention was not to read the informants' perspectives as truth. Rather my intention was a detailed analysis of the discursive practices of a professional community at a particular time and place. I was particularly interested in ascertaining what kinds of literate practices teachers made high priorities and what kinds of pedagogies were constructed to this end. I was interested in how literacy was constructed in a disadvantaged school setting and the material, institutional and discursive limits on who these teachers and students could be. Therefore a case study approach was suited to the problem at hand.

I did not set myself up as being in a position to fix or improve school practices. My problem was to understand teachers' work in a disadvantaged school particularly in regard to their pedagogical decisions and discursive practices about literacy. Initially this problem grew out of critical feedback to my teaching, writing and curriculum development and mounting evidence of the failure of educational institutions to deliver curriculum that worked for disadvantaged groups. I include teacher training institutions as well as schools here, as I believe that we have not implicated ourselves - as university educators - in the production of school practices. Rather, problems have been placed with school practitioners, administrators and educational bureaucracies, in ways not unlike how teachers direct the problem of school failure to parents. I did not see my role as helping teachers to see themselves more clearly, so that they could better transform what they offered their students. Rather I sought the help of collaborating school-based educators in understanding how different pedagogical practices were taken up and delivered in a specific site. I was committed to learning about how these teachers operated in this school at this time and to appreciating the local rationality of their practices. I was interested in re-educating myself about what it meant to teach literacy in a disadvantaged school and what the implications might be for me as a university teacher educator. In the long term my commitment is to improving disadvantaged schools as workplaces for students and their teachers. To do this I believed I needed first to listen and experience the everyday lives of these teachers and their students.

The problem that I decided to research had involved me personally and professionally for some time and it was also increasingly seen as urgent by academics and policy makers. The teaching of literacy in schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities was under-researched in the Australian context (Freebody & Welch 1993). This lack of research may have been part of a silence in Australian educational research, a missing 'equity discourse, concerned with how educational research deals with social justice' (Blackmore et al. 1994, p.ii). How gaps in knowledge or problems for research are identified and by whom is itself a matter for debate (Clifford 1986). From my viewpoint this research was concerned with addressing an immediate and far-reaching educational problem concerned with who gets what from schooling. The five year period since I began this research has seen an increasing body of work in the area of literacy achievement of socio-economically disadvantaged and diverse student communities, much of it funded by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training (Breen et al. 1994; Freebody et al. 1995; Luke et al. 1994a). Many of these studies involved teams of researchers working in multiple contexts and involving comparative cases.

My project is limited to one site and myself as researcher. My particular focus was the way in which literacy was discursively constructed in the everyday practices of teachers in a disadvantaged school. In developing the project I turned to a range of approaches which have proved useful in studying similar problems - qualitative case study, poststructuralist, critical and feminist research. Next I briefly outline how insights from each of these areas informed the present study.

### **3.3 Constructing principled research practices: A poststructuralist study in a local site**

My previous research had indicated how illuminating and useful classroom observations over a period of time could be. Yet I was also conscious of how easy it is to leave such investigations rich in anecdote and low in theory. In my earlier work I had been unsure how I might approach questions of power in classroom interactions. For instance in an investigation of children's questions and requests for help in literacy lessons my analysis was limited when it came to the problem of differential pedagogical resources for different groups of children (Comber 1988a). Hence in this case study I turn to critical, feminist and poststructuralist theorising in order to explore power relations and to deal with the methodological and ethical dilemmas which arise from researching other people's teaching.

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative case study**

Case studies have made significant contributions to theories of social inequality and the differential effects of education by introducing cultural elements, injecting human agency and the reflexive relations between institutional practices and students' careers (Mehan 1992). Research about literacy includes a rich history of qualitative case studies, particularly in the United States where 'kidwatching', ethnographic and sociolinguistic studies of classrooms have become prolific over the past two decades (Evertson & Green 1986; Heath 1983; Edelsky et al. 1983; Dyson 1993). Classroom observation allows researchers to explore literacy events as they are constructed by participants. Through recording classroom talk, collecting artefacts and talking with teachers and students, the case study researcher can make a close analysis of everyday school and classroom practices. This study draws on this tradition of inquiry.

Case studies are useful because their flexible responsive methods of inquiry adapt to the 'evolving contexts' education presents (Anderson 1990). The researcher has access to everyday routines and unanticipated dilemmas as well as to multiple and comprehensive sources of data. Case studies investigate contemporary phenomena in actual contexts.

Case study researchers aim to 'make the familiar strange'. Everyday activities and language are explored in depth to scrutinise what are often taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. In the present study, examining teachers' talk about 'these children' is one instance of making the familiar strange. Investigating 'what counts as literacy?' in enacted classroom events and in teacher assessments is another (Baker & Freebody 1993). The combination of intensive data collection, including classroom discourse and artifacts combined with a discourse analytic approach allowed me to re-read the ordinary and mundane aspects of classroom literacy lessons which are often ignored or edited out, such as interruptions, routine announcements and behaviour management. I deliberately foreground aspects of classroom life that some researchers may see as technical or trivial. Following Foucault and feminist researchers, I am interested in specific everyday institutional and discursive practices. As against the goals of much educational research, my interest is not in whether such routine practices 'work', but what work they do and what they work to do.

In the present study I employed case study methods in design, scope and data collection. I observed in literacy lessons two to three mornings per week over an eighteen month period. During this time I was a participant observer in each of four classes for the minimum of a school term, and attended staff meetings, school celebrations, library lessons, liturgical ceremonies and major school events. I also talked with each of the staff, both in recorded interview situations and informally at school, at my home, in their homes and cafes. This investigation benefited from the potential of case study research for building a comprehensive, contextually rich and detailed corpus of data. I explored how teachers and administrative staff talked about literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage and how they constructed their literacy programs. However I do not present a case study to demonstrate the uniqueness of one environment. Rather my interests are in the ways in which discourses linking literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage are constructed in a local site within the contexts of larger regional, state and national debates.

Insofar as all description is epistemological activity, qualitative research projects require an engagement with theoretical analysis (Weiler 1988). In this investigation the data generated through the case study methods have been treated as text and discourse analytic approaches informed by the theoretical work of Foucault have been employed. Thus the outcome is not a case study in the sense of rich portrayals of individuals or events, but rather an analysis of discursive practices in one educational site. This project allowed me give an account of the ways in which educational discourses compete to construct the literacy teacher and the literate student in this community. My aim is to consider how people in schools are constituted by contemporary theories and practices of literacy education and what kinds of agency and spaces are available to educators working for



social justice. Foucault describes the need to examine material and concrete operations of power in local sites. Here I analyse how professional knowledges about literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage, produced through a proliferation of competing discourses, are recontextualised in one site and affect the day-to-day construction of literacy lessons.

### 3.3.2 Poststructuralist challenges to ethnographic reality

I have already touched on some criticisms of qualitative research methods and claims. These include the problems with ethnographic claims to truth and the ways in which researchers represent 'others'. The limits of the ethnographer in being able to re-construct people's lives in text have been acknowledged (Atkinson 1990; Brodkey 1987; Clifford & Marcus 1986). The extent to which research in process and product involves the researcher's textual practices has been foregrounded. The 'textual turn' in educational research has implications not only for the objects which educational researchers study, but also for their own practices as data producers and writers.

