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Chapter 4 Putting literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage together: Discursive constructions of problems and solutions

Apart from its obvious importance to the individual Australian's personal, social and cultural development, proficiency in English is central to the education, training and skill formation necessary to produce a more dynamic and internationally competitive Australian economy. The development of English skills is also fundamental to improving the quality of life and opportunities for disadvantaged members of our society. (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p.xiv)

[T]eachers, school and other educational institutions are used as 'shock absorbers' for larger systemic social changes and problems. (Green et al. 1994, p.5)

4.1. Introduction

Since the eighties, trends in late capitalist nations towards greater gaps between a small percentage of wealthy people and a large and growing percentage in the lower range of earnings and the creation of 'underclasses' of underemployed and unemployed people have been noted by sociologists and educators concerned with transforming societal inequities (Bessant 1993; Connell 1994; Kantor & Brenzel 1993; Katz 1989; Mann 1992; Polakow 1993; Varghese 1994). During this period governments have been faced with the problem of managing and caring for the population whilst maintaining competitiveness in global economies. There is a tension between economic reform which aims to improve the performance of the nation and the need to provide for increased employment and enhanced living conditions. How economic 'hard times' might impact on educational policy (Lingard et al. 1993) and upon literacy education, in particular, is my interest here.

In Australia, the late eighties and early nineties saw a proliferation of programs and policies, supported by the National Labour Government [led by Hawke (1983-1991) and then Keating (1991- March 1996)], which purported to deliver both excellence and equity in order to produce a 'clever country' (Dawkins 1990). As Bessant argues the Australian Labour Government made its social justice, equity and economic policies 'add up' (Bessant 1993). To illustrate, youth unemployment and the resultant high levels poverty amongst young people could in part be attended to through training programs designed to

make young people more employable. When young people were involved in further education, the numbers registering as unemployed would decline. At the same time by keeping young people in education longer the government could meet its commitment to increasing the length of education for disadvantaged students. The rationale at work here is that increased levels of education and training increases employability which decreases the likelihood of unemployment and poverty. Increased levels of education are constructed as evidence of the government's social justice policies in action. In this context Bessant's commentary is a somewhat cynical critique of economic rationalism and political cunning posing as social justice.

A number of commentators have discussed the ways in which the national Australian government made education and training the centrepiece of its response to unemployment and economic restructuring (Bessant 1995a; Lingard et al. 1993). In so doing educational institutions were constituted as 'shock absorbers' for wider social and economic changes and problems (Green et al. 1994). As far as literacy education is concerned, the linking of economic and equity agendas is evident in Australia's Language, the first national policy on language and literacy (Commonwealth of Australia 1991) as the above quotation suggests. The 'development of English skills' is linked with both producing an 'internationally competitive Australia' and to 'improving the quality of life and opportunities for disadvantaged members of our society'. Political and economic material conditions, such as high youth unemployment, global economies, changing population, economic recessions and a national Labour Government, affect what can be said about education at a specific time and place. Hence it becomes possible at this time for literacy education to be explicitly connected with the paired political goals of social justice and economic viability.

In examining teachers' work and literacy pedagogy in schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities it is necessary therefore to take into account the possible effects of public discursive practices. Policy, media and academic texts form macro-political discursive contexts for local action. In assembling local pedagogies teachers draw on available discursive resources. In this chapter I explore policy, media and academic texts which deal with literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage. My object here is to consider the public discourses available to teachers at Banfield. I focus on documents which make claims about the nature of literacy, teachers and students; those which bring the trilogy of literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage together; and those which have been key in debates about literacy pedagogy. In this way I explore the publicly available 'truths' on these subjects which are constructed at this time in official government policy, media texts and in educational publications. I see these as key

discursive sites both in terms of constructing teachers' professional knowledge and also the public commonsense.

The chapter addresses three major topics. In section 4.2, I summarise key themes in media and policy texts about literacy, disadvantage and teaching. My object here is to consider how discursive practices evoke commonsense hypotheses about the lives of disadvantaged young people. In section 4.3, I examine the findings of recent educational research investigating literacy pedagogy for diverse student communities. My aim here is to summarise how theorists and researchers have explained why school literacy pedagogies fail socio-economically disadvantaged students. In section 4.4, I move to contemporary academic debates about literacy pedagogy. Here I briefly outline competing positions around literacy pedagogy which have been prominent in Australia over the past decade. My hope is that this discussion of public and professional discourses will provide a macro-context to situate and analyse the local discursive practices of Banfield school.

4.2. Literacy, disadvantage and pedagogy: Policy and media constructions

Public texts, including policy documents and media reports, are productive in the construction of community commonsense in relation to contemporary life. Governments direct attention to matters concerning the care and best management of the population, marking out problems to be addressed and programs of reform and action. The popular media also contribute actively to what the community comes to know about itself, deciding what is newsworthy and how it should be represented. In this section of the chapter I consider the ways in which public discourses (including those produced through policy and media texts) deal with literacy, disadvantage and pedagogy. The point here is the ways in which these discursive practices collectively produce hegemonic commonsense about what is good for disadvantaged young people in contemporary Australia and about the concomitant responsibilities of schools.

In the eighties and nineties Australian government policy and the popular press produced discourses with the theme of 'decline' where young people were constituted as 'at risk'. Repeated topics included child poverty, child abuse, family breakdown, child crime, and 'the discovery of a youth underclass' (Bessant 1995b). Simultaneously key themes in public discourses around child education included doubts about the quality of public schooling, about the quality of teachers, about literacy standards falling and about the lack of discipline in schools. At a national and state level numerous government inquiries into such 'problems' were carried out (see for example *Teaching English Literacy: Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century* (Christie et al. 1991), *The Literacy Challenge*

(Crawford 1993), *Australia's Teachers: An Agenda for the Next Decade* (Commonwealth of Australia 1990), *Towards social justice for young Australians: 1989-90 Budget* (Commonwealth of Australia 1989). It must be emphasised that these problems were 'discovered' in a period of economic recession and economic restructuring during which unemployment had its most devastating effects on the youth labour market (Bessant 1993, 1995a, 1995b). A comprehensive analysis of the themes relating to childhood, youth, disadvantage and literacy is beyond the scope of this chapter.

My interest here is in the ways in which public texts produce discursive constructions of the 'literate student' the 'disadvantaged child' and the 'public school teacher'. I deal with four propositions constructed in public discourses relating to these matters: first, young people are a problem; second, literacy standards are declining; third, the quality of public schooling is falling; and fourth, better teaching would produce more literate students who would become better citizens in a more competitive Australian economy.

4.2.1 'Young people are a problem': Australia's major resource 'at risk'

During the eighties and nineties Australian governments and policy makers began to use a human resources discourse when referring to the population at large and in reference to young people in particular. For example, in 1987 Prime Minister Bob Hawke in his pre-election address to the nation stated:

The greatest resource in Australia is not something we can grow or dig up from the soil. It is the capacity of its people, our great human resource. And above all - the resource of the future - the children of Australia. (Hawke 1987b: 5)

Young people were constructed as human resources, the workers and democratic citizens of the future. Therefore, as valuable resources, young people needed to be developed and watched closely. In this same speech Hawke made the political promise that, 'By 1990 no Australian child will be living in poverty'. In addition, in the more extended accompanying statement it was claimed that the provision of education allowances 'removed the financial incentive which tempted too many young people – especially those from poor families – to go on the dole rather than stay at school, go into training or get a job (Hawke 1987a, p.12). Along with this is the assurance that secondary schooling will be 'more relevant to the world of work'.

In this speech and the extended statement which accompanied it, the Australian government brought together themes of the national economy, a caring democratic community and global competitiveness. It is noteworthy that education is placed in the section on the economy along with training and industrial relations, unlike other social policy areas such as health, housing, and the Arts which are located under the 'caring

community' section. Indeed, this statement heralded a new emphasis on education as human resources development. Here the government committed itself to the development of the National Policy on Languages (Commonwealth of Australia 1991), promising to 'tackle the problem of adult literacy' and allocating an 'additional \$15 million' to that end. Since that period government inquiries and programs of reform in education have constituted students and workers in terms of sets of desired competencies. A human resources discourse has driven educational policy, funding and program reform and simultaneously linked the problem of poverty, with schooling and literacy. In the 1993-1994 Social Justice Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia 1993), young people are textually described as a problem, still experiencing high levels of unemployment, homelessness and poverty. Further education, training and literacy are said to be high priorities in funding equations and hypothetical solutions.

During the same period the discourses of government policy and media texts had much in common and produced similar hypotheses in matters related to literacy, standards and youth (Falk 1994; Green forthcoming). In the media, concern for the young manifested itself in repeated reports of youth unemployment, youth homelessness, child abuse, child poverty, child violence, child illnesses and addictions, low standards of education, low levels of literacy and poor attitudes to work. The disintegration of the family and 'discovery of a juvenile underclass' became pervasive themes (Bessant 1995b). An ensemble of threats to children was reported, targeting living conditions, morals, health, education and literacy, to name just a few. Walton contends that, 'For the most part youth is only visible to society (via the media) when it poses a problem' (Walton 1993, p.71). The overall effect of such reporting was to portray a youth population 'at risk', drawing from a 'public health' discourse (Polakow 1993).

This negative reporting of youth is not new, but the particular formation of youth as a problem at this time is of interest. Children are constituted as victims of child abuse, poverty, drugs and popular culture. The disintegration of the nuclear family and poor schooling are seen as major causes of such problems. This same child population several years further on as adolescents come to be represented, not as the victims of social injustice, but as the would-be perpetrators of crime and violence. Thus in the media young people are most commonly constructed as victims in need of rescue or as a threat to 'normal society'. As Walton notes, 'News and documentary discourses normally construct the troubled side of youth culture' (Walton 1993, p.68).

The scenario constructed in the popular press is one of family disintegration which in turn produces the child victim who, without government intervention and policing, threatens to become the adolescent delinquent and the criminal adult. My particular interest here is

the treatment of disadvantaged youth; how the embodied problem youth becomes the problem rather than structurally produced poverty.

As Polakow (1993) points out, the discourses surrounding poverty construct people living in poverty as 'other', as deviants from the norm: 'Poverty talk, however, is always a discourse about *them*.' (Polakow 1993, p.43). In Australia, contemporary media accounts increasingly indicate a preoccupation with poor youth as 'feral' and 'dangerous' (Bessant 1995a). They are constructed as the objects of fear. This is evident in journalism such as the following:

'Poverty and disadvantage are being passed to a new generation, creating a breed of outlaw children who reject all help'. (*Bulletin* article quoted by Bessant 1995b, p.34)

In statements such as the quotation above no agent is named as passing on poverty and disadvantage. The passive and agentless construction in this clause leaves no-one responsible. However the 'breed of outlaw children' are given agency in that they 'reject all help'. The absence of an agent of poverty sharply contrasts with the strong agency afforded the outlaw children. Thus a criminal discourse is deployed in constituting disadvantaged children. As Bessant's (1995b) comprehensive study reveals, this is not an unusual instance. The popular press regularly uses a martial vocabulary (guerrilla gangs, explosive, garrisons) and animal metaphors (wild, predatory, untamed, feral) in reporting on young people. Such reporting contributes to the constitution of types of people, such as 'the disadvantaged', 'juvenile underclass', 'delinquent', 'gang member' and so on (Bessant 1995b). The construction of poor youth in such a way constitutes them as a threat to normal society. Their reported potential for violence and their unwillingness to work means that their poverty is blocked out. What the 'youth underclass' might do to the rest of society replaces poverty as the problem.

The argument that the poor deserve to be poor is not restricted to young children who are said to 'reject all help'. Bessant discusses an article from the Sydney Morning Herald which concluded that 'poverty and unemployment were essentially moral and individual problems, and that the real problem was the lack of a true work commitment on the part of the jobless individual' (Bessant 1995b, p.36). The net result of such cumulative reporting constitutes the poor as getting what they deserve. The reader is told that poverty is a 'self-reproducing condition'. Journalists make reference to social science and medical discourses diagnosing the psycho-social problems attributed to the poor and the young. Researchers' textual practices mediated by the media, contribute to the construction of the public commonsense. Further it produces a grid by which such populations might be identified and monitored. The underclass are constituted as 'objects of knowledge' as Bessant points out.

Values like a lack of thrift, deficient linguistic codes, dysfunctional families and deficient life skills, and a culture of violence and unemployment, have all been attributed to the poor by studies ranging from those of Rowntree into poverty in York (1901, 1941) to Henderson's Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in Australia (1975). (Bessant 1995b, p.42)

In this way the poor can be identified, diagnosed and treated as a problem to be handled by schools, welfare agencies, health institutions and the police. Drawing on a collage of quotes from many newspaper accounts, Bessant sums up how this works.

The underclass can also be characterised 'empirically' by 'observable life-patterns' such as low standards of literacy, numeracy, poor attitudes to work (typically defined as 'weak attachment to the labour market'), a propensity to commit crime, the use of body tattoos, and a life-style which is inherently threatening to the wider society. (Bessant 1995b, p39).