Poststructuralism recognises that data is shaped, selected and produced, rather than naturally occurring, complete and objective. Fieldwork 'is synonymous with the activity of inscribing diverse contexts of oral discourse through fieldnotes and recordings' (Marcus 1986, p.264). Fieldnotes and final reports are both consciously and unconsciously constructed by researchers in ways intended to produce versions of reality that readers will find both credible and insightful. The writer's constructive craft is therefore central to the research text. Experience cannot be reproduced in speech or writing, it must be narrated (Brodkey 1987, p.26). Rather than a truthful, objective eyewitness observer the identity and cultural location of the researcher/ narrator is considered as part of the research process and therefore needs to be theorised and visible in the 'final text'. The focus of poststructuralist research then, is on 'the productivity of language in the construction of the objects of investigation' which requires a reflexive rather than 'realist ethnographic tale-telling' (Lather 1991, pp.13-15).

Thus 'writing up' case study research is not a neutral activity. What is required therefore is that the researcher simultaneously denaturalises the representations they have constructed, self-consciously contextualising the claims, description, interpretations, explanations of what is selected and why and what is missing and why (Clifford 1986). There is 'a general trend toward a specification of discourses in ethnography: who speaks? who writes? when and where? with or to whom? under what historical and institutional constraints?'(Clifford 1986, p.13). Some poststructuralist theorists argue that researchers should use textual techniques that allow them to interrupt the text so as to alert readers to their position. One approach is to insert a meta-text or meta-commentary

that questions the ethnographic narrative presented. Another approach is to make explicit layout and typeface decisions in order to signal who is speaking or whose words are to be foregrounded (Lather 1994). Despite this ever-increasing sophistication of textual strategies, no matter how multi-layered or multi-vocal, research accounts remain nevertheless partial and intentional. The writer directs readers to incomplete representations which have been selected ahead of others. My intention in this document is to give space to multiple and contrastive examples of extended texts in order for readers to have access to the contradictory and exceptional along with what I have analysed as usual.

I acknowledge my role in the construction of this 'story' and try to avoid 'the third-person voice of analysis' (Brodkey 1987, p.39). Deciding which texts to include and what kinds of ethical positions has been one of the most difficult parts of the research. For instance, it was difficult to decide about the inclusion of teachers' statements which portrayed children and their families as 'deviant'. Yet these statements were elicited in interviews with me. How did my questioning contribute to the kind of talk that was produced? I cannot pretend that my being there and that my own discursive practices were unrelated to teachers' responses. Asking teachers to tell me about their children constructed a space in which things could be said which were unacceptable in official school talk. I had not anticipated how (or why) teachers might use the interview to vent negative representations of the school community.

If a subject can talk about feelings and thoughts in an interview that they feel are not 'allowed' expression within the normative realms observed by the researcher, then the researcher has learned something important about the norms operating in the routine contexts. (Carspecken & Apple 1992, p.532)

Indeed the interviews did reveal a great deal about what teachers thought could and couldn't be said about children and their families in the context of their professional school day. Yet I was uncertain about how to deal with deficit representations of children and their families in this written account and the effects my writing might have on my relationships with the teachers. Because the emphasis in talk and writing generally is frequently negative and because Foucauldian discourse analysis deals with what is produced (rather than what isn't) it may be that a cycle of negativity results. I was concerned not to betray my informants - 'by revealing too much that is identifying, by reaping the benefits of good data from someone else's life crisis' (Edelsky & Boyd, 1993, p.17). Nevertheless, as a teacher-educator I could no longer ignore the questions that drove this research, questions about how schools work for, on and against children from disadvantaged communities. In writing this thesis I continue to confront the ethical tensions and dilemmas that arise from researching other people's lives.

I provide readers not with a neat account, but a text which foregrounds complexity, contradictions and discontinuities whilst at the same time identifying patterns. I deliberately include selections of texts which illustrate the multiplicities of positions each teacher holds simultaneously. I have avoided case studies of individual teachers which position them as certain kinds of people, or types of teachers, or as uni-dimensional consistent subjects.

As I have discussed in Chapter Two studies of classroom literacy which draw on poststructuralist theorising have produced new questions concerning the ways in which pedagogical discourses position students and teachers and the differential effects on different groups of students (Baker 1995; Donald 1993; Gilbert 1990; Lee 1992; Luke 1993c; Luke et al. 1993). The present study is informed by this work in terms of the questions asked, the data gathered and the analysis that was undertaken. Firstly, I am interested in the discursive construction of literacy and the allied production of subjectivities for teachers and students. I have treated the data as constructed text, which can therefore be deconstructed. I have assembled a range of analytical tools in 'reading' the data. The purpose of the research remains firmly anchored to broader questions of education and social justice.

### **3.3.3 Research and social justice**

This research is informed by principles of research which is 'openly ideological' (Lather 1986), insofar as it begins from stated critical and feminist orientations. I was concerned with questions concerning the 'role of schools in the context of an unequal society' (Carspecken & Apple 1992, p.510). Critical researchers examine the 'connections between what goes on in institutions such as schools and the assemblage of differential power relations - and how they are continually produced, mediated, and/or transformed in our daily lives' (Carspecken & Apple 1992, p.549). In working over an extended period in everyday lessons and meetings, I was interested how and why literacy came to be seen as urgent for 'these children' and in the literacy lessons teachers produced at this time, in this location. Literacy was seen as a right and as a priority in a school community committed to social justice, to use the principal's words, as 'a liberating force', but what did this mean for teachers and students work in literacy lessons? Critical and feminist researchers focus on the ways in which unequal power relations and distribution of resources are produced or changed through local action.

Feminist researchers 'begin their investigation ...from a grounded position in their own subjective oppression'; emphasise 'lived experience and everyday life'; and state that their research is 'politically committed' to changing the position of women and therefore

society (Weiler 1988, p.58). Feminist theory denies the possibility of value-free research and requires instead that the conscious subjectivity of the researcher be articulated throughout the project. Feminist research is self-reflective and is concerned with socially relevant issues in specific contexts. Rather than aiming for invisibility or objectivity the researcher explicitly names her involvement and position. The research is overtly political in that it attempts to replace patriarchal models with feminist ways of reading, understanding and writing. Feminist 'textual practices seek to map diffracted subjectivities and subject constructions and to write marginalised and localized knowledges and subjects' (Luke & Luke 1995, p.361). It is research which is both about and for women (Nielsen 1990; Jones 1992).

Considering the feminised nature of the teacher work force, particularly in primary education, I took the opportunity to work in an all-female site, where teaching and administrative staff were all women. I was also aware that approaches to literacy pedagogy have largely been generated without teachers or at best involve teachers at the point of testing out the theory. Teachers are often the object of criticism in terms of the authority they hold in the classroom, yet they are often excluded when it comes to the construction of curriculum theorising. In this study I consciously sought to get the perspective of women teachers working in a disadvantaged school in order that I might see things differently.