A number of crucial points emerge from Bessant's study which are relevant here. Her analysis indicates that such reportage reconstructs the problem of youth poverty as the threat of youth criminality. Poverty is seen as deserved. Welfare is implicated as contributing to this underclass who don't need to work because they can get the dole. The problem then becomes one of deviant populations for governments to manage and control, rather than structural inequality which must be changed through political action and economic redistribution. Poverty is linked textually with, for example, low standards of literacy, poor work attitudes, criminality and body tattoos. The construction of the youth underclass becomes a matter of immorality rather than material deprivation.

Simultaneously, for governments informed by a human capital theory, the problem of poverty is one of lost resources. Spending public money on poor children is treated as an investment which requires calculable outcomes. Thus governments invest money on poor children as a down-payment on later productive citizenship. Rather than undertake large scale economic reform, compensatory funds can be set aside to construct the institutional apparatuses to identify, manage and monitor problem populations.

Teachers working in disadvantaged schools may actively resist constructions of deficit children which such media reportage produces. Yet this continual onslaught of negative representations of poor youth in the public press may take a toll. Teachers may be vulnerable to these images of the poor child as 'other'. Respect for the child's difference may be difficult to sustain in a world where the dominant public discourses construct poor children as victims or threats.

In terms of the discourses available to teachers and the community, the press represents poverty as a self-reproducing condition and disadvantaged young people as criminally inclined. While these accounts may be read critically, they contribute to a commonsense

hegemony of such children as deviant threats to an otherwise 'normal' society. Solving the problems of poverty is reconstituted as managing and transforming deviant youth. As has already been suggested, a lack of literacy is associated with the grid of specification which defines the underclass or the poor. In the period surrounding the present study literacy became a matter of considerable public attention. It is to the construction of literacy in public discourses during this period to which I now turn.

4.2.2. 'Literacy standards are declining': Constructions of crises

The period during which the present study was conducted was one of intense activity at the highest levels of public policy and media attention. 1990 was International Literacy Year, an occasion marked in Australia by numerous events, special project funding, publicity involving politicians and their family members and publications. Managing it all was the International Literacy Year Secretariat, specially created for this purpose and funded by the Commonwealth. In 1991, the National Labour Government released the first national policy on language and literacy, *Australia's Language, The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (Commonwealth of Australia 1991). In December 1992, a report on early literacy was tabled by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (Crawford 1993). Following an agreement in 1989 by state and Commonwealth ministers of education to work on national goals for schooling, The National Profiles and English Statement were written and trialed from that time and released in 1993.

In this period therefore, literacy enjoyed an unprecedented level of national government attention and financial investment. These are merely a sample of the kinds of highly public national government sponsored activities which were undertaken. Running across these inquiries, policies and related curriculum and assessment production, is the assumption that the state is responsible for delivering literacy to its population and that the extent to which this is being effectively done must be closely monitored. Driving this public policy and spending was a human capital view of literacy and its effects. In a media release accompanying *Australia's Language* the then Minister for Education, Employment and Training, John Dawkins claimed that 'Australia's ability to compete internationally will remain seriously impeded while one in seven workers cannot read or write well enough to improve their skills' (cited in Green et al 1994).

In government policy literacy was tied to the nation's ability to compete internationally. Many workers were estimated to have literacy problems and considerable amounts of money were devoted to assessing literacy 'skills' and to providing remedial training in and through the workplace. Not surprisingly given literacy's new status in relation to

adult training and employment and the proliferation of national documents, literacy became a matter for media concern.

What counts as news in a society varies, but when it comes to education one stable trend is the reportage of 'bad' news, in preference to 'good' news (Baker 1994). The publication of bad news about education not only sells papers, it redirects attention away from other economic and political problems which may not be in the interests of the media owners. Media constructed crises of public schooling invariably coincide with periods of economic hardship. Thus the period surrounding the present study, conducted during an economic recession, was marked by escalating government and media attention to literacy as a matter of national concern. How and whether literacy becomes a topic for public attention depends on the political, economic, technological, cultural, and social conditions of the time. The Australian Literacy Federation recently funded an extensive documentary history of literacy debates in the public media in Australia since the end of the second world war (Green et al. 1994). I draw on that history, analysis and corpus of newspaper examples here.

The writers of the documentary history found that in the decades following the war media reportage of education was limited. However traces of contemporary themes such as fears of delinquency, the need for a skilled workforce and the importance of Standard English were already in evidence in the fifties. For example, in 1953 a subcommittee of the Directors of Primary Education saw their task as 'ensuring that our Australian education results in a better human product'. The 'competing and contaminating influence of home and street' was already taken for granted as a problem for teachers when it came to the oral language use of the lower class. By 1962, literacy was described within the same text as a key to the 'production of skilled workers' and personal 'freedom', suggestive of the current twin agendas of human capital and social justice noted in the introduction to this chapter.

When literacy itself did become an item for media attention in the early seventies, it was reported negatively in terms of 'illiteracy', taking on the baggage of anxieties already in place (Green et al. 1994). Illiteracy was conceptualised as a disease and those with the disease were seen as flawed or deficient. By 1976 the problem was reported as urgent in *The Age* including claims that without rescue from remedial reading teachers 'some will retreat into sullen defeatism; others will react aggressively (illiteracy among delinquents is considerably above average)' (Green et al. 1994, p.322). The child as an ethical subject is visible in texts which put delinquency, religion, literacy and morality together. Not only is literacy blamed for the unemployability of young people, it is also associated with delinquency and a lack in discipline. This use of the 'decline of literacy' reads very much

like the 'decline of religion'. It becomes a 'codeword', with taken-for-granted positive powers and effects. Thus the hypothesis runs, the absence of literacy produces negative effects and is disempowering.

Literacy acts as a 'codeword' for other concerns and anxieties in public debate.... We are led to believe, then, that violent criminal acts are the result of a decline of literacy'. (Green et al. 1994, p.5)

Negative metaphors surrounded literacy including 'wars', 'decline', and 'debates'. These negative themes echo those around youth described earlier. The writers of the documentary history point out that, despite media claims, there is no evidence of falling standards of literacy. Comparisons across extended time frames are not possible given changes in the school population, changes in reading and writing practices and changes in instructional approaches (Green et al. 1994). Literacy was allied with educational standards and the recurrent theme, that standards were declining, became 'part of the public common sense'. Even though there was no hard evidence 'the damage has been done' (Green et al. 1994). Some of that 'damage' may be seen as the effects on teachers and community members, who may read such reports as true. However blame for the so-called decline in literacy has been directed at teachers for the past twenty years, with parents and television also held responsible.

In the print media, by 1974, the suggestion that low levels of literacy may be related to class and disadvantage, has been made.

So very often, kids from working class or disadvantaged homes come to school not ready to read or write and begin high not much better off. (*Sunday Telegraph* cited by Green et al. 1994, p.298)

Educationalists this week expressed alarm at the findings. [of a survey employing reading comprehension tests] They said it pointed to a much higher illiteracy rate in the poorer working class suburbs nearer the city. (*Sunday Telegraph* cited by Green et al. 1994, p.300)

The writers of the documentary history claim that 'one of the persistent beliefs about literacy education has been that it could be the 'great leveller', 'equaliser' and 'unifier', but this has not occurred; neither is there any evidence that 'levels of literacy either have or are capable of driving such large scale economic and cultural change' (Green et al. 1994, p.4). Yet the hypothesis that education, and literacy in particular has positive material effects on people's lives may be as strong as ever. For instance, in a recent report of the House of Representative Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, concerned with approaches to early intervention in literacy education, the committee's second point was:

It is generally accepted that unless children learn the basics of reading and writing, listening and using spoken language by the end of Year 3, they will probably be disadvantaged for the rest of their lives. (Crawford 1993, p.1)

In public forums then, the repeated message positions literacy as a prerequisite set of skills for avoiding or for moving out of 'disadvantaged' living conditions. While contemporary themes about literacy may have a long history, the last decade has seen a radical increase in the frequency and volume of public discourses about literacy. Green and his colleagues argue that some major shifts over the past two decades in social, cultural and economic spheres are central to literacy becoming a central focus for educational funding and policy during that time. These include:

- a shift from relative geographic and communications isolation to participation in globalised culture and multinational economic relations
- an intergenerational shift from traditional British cultural and political orientations to those affiliated with US, Asia and the Pacific rim countries
- a shift from a resource and agriculture-based economy with protected traditional markets to a multinational, corporate economy
- the emergence of an overly multicultural, multilingual population as the result of successive waves of postwar immigration, recognition of Aboriginal citizenship and entitlements (Green et al. 1994)

These changing circumstances have contributed to new sets of problems for governments which in turn have changed the priorities for educational institutions across the sectors. From their analyses, Green et al. (1994) locate a series of repeated claims made in the press regarding literacy debates:

- (1) that standards and practices of literacy are falling;
- (2) that these declines are definitive of wider social, economic and cultural 'ills' and;
- (3) that schools and teachers are directly or indirectly responsible for these declines.

The cumulative effects of such reporting produce a pervasive commonsense set of 'truths' which enjoy currency in the community and impact on teachers' professional status and work. In addition to these general claims about the state of literacy levels across the population, particular kinds of literate subjects are constituted in these texts which may have effects on teachers classroom practices. In these archives the literate subject is constructed in four ways: the moral subject (1950s); the technical/skilled subject (1960s); the deficit/disadvantaged subject (1970s); and the economic subject (1980s) (Green et al. 1994).

At particular historical moments and in particular locations, ideologies such as human capital, Christianity or scientific progress, might inform the ways in which literacy is written about. While a version of the literate subject may predominate at any one time and place, other versions are not erased. Teachers' constructions of the ideal literate subject

are likely to be informed by these competing and overlapping literacies and literate subjectivities. For teachers who work in disadvantaged schools, each of these constructions may be seen as talking about the student they teach. Literacy pedagogy may become the site of moral training, the rescue of the disadvantaged child and the skilling of the child worker.

The claim that literacy standards are falling is usually related to the question of what counts as 'proper literacy'. For example, the writers of the documentary history illustrate the ways in which cultural heritage models of literacy have been promoted in recent editorials of *The Australian*. Thus the protagonists of cultural heritage models of literacy, emphasising 'the classics', mourn the supposed demise of this formation of literacy. I digress briefly in order to examine this issue and how it might particularly relate to questions of class and literacy.

In 1987 an editorial in *The Weekend Australian* (June 13-14, 1987, p.18) made claims for the 'civilising' effects of print literacy over the 'terrifying emptiness at the heart of popular culture' which, according to the author, is implicated in the high youth suicide rates. This editorial is concerned with the supposed decline in the moral order of society as evidenced by a lack of discipline, over-use of television as baby-sitting and the enjoyment of popular culture (Green et al. 1994, p.443). The editor makes claims for the positive moral effects of reading the classics. Thus the decline in literacy constructed in this editorial has to do with the rejection of new forms of language and literate practices – popular culture – which are widely accessible to the majority of the population. Thus what is at stake is what counts as literacy in the community. It is, however, the repeated vocabulary of this article, in relation to poverty, about which I wish to make some further comments.

The central metaphor of *The Weekend Australian* editorial is 'poverty'. According to the writer, today's society is threatened by a youth population who lack 'the civilising effects of words on character', who lack 'their magnificently rich heritage'. The journalist concludes that:

The more we demean the essential importance of literature in all its forms the more we impoverish and harden our community, and deprive it of the intellectual and spiritual sustenance it so obviously needs (*The Weekend Australian*, cited by Green et al. 1994, p.443).

Elsewhere in the article the author refers to 'the poverty of some aspects of our contemporary culture', 'the richest heritage', 'the poverty, the emptiness of the culture', the poverty of popular culture. Using the emotive imagery of poverty (and its opposite, richness) the argument is made that popular culture and working mothers (who do not

control their children's viewing and use television as a baby sitter) have produced a young population which threatens democracy and the civilised world. The writer conjures up images of a society at risk which could be saved by the 'romance with the printed word'. The material realities of poverty are alluded to only briefly in a one sentence paragraph which asserts: 'The idea that a young unemployed person does not benefit from a literary education is the reverse of the truth.' In the remainder of the article the real 'poverty' is that produced by the emptiness of popular culture. The one sentence paragraph and the use of the 'poverty' metaphor bear further comment. The reference to the young unemployed person not benefiting from 'a literary education' is not contextualised. The relevance of this idea and whose idea it is are not specified. It is simply denied, named as 'the reverse of the truth'. The writer then is positioned as being a proper arbiter for the truth on these matters. No further explanation need be offered. The next sentence moves on to the 'perplexing' problem of teenage suicides.

In this editorial the writer insinuates the lack of a particular kind of literacy, a literary print based cultural heritage literacy of Kipling and Buchan, is causally related to teenage suicide and violence. However youth unemployment is never connected with youth suicide. Material poverty is absent as the poverty metaphor is highjacked for the writer's ends – the proposition that the lack of print literacy is a threat to democracy and productive of a desolate youth population. The 'essential importance of literature' is proclaimed as offering 'sustenance' for an impoverished community.

So the image of the 'illiterate' here is that of the criminal, improperly reared by working women, crazed by exposure to barbaric forms of technological, popular culture. (Green et al. 1994, p.6)

The mixing of the metaphors in this editorial is very telling and indicates the ways in which literacy can be taken up and championed for particular moral and political ends whilst diverting attention from the actual poverty many young people experience. A follow-up editorial was published several weeks later. Again the metaphor of 'a poverty, an emptiness, in our popular culture' is employed and again literature is proclaimed as a civilising influence. Six months later *The Australian* was still pursuing this theme, this time however, specifying what kinds of literature might have this civilising effect.

Too many novels studied in the classroom today are of low quality. Frequently, they are books that employ relatively small vocabularies and explore the tedious theme of urban alienation. (*The Australian*, cited by Green et al. 1994, p.455)

Here 'urban alienation' is a 'tedious theme'. Again the invisibility of real social problems is maintained. Across these articles (in an influential national paper with high circulation rates) the writers construct a model of cultural literacy where contemporary youth could

be civilised by classical literature. The poverty metaphor is colonised for conservative ends. Actual poverty, unemployment and urban alienation are trivialised and discounted.

In terms of the present study, the discursive construction of literacy in a disadvantaged school, these media texts surrounding literacy are extremely interesting. The assumed absence of particular formations of literacy is used to explain an assumed youth alienation problem, at the same time seeing 'urban alienation' as a 'tedious' theme studied in too many classrooms. The material realities of the lives of poor youth are reframed as a problem with the poverty of popular culture. Print literacy and engagement with classic works of literature are offered as sustenance to young people at risk of suicide. Australia has the highest suicide rate for young men in the world; two million people are living in poverty; almost half a million people are suffering long term unemployment (Varghese 1994, p.96). The faith placed in cultural literacy, rather than an analysis of the social and economic causes of poverty and suicide, means that literacy is used to deflect attention away from the nation's structural social and economic problems.

In concluding this section I note how similar discourses are at work in the public texts surrounding young people and literacy. Texts on young people construct them as a problem, either in need of rescue or as a threat. Newspaper texts about literacy tend to arrive at a similar set of conclusions. Literacy (of the 'proper kind') is offered as a solution for disadvantaged young people. The absence of such a literacy is seen as a threat to the young person's future and to that of the community and to democracy. Given these problems it is therefore not surprising that governments and the media have made schools the focal points of proposed solutions.

4.2.3 'The quality of public schooling is declining': Questions of teacher competence

In the late eighties and early nineties, governments carried out a number of inquiries and released policies on teacher education and quality assurance throughout the education sectors. The quality of schooling became an issue internationally (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 1989). In Australia the Schools Council and the National Board of Employment, Education and Training commissioned papers and sponsored seminars to discuss issues of teacher quality. My interest is in the competing discourses of these documents and the possible effects on teachers' work and subjectivities. In an extended discussion of historical and contemporary reforms in teacher education policies Knight et al. (1994) analyse the dominant discourses of teacher education policy under national Labour governments in Australia from 1983 to 1993. A number of their arguments are germane here:

1. An instrumentalist and human capital perspective was already visible in government reports on teacher education in the late seventies, but escalated rapidly with the creation of the 'mega-department' of Employment, Education and Training in 1987
2. During this period education became central to micro-economic reform
3. In the 1980s there was a shift from a conception of the teacher as an 'educated professional' to that of a 'competent practitioner'
4. There was a tension between the regulation required to achieve equity and the deregulation required for efficiency and productivity
5. Concerns for social justice were subordinated to concerns about Australia's economic performance.

As the writers explain, with Australia's economic performance in decline, government policy maintained a commitment to equity, but the emphasis was on 'quality', 'outcomes', 'competencies' and 'doing more for less' (Knight et al. 1994, p.457). Talk of quality was carried by what have been variously described as human capital, economic rationalist, managerial discourses.

Whatever the vagaries of the term 'quality' and the problems this produces for those who would measure it, quality became a key word in government educational policy in the mid-eighties, along with the mandate of accounting for student outcomes.

In policy terms, it is difficult to measure progress towards the achievement of quality unless it is converted to quantitative indicators such as graduation rates or achievement scores - in which case quality policies are merely policies for better quantitative outputs without better quantitative inputs. This approach to policy on quality provides governments with an open-ended way of bringing pressure to bear on educational institutions for improved performance, perhaps through the intensification of work. In this context quality is an effective tool of control. (Marginson 1993, p.99)

The problem with the human capital theory in education is the extent to which it has meant 'the employment of a *singular, dominant educational discourse*' (Marginson 1993, p. 233, italics in original). As Marginson puts it, economics has become the 'master discourse'. For example, in the paper, *Quality of Teaching* (Dawkins 1990, p.2) the Minister of Employment, Education and Training stated that there was a number of 'structural inefficiencies' in teaching, which he illustrated with reference to teacher credentialling, benefits and entitlements, and qualifications. When a managerial discourse is deployed to define the perceived problem of 'teacher quality', it can be solved through award restructuring and the intensification and nationalisation of accountability measures. Not surprisingly, the work of the Schools Council on teacher quality which was commissioned and initiated in the Dawkins era was subject to the same imperatives of making quality add up. In 'Australia's Teachers' the problem of how to develop incentives to maintain teachers' 'commitment' – constructed as a key ingredient in enhancing productivity and quality in schools – is explored. This report follows earlier

papers on the quality of teaching and takes up the issue of effective teaching as well as the conditions of teachers' work and their industrial agreements. The Schools Council document uses this opportunity to frame the need for a fullscale review of teachers' work conditions and career options and argues that improved productivity and quality is contingent on rewards to teachers. The Schools Council document works hard to keep faith with teachers, teacher unions and teacher employers and to urge the need for harmonious relationships. Thus this document uses the human resources argument to advocate for improved work conditions for teachers while accepting the government imperative for accountability. For example, under the heading 'public confidence', the Schools Council accepts the need for 'more information':

While mindful of the technical difficulties and possible practical shortcomings, the Schools Council fully supports the Australian Educational Council's move to introduce a scheme of national reporting. (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.145)

The document goes on to argue that schools should give their 'clients' (parents) more reports of 'what they want to know' and that confrontation between administrations and unions saps public confidence in schooling and should be avoided. Yet the Schools Council document also attempts to contest the human capital discourse to some degree and reintroduces a professional discourse of education.

We believe that rather than becoming a 'clever' country, Australia must become a well-educated country...(Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.146).

Thus the writers contest the government's 'clever country' vocabulary by inserting an overt educationalist discourse. In this document there is public evidence of bargaining as educators regroup and work strategically with governments, trading accountability measures for improved career paths and work conditions. For this study it highlights the need to contextualise studies of curriculum and pedagogy in terms of broader policy, structural and industrial change – 'to see literacy teaching as work and to reintegrate industrial issues with pedagogical issues' (Green et al. 1994, p.15). To some degree this is what this Schools Council document does through its content and vocabulary. It deals with teachers' work conditions, industrial agreements, career paths, professional development and under the heading of 'teachers' work' lays out 'a charter for teaching', where explicit pedagogy is promoted. It outlines a series of propositions. Firstly, if the quality of teaching is to be improved and if we are to avoid a crisis, then teachers require professional development.

There is no crisis in Australian education. Not yet. But one could readily be brought on by inaction or by inappropriate response to the current situation. (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.140)

Secondly, teacher commitment is constructed as key to the process of the improvement of the quality of teaching and increased productivity.

[I]f the demands on teachers' commitment are increased without concomitant changes in their reward, not only is commitment likely to decrease, but it will become increasingly difficult to attract good quality candidates to the profession...' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1990, p146)

An uncommitted and poorly motivated teaching force is unlikely to produce the quality of educational outcomes commonly desired. (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.146)

On the other hand teachers must be able to demonstrate the appropriate degree of commitment and capability to establish the grounds for increased rewards. They must be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their professional work. (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.146)

Thirdly, the way to ensure teacher 'commitment' is through 'rewards', such as promotion opportunities, physical work conditions and salary incentives. This 'commitment' is said to be monitored through 'teacher appraisal'. The Schools Council does contest the economic rationalist approach to quality at one point, to the extent that it argues for and on behalf of teachers and for the return to an education discourse. However it also deploys the human resources discourse where the grounds for improved quality and increased productivity remain contingent on teacher 'commitment' – and the way to teacher commitment is 'reward'. An instrumental view of quality is evident again in a statement about teacher student relationships.

Careful attention must also be paid to the quality of teacher-student relationships, because of their deep importance to both parties and to the productivity of the educational enterprise. (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.142)

The educational discourse and advocacy for teachers is overtaken once again by an odd blend of economic rationalism, 'new times' work psychology, and moral responsibility. The way to ensure quality is through explicit teaching.

Achieving a 'quality performance' depends on knowing what it might be. We believe the way to improve the quality of teaching in its broadest sense is to improve the quality of teaching in its most exact sense, the working relationship of teachers and students in a classroom. (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.141)

According to the document the way to ensure the quality of teachers' work is ultimately through national reporting on agreed indicators of competencies, both for students and for teachers. Throughout the document 'quality' remains a very flexible word:

- good quality candidates (p.30)
- the quality of learning (p.58)
- our task remains to build schools which are happy, purposeful and productive and which have an ethos...which supports those qualities (p.75)
- the quality of teachers' working conditions (p.80)

- the maintenance and improvement of teacher quality (p.87)
- the quality and success of teaching practice (p.89)
- the importance of quality classroom performance (p.120)
- the importance of having high quality assessment and testing operations (p.132)
- the quality of teaching (p.140)
- the quality of their resources (p.141)
- a list of qualities (p.141)
- the quality of relationships within the institution (p.141)
- the quality of teacher-student relationships (p.142)

'Quality' is used as an abstract singular noun (the quality), in the plural form to describe a cluster of abstract, but specified, conditions (a list of qualities; those qualities) and as an adjective (good quality candidates, quality classroom performance, high quality assessment). It is used in relation to teaching, learning, classroom performance and teachers' working conditions. It can describe would be student-teachers or indicators of a school ethos. Thus it can be attached to people, products, processes and relationships. The problem with quality, as indeed the writers of the document acknowledge, is the difficulty with its identification and measurement. In an analysis of recent educational policy, Marginson notes, ironically, one problem with the construct quality.

It seems impossible to reach universal agreement on the meaning of quality. Yet people seem to recognise it when they see, read or hear it (Marginson 1993, p.98)

However, the writers of *Australia's Teachers* argue that the difficulties with defining and measuring 'quality' and 'effectiveness of education' should not prevent efforts 'to identify and quantify educational outcomes' (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, pp.132-133). If there is any doubt in the 1990 documents of the dominance of the human capital theory in the work of the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning to which the Schools Council papers contribute, by November 1991 in a discussion paper on the whether a national teaching council should be set up, the consultant writes of 'the current level of concern with quality', the need for education to 'become more productive', the need for a 'closer scrutiny' of goals, and the need for 'more careful evaluation of both achievement and performance'. Further, he speculates that the current challenges and complexities facing teachers will continue and that 'Quality human resources will be at a premium' (McRae 1991, p.11).

The 1990 Schools Council document argues that the lack of 'data' about schooling in Australia makes it difficult to support education in 'public discourse'. In other words, they contend that the lack of statistical evidence makes it harder to counter media

arguments about declining standards. It is to newspaper representations of the quality of schooling and teachers during this period to which I now briefly turn.

The writers of the Schools Council document explain that 'the overall impression to be gained from material from the print media ... is that education in Australia is in a state of crisis....Contemporary messages of crisis and confusion appear to have conjoined with older issues ('teachers have it easy') to produce a powerfully negative mood in the media' (Commonwealth of Australia 1990, p.17). The writers of *Australia's Teachers* try hard in the document to work against these negative images, but it is not easy. As they point out it is frequently the oppositional political party (in this case, the national Liberal party) who provide fuel for such media reportage. However this negative constitution of public schooling and teachers is by no means restricted to Australia, but a regular issue in newspapers in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America.

Teachers often feature in the news when their actions are thought to make a difference to students or parents (Baker 1994). For example, reports of teacher strikes and unionism appear regularly. Teacher refusals to enact government policies such as mandatory testing are also common topics, especially in recent times. Teacher failure to produce the kinds of citizens society wants is the overarching theme frequently recycled. In addition, the press gives considerable attention to stories of suspected teacher deviance or criminality. The print media 'shape the picture the public has of schools' (Baker 1994, p.287). This in turn contributes to what can be said about schools and teachers in the communities which has effects on teacher morale and identity. In South Australia school education made the front page a number of times during the period of the present study. During 1992 the following headlines featured in the state's only daily newspaper, *The Advertiser*:

- School under siege (February 20, p.1)
- School under siege as teachers 'crack' (February 20, p.2)
- Schools crisis: teachers to rally (February 21, p.2)
- SA education needs funds, not rhetoric (February 21, Editorial Opinion, p.10)
- Employers slam school training (July 14, p.1)
- Employers lash out at school training (July 14, p.2)

These headlines and the articles they lead represent similar themes as those identified above. The net result produces a decline in teachers' public status and low morale at a time when the intensification and complexity of teachers' work is escalating. Metaphors associated with aggression and violence are common, including 'siege' and 'slam'. Accompanying these articles are photographs and cartoons which help drive the messages home. A semiotic analysis of these visual texts is beyond the scope of this study.