In the present study the research problem was explicitly stated at the outset and became the focus of ongoing conversations between the school staff and myself. Formal interviews quickly gave way to audiotaped conversations where the school staff initiated topics and questions. Transcripts of initial interviews indicate that before the end of our first one-to-one conversations staff members were asking questions of me about their classroom or professional concerns. Thus as well as introducing my agenda I took a responsive role in all conversations. Ultimately listening to their questions and responding to their issues meant that I was able to find out what preoccupied them about their work.

I have taken up the calls from feminist researchers for more reflexive texts which foregrounds the position of the writer (Brodkey 1987; Bannerji et al. 1991; Jones 1992, Lather 1994). Throughout the document I have attempted to implicate myself as a literacy educator as a part of the research not as a separate all-seeing spectator. In many respects I have used my time with this school community as a way of re-reading my practice as a tertiary literacy educator. The investigation then has dual effects; on the one hand I consider the ways in which contemporary discourses construct the work of the literacy teacher and student in disadvantaged schools and I use my analysis of these effects to re-

read the discourses I produce as a teacher educator. While there is an increasing awareness of the importance of the 'researcher as instrument' in qualitative research, there is a need for:

asking new questions out of reflexive encounters and re-encounters with our practice via a move from the dominant confessional, psychologizing approach to self-reflexivity to the micropolitical practices of representation of self and others in situated inquiries. (Lather 1994, p.42)

Here I try to avoid a confessional approach to self-reflexivity. Rather I examine my practices in representing myself and the people in this school community. As Lather goes on to point out, research in the human sciences has been intrusive and exploitative (Lather 1994). I wanted to see and hear the everyday world of work of these women teachers in order to critically re-evaluate my own work as a teacher-educator, not to make teachers the targets of blame.

Feminist research shows the value of focussing on everyday life worlds as opposed to the public domain. Schools are both public and private territory. While schools are public institutions, classrooms are semi-private spaces where one teacher and about thirty children become invisible for whole days. One paradox of classroom teaching is that teachers are publicly 'on show' to children but cut off from their adult peers. Hence pedagogy is simultaneously public work, within a defined, partially isolated and secluded space. As a participant-researcher I was aware that for some teachers I was, at least initially, an intruder into that semi-private environment.

Unlike some critical and feminist researchers, I do not make claims for social transformation as an outcome of this work. The project provided an opportunity for women teachers to speak about their work which I hope was useful to them at the time. In the thesis I discuss teachers' 'valuable and committed work' (Weiler 1988, p.70) and attempt a socially critical approach to the study of literacy pedagogy which foregrounds the complexity of teachers' work in disadvantaged schools.

In feminist and poststructuralist work, questions of class and consciousness, central to all sociological theory and research, are reconceptualised in terms of locality and identity. What this enables is a much more acute empirical description and theorization of the various intersections and conjoint knowledge effects of 'gender', 'class', and 'ethnicity/race' than the previous determinist sociologies enabled. (Luke & Luke 1995, pp.375)

It is this potential of feminist and poststructuralist work to take into account issues of locality and identity which I seek to highlight in this project. I try to avoid a determinist analysis, that constructs teachers as unitary subjects who passively reproduce inequities. What I aim to do is to show how teachers in one school mediate competing and contradictory discourses in assembling a pedagogy in a local community.

### 3.4 Research in practice

As I have explained I consciously tried to construct a principled practice for this project. Research also involves negotiation and compromise as it evolves in the site. In this section I explain how and why I constructed the study in the ways I did, outlining key decisions and consequences. I begin by explaining why I chose the school site; next I briefly discuss my relationships with the school community; and finally, I describe the scope and design of this research.

#### 3.4.1 Choosing the site: 'Holy Mother', Banfield

There was a number of reasons why I decided to work with this school community - 'Holy Mother', Banfield. These related directly to the nature of the Banfield community, its size, location and the openness with which I was welcomed into the school. The school was a classified disadvantaged school with seventy percent of students' families receiving financial assistance from the government at that time. As one of the poorest communities in the state it was an ideal place for studying the ways literacy was constructed in a disadvantaged school. In addition the school population was extremely diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language and religion. The principal had a reputation amongst teachers and administrators in Catholic Education for her commitment to social justice and was actively involved in a number of committees associated with the Disadvantaged Schools Program. This was her first appointment as a principal. She was doing further university study with a research component and was supportive of local action research. Her studies emphasised emancipatory approaches to religious education and she involved her staff in opportunities for professional development which took a socially critical stand concerning the role of Catholic education. In addition to the support I anticipated from the principal, prior to this project I already knew two Banfield teachers from their attendance at professional development courses in language and literacy. One teacher had invited me into her classroom the previous year and was willing to continue working with me. Another asked me to be her 'critical friend'. I asked the principal whether other members of staff and the parent community would be comfortable with me conducting research in their school. After checking with the school community, she reported that they had agreed to support the study. From the start I was welcomed as a friend and colleague by staff, parents and students.

A further bonus was that Banfield was an inner suburban school only a ten minute walk from my home and a ten minute drive from my workplace. Its location meant that I was able to spend time there on a regular basis. Another feature of the school which attracted me was its size. In 1991 the school had an enrolment fluctuating between ninety and one hundred students and only four fulltime class teachers. This meant that I was able to

work with each of the teachers for at least one school term. As I discuss in Chapters Five and Six, during this period Banfield staff saw the literacy performance of their students as an issue requiring attention so they were sympathetic to the focus of my work. As I was interested in the ways in which literacy was constructed across a school community, Banfield was ideal.

Each teacher was a committed educator with lengthy experience in disadvantaged schools. All teachers had been teaching for at least eight years and were recognised as effective practitioners. Two of the teachers were regarded as having particular expertise in literacy. One had trained as an Early Literacy Inservice Course tutor and one as a Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years tutor. The Early Literacy Inservice Course (Education Department of South Australia 1984) was an official inservice program for grade one, two and three teachers which was developed in South Australia. Teachers whose own classroom practice in language arts was judged to exemplary were trained over a school term to be tutors of other teachers. Theoretically the program was largely based on the work of Marie Clay, Donald Graves and Don Holdaway and took the standpoint that teachers could learn best from having access to current research and theory and the opportunities to reflect on their practices with their colleagues and by watching children read and write.

The Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years Project (Campagna et al. 1989) was similar except that it targetted middle years teachers and was more concerned with the teacher's role than with child development. In addition, in this project the tutor training required that the selected teachers enrol in a two year graduate diploma course at the university. Both programs were based on a reflective practitioner stance and encouraged small scale directed classroom research and collaborative professional development and programming. Each of the Banfield teachers who had been involved in these projects had participated in extended professional development and further study in language and literacy education. Other staff had been participants in these courses and all were undertaking ongoing professional development in the area of genre based pedagogy. At this time the principal explicitly made literacy standards a problem for discussion.