However several observations are worth making. *The Advertiser* cartoonist takes a similar line across articles published over several years in regard to schooling (See for example Figure 4.2.3b).

The article entitled, 'School Under Siege' (see Figure 4.2.3a), is concerned with teachers' inability to cope with the 'escalating violence and severe behaviour problems' amongst students at one northern suburbs disadvantaged school. On either side of the article are two photographs, one of the female school principal and a large photograph of a classroom with a smashed window panel on the classroom door. Partially covering the large cracks is a sign, 'Welcome to Class RM 4'. The report goes on to describe violence between students and towards teachers in this primary school. The school principal ascribes blame to the economic recession and inadequate levels of staffing. The story of 'one experienced and skilled' teacher's breakdown is told. The photograph of the classroom has been taken from outside the classroom through the cracked glass of the door. Because the glass is reinforced with a metallic grid the effect of the photograph is to give the appearance of a cage. The children in the classroom look as though they are behind bars or a wire enclosure. The article on the other side of the photograph reports on the escape of a high security prisoner from an escort vehicle whilst on his way to a court appearance.

As Kress (1994) has argued, where the boundaries for texts begin and end in newspaper reportage is not clear. The overall effect of this front page is to place the problem school and its prison-like environment next to a report about a violent criminal. The story of the violent and dangerous adult criminal are placed together with those about children who punch their teachers, who threaten them with chairs and whose teachers need police assistance to maintain control. The story also tells of a teacher who cracked the glass panel in the door by slamming it in her frustration. On page two next to the continued story headed, 'School under siege as teachers "crack"', (See Figure 4.2.3b) the resident cartoonist shows two student figures talking to each other. The ballooned script from one reads: 'We learnt the 3R's today...reading rioting and wrecking!' This cartoonist uses the 'three R's' as the starting point in most of the material relating to schooling.

Figure 4.2.3a *The Advertiser* article: 'School under siege'

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Figure 4.2.3b *The Advertiser* article: 'School under siege as teachers "crack"'

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The article itself devotes considerable space to the principal's views as the excerpt below indicates.

Despite an excellent behaviour management plan, the social and economic pressures of the recession and a lack of staff meant teachers could not devote enough time to educating students. Instead, they spent much of their time controlling a hard core of violent and disruptive children.

Apart from the department's staffing policy, Ms Gillett [the principal] also blamed the recession and the 'skewed' funding priorities of the State Government for the problems. She said that while the department offered more staff for schools with children from economically disadvantaged families, it did not take the number of children with behavioural problems into account.

Elizabeth Field's problems were exacerbated because 12 of its 18 teachers were new this year.

Ms Gillett said the new teachers, who received only two days' training on the school's special needs, suffered from 'culture shock'.

The school needed three extra teachers to lower class sizes, which were generally in the 'upper 20s', and more training.

Ms Gillett did not blame their teachers, the students or their parents for the 'disarray' gripping her school.

'The economic recession is so deep that there are families, particularly in the Elizabeth area, who are in crisis,' she said.

'They are fighting a courageous battle against poverty. The violence isn't because Elizabeth Field people are violent - it's because they are suffering.'

'We have some of the best teachers in the state, but they go under because they're not prepared for the traumatic conditions.'

The article continues with a statement from a Department of Education spokeswoman who claims the school already receives eighteen percent extra funding on top of the regular staff allocation. While the principal's views are represented here, the visual images and headlines convey images of teachers not coping. This perspective is highlighted the following day when once again the 'schools crisis' and indeed this particular school again feature on the second and editorial pages. This time the accompanying photographs feature two men, the new director general of education who is due to take up his position a week later and a heavily tattooed parent who helps out at the school voluntarily. On this occasion the main article is headed, 'Schools crisis: teachers to rally' (See Figure 4.2.3c).

Figure 4.2.3c *The Advertiser* article: 'Schools crisis teachers to rally'

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After a brief description of the support Ms Gillett has received in response to the article published in the previous day's Advertiser, the journalist reports the Opposition Leader's statement that four thousand children from the northern area were waiting for places in private schools because of the 'falling standards of education in the area'. Next the article moves to a response from the future director general of education, Dr Eric Wilmott, who explains he would be out at the school himself, except that he has not formally taken up his new position. This does not prevent Dr Wilmott from stating that 'pouring in more staff would not in itself solve the problem'. A series of interviews with male politicians is reported. Adjacent to this report is the photo of the parent, Bill Wade, leaning over two male children, one of whom is Aboriginal (see Figure 4.3.2d). The subheading reads: 'Mr Hulk calms kids with art'. In this article this parent member of the Elizabeth Field's community is described as a 'local hero' who uses art as an antidote to depression and anger. The article concludes with a quotation from Mr Wade, 'If I could get a job here, I would be happy as a pig in crap'. Multiple constructions of schooling, disadvantage, teaching, and parenting compete across these newspaper accounts. Political, economic and professional discourses are contested. However some messages come through very clearly. Children in disadvantaged schools are portrayed as out of control. Women teachers who work in disadvantaged schools are constituted as not coping, as 'cracking up' (even though as the official discourse claims they have been provided with more than adequate support). A commonsense reading may suggest that if a parent helper can 'calm kids with art' why are the professional women teachers 'cracking up'? Whose problem is it?

During the period in which I conducted the present study the quality of schooling and the quality of teaching and learning were constructed as problematic in public discourse, through both policy and media texts. Official policies were dominated by human capital theory which sees teachers as the human resources who are central to the process of enhancing the quality of education. In concluding this review of public discourses surrounding the themes of literacy, disadvantage and schooling I bring these together in a fourth proposition which summarises the commonsense hypothesis dominating this era.

Figure 4.2.3d Photograph from 'Schools crisis: teachers to rally'

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4.2.4 Better teaching would produce more literate students who would become better citizens in a more competitive Australian economy

In August 1991 the Minister for Employment Education and Training, John Dawkins, released Australia's first national policy on language and literacy. This policy is still important at the time of writing this thesis as it guides, through the Australian Language and Literacy Council, the ways in which national monies are allocated. The national policy has been the subject of considerable attention and critique (Freebody 1992; Green et al 1994; Ozolins 1993). The policy deals with adult literacy, languages other than English, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, English as a second language, as well as children's literacy. It made language and literacy central in public policy and in workplace and educational institutions. Accordingly considerable sums were diverted to the improvement of literacy in English for both workers and school children. As the quotation which leads this chapter signals, the money spent on literacy is seen as an investment in a more productive, competitive clever country. The theme of quality is visible again in the introduction to this policy document.

A heightened concern for quality has emerged - quality in content, in delivery and in results. (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p.1)

The document then goes on to make the joint argument that literacy is essential for economic competition and to alleviate disadvantage.

Without appropriate intervention and assistance those lacking effective English literacy are likely to become even more disadvantaged over time in a society which increasingly values skills and relevant employment experience. We cannot afford the inequities and inefficiencies which such a waste of human resources would entail. (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p.1)

In terms of the goals for children's literacy there is an emphasis on 'standards' and 'comprehensive assessment'. The other key move is the stress on 'national' – national statement of curriculum principles, national proficiency standards, regular national reporting. As the provider of funds, the national government requires states to increase and standardise accountability measures. The other targets are the improvement of teachers through nationally co-ordinated professional development activities related to the National English Curriculum Statement and through the improvement of teacher training courses. Thus the economic and equity rationales for literacy appear in tandem once again.

Headlines of texts collected during the period of my research at Banfield illustrate the dominant discourses regarding literacy in the press at that time.

- Young readers, writers 'just make grade' (*The Advertiser*, 28 July 28, 1992, p.3)
- Literacy problems a barrier to output (*The Australian*, 2 August, 1992, p.57)

- Poor literacy costs \$6.5 bn, bosses told (*The Advertiser*, 28 January, 1993, p. 8)
- Primary students literacy slammed (*The Advertiser*, 3 February, 1993, p. 6)
- Schools to focus on literacy skills (*The Advertiser*, 25 October, 1993, p. 10)

In these and other articles which appeared during the period propositions consistent with the findings of the documentary history of literacy debates are repeated (Green et al. 1994). In this period the literate subject becomes the economic subject, the human resource. At the same time even positive findings concerning standards of literacy are reported negatively, as in the case of 'Young readers, writers just make the grade' and 'Literacy test attacked as a publicity stunt anyone can pass'. By these accounts literacy remains a problem.

The cartoon accompanying 'Primary students literacy slammed', reads 'We learnt our ACB in school today', suggesting that even the commonsense basics are beyond today's schools. 'Slam' is a key verb when it comes to the performance of schools. Headlines such as 'Employers slam school training' and 'Primary students literacy slammed' position schools and teachers as the deserving victims of more expert critique. Teachers are constructed as incapable of producing the kinds of literate workers Australia needs. In addition many of the articles press home the ways in which schools continue to fail disadvantaged students or produce disadvantage through inadequate teaching.

My aim in this first section of this chapter was to explore the public discourses surrounding literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage in policy and media texts. There are success stories printed in the press, but careful scrutiny of such accounts is needed in terms of who is represented and what is reported. The children of the bad news stories are constructed as victims or threats and as hailing from the poorer working class suburbs or as homeless. The 'clever' children are computer whiz kids, scrabble champions, solar power inventors, maths prodigies, and sporting heroes often from private schools or state schools with an emphasis on academic success. In these ways, the press divides the world of children into success and failures, 'saints or sinners' (Walton 1993).

The effects of print media discourses on readers, or teacher readers for that matter, are not possible to gauge. However, newspapers do contribute to the production of available public discourses on a range of community concerns. They are one major way in which government policies in social services and education are mediated and made accessible in a society. Thus print media reportage on topics such as schooling, young people, literacy, poverty and teachers, contributes to the available cultural resources and commonsense knowledges about the way things are. When it comes to poor communities, the media sustains and perpetuates a view of the 'problem child', to be both

pitied and feared. When it comes to schooling, teachers and literacy, the print media sustains and perpetuates the view that there is a literacy crisis and that the quality of public school teaching is poor. In terms of the local effects of such discursive practices on teachers working in disadvantaged schools one can only speculate. What can be said though is that such messages do nothing to support teachers' work. Rather, cumulatively, a powerful negative public subjectivity is constructed (Green et al. 1994). While teachers may read such press critically, it remains ever present, eating away at the public confidence in the public school teacher and simultaneously eating away at the private confidence of the public school teacher. How the production and sustenance of teacher identity and morale is affected by popular media versions of what it means to teach and who one's students are is not possible to predict. Yet it is crucial to study the 'texts that script our lives' (Falk 1994, p.3).

Media reportage can also create a public outcry such that funds are diverted to 'the problem' as constructed by the media. For example inaccurate reporting of the literacy test (see above, 'Young readers, writers "just make grade"' [*The Advertiser*, July 28, 1992, p.3]) prior to an election assisted the Shadow Minister for education in producing a platform with literacy testing as a high priority item. Nationally the media promoted literacy crisis has coincided with the allocation of funds to national assessment instruments, such as the profiles. Thus media reports can no longer be simply dismissed as wrong or conservative right wing backlash; such texts are instrumental in maintaining a managerial discourse of accountability and the dominance of human capital ideology. Further, media attention to youth crime or literacy crises swings the focus away from the structural and economic causes of social problems. The response becomes one of increased surveillance, examination and training for the designated problem population, rather than a redistribution of resources.

The writers of the documentary history point to the need for a sociological and historical analysis of 'the changes in the social and cultural, economic and political worlds where we and our students practice literacy' (Green et al. 1994, p.16). This is key advice in terms of the present study. My aim in this brief sketch is to consider how the media shaped the terrain in the period surrounding my investigation at Banfield in order to better understand the discursive contexts in which teachers operate.

Teachers do not work in a vacuum, nor do they work in a protected space. As members of the community, teachers are subject to media constructions of reality. The media, in presenting 'the news', selects items which pertain to teaching, schooling, literacy and 'adjacent fields' such as delinquency, popular culture, poverty, child abuse, working mothers, childcare and so on. As readers of the media, teachers confront versions of

reality which they deal with both as 'private citizens' and as 'employed professionals'. Some of this 'news' impacts quite directly on teachers' professional roles, (such as the 'literacy debates', 'schools crises', 'teacher quality', 'basic skills testing'); others may have an impact in terms of teachers other roles as parents, women, members of religious communities, (such as, working mothers, childcare); others might impact in terms of teachers' membership in the wider community (such as poverty, child abuse). Reports on these adjacent fields share a number of common discourses and may be read by teachers as part of a heteroglossic text about modern childhood and pedagogy.

In closing this first section it is important to point out that teachers may read these public texts resistantly and critically. I do not assume that messages of decline and crises are accepted unproblematically, nor that all teachers read such texts in the same way, nor that these texts are read at all. Nevertheless, these publicly available hypotheses about disadvantaged young people, poverty, literacy standards, school and teacher quality contribute to community commonsense about such matters and as such have effects on teachers' work. Teachers can not and do not proceed locally without taking cognisance of dominant popular opinion and government policy. Together these discursive practices construct myths about literacy as a solution to economic problems and structural inequality. This makes the work of the literacy educator important at the same time as it makes it impossible.