That the school was Catholic was not a major factor in my choice. I should note however, that the Catholic Education Office was supportive of research such as mine, whereas at the same time regulations and procedures in the state education department concerning 'outside research' were being tightened considerably. The Catholic Education Office was encouraging of school-university collaboration and the Catholic school principal enjoyed considerable autonomy in making such decisions within the community. However the Banfield principal did, at my request, formally 'clear' my

proposal to conduct the research with her administrator. Negotiating access to do research in a Catholic school was not a bureaucratic hurdle but a matter of forming trust with a particular school community. I chose Banfield because it served a poor community and also because the staff welcomed my being there as researcher. Nevertheless the fact that the school was Catholic cannot be ignored as it impacts on the ways in which discourses were articulated and heard (Brodkey 1992). Further discussion of the school ethos and history is provided in chapter five.

In consultation with the school staff, it was decided to provide pseudonyms for the school. The principal suggested 'Holy Mother' as it signified elements of the school ethos which she associated with the school's actual name - the spiritual, strong, caring and nurturing aspects of 'Mary', emphasised in Catholicism. I suggested 'Banfield' as a pseudonym for the industrialised suburb where the school was located, to highlight physical aspects of the school environment and surrounding area, characterised by an absence of parks and playing fields. The suburb name was the label more commonly used by teachers in naming the school. For that reason, and also because it highlights the environmental and material conditions of the community, I use it more frequently than 'Holy Mother' in this document.

### **3.4.2 Relationship with school-based educators**

Collaborative research with exemplary teachers produces useful knowledge for other educators. Collaborative research studies of good teachers have the potential to improve the educational enterprise (Edelsky & Boyd 1993, p.8). In earlier research I had worked collaboratively with teachers to analyse successful teaching (Comber 1987; Comber 1988a; Comber & O'Brien 1993). In this project I decided to work with all the teaching staff at Banfield. While all teachers were personally welcoming some simply did not have time to devote to what they saw as 'Barbara's research'. Ultimately this meant that it was not possible to work in a co-researcher fashion with every teacher. Deciding to work with all teachers also meant that I would be working with teachers of whose classroom expertise I was completely unaware. This meant that there were no guarantees that each of the teachers would prove to be 'good teachers' when it came to literacy curriculum.

Initial interviews indicated that there were different degrees of professional knowledge and expertise amongst the staff as far as literacy pedagogy was concerned. In terms of the four teachers, the principal spoke of two as 'high flyers' in the area of literacy teaching. The other teachers she saw as having strengths in other areas of the curriculum. It was her hope that the two teachers with high expertise in literacy teaching would assist the other teachers. Thus while all four teachers were seen as competent and experienced, two



were considered within the school community as 'good teachers' of literacy with a special interest in or flair for language related work.

Working with each of the four teachers with their different professed levels of expertise and interest in literacy meant that I could see how different teachers took up and worked on theories of literacy pedagogy. For example when the staff attended a conference concerned with the explicit teaching of genres or worked together at a planning session it was illuminating to see the impact of different theories and practices on different teachers working in the same school. I found that I had much to learn from each of the teachers about teaching literacy in their particular classroom context. I am less sure now than when I began that I know how to identify a 'good teacher' of literacy. Each teacher was working on her theory and practice. Some already had extensive discursive expertise in the area of academic discourses of literacy and for others literacy was new territory. In practice however the differences in classroom practices were less than each of them had imagined. I sought to learn from these teachers, not to change their practices. What I saw then was what each of them was prepared to try with me as an observer in their classroom.

I did not have, nor did I try to have, the same kind of relationship with each teacher. One teacher was a friend and former student, another I had known of for some years. The principal was studying with University colleagues of mine; two teachers I had not met until I began the project. This meant that I started with a different relationship with each teacher, which made a difference to the kinds of conversations we had and how involved in the research the teachers became. In addition to the history of relationships teachers' other commitments made a difference to what they could manage. Two of the staff were studying part time. Two taught aerobics classes during the evening. One was a single parent. For most of the 'field work' I was teaching graduate courses in language and literacy education at the university fulltime. What transpired therefore in terms of collaboration and working relationships was the best that we could negotiate and physically manage. I was concerned that my research did not 'add an oppressive burden' to teachers' workloads (Edelsky & Boyd 1993, p.17). Mostly I took a position of participant-observer, rather than collaborator. While I rarely initiated I always responded to teachers' requests for feedback and resources. The relationship I negotiated with each teacher and the kinds of roles I took therefore were not fixed.

One final issue is worthy of mention regarding my relationship with this small community, concerning the ethics of reporting on the conflicts and problems of others. The researcher role can be seen as voyeuristic (Walkerdine 1994) in the sense that one hears about and sees events and circumstances that would usually remain private. For

instance, during this project I had access to legal and personal information about staff, parents and children. I also witnessed conflicts between staff. This group of women educators were extremely dedicated and close knit, but they differed on a number of values, beliefs and practices. At the time of my entry to the school they were negotiating friendships and professional relationships. I made the decision that I would not use any information which was likely to create at that time (or as far as I could predict in the future) discord amongst the community or personal information about any of the staff or students which may unwittingly affect future relationships. This relates to Edelsky and Boyd's warning, mentioned earlier, about the dangers of researchers benefitting from 'someone else's life crisis'. In this document I use only data which are relevant to discussions of literacy, disadvantage and pedagogy.

### 3.4.3. Scope and design of the project

Over a two year period I collected a corpus of texts concerned with literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage. Having put together a corpus of contemporary texts which related to the teaching of literacy in a disadvantaged school community at this particular time my objective was then to analyse both public and local discursive practices using poststructuralist discourse analysis. The corpus comprised three sets of data:

1. Set one: A collection of publicly available texts, including newspaper articles, policy documents and academic texts.
2. Set two: A collection of written documents produced at Banfield, including official documents, policies, teacher programs, parent information pack, school advertising, newsletters, day books, roll books, submissions for funding, school census data, and student report cards
3. Set three: A collection of fieldnotes and transcripts of interviews, staff meetings and classroom literacy lessons (and related teacher and child products).

Across the corpus of texts I consider the discursive practices of those who make authoritative statements about the role of literacy in the lives of disadvantaged students and the discursive practices of those who are authorised to make these students literate. Published official texts are thus read with and against the everyday texts produced in the course of teachers and students' work in one disadvantaged school. By reading these data sets with and against each other I explore the contradictory nature of teachers' work and the multiplicities of teacher and student identities produced in schools.

Similar statements, constructions, images and metaphors may appear and reappear in written and spoken texts like the policy document, the syllabus, principals' memos, the staffroom conversation, the teachers' guidebook, and, of course, the textbook. (Luke & Luke 1995, p.371 )

The present study explores how professional discourses in different sites produce versions of the literate student. Academic, policy and media documents are examined alongside school based texts produced by educators and students. The first data set, the publicly available texts, is considered in terms of the commonsense views of literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage which are produced. What is taken-for-granted by the public impacts on teachers and schools through media accounts and policy action and funding. My questions are related to the construction of literacy, the disadvantaged student and the transformative role of the teacher. These discourses are produced outside of the school by professionals in media, academia and policy but have specific effects in schools.

The second data set consisted of materials produced by the school, about the school, its programs and its community, including staff, parents and children. In analysing these texts my objective was to consider which discourses were taken up and in what ways at this time in this site. In particular, I was interested in the competing discourses which were employed in constructing literacy and the literate student. These analyses are reported in Chapters Five and Nine. In Chapter Five I construct the school site in terms of school population, material conditions, ethos and contested discourses at this point in its history. In Chapter Nine I analyse the ideal literate student as constituted by teachers' written reports and students' written self evaluations.

The third data set comprised the field notes and transcripts which I produced through interviews and participant observations of classrooms and staff meetings. During an eighteen month period I observed in each of the four classrooms two to three mornings per week. I have not presented this as four individual case studies, but rather organised the analysis around themes and discourses that were produced across the group of teachers, in order to protect the anonymity of the teachers and because the similarities between the teachers' discursive practices were considerable (Weiler 1988). During this period and for the remainder of 1993 I continued to visit the school and talk with teachers and to collect school and classroom artifacts. Over the eighteen month period I also scheduled interviews and observed staff meetings and collaborative planning days. In the observation of everyday school life my aim was to document and analyse teachers discursive and institutional practices about literacy, disadvantage and pedagogy and teachers' and students' constructions of literacy in lessons. The oral data derived from ethnographic fieldnotes has been treated as 'text' and poststructuralist discourse analytic methods have been applied (Luke 1995; Burman & Parker 1993; Waitzkin 1991). This is reported in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. Some of the interview data is also used in Chapter Five.

#### 3.4.4 Data collection and selection

As may be clear from the outline above the project involved the collection and production of a rich and considerable corpus of data from a range of sources outside of and within the school. In this section I explain briefly how each of the three data sets was collected, organised and selected.

During the period surrounding the study I collected and read newspaper articles, policy documents (and associated press releases) and academic materials which made statements about literacy (including reading, writing, spelling), disadvantage (including poverty, unemployment, underclass), and pedagogy (including teachers, schooling, students). I began this collection from the mid to late eighties, realising that the effects of such discursive practices may prevail for some time. Where necessary I reviewed earlier documents which continued to have impact such as policies to do with the Disadvantaged Schools Program, initiated in the mid seventies. I also drew on secondary sources - larger comprehensive historical document analyses - which were relevant to the project. For example, the Australian Literacy Federation had funded a documentary history to track literacy in the public media (Green et al. 1994). Judith Bessant (1995b) had completed a comprehensive study of the ways in which youth were represented in policy and the media, particularly 'poor youth'. Each of these studies made my task considerably easier. For my own part, I was particularly interested in the ways in which publicly available texts constructed commonsense myths about literacy, schooling and the needs of economically disadvantaged youth. In selecting texts for detailed attention articles and documents which made claims about the economic and civilising effects of literacy were of particular interest as were those which positioned teachers as agents or problems in these processes.

The second data set I collected during the period I observed at Banfield and in the following year. This consisted of written documents produced at Banfield, including official submissions, policies, teacher programs, parent information pack, school advertising, newsletters, day books, roll books, submissions for funding, school census data, and student report cards. In collecting and selecting this material I was interested in texts which represented the school community and its programs, literacy and the literate student. My focus was on what could be learnt about the school ecology, the material conditions and the competing and changing discourses which affected teachers' work as literacy teachers. I realised that the corpus of school report cards may be a useful way of considering the question of what counted as literacy in this environment and how that may have changed over time. Hence I collected the entire corpus of reports that were available for senior students in the school and the entire collection of reports written for

the 1992 school year. Other key documents were the principal's application for re-appointment where she reviewed recent school history, an advertisement and an article promoting Banfield in the local newspaper. Thus the texts which I selected for close attention were those which represented the school and its students publicly and those which made particular reference to literacy.

The third data set comprised the fieldnotes and transcripts I produced to record the interviews and observations I made of staff meetings and classroom literacy lessons. In the course of the study eighteen formal interviews were fully transcribed from the audiotapes. These included interviews with the four teachers, the principal, the English as a Second Language teacher, the religious education coordinator and the school secretary. I start by explaining how the interviews evolved, illustrating from my initial interviews with the teachers. Firstly, interviews are constructed events involving power relations between researcher and informants and a complex negotiation of what can and should be said. The development of useful theory requires the deconstruction of researchers' discursive practices as part of the analysis (Anyon 1994). Aware of these issues I attempted to be explicit with teachers about my agenda and to build the interviews around things they may have already said to me. In the case of the initial interview in the first month of the school year, I wrote to each teacher before hand, explaining what I was hoping to talk about. (See Figure 3.4.4)

**Figure 3.4.4 Letter to teachers**

Dear [Teacher's name],

I was wondering if I could make a time to interview you over the next two weeks. What I'm interested in is your language arts program, in particular, what you plan to do with this year's group and how you intend to go about it, your perceptions of the difficulties etc.

I'm also interested in your understanding of literacy, what you think is important for the children you work with and how you think you can best teach it. I'm interested in the activities you do daily and those you do weekly etc. I'm keen to know the kinds of books you read to them, what they read to you, what they take home etc. I'm also curious about what they write, how they approach spelling.... Anything at all that helps me to understand the approach you take to language arts; maybe we could also look at kids' work?

I'd like to ask you about any other teaching experience you might have had, what you see as unique or important about this school or the students. I don't want to overwhelm you with questions. I just want to give you an idea of what I'm interested in. We can add or delete things from here depending on what you think.

[Teacher's name], ignore the formality of this letter. I just wanted you to know the kind of information that I'm asking for from you and your colleagues as well. It's a bit easier to talk with you, because you know me and you're used to having me around and talking about this kind of stuff, but I think it is important to let people know before hand the focus and purpose of an interview. Really I'm trying to get a picture of the ways in which the teachers translate their understandings of literacy into classroom practice in this particular context.

Thanks so much for agreeing to become a part of this project. I really appreciate it.

Regards,  
Barbara

Each of the teachers received a letter similar to this one. My aim was to let them know my agenda before we talked. In reviewing the letter above I am conscious of my invitation to describe 'difficulties' and refer to this in making the point that interviews are constructed texts, where the researcher's own textual practices produce what may be unanticipated as well as hoped for effects. The schedule outlining the initial interview I had with each of the teachers is included below. At the beginning of each interview I explained to each teacher that my purpose was 'to explore the ways in which you think about literacy and also about teaching in a disadvantaged school. I'm interested in what you see as your priorities, what you think children need to know and how you go about teaching.' The questions I prepared grew out of comments which the principal and teachers had made to me in my first few weeks in the school. Although I had a lengthy set of questions and prompts, no two interviews went in the same direction and in no case did we complete the schedule in the first interview. In all cases I followed up the initial interview with further taped informal conversations.