Poverty requires the redistribution of wealth. Cultural capital, through literacy or whatever other knowledge or practices a society may value, is not a sufficient condition for transformation of material inequities (Luke 1996). In the media, and more subtly in government policy, teachers and schools become scapegoats for societal problems. Another important contributor shaping the discursive practices of schooling, literacy and disadvantage is educational research. Indeed policy and media texts draw on the knowledges and discursive practices of research texts (Bessant 1995a; Falk 1994). These domains operate interdependently and intertextually mediate commonsense truths. In the section which follows I review recent research exploring how school literacies are understood as a problem for disadvantaged students.

4.3 School literacies as a problem for disadvantaged students: Explanations from educational research

One consistent generalisation made by researchers internationally is that children who experience socio-economic disadvantage are also more likely to experience educational

problems and perform less well than middle class children on literacy tests. Scores of articles and books explain it like this:

Failure of low-income, inner-city children to read and write at levels comparable to their middle class counterparts is well known. (Purcell-Gates 1989, p.95)

A substantial proportion of those who fail to achieve adequate levels of literacy are students from financially disadvantaged families. (Snow et al. 1991, p.1)

In Australia, until recently, there have been few detailed studies of the school and home literate practices of disadvantaged students and communities (Breen et al. 1994; Freebody et al. 1995; Luke et al. 1994a) and these recent studies have been concerned not with assessment of students' performance but with describing and analysing the literacy practices of homes, schools and communities. Yet it is widely assumed from teachers' reporting and anecdotal evidence that the standard of literacy of socio-economically disadvantaged children is below the norm. The introductory pages of *Australia's Language, The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* report that:

There is a strong and well demonstrated relationship between low levels of literacy or English language competence and high levels of unemployment and other forms of social disadvantage. (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p.1)

The evidence for such assumptions was largely derived from a 1989 study of adult literacy (Wickert 1989) and research associated with the Disadvantaged Schools Program (Connell et al. 1991). In the companion to the policy paper the writers state:

Research associated with the Disadvantaged Schools Program in Australia (Connell, Johnson and White) also showed that low socio-economic status and poverty are the strongest predictors of educational disadvantage and consequently, of inadequate literacy development... A strong predictor of literacy success, according to the national survey of adult literacy, is the amount of reading material in the childhood home. It may be necessary, therefore to approach literacy development as a family issue. (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p.39)

However the policy writers do admit that 'we do not have a clear picture of the literacy levels of our children' and considerable national funds were set aside for national and state assessments of children's literacy proficiency (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p6). In the late eighties and early nineties this lack of official evidence of standards of literacy was dealt with in different ways by different state education departments, with some states taking on large scale standardised tests of children's performance in literacy. In South Australia, however, a three year statewide survey of curriculum and student performance in literacy (known as WRAP), based on naturalistic assessment and holistic scoring by teachers, was conducted in preference to basic skills testing.

In the WRAP literacy survey students in years six and ten were asked to complete a range of tasks, including story writing, autobiographical writing, science report writing,

persuasive writing, a summary, a fiction reading response and a non-fiction research report. In addition, students' usual classroom work was collected over a two week period. The writers of this survey were keen to model 'the best of current classroom practice' in their assessment procedures and students were given opportunities to get feedback and help in planning. Even so they recognised the non-neutral nature of literacy assessment:

The Writing and Reading Assessment Program was confronted with the issue of how to assess the literacy development of students who experience educational disadvantage. In our society certain groups are educationally disadvantaged because their ways of learning, uses for literacy, and experiences are different from those whose home backgrounds most closely match the culture of schooling. WRAP assessment tasks reflected the literacy of what might be called mainstream Australian culture. (Education Department of South Australia 1992, p.5)

Notwithstanding the attention of the WRAP team to the constructed nature of educational disadvantage and its impact on mainstream assessment, their survey indicated what they had feared, that while the literacy achievements of some students living in poverty were compatible with the random sample, 'there were significant numbers whose achievements were somewhat less' (Education Department of South Australia 1992, p.30). Overall this survey indicated that children from poor communities performed in the lower bands of achievement. As Connell and his colleagues have pointed out results of this kind are not unexpected.

The correlation of 'socio-economic status and 'test results' which is so familiar a result in educational research is not only un-surprising; it is, in a basic sense, intended. If the poor were shown to be more clever than the rich a drastic de-legitimation of the social order, and the education system, would result. (Connell et al. 1992, p. 22)

For educators committed to schooling as a site for transformation and for governments promising equitable outcomes, this predictable difference in the performance of disadvantaged students is an urgent problem.

The differential access of working-class, Aboriginal, and other groups of children to effective literacy programs in school has ... reached crisis point in the context of changing economic and employment conditions. (Freebody & Welch 1993, p.210)

Internationally and in Australia, governments with various agenda from social justice to economic performance, have funded research and compensatory programs to explain and address this differential performance. As a result of such research, four main explanations for the lower levels of literacy achievement of disadvantaged students have been produced and continue to circulate in the educational community:

1. the deficit explanation, which argues that these children are deficient and therefore not educable;

2. the difference explanation, which argues that these children have different knowledge and language practices than those valued by schools;
3. the 'structural inequality' explanation, which argues that schools, as state institutions, reproduce the inequalities which already exist within the population; and
4. the 'resistance' explanation, which argues that nonmainstream students actively resist white middle-class schooling.

As will become obvious in the discussion which follows these explanations are not mutually exclusive but frequently overlap and intersect within and across research studies. In the next part of the chapter I discuss each of these explanations for the problem of the differential literacy achievement of students from disadvantaged communities.

4.3.1. The 'deficit' explanation

Historically, early social science research contributed to the view that children have difficulties learning to read because they or their families lack the necessary abilities or experiences required to be literate (see Allington 1995; Bartoli 1990; Cambourne 1990; Henry et al. 1988; Jacob & Jordan 1993; and Luke 1993b for critiques of deficit theories). Deficit explanations may draw upon medical and genetic discourses (that the child is physically or mentally incapable of particular forms of learning) or upon educational and psychological discourses (that the child has not had the appropriate experiences to enable learning).

Allington (1995) recalls how early theories of intelligence, aptitudes and reading were constructed around such deficit theories and the impact for socio-economically disadvantaged students. When children of the poor fared badly on intelligence tests this result was taken as evidence for the argument that 'innate stupidity' was the major cause of poverty (Allington 1995, p.3). By the 1930s reading instruction was being tailored to account for the 'slow learner', whose condition was assumed to be physiological.

Methods of word recognition that other children pick up by themselves must be taught to these slow minds. Attention to individual letters amounting almost to a spelling method may be necessary. Reading material must remain very simple and childlike. (Dolch, cited by Allington 1995, p.4)

It is not my intention to review the extensive critiques of deficit theorising, but to argue that while educational researchers are now more cautious about making claims which suggest that literacy failure is produced by lacks or deficits in children or in their families and cultural communities, deficit explanations remain pervasive and are still at work in schools (Badger et al. 1993; Freebody et al. 1995; Freebody & Welch 1993). It is the contemporary manifestations of deficit explanations which I want to take up here. In this

discussion I focus mainly on recent Australian studies which illustrate the ways in which deficit explanations for the lower achievements in literacy for disadvantaged students continue to permeate educational discourses.

In 1992 I was involved in conducting a national survey of the literacy and language practices of early years teachers (the first four years of schooling) in disadvantaged schools. One worrying statistic was that teachers reported that 41% of grade three children failed to meet, or were barely meeting, teacher expectations for literacy performance. This compared with 32% in the first years of schooling. Hence the percentages of children not meeting expectations increased in the higher years of primary schooling. Teachers reported that a major reason for student failure was their deprived home background and that some children lacked 'worthwhile experiences' and 'appropriate models of language and social and literate behaviour'. Teachers' explanations appeared to be based on deficit assumptions about the students and their home contexts. When asked what it was important for teachers in disadvantaged schools to know in order to teach literacy respondents made statements typified by the following:

Cannot assume that the child has a basic vocabulary. Child may not have a good model to copy - speech.

Be prepared to make everything simple.

Many children have a literacy deprived background.

Children, in general have a limited linguistic data pool, ie fewer experiences and a limited vocabulary. Teacher expectations have to be lowered to meet the particular needs of the pupils.

The children usually come from a non-stimulating environment, where they do not have the range of experience other children have. Speech and use of vocabulary are usually limited, thus spelling becomes a problem and using semantic cues is difficult.

Be aware of vacuum in literacy background. In some cases conflict of values between parents and teachers re the importance of literacy.

Such explanations place the problem with assumed lacks or deficits with the child and the family. Elsewhere my colleagues and I have described this as a 'discourse of disadvantage' (Badger et al. 1993). In effect such discourses absolve the school and its teachers of responsibility for children's literacy. Further evidence of the way in which this works was provided in another aspect of the survey. We had asked teachers to say what they believed were the most important experiences were in children becoming literate. The two most important literacy events as far as these teachers were concerned were parents reading to children and parents hearing reading. Teachers constituted literacy development as contingent on these family practices with books. When the parents did not provide these experiences for their children (for whatever reasons) the

child was seen as at risk in terms of literacy. In these ways parents were made responsible for the literacy dispositions and proficiencies which schools are meant to deliver. The very discourses of teachers and schooling shifted responsibility for children's literacy to the parents. Moreover teachers' professional discourses about literacy development and how it should occur, allowed them to make judgements about what constitutes 'normal' social, family, language and literate practices and what would count as deviant or problematic. The model happy family engaged in storybook reading was constructed as the ideal and as pre-requisite to literacy learning at school. The unanticipated effects of teachers' employment of a professional construct, in this case the idea of a 'literacy set' (Holdaway 1979) or home reading as preparation for school literacy, can be seen here. The expectation of a middle class form of family literacy in the disadvantaged school site ensured that students did not meet teachers' expectations.

The dominance of deficit explanations in teachers' responses to the survey came as something of a shock to those of us who had been engaged in teacher professional development such as the Early Literacy Inservice Course (Education Department of South Australia 1984) which emphasised starting with the learner's strengths and acknowledging what the child could do. However it seemed that these positive principles were readily discarded when teachers were confronted by students whose strengths they neither recognised nor acknowledged as relevant to literacy learning at school. The dominance of the story reading model as the pedagogy for home and school led teachers to diagnose gaps, vacuums, lacks and deficiencies.

The identification of 'home background' as correlated with poor performance at school is not new. In a widely quoted longitudinal study of one hundred and twenty eight English speaking children, (from the time they were fifteen months until they were seven years of age) in England, Gordon Wells foregrounded class and family background as key variables related to differential performance in school literacies (reported in Wells 1985). He found that by five years of age there were no significant differences in children's speech despite differences in class and family background.

School tests, however, on the same cohort of children within the first term of school indicated that some children were more 'ready for school' than others (Wells 1985, p.230). Further, these differences in performance on school assessments were significantly predicted by class and family background. Wells concluded that some common contexts for language use in school were especially problematic for children - situations involving question and answer sequences where children were required to display knowledge which had no apparent relevance to the situation at hand. Children in working and lower class homes were shown to have less experience of these

decontextualised forms of language use around texts. From his earlier work Wells had concluded that:

[I]t was the place and value given to literacy in the everyday activities of the family that we considered social and educational inequality to be transmitted from one generation to the next.

In a later study Wells reports that while looking at books was very common across the study children, it was having a story read and discussed that predicted future success on mainstream measures of reading performance. And in Wells' study differences in how books were used in the families were related to class and parental education. Listening to stories at home also correlated with teacher assessments of children's oral language at school. Wells emphasised the importance of reading stories to children for success in school language and literacy, pointing out that:

[B]ecause stories are self-contextualizing, sustained symbolic representations of possible worlds, they provide the child with the opportunity to learn some of the essential characteristics of written language. Reading and discussing these stories helps the child to cope with the more disembedded uses of spoken language that the school curriculum demands. (Wells 1985, p.253)

While Wells does not blame working-class families for their children's differential poor performance, his conclusions privilege the story reading practices of the middle-class families and his recommendations imply that reading and discussing stories is the logical way to school success. Given the emphasis put on parents reading stories to children to emerge from the work of educational researchers it is not difficult to see how teachers might explain an absence of parent story reading as the cause of school failure.

In a sociological study of a child centred pedagogies in a working class community in England, Sharp and Green (1975) noted that as far as the school staff were concerned students' 'home backgrounds' explained failure, whilst ironically, it was 'the school's approach that explains success' (Sharp & Green 1975, p.65). 'Home background' may be a euphemistic alternative to labels which are overtly political, such as 'socio-economic status' or 'working class' or 'poor'. In a recent study of teachers in an inner city multi-racial school, Lee (1987) explains how teachers' apolitical ideologies ensured that school failure was treated as an individual problem. According to Lee teachers saw it as 'fairer' to treat students as individuals (Lee 1987).

When a material analysis of students' lives is denied, psychological theories of abnormality and deviance are invoked with the result that individual children and their families are seen as responsible for school failure. When these discourses are employed the child and the family are often judged morally as well as educationally and

explanations of poor reading are allied with a child not having models of appropriate social behaviour (Freebody & Welch 1993). As teachers frequently consider students as the most salient variable in the context of their work (McLaughlin & Talbert 1992) how teachers think about, talk about and understand their students is crucial to the ways they organise their teaching. Students who are assigned reputations for 'laziness' or 'limited ability' may learn to perform accordingly (Knight 1974; McLaughlin & Talbert 1992). The discourse of individualism can become dangerous when students' cultural practices and resources are seen as deficient by teachers.