- How long have you been teaching at B.P.S ?
- How long have you been teaching altogether?
- Where else have you taught?
- How would you describe what it is like for you to teach at B.P.S.?
- How does teaching at B.P.S. compare with other schools you have taught at?
- What do you see as the greatest challenges in teaching in a disadvantaged school ?
- What do you see as your main priorities at the beginning of the school year, in the first weeks of school ?
- What difficulties have you confronted so far?
- Have you had a chance to assess what the children are able to do in literacy and language arts ?
- What are you pleased with/what are you worried about ?
- What is your understanding of what it means to be literate ?
- Can you remember how you were taught to read and write?
- What do you think of that approach?
- How do you set up your literacy/ language program?
- What do you expect the children to be able to do at the beginning of the year?
- What do you expect them to be able to do at the end of the year ?
- If I asked your students from last year about what they did in language time what do you think they would say ?
- What kinds of texts do you use in the classroom? What have you used so far?
- In what kinds of ways do you use these books?
- Are there texts you have rejected that you expected to work ?
- What kinds of writing have the children done so far ?

- What are you working on for their writing?
- What are your main aims for their writing at this stage?
- Do you have any concerns?
- What are the activities that you do most often in language time?
- What are you hoping to achieve through this?
- How do you find out what the children can do at the beginning of the year?
- How do you monitor the children's literacy and language progress?
- Are there any other things you would like to discuss/ comment on about teaching, literacy, working in a disadvantaged school ?

While I started with a set of questions, when teachers were clearly uncomfortable about a particular issue I did not insist in any way. Some teachers quickly moved from my agenda and introduced their own. One teacher began to seek my advice; another used it as an opportunity to express her uncertainties about her literacy program. As I was committed to the research being an opportunity for the teachers to debrief about the nature of their work and also that the investigation would add as little stress as possible to an already difficult job, I did not press for answers to my questions, rather I listened to their questions and doubts about their teaching and encouraged them to talk through possibilities. This approach has been described as 'dialogical data generation' where 'subjects of study are asked to reflect on their lives in ways that may be new to them and to share in the production of a theory relevant to their lives' (Carspecken & Apple 1992, p.513). As I was interested in the statements teachers made about their literacy teaching rather than answers to particular sets of questions, when they regulated how the interview went I did not challenge this. When they did not answer this in itself was data.

Throughout the interviews I found that my initiating prompts or questions were more likely to match the discourses of some teachers than others. With one teacher my prompts acted as catalysts for some lengthy and largely self-sustaining monologues whereas with other teachers, the same question might produce a response such as, 'I don't know really'. Teachers varied in their approach to interviews. Some actively sought me out for extended discussions and others were brief and efficient. In these ways, teachers used the interview situation differently, with some simply helping me out and others using the interview as a chance to talk through decisions about their work and approach to literacy teaching. Some teachers had more to say about teaching literacy in a disadvantaged school than others. Teachers who were new to the school and critical of what they found and those who had done further study in literacy education were more eager to talk with me. They talked more, dealing with my agenda and adding their own. Teachers who were old hands at the school were less verbal in the initial interviews. When they talked about literacy they talked about their uncertainties and doubts about pedagogy and were

keen to get feedback from me about their ideas. As this was their thinking about literacy at the time I chose to follow their lead. Partly then this was a decision that is defensible in terms of my interest in the statements teachers produce. But also it was based on my commitment that the research should be supportive of the women with whom I worked.

I am aware that teachers' practical knowledge and the truth claims need to be deconstructed along with grand meta-narratives (Luke 1992). The interview therefore needs to be treated in the context of its production. It remains text produced for, with and partially by the researcher. Hence I read the interviews as what the teachers were prepared to say to me in the context of the research. Baker explains how interviews are constrained and situated events.

These accounts are moral accounts in that they describe what they take to be the normative order by which they and others should live. These interview responses and other speeches are not direct 'representations' of what they do or think, but culturally plausible accounts of what they do and think. (Baker 1995, p.14)

When the interview texts are read together with and against the discourses produced in the classroom and in writing reports they indicate the rationalities and theories teachers employed in the course of explaining their teaching of literacy with these kids in this school.

Interviews can also be seen as confessional. It is a site in which teachers can explain failures, fears, conflicts and successes. In the privacy of the interview teachers speak about their feelings about teaching in this school in a way that is quite different from the classroom, yard and staffroom. As feminist researchers point out research is itself a form of policing and surveillance (McWilliam 1993; Walkerdine 1994). This may have unanticipated consequences such as the production of teacher guilt and changing emphases in classroom work, (for instance concern with discipline). The most intensive data collection work in this project was the observation of classroom literacy lessons.

Over an eighteen month period I spent one, two or three mornings per week in a classroom at the two-hour time slot for Language Arts. I often arrived in time to have a coffee and a chat before school in the staffroom. Usually, I was in the school from 8.30 - 11.30 and sometimes I stayed longer to follow up specific ongoing events in classrooms or to talk with the principal. There were four classrooms: a reception/one composite class; a reception/one/two composite class; a three/four class; and a five/six/seven composite class, each with their own class teacher. Reception is the first year of formal schooling in South Australia. Children begin school at five years of age. Composite classes are very common in small schools and necessary to balance the number of children across the classes.



I spent at least one school term (ten to twelve weeks) with each of the four class teachers and in one case I continued my visits the following year. Thus I observed in each classroom between fifteen to twenty-five occasions for a period of two hours. I usually spent time talking with the teacher informally either before and after the lesson. (See schedule of observations in Table 3.4.4.)

**Table 3.4.4 Schedule of observations**

Year	Term	Class	No. observations
1992	1	Grade 5/6/7 Composite class	23
1992	2	Grade R/1/2 Composite class	15
1992	3	Grade 4/5 Composite class	15
1992	4	Grade R/1 Composite class	14
1993	1	Grade R/1/2 Composite class	10

During the two hour language and literacy time slot I wrote fieldnotes and audiotaped classroom talk. When the teacher talked to the class as a whole group I sat with the children if there was space, or to the side when there wasn't. Thus I listened to and observed the teacher from the same place as the students. When the children were doing tasks at their tables or on the floor I sat with and recorded the talk and action in one small group, where there was space for me to sit (often where a child was absent). I collected handouts and copied notes on the blackboard. The combination of the fieldnotes and the audiotapes was used to complete transcripts of the literacy lessons. A research assistant and a typist helped with some of the transcription which I then checked against my original handwritten fieldnotes and the audiotapes. On some occasions the timetable was changed to celebrate a special event or a religious festival. I participated in these events and recorded a summary afterwards. In addition to the classroom lessons I observed the principal take classes for their library period. In total I completed transcripts of seventy five literacy lessons over the eighteen month period. Thus the corpus of data concerning literacy practices in the school community was extensive and detailed.

In addition to the informal staff room conversations I attended several staff meetings where curriculum issues and collaborative planning were on the agenda. I recorded these in fieldnotes and on audiotape. This was an illuminating source of data as the professional relationships were negotiated here and what was to count as appropriate curriculum and pedagogy was discussed. How official discourses and practices are contested in everyday professional interactions was visible on these occasions. This is discussed further in Chapter Six.