In a number of critical analyses of contemporary educational discourses about literacy, Freebody (Freebody 1992; Freebody et al. 1995; Freebody & Welch 1993) argues that deficit explanations for the lower educational achievements of working class and disadvantaged students are typically domesticated or individualised in their location in the family home or within individuals. As Freebody (1992) points out, researchers and policy writers are complicit in such constructions of the problem in that their discursive practices often deflect analysis of the social and historical conditions in which such problems are created.

Through a critical analysis of a research report and a national discussion policy paper, Freebody demonstrates how social class is often omitted as an explanatory variable. Referring to a study of the literate competencies of Victorian school students in grades five and nine sponsored by the Australian Council for Educational Research, Freebody questions why the researchers devoted so much of their report to the discussion of gender as a key variable when this was a statistically insignificant result and gave almost no attention to the 'surrogate' class variables of father's occupation and number of books in the home which were both statistically significant. Freebody found that the researchers avoided dealing with social class by explaining that the 'cultural-intellectual environment of the home' was not conducive to literacy development (Freebody & Welch 1993, p.217). Hence uneven literacy achievement along class lines was constituted as 'a problem of motivation and parental encouragement' (Freebody 1992, p.74).

Freebody describes this approach as 'backyarding' in the sense that critical attention is directed at the home and away from social structures and institutions. The omission of class analysis may result in lack of proper resource allocation or resources being wrongly directed. The discursive practices of social scientists can thus unwittingly contribute to the maintenance of the social problem they seek to describe.

Freebody's critique (1992) of the 1991 discussion paper on Australia's Language and Literacy Policy for the 1990s, circulated by the national Department of Employment,

Education and Training (Commonwealth of Australia 1991) also addresses how educational discourses are productive and constitute the literate subject in particular ways. Here again he takes up the theme that in this first official national statement on literacy, the causes of literacy difficulties are 'backyarded'. The definition of literacy employed in this statement requires amongst other things that speakers, writers or readers recognise and use 'language appropriate to different social situations' (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p4. cited by Freebody 1992, p.72). According to Freebody, this requirement for 'appropriateness' is 'insidious' in that it appears sensible and even 'neighbourly', but it privileges as natural particular cultural practices over others. Which competencies are considered appropriate in different contexts are taken-for-granted as obvious. In the discussion paper's outline of the causes of literacy difficulties, Freebody again finds evidence of an individuated version of literacy education. He emphasises what he considers as the most problematic section.

Schools accept their role in transmitting and in making special arrangements for children with difficulties. However, they will not be successful unless there is a willingness to learn *on the part of children* and unless their *families accept their responsibility* to provide an environment conducive to learning. (Commonwealth of Australia 1991, p. 15, cited by Freebody 1992, p. 73)

Freebody's analysis shows how socio-economic problems come to be considered as if they were 'personal setbacks', which individuals and families with the proper attitudes should be able to overcome. Family and personal irresponsibility come to be seen as causes of educational problems and any analysis of the actual effects of poverty, ill health and other material realities are ignored. Freebody's analysis of the discursive practices of researchers and policy writers is important in indicating the ways in which social science maintains deficit explanations of the literacy difficulties experienced by disadvantaged communities. Given that official policy and government funded research has contributed to a commonsense view in the educational community that literacy is a problem of individual ability or motivation or caused by inappropriate family attitudes and practices, it is less surprising that teachers' explanations of children's literacy difficulties incorporate deficit views.

In a nationally funded study, Freebody and a team of researchers investigated the everyday literacy practices in and out of schools in five low socio-economic urban school communities were investigated. Through selected observations during classroom literacy lessons and during homework, plus interviews of parents and teachers they found that school personnel (teachers and administrators) accounted for poor literacy performance with reference to students' experience of poverty. Parents who school personnel considered to be disadvantaged were seen as non-supportive. In the executive summary

of this study Freebody et al. report that such parents were often seen to lack 'intelligence, knowledge, propriety and responsibility' along with financial security (Freebody et al. 1995, p.x). In contrast middle class families were seen in 'highly favourable terms' and as providing models of literacy practices along with the material and emotional resources children needed to be successful at school. The researchers noted that 'a heavily weighted baggage of moral, intellectual, social, physical, cultural and motivational dispositions is readily attached to poor people' (Freebody et al. 1995, p.xxviii). In this investigation further evidence of deficit explanations for the poor literacy achievements of disadvantaged students is provided. Many of the teachers interviewed,

attributed to 'disadvantaged' children a lack of certain, generally unspecified but clearly touchstone, life experiences, resulting in deficiencies in what are said to be basic areas of school-relevant knowledge. (Freebody et al. 1995, p.142)

The researchers recommend that one approach to working against the pervasiveness of such deficit views may be to involve teachers (preservice and inservice) in study of discourse analysis in order that they might critically examine their 'beliefs and the practical consequences of those beliefs' (Freebody et al 1995, p. xii). They also recommend that teachers explore the concepts of disadvantage, cultural difference and social justice in order to provide 'more effective resources to overcome the marginalisation of disadvantaged groups within the activities of schooling' (Freebody et al. 1995, p.xii). These recommendations begin to recognise the constitutive nature of educational discourses and their role in the maintenance of inequitable practices where socio-economically disadvantaged students are concerned.

One way in which deficit discourses are maintained is through the language of labelling. Contemporary students living in poverty are often described variously as minority, non-mainstream, non-traditional, disadvantaged, disaffected, low-income, urban, at risk. The negativity of our naming practices contributes to the maintenance of deficit myths where children are described in terms of deviance from 'imagined norms' (Dyson 1994; Willis 1995). Another difficulty with naming and categorisation is that there is nothing homogeneous about the cultural experiences of children living in poverty. Some children experience multiple disadvantage related to their colour, ethnicity, sex, geographical location, religion. Some children are members of communities who have lived in poverty across generations, whilst others are part of the increasing numbers of newly poor. Despite this heterogeneity, it is often the case that disadvantaged students are described as if they were all the same. 'These children' is a global label for children whose difference makes them problematic for mainstream institutions (Polakow 1993). Thus educators continue to struggle to develop vocabularies which respect difference and diversity, without ignoring the material realities produced by the unequal distribution of resources.

Such naming practices can lead to specific pedagogic effects, where teachers lower their expectations about what can be achieved. This can lead to a 'pedagogy of poverty' (Haberman 1991) where children from disadvantaged communities receive a limited curriculum which narrows their life choices (Anyon 1980; Jones 1989). Deficit discourses can lead teachers to misinterpret students' cultural resources and practices and to provide a restricted curriculum and a pedagogy which emphasises behaviour management (Malin 1991; Polakow 1993).

In an ethnographic study of the patterns of interaction at home and at school of Aboriginal children in an urban community, Malin concluded that the three most culturally different Aboriginal students received less of the teacher's resources than other students and that this led to them having low status academically and socially. These children were assigned to the lowest reading group where they received less instructional time than children in the middle and top groups. Paradoxically, the teacher heard the children in top group read more often than the children in the bottom group. Given that hearing reading is a literacy event in which teachers place considerable importance, this unequal distribution of time in favour of the 'better readers' is problematic. Malin also found that these children were most likely to be removed from reading lessons into 'time out' for disciplinary reasons. Malin argued that they were punished for behaviours which were ignored when displayed by other students, such as moving around the room in order to see what a friend or relative was doing. Malin observed that these children rarely received expression of teacher affection as did children in the other groups. This study highlights the ways in which deficit interpretations of cultural differences can reconstitute such behaviours as transgressions.

Similarly Polakow's case studies of children living in poverty in the United States also indicate negative differential pedagogical treatment based on income and race, where classroom life comes to mirror the 'bleak landscapes' that many children living in poverty experience outside of school (Polakow 1993). Polakow observes that children sometimes receive overly harsh treatment for childish misdemeanours and little understanding of the complexity or material difficulties of their lives outside of school. However Polakow also demonstrates that the teacher's response can make a considerable difference to whether or not the child is able to be integrated into the classroom community and to participate in literacy lessons. Together these studies indicate the urgent need for educators to examine the ways in which discursive practices and models of literacy exclude and include children from different communities.

4.3.2. The 'difference' explanation

A key move against the destructive dominance of deficit discourses has been work around the construct of 'difference'. According to this explanation, children from disadvantaged communities sometimes have difficulties with school language and literate practices because their home language and literate practices are different from those required and valued at school. It was not that such students lacked experiences or facility with language but that there was a mismatch or a discontinuity between school and home 'ways with words' (Au 1993; Cazden 1988; Corson 1993; Gilmore 1983; Heath 1983; Luke 1993b; Phillips 1983; Willis 1995). In this section I discuss illustrative examples of such studies in order to explain variations of the 'difference' explanation.

In a most influential ethnography, Heath (1983) found that the language and literacy practices of three different communities varied in patterns which related to class, race and religion. Children whose home language and literate practices matched most closely those of the school were advantaged when it came to school literacy. For instance, Heath (1982) reported that in Maintown, the mainstream townspeople (black and white middle-class families, including parents who were teachers, doctors, lawyers and business people) prepared children for the kinds of literate practices and dispositions required in classrooms through bedtime story reading events. Children learnt the authority invested in books and book-related activities; they learnt to answer their parents' questions about the books; they learnt to talk like books; and they learnt to participate as an audience for stories read aloud from books. They learnt ways of talking which resembled those of schooling.

Heath found that children in Roadville (the white working-class mill community of Appalachian origin) also participated in talk about books, but frequently this talk was highly directed and simply required them retell the facts or produce 'right answers'. Heath's interpretation was that in family interactions around texts that Roadville children learnt to be passive listeners. At school she observed that these children rarely answered questions about their opinions of stories and did not cope well with activities requiring independent action.

In contrast once again, Heath found that children growing up in Trackton (the black working-class mill community of recent rural origin) experienced different interactions around texts from their peers in either Maintown or Roadville. In Trackton there were no special books for babies and children and reading was often a public social event. While older children sometimes played school and read to younger siblings there was no special bedtime reading event. Young preschoolers however were active participants in oral

storytelling and fictionalised their everyday 'true stories'. Language use was heavily contextualised in daily events. Heath observed that when Trackton children went to school they were unfamiliar with teachers' 'display questions', where they were required to give answers to demonstrate information which the teacher already had.

Literacy events at school most closely matched those which the mainstream children experienced at home. Roadville children's home experiences with books prepared them for the limited literate practices of early schooling but their performance gradually declined when independent self-directed work was required. The discontinuity for Trackton children was greatest. Their storytelling resources and the roles they had learnt to play at home were not useful to them in school. They had no practice with understanding texts out of contexts, which teacher's questions required them to do. Heath concluded that neither Roadville's nor Trackton's 'ways with the written word' prepared children for the school ways (Heath 1983, p. 235).

However Heath's work did not stop with these findings. She trained a group of teachers, many of them townspeople, as ethnographers and helped them to examine the different language and literate practices of the communities they served and how these might be considered a resource rather than as a problem in the classroom. Further she helped children research the ways language worked in different situations. Heath reported that through the study of language in use some Roadville and Trackton children came to 'understand how to make choices among uses of languages and to link these choices to life chances' (Heath 1983, p.343). The methods of the ethnographer became a pedagogic tool for teachers and students exploring language difference.

A variant on the cultural difference explanation is the cultural discontinuity hypothesis (Au 1993; Jacob & Jordan 1993). Here the argument is that children from diverse backgrounds (who may be distinguished by ethnicity, social class and/or language) experience cultural discontinuity when moving between home and school. For example, children who are used to cooperating with peers and younger siblings may find individualistic and competitive reading lessons alien. Also the formal middle class inexplicit language used by teachers differs from the family's contextualised use of language. The different uses of language and literacy in schools and in home communities and the different values directing children's everyday roles and interactions create discontinuities for children.

In a longitudinal series of projects known as KEEP (Kamehameha Elementary Education Program) in Hawaii, an analysis of cultural difference in language practices was central to reshaping classroom literacy pedagogy (Au & Mason 1981; Au 1993; Boggs 1985). Au

and Mason describe how indigenous minority Hawaiian children were taught their reading lessons in a language interaction style of their community, 'talk-story', where stories were constructed collaboratively. Children were allowed to share turns in a joint performance rather than the usual process of nominated individual children answering teacher set questions. Children were invited to make comments as the teacher read rather than responding one at a time to teachers' questions. In this way the children's usual ways of operating, which were social, cooperative and peer oriented rather than individual and competitive, were validated as appropriate classroom practices. Students taught in a manner congruent with their patterns of interaction in their home communities were reported to have improved their reading performance. The KEEP project has been running over a decade and reports consistently good results for minority Hawaiian students (Jacob & Jordan 1993; Vogt et al 1993). For proponents of the cultural discontinuity hypothesis the solution to the differential performance of minority students is to design and practise 'culturally responsive instruction' (Au 1993).

Redesigning pedagogies around the language and literacy practices at work in the community has been a positive strategy particularly in schools serving relatively homogeneous populations. Further, the principle of 'ethnographic intervention' (Jacob & Jordan 1993) has been taken up in a range of sites by educators who seek not only to understand different language practices but to ensure that the cultural and language resources of disadvantaged groups are not excluded from the everyday discursive practices employed in schools (Cazden 1988; Heath 1983; Moll 1992).

While the above studies emphasise the differential effects of the patterns of talk which occur in reading instruction, other areas of the literacy curriculum may be equally problematic for some groups of students. For instance what counts as a good story in the home or peer community does not necessarily work in the official school forums of 'sharing time', 'show and tell' and 'sharing writing' (Cazden 1988; Dyson 1993; Gee 1990; Michaels 1981). On these occasions children are invited to tell or read a story or give an account of an event from their lives. On the surface such literacy events present as an open-ended activity where children have the opportunity to hold the floor or take centre stage in the classroom scene, yet these occasions are governed by participation structures and sometimes rules apply about topic choice and time limits. And, as children come to know, not just any performance will do.

In these language events the teacher evaluates the child's language competencies across norms which may be more or less explicitly made available to the children. Along with the patterns of talk in reading instruction, these common literacy events have been of interest to researchers considering differences between community and school language

practices. Of these studies, Michael's (1981) study of 'sharing time' has received considerable attention (Cazden 1988; Gee 1990). In an ethnographic study of a first grade class in an ethnically mixed urban school in California, Michael's observations indicated that sharing time was a key situation in the classroom life in that it was a recurring event which had a gatekeeping function, in that children's performances are judged in ways that may make a difference to current and future educational opportunities. In this case, 'sharing time' (also called 'morning talks', 'show and tell', or 'news') referred to occasions where children told about past events in their lives. As children are required to narrate a story this event can be seen as an oral preparation for literacy.

Michaels found that the narratives produced in sharing time varied in ways related to race and culture. White children told topic-centred stories, whereas black children, particularly girls, tended to produce episodic narratives. She also found evidence of differential treatment of children, in that some children's stories generated more 'successful teacher/child collaboration' than others, which meant that some children had more practice in using this 'literate discourse strategy' than did others (Michaels 1981, p.425). Michaels concluded that differences in communicative background led to unintentional mismatches in conversational style and less practice for the black children in the prose-like oral discourse required in this event, and that these difference may affect children's progress in literacy acquisition.

Cazden agrees that sharing time is an important event because it provides a rare opportunity at school for children to create their own oral texts and to tell stories about their own lives, 'perhaps the most universal kind of text' (Cazden 1988, p.8). For this reason Cazden conducted similar studies in the Boston schools. She also presented transcripts collected from the different studies to her graduate students. Cazden (1988) found that white adults considered the episodic stories harder to follow and that they inferred from the text that narrator was a lower-achieving student. However the black adults appreciated the episodic stories, noting their detail and complexity. Hence these everyday performances by children may be differently assessed by teachers. What is heard, understood and assessed may depend on the teachers' primary discourses (Gee 1990). In these ways children's different discursive resources and practices come to differentially valued.

When psycholinguist James Gee analysed the narratives of one of the black girls (which the white adults had assessed as 'terrible') he found them to have 'a complex even elegant structure' (reported by Cazden 1988, p. 21; see also Gee 1990, pp.117-126). Most commonly the topic sentence structure, produced by the white middle-class children, is the preferred discursive practice for sharing time in mainstream classrooms. The sharing

time studies suggest how teachers' responses to children's different language and cultural practices can construct school success and failure. What comes to count as competence are particular cultural formations of language and literate practices.

In a series of ethnographic studies of writing time in urban schools serving heterogeneous multi-racial and working and middle-class communities, Dyson (1989, 1993) examined the social world of the classroom from students' viewpoints. Her analysis of the occasions where children shared and directed performances of their written narratives and songs - 'sharing time' and 'author's theatre'- explicates how children must negotiate what can be said and written in the official classroom not only with their teachers, but also with their peers. In Dyson's research, different language practices became the object of children's discussions and arguments.

Dyson (1993) outlines how this diverse peer community used the literacy classroom to do important social as well as intellectual work. In one classroom Dyson visited, the teacher allowed children to use out-of-school genres such as raps, jokes and songs and the narrative and characterisation of favourite television programs and movies as resources for learning school literate practices. While the classroom teacher encouraged children to use knowledge and resources from their home and popular cultures, on some occasions, children attempted to enforce traditional mainstream requirements for school genres. Dyson demonstrates how children use their different cultural and linguistic resources to accomplish social goals in their everyday lives at school. In addition to the cultural resources associated with the African-American oral storytelling tradition, she also shows how the children used knowledge of popular culture and their own local worlds as a bridge to the official world of school composing.

Dyson's (1989, 1993) work illustrates what 'difference' might mean as children negotiate ways of being students and friends in a diverse school community. Further, it suggests how teachers' and students' constructions of literacy curriculum allow or disallow the use of what children know and can do with language. Dyson's argument is that researchers have sometimes contrasted the linguistic and social features of children's talk and writing without an analysis embedded in the classroom as a dynamic social environment. In Dyson's view children are often reduced to categories and their material, cultural and local circumstances ignored. Her aim is to resituate analysis of language use within the human relationships in which it is produced. As Dyson et al. (1995) note it is important to remember that 'difference' is constructed out of the analysis of the language practices of privileged children and their families and that pedagogical models built from the patterns of interactions so located will continue to advantage those same children. In diverse classroom communities the challenge is, in Dyson's terms, to construct a

'permeable curriculum' where a multiplicity of practices, language and literate resources can be used. She argues that teachers need time and opportunities to discuss what counts as 'difference' in their localities and the kinds of difference which make a difference to school success in particular contexts (Dyson et al. 1995).

In Australia, while the body of ethnographic and sociolinguistic research is somewhat smaller, a number of educators have drawn on the difference hypothesis to explain why disadvantaged children perform below the norm on mainstream school literacies, and to develop culturally inclusive pedagogies (Cope & Kalantzis 1993; Kale & Luke 1991; Malin 1991). I turn now to two studies which illuminate how different early language and literate socialisation may lead to differing consequences when their different competences are brought to the linguistic 'market-place' of the school (Luke 1993b, p.31).

Based on an extended case study of the language development of a Torres Strait Islander child, Elsey, Joan Kale and Allan Luke (1991) have indicated the ways in which Elsey's home language and literate socialisation prepares her for different practices than those commonly made important at school and suggest that Elsey's practices are likely to be misjudged in the context of school. They point out that her bilingualism is likely to be seen as a problem rather than as a resource and that her use of Torres Strait Creole is likely to be interpreted by teachers as incorrect English rather than as another language. Elsey's experiences around written texts occur in relation to her everyday environment, including reading and talking about the Woolworths fliers, collecting the mail, reading the familiar labels on envelopes and copying songs from church. Her experience of narrative includes listening to her grandmother's 'yarning', where Elsey cannot interrupt but can continue with her own activities whilst listening.

Kale and Luke (1991) point out that, while Elsey participates in a wide range of purposeful language and literacy events at home, bedtime story reading is not part of her language and literate repertoire. They anticipate that Elsey's difference may create problems for her at school because her language and literate socialisation has taught her different rules and procedures than those favoured by the school. While their analysis foregrounds the competencies which Elsey has developed prior to beginning school, as a Bilingual Torres Strait Islander child, they predict that her cultural practices may be judged as deficit at school. They argue that what is needed is the commitment to strategies which provide 'students of non-mainstream cultures with socially powerful and critical ways of using talk and texts'(Kale & Luke 1991, p.13).

Williams (1990, 1991) studied variation in home literacy practices, focusing in particular on story reading. Through parents' survey reports and tape-recordings of home reading

practices of the mothers of children in kindergartens from different communities Williams conducted a comparative study of story reading sessions. Williams made broad distinctions between the kindergartens in the educationally disadvantaged areas, as defined by the New South Wales Education Department, and those which were privately owned and located in more affluent areas. He also distinguished between families where the major breadwinner worked in a high or low autonomy profession (following Hasan 1989).

While Williams (1990) found mothers from both areas reported reading to their children frequently, he identified a number of differences in reading practices between families attending preschools in disadvantaged areas and those attending privately owned preschools in what he describes as more affluent areas. Children attending preschools in disadvantaged areas experienced a smaller range of texts than children attending the privately owned more affluent preschools who had more access to reading and discussion around information texts (such as those on dinosaurs or nature). As well as the differences in the range of texts read, he found that there were class-related differences in the interactions that went on around the texts. According to Williams, mothers in the disadvantaged area 'almost seem to limit the child initiating interaction by fractionally speeding their reading when the child murmurs for attention. Sometimes they were explicitly told not to interrupt' (Williams 1990, p.15).

Williams points out that 'there is no sense of personal rejection of children in the DSP [disadvantaged] transcripts, either through the voice tones or the wording and that all the mothers worked to make it an enjoyable time for the children' (Williams 1990, p.23). However the activity of reading a story was constructed differently in different households in class related patterns that potentially might impact on school success. Mothers from the more affluent areas talked more about the text and were more likely to question children until their answers match their parents' interpretations. Williams concluded that children from the more affluent areas entered school with more experiences of school type interactions around a greater range of texts. In the first few months of school Williams found, not surprisingly, that children from families where the major bread-winner was in a 'high-autonomy profession' were more likely to understand and respond to teachers' questions. Such children were more likely to correctly interpret the point of the teacher's questions.

What is learnt in early socialisation of literacy is not only the patterns of turn-taking and the use of decontextualised questions and answer sequence, but also the kinds of logic upon which teachers' questions about texts are based. William's investigations suggest that the pedagogical practice of the shared book experience lesson and the associated talk

and questioning around the text is likely to be of differential instructional value to different groups of children.

Together these comparative and ethnographic studies suggest that the literate practices of middle-class white communities match those of schooling in that the individual reader/writer is emphasised, the text is taken as authoritative, children are taught to match adult interpretations of text, children are taught how to answer adult questions about text and children are taught the question-answer interaction patterns common to teacher-led classroom interactions around texts. Parents who are themselves more experienced with formal education will be best placed to train their children for the literate performances typically required by schooling. The extent to which children's home language, literate and cultural practices varies from the practices summarised above predicts the new kinds of learning they will need to do to be successful in school.

'Difference' is itself a construct requiring critical analysis lest it comes to signify an empty, if politically correct, label or a static stereotype which imperceptibly slides into deficit constructions of 'learning styles'. The adjective 'different' immediately implies a normative comparison which is potentially dangerous to those marked as 'different'.

[S]ince normalisation hinges on the detection of the pathology, the targets of intervention continue to be the poor, the working class and ethnic minorities. (Walkerline 1985, p.204)

Nevertheless, difference explanations of the causes of children's difficulties with school literacy have been positive insofar as they have led to the production of culturally responsive and culturally inclusive pedagogies which have resulted in disadvantaged children being able to access the literacies on offer at school. Literacy studies of cross-cultural differences have resulted in researchers and educators moving towards the plural 'literacies', signalling the multiplicities of situated practices, rather than the singular construct, 'literacy' as the collective label for reading and writing skills (Street 1993). The difference explanation of school success and failure does not in itself confront the issue of the kinds of literate practices which are or should be 'disbursed to children' (Luke 1993b, p17). Even with pedagogical reform within the classroom and positive frames for educational research, structural inequities may continue to block the success of disadvantaged children and to ensure that their resources, competences and literacies do not count in mainstream and competitive societies.

4.3.3. The 'structural inequality' explanation

The third major hypothesis concerning differential outcomes argues that there are structural inequalities in place through which the educational systems construct inequitable opportunities and outcomes (Anyon 1981; Connell 1993; Sharp & Green

1975). According to this explanation the structures and assessment practices of schools, educational bureaucracies and credentialling authorities ensure that privileged students are rewarded for the resources, competences and practices they access at home and disadvantaged students are classified as poor performers and receive a watered down curriculum and at times less instruction. Within school institutional practices such as streaming or ability grouping can maintain different positions and ensure that disadvantaged children get differential treatment. At key transition points of schooling children are assessed within the school and by outside agencies in ways that determine both current placements and possible futures and these assessments are made on the basis of norms constructed from the 'ruling class' (Connell 1985).

Even though the everyday pedagogical practices may be inclusive or culturally responsive, tests which value forms of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1990) to which some children have had no access, can result in their present and future exclusion from educational and employment opportunities. The need for change is demonstrably not only within the sphere of the classroom or school, but in the ways which educational systems and governments organise the assessment and credentialling of the student population as a whole. Such assessments can have material effects on students' opportunities to learn at school.

In the area of reading, for example, numerous studies have suggested that the instruction received by children in different ability groups varies in quality. Typically, children teachers place in the 'high ability' reading group read whole texts and focus on enjoyment and understanding and are asked challenging questions while the children assigned to the 'low ability' group (often students from disadvantaged backgrounds) focus on words and word parts, are interrupted more, read much less overall and are asked literal questions (Allington 1992; Collins 1986; Eder 1981; Snow et al. 1991).