A key moment for researchers and the subjects of research is the selection of data for reporting. Data do not merely get collected; they are produced and selected. In ethnographic research the investigator is faced with an embarrassment of texts from which they select to construct their narratives and arguments. There are ethical questions associated with data selection. Educational researchers are powerfully positioned with respect to their teacher subjects. In literacy education research teachers are frequently constructed as the objects of criticism. Recent research about literacy has foregrounded how students are positioned in the classroom (Baker & Freebody 1993; Dyson 1993; Freebody et al. 1995; Luke 1993c), indicating the work students have to do to make sense of classroom life in literacy lessons. In this work I attempt to take a similar position in regard to teachers, to take seriously the complexity of the literacy teachers' work in contemporary and diverse communities. From a large corpus of data I discuss texts which are typical, in the sense that similar events occur frequently or that the discourse is repeated on numerous occasions, but at the same time I include the unusual, the occasions where contrastive discourses and practices are employed. Thus in selecting the texts for discussion I have included instances that illustrate teachers' contradictory practices and positions as well as the common patterns of discursive and pedagogical practices.

I selected texts for detailed analysis which challenge totalising theories of literacy pedagogy. In order to explode the myths that teachers can be identified unproblematically as 'whole language' or 'genre' or 'critical' or that any of these is intrinsically empowering, I deliberately show contrastive discursive practices from the same teachers. I argue that in classrooms there are no pure theories or practices and that teachers by the nature of their work often produce conflicting discourses and practices.

In addition to selecting contrastive texts I try to avoid reducing data to neat 'literacy events'. Rather through extended transcripts of classroom literacy lessons I re-contextualise how literacy lessons happen within the broader times and spaces of the school day. I apologise to readers for the extra length of my text which results from these decisions. However I believe that these are key decisions in my work. In order to re-contextualise school literacy pedagogy as institutional practice and to theorise literacy pedagogy as teachers' work, there is a need to read extended texts where the construction of school literacy can be viewed in its intricate intersections with the lifeworlds of teachers and students. Despite these attempts to include extended passages of school texts, I remain aware that these too are fleeting reductions of an ensemble of practices that one can never hold quite still. There are no complete or finished stories in educational research.

### 3.5 Discourse analysis

In this project I construct an approach to discourse analysis following the interpretive analytics of Foucault. Foucault's work on the constitutive nature of discourse is particularly germane to the present study. As I discussed in Chapter Two, poststructuralist theorists have demonstrated how human subjects are constructed through discursive practices, for example 'the disadvantaged child', 'the illiterate', 'the unemployed'. This classifying, naming and managing of the population happens in local sites, such as schools and families, as well as more broadly through government policies and systems, media and so on. In these ways the modern individual is produced. Different professional knowledges (including legal, economic, medical, educational, psychological) are deployed in deciding what counts as 'normal' within a society at a particular time. In the present study I am interested in how primary school teachers induct the disadvantaged child into school literacy and the limits and possibilities this creates.

The corpus consists of a range of texts: staff meetings, everyday conversations, the talk and artifacts of literacy lessons, written applications and newsletters, report cards and students' writing. How to apply poststructuralist theory of discourse, power/ knowledge and subjectivity to such a corpus is not a given. A method must be built which deals with problem at hand. My analysis was informed by educators and researchers who have constructed approaches, generated from a Foucauldian perspective, for dealing with contemporary oral and written texts (Burman & Parker 1993; Fairclough 1992b; Gore 1994; Luke 1995; Waitzkin 1991; Walkerdine 1984).

The order of discourse of some social domain is the totality of its discursive practices, and the relationships (of complementarity, inclusion/exclusion, opposition) between them - for instance in schools, the discursive practices of the classroom, of assessed work, of the playground, of the staff-room. (Fairclough 1993, p.135)

Taking up Fairclough's point about the 'order of discourse' in a social domain, my aim was to consider the discourses at work in a school site, which had effects on the ways in which literacy was taught at this time. In reading across the corpus of texts my first approach was to consider the recurring topics. These included for example 'work', 'quality', 'behaviour', 'standards'. In other words, across the interviews, staffroom and classroom observations, official school documents and teachers' and students' assessments these topics reappeared. In addition I looked within particular data sets and subsets for patterns in the ways the texts were produced and delivered.

Because I was interested in teachers' discursive practices across entire literacy lessons I needed some ways of dealing with extended passages of text which accounted for what I was seeing. In analysing transcripts of classroom discourse I developed some analytic

tools for describing features of teachers' talk which are sometimes overlooked by literacy researchers whose frame may be more restricted by the boundaries of defined 'literacy events'. For example, I noted the ways in which all of the teachers continued to talk after dismissing the children and sending them back to their desks with assigned tasks. This form of teacher talk I described as 'voice-over' as it continued over the top of other classroom events as a kind of running commentary on what students were doing and how they were doing it. I noted also that teachers combined this with other discursive techniques which I described as 'pep talks' and 'on patrol' in order to produce the self-regulating productive student required for literacy lessons (see Chapter Seven).

In addition to building a picture of the everyday routinised formations of language use within literacy lessons, I also actively sought exceptional cases, where teachers worked 'against the grain', resisting and contesting the normalising and disciplinary practices they had worked hard to put in place. I looked for instances where students fought back, contesting the literacies and subjectivities they were asked to take up as their own (see Chapters Seven and Eight).

In constructing an approach to discourse analysis for this project I worked from topics across the corpus to specific discursive practices within types of events and genres. In the case of the teacher written student report cards I used an approach based on the work of Halliday, developed by Kamler (1994a) with lexical chains. My overall question was related to Baker & Freebody's (1993) question as to 'what counts as literacy'. Here, I identified key words in the construction of the reported student which were repeated across teacher writers and across the students reported. Thus I began an analysis of recording key lexical items across the entire corpus of reports collected for 1992. Using this analysis I constructed a grid of specification for the ideal literate student. I then moved to a closer analysis of five contrastive reports, in order to see how different students were measured against the normalising grid. I followed with a close reading of one students' report cards across his entire school career.

Thus having started with the full corpus of the contemporary texts and doing broader counts of lexical items, I then gradually moved to closer textual analysis, exploring the way euphemism was employed in the report card genre. In selecting examples I was always concerned to consider the effects of practices on students who are differently positioned in regard to community and school resources. In other words 'what kinds of difference make a difference?' when it comes to success with school literacy at this time in this place (Dyson et al 1995). In concluding this work on assessment I considered the students' self-assessments as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault 1988). Here I was interested in the ways in which teachers' actions affect students' actions, and which

discourses the self-assessing students apply to themselves in constructing school success and failure.

Thus my approach to discourse analysis in this project was informed by the work of Foucault. Having broadly thematised key issues across the corpus I then used tools of analysis which related to specific questions I had about the focal texts. I did not conduct a formal linguistic analysis, but applied questions emerging from ethnomethodology (Baker & Freebody 1993) and adapted forms of discourse and textual analysis from a range of researchers in order to read the data (Fairclough 1992b; Kamler 1994a; Luke 1995; McKenzie 1992). These decisions and practices are outlined in more detail in Chapters Five through Nine. While my approach in this work is somewhat eclectic I have endeavoured to utilise methods of data collection and analysis which fit the demands of the questions I was asking. In fact some researchers argue that appropriate methods are necessarily eclectic in the human sciences and that such an approach without being anarchic, permits a 'freer play of interpretation' (Waitzkin 1991, p.61).

Two further explanations related to method are necessary here. The first is to do with transcription practices and the second with questions of pseudonyms. In transcribing the classroom talk I have used a minimum of transcription techniques and conventions. My decision was to present the data more like the script of a play with stage directions or as ethnographic fieldnotes with comments. Hence the reader will note an absence of visual markers signalling overlapping speech, for example. Rather I have noted in square brackets when interruptions occurred, when students or the teachers' physical actions, were important. I have signalled missing text with ...(inaudible)... . In part the decision to keep the transcript convention simple was pragmatic, given the large corpus of data I was dealing with, but also it signals my intention to focus in this research on what is said - the texts which are produced, the statements which are made and less on patterns of interaction and turn-taking.

The second issue relates to how I named teachers and students in the transcripts. In consultation with the teachers I decided to remove labels which might identify them. I use pseudonyms for the teachers, such as Mrs E, only when it is necessary for the sense of the text. Because I was interested in the collective experiences and discursive practices of this group of teachers in this small community, rather than in the individual teacher, I mainly refer to 'the teacher'. Research projects, such as this, inevitably produce some pressures on teachers. Knowing that they were not to be the subject of individual case studies reduced teachers' anxieties about how they and their practices might be represented in this text. In addition I did not wish to associate practices with individual

teachers, when the evidence suggested that there was much which teachers had in common.

Where the teacher's own life-world, history or current location appeared to relate directly to the data and the interpretations I make, I provide extra contextual information on that occasion. The decision not to name the teachers relates also to the fact that some of the data explored conflicts, difficulties and dilemmas which these teachers were working through. I did not want this project to put the teachers at risk in any way in relation to each other or to their administration.

I did however decide to provide pseudonyms for the students, in order to protect the identities of the students whilst retaining information, through naming, about gender and in some cases culture. Thus in giving students 'new names' I have most often signalled cultural groupings. For instance 'Carlo' and 'Adrianna' signal that these students are pseudonym for students of Italian heritage. However where a culturally consistent name might identify students or their families I have sometimes used an Anglo name instead (as for example in the case of Dan in Chapter Eight). I supplied these names in the hope that readers would be able to consider the diversity of students in the Banfield classrooms.

### **3.6 Doubts and dilemmas**

In using discourse analytic techniques I do not wish to suggest that decisions were straightforward or without consequences (see Burman & Parker 1993 for a discussion of the problems discourse analytic researchers face). For researchers who are committed to positive action for participants as an effect of their research, discourse analysis can be problematic (Marks 1993). Firstly in a project such as this one it takes considerable time to produce transcripts and analysis. Thus there is likely to be a significant gap between data collection and taking the data and analysis back to informants for checking and discussion. Teachers may be hesitant to contest the researchers' readings of the data given power relations between 'researched' and 'researcher' (Marks 1993). Thus it may be difficult to build in the reciprocity to which feminist researchers aspire. The labour intensive nature of the endeavour may preclude such relationships especially in a project where a lone researcher works with a team of informants. By the time I had transcribed and analysed this corpus of data each of the four teachers has left Banfield, either through transfers or parenting leave. While I might hope that the interviews and informal conversations were useful for the teachers at the time, it was difficult to involve them more fully in the project. Ultimately, despite our best intentions, only one of the teachers and the principal was able to provide critical feedback and advice on this document.

Whose stories we should tell as researchers and teachers in the human sciences depends on the work we are trying to do, on our commitments (Polakow 1985). Polakow argues that telling the stories of the workers, the imprisoned, the children, those who are oppressed is crucial for praxis. I agree. However as Foucault has demonstrated power works in a capillary rather than a hierarchical fashion. Thus where teachers stand in terms of binaries such as oppressed/oppressor is problematic. My task in this project is to hear teachers' stories, not in order to privilege them or position them as beyond question but in order to critically re-examine my work as a teacher educator. Some readers may find the absence of parents' and to some degree students' stories problematic. I think that such work is crucial. However it was more than I could hope to manage here. In foregrounding the teachers' discursive practices I signal my standpoint that despite claims that teachers exercise considerable power in the classroom they do so within broader political and institutional regimes, which need to be taken into account in theories of pedagogy and pronouncements about curriculum.

At the beginning of the research I was teaching full-time at the university and had heavy administrative responsibilities. I always felt like I rushed in and out of their day. At least two of the teachers were studying tertiary courses in the evenings. Several taught aerobics classes after school hours as well. Everyone was juggling personal and professional loads that did not allow for the luxury of lengthy conversations. We often said we should get together more; but it was hard. I do not mean to suggest that I spent little time in the school; in fact the reverse is true, but like the teachers, I never felt it was enough, not enough to understand the complexity of what they managed, never enough time to debrief on things that occurred in the classroom or staffroom. I was forever aware that my understandings were partial, that much of what I saw and heard I had no context for interpreting. It took me almost a year after I initially collected the data to begin to understand how much the personal and professional histories of the teachers impacted on the daily interactions of the staff. This is not by way of an apology or an excuse, but simply to note that ideal research methodologies are not always possible nor ideal; that for women managing families and full-time teaching research is perhaps always less than ideal.

Sometimes dramatic events occurred in the school which would have made for fascinating discussion and sometimes I simply had to learn not to ask, that the curiosity of the researcher does not give one the privilege of dredging up all the difficult decisions and events of the day. We had to accept that the pedagogical and research decisions we made were constrained by what was possible at the time and this needs not to be buried in a line in the report, but to be understood as part of the process of doing research in the

kind of school I chose to work in. However the incomplete pictures I deliver in this thesis are very much the kinds of incomplete, less than ideal realities that these teachers dealt with on a daily basis. If I had waited until we all had more time, I would still be waiting. I try to find a path through the tensions of personal narrative and critical academic discourse. My textual practices are the consequences of the contradictory nature of educational research, the claims its practitioners make for it and the relationships I have with the school community who permitted and helped to construct this research.

For me and the educators I worked with this work is ongoing. It is not bounded by the completion of this report. In many ways the present study represents only part of an ongoing project to which I remain committed - how literacy educators can work for social justice. I continue to work with educators from Banfield and to use what I learned, with their help, in working with other teachers (Comber & Cormack 1995; Comber & Simpson 1995; Nixon & Comber 1995). Two of the teachers went on to publish locally their innovative work in the area of early literacy assessment. The school became involved in a broader project making educational documentaries which focussed on teaching literacy in disadvantaged schools (Comber et al. 1994). Thus the project may be seen as having 'catalytic validity' (Lather 1986) in that it opened up, rather than closing down, questions for further inquiry and action.

To summarise and resituate this project, this thesis considers the nature of literacy teaching in one disadvantaged school. Using Foucauldian interpretive analytics and a feminist standpoint to teachers' work, I try to avoid binary distinctions which suggest literacy as either empowering or domesticating and to look at the multiplicity of effects of literacy education in a local site. In the next chapter I discuss the public discourses, concerned with literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage, during the period surrounding the present study. In so doing I construct an account of the discourses available to Banfield teachers at that time.