[R]eading instruction in the better reading groups focused on comprehension, inference, and analysis, whereas instruction in the poorer groups was limited to the difficulties of word recognition and comprehension of detail. (Snow et al. 1991)

In a local ethnographic study of Aboriginal children in an urban South Australian classroom, Malin (1991) explains how ability groups work against the children who are assigned to the low ability group. Malin found that the teacher held low expectations for three of the eight Aboriginal students in the class. These children were placed in the lowest reading group where they had less access to the teacher's time and attention. Here they received less affection and did not enjoy 'co-membership' with the teacher in the form of shared jokes and rapport which the children in the high ability group children enjoyed. The Aboriginal children in the low group were punished for 'rabbling' while

children in the high group were teased in a friendly way about wasting time. Malin concludes that the cultural knowledge of the teacher and these Aboriginal students was incompatible and that this mismatch combined with the institutional practices of schooling, in this case ability grouping, to produce severe educational disadvantage when it came to literacy instruction for these students.

While the results of local ethnographies cannot explain large-scale trends in children's achievements, they can alert educators to the sites and practices which are likely to be problematic for disadvantaged students and encourage critical review of the unquestioned and taken for granted technologies in place in classrooms. What occurs in the reading group situation can be seen as a microcosm of the ways in children are assessed and classified and then provided with different instruction, resulting in different outcomes and different credentials. While it could be argued that the ability grouping is now a rarely used technology for organising instruction, there may be subtle ways in which children still receive different kinds and amounts of instructional resources and assistance even within heterogeneous and democratically organised classrooms. Compensatory programs and altered pedagogies may work to help disadvantaged children make the initial transitions to formal schooling, but success with early literacy will not necessarily be enough to sustain the performance of these children throughout their schooling.

In a longitudinal study of elementary school children in the industrial northeast of the United States, Chall and her colleagues found that low-income children achieved as well in literacy as the general population up to the end of the third grade. From that point their performance began to slump (Chall et al. 1990, p.142). Their results suggest that the longer poor children spent in formal education the greater was the difference in literacy performance. While low-income children's academic problems increased the higher they went in schooling the researchers found that there were fewer opportunities for 'potentially rectifying parent-teacher contacts'. The more academic help children needed, the less they were able to use family support to access it.

The results of the Chall et al (1990) study are similar to those of a national survey of early years teachers in Australian disadvantaged schools. In the Australian survey the numbers of children not meeting teachers' expectations for literacy increased in the higher grades of primary schooling (Badger et al. 1993). If students were disadvantaged by their home experiences (as both deficit and difference arguments assume) and simply needing more instructional time, one would expect that the performance of children who were disadvantaged at the beginning of schooling would gradually improve with more time in school. However these studies suggest that the reverse is so. More schooling increases, rather than reduces the gap.

Everyday school and classroom structures and routines are not separate from literacy learning. Children are evaluated on a moment by moment basis in terms of how closely they match the school's expectations.

Students will be credited and credentialled differently according to how well they can match the formal academic literacy curriculum as taught and listened for by teachers (Baker & Freebody 1993, p.280).

Literacy practices are not in themselves neutral, but work culturally and politically to privilege particular kinds of literacies and therefore particular kinds of literate students. Assessment in any subject is a political act. Assessment of literary or written artefacts is especially problematic. Freebody's (1990) analysis of reports of the New South Wales High School Certificate English examination, demonstrates that class-derived notions of 'cultural capital' were discernible in the examiners' comments, suggesting that one cultural disposition could be systematically favoured over another. Freebody's analysis indicates that gender, class and cultural background all make a difference in how students tackle writing tasks and in how their products will be 'read' by examiners. Many of the tasks that now exist in public examinations across Australia are based on whole language and 'reader response' models of English curriculum. Freebody's analysis suggests that such tasks put learners at risk because some kinds of personal response are more highly valued than others. All kinds of personal response are not equal.

According to the structural inequality argument, schools in Western nation states are the product of white middle-class capitalist societies which privilege white middle class competitive knowledges and literacies and exclude other practices. Given this analysis it follows that schools will sort and select students for life futures which maintain the inequities on which such economies function. Differential student outcomes and pathways are in the interests of the economically powerful and privileged. The problems poor children have with literacy achievement may be more a question of access to effective programs than of any lack or difference in the children (Freebody & Welch 1993). According to this view there may be a need to consider the 'deficits' of the school (Polakow 1993). Discussing how school assessment practices disadvantage children living in poverty, Connell (1993) argues there is a need to change the question.

The question at the centre of EBA [equity-based-assessment] is not 'where does the pupil stand?' but 'how well is the teaching/learning process working - for *all* the pupils?' (Connell 1993, p. 83, italics in original)

In Connell's view there is a need to examine assessment as a social process that does particular work in societies. Current assessment technologies focus on attributes of individuals and this is where the problem lies. Connell argues that to change the structural

inequities produced by assessment practices there is a need to consider educational outcomes in 'collective' ways and to focus upon the participation and the effects of collective groups of students and communities. Connell's approach is to make radical changes to what is assessed (the work of the collective), how it is assessed and to what use the information can be put. In such an approach the performance outcomes of all students become a collective responsibility for the students, their teachers and the community.

The dominance of a discourse of individualism in regards to assessment ensures that advantaged students will be acknowledged for what they have and that disadvantaged students will be blamed for what they don't and the responsibility for success and failure is seen as a matter for student effort. Schools, departments of education and credentialling bodies continue to assess the individual and to do so in ways which authorise and require mainstream white middle-class Standard English, as is evident in *Australia's Language* (Commonwealth of Australia 1991) and the *English: A Statement on English for Australian Schools* (Curriculum Corporation 1994b) and *English: A Curriculum Profiles for Australian Schools* (Curriculum Corporation 1994a). The insistence on literacy in Standard Australian English ensures that children's language and literate resources will be differentially valued and assessed. Edelsky summarises how this works in the American context to maintain educational disadvantage for children who don't already speak Standard English when they begin schooling.

Some children come to school already 'privileged', already knowing this way of using language. It isn't that if you're a non-standard speaker you can't ever acquire standard English. You can, but it's with considerable effort. So you're at a disadvantage because you spend more energy doing it, and in stressful times you forget more easily. As a result, schools often make it look as if the kids who already know the standard dialect are somehow smarter and deserve higher grades. But in reality they are getting higher grades because they rely on knowledge they already had before they ever entered the classroom door. So the political arrangements in the society at large affect whether kids are seen as smart or not. (Edelsky 1992, p.325)

While official assessment practices continue to require and value the language practices of the privilege and exclude other forms of language practices, certain groups of children continue to be categorised at worst as deficit and at best as different. The grid of specified language practices applied to the child population thus is a way of knowing, classifying and evaluating the population to be educated.

As well as the structures and organisation of schools, evidence of structural inequality and its effects exists in the different physical conditions and resources of schools. The material resources of schools – where they are located, how well they are resourced and

the well-being of the community they serve – make a difference to the teacher-learning contexts that can be produced and to the kinds of literacies that can be explored.

An obvious example is that learning to write with a word processor or conducting CD ROM searches require access to the equipment and the personnel with the know how. Less obvious are the schools who are unable to adequately resource their libraries to allow for resource-based-learning or information literacy approaches. Less obvious again are the schools who don't have adequate numbers of books for children to take home to read with care-givers.

In Australia, resource problems are addressed to some extent through Disadvantaged Schools Program funding. However some schools continue to be less well-resourced than others because they cannot rely on the community as a source of extra funding nor upon extra educational resources in the home (McRae 1990). A principal of a large disadvantaged school in South Australia made the following analysis of the material conditions of her school which make a difference to what students, teachers and the community achieve. According to Thomson (1992), poor schools have less because they typically charge lower school fees, have more non fee payers, can raise less money from their communities, have less equipment, have less comfortable and less safe buildings and amenities. She also argues that poor schools have to do more in the way of welfare related tasks and alterations to the curriculum in order to meet the needs of their student community (Thomson 1992). The upshot overall is that despite extra allocations of Commonwealth money for the upgrade of facilities in the late seventies and early eighties, (Henry et al. 1988) by the late eighties and early nineties the perception in many school staffs was that poor schools have a bigger job to do and less resources with which to do it (McRae, 1990; Thomson 1992).

These are important factors in the construction of teaching-learning contexts. Teachers working in disadvantaged schools can take less for granted in terms of the material resources available to them and their students. Thomson's generalisations about poor schools indicate that there are material realities that need to be remembered when considering school and classroom contexts. Extra funding and resources do not guarantee improved teaching-learning contexts but they do make a difference to the potential. If paper and other consumables are in short supply, programs can be curtailed as a result (McRae 1990). Pedagogical approaches such as resource-based or inquiry learning may be abandoned when the school and the community has insufficient sources of information (Comber et al. 1991). The physical resourcing of schools makes some things possible and others not. The physical conditions Thomson refers to are not an isolated case and impinge on the morale and image of those who work there (McRae 1990, p.27).

Given that the available resources construct different possibilities for literate activity, one important indicator of structural inequalities is still to be found in the contrastive material resources of poor and wealthy schools. If the physical conditions where teachers and students must work are uncomfortable, unsafe, noisy and over-crowded these material realities also make a difference in what can be achieved educationally. While an ongoing analysis of the differential material and symbolic resources made available to students is critical to social justice reforms in education, explanations for the inequitable outcomes which constitute educational institutions as sites of cultural reproduction may overly down play the agency of both students and teachers. Explanations for unequal outcomes which take into account students' resistance to what schools offer are important reminders that students are active in the construction of their own identities and lifeworlds.

4.3.4. The 'resistance' explanation

Not all researchers have characterised disadvantaged children as the victims of their families or of powerful education systems. In the sociological tradition of Willis' (1977), some researchers have theorised that certain groups of 'minority' students may resist what school systems have to offer in order to protect their own identities in relation to their peers and communities (Christie 1989; Fine 1987; Ogbu 1987; Willis 1977).

In Willis' classic ethnography *Learning to labour* subtitled, 'How working-class kids get working class jobs', the boys equated doing well at school with submission to authority and the privileging of intellectual over manual work. In defence of their own cultural identities they actively rejected the school culture and at the same time the future choices which success in school may have offered them. Willis warns against overly determinist class-based analyses of schools and their practices which ignore the local cultural and peer dimensions of students' lives. He argues for understanding the counter-school culture in reference to the wider community and national cultures in which students are located.

Willis' work has been critical in reminding researchers of the extent to which students contest dominant social and cultural practices in day-to-day activities and interactions. As Giroux notes, 'Resistance is a valuable theoretical and ideological construct that provides an important focus for analyzing the relationship between school and the wider society' (Giroux 1983, p. 107). However, as Giroux also points out oppositional behaviour does not always have 'radical significance' or positive effects in the longterm, and the relationships between the ideologies of 'subordinate groups' and the dominant ideologies and practices of schooling are complex and often contradictory. Nevertheless, in its

emphasis on the relative autonomy of human agents, the concept of resistance offers some optimism for theorists and practitioners working on critical pedagogies and literacies, as against the pessimism often associated with traditional Marxist cultural reproduction analyses.

Following the work of Willis, Apple (1982) used resistance as a tool of analysis in understanding teaching as a labour process and in beginning to theorise how teachers and students might create spaces for educational action. In a period where an instrumental ideology has increasingly resulted in teacher deskilling or the loss of their professional autonomy, Apple argues that teachers can and do work against commodified curriculum through informal everyday conversations and activities and that educational researchers need to find and document these forms of resistance or struggles and examine their effects, in terms of, 'whether they lead anywhere beyond the reproduction of the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes in our society, whether they can be employed for political education and intervention' (Apple 1982, p.162).

A number of education researchers working in this tradition have seen evidence of such resistance in student minority groups (Everhart 1983; Fine 1987; McRobbie 1978). The argument is that students perceive that they have more to lose by conforming to mainstream ways of being, speaking and doing than they stand to gain. No guaranteed futures come with scholastic achievement but there may be immediate negative community consequences which impact on students' identities and social lives. In fact, different groups in the community 'are unevenly mobilised by the same educational credential, and even more unevenly disabled by its absence' (Fine 1987, p.157). Fine (1987) cites findings which indicate that dropouts from the wealthiest neighbourhoods are more likely to be employed than high school graduates from the poorest neighbourhoods. Given these structural inequalities, some 'minority' students actively resist school values and practices, in order to maintain their peer and cultural memberships. In regard to literacy, Ogbu argues that:

The problems experienced by the minorities in acquiring literacy and in academic performance generally are a function of their adaptation to the limited opportunity historically open to them for jobs, and other positions in adult life requiring literacy, and where literacy pays off. (Ogbu 1987, p.151)

Resistance theorists believe that structural inequalities produce and maintain disadvantage but that in addition disadvantaged students' analyses of their situation leads them to actively resist what the school does offer. Young people may have much to lose if they succeed too well in mainstream educational institutions which threaten to separate them from their peers and community. Even when schools are successful in developing minority students' literacy through a liberatory pedagogy, a 'literacy related alienation'

can occur (Edelsky 1991). One problem is that literacy in the second language 'may threaten existing relations between the generations' (Edelsky 1991, p.134) as well as between students' and community values and practices.

Non-mainstream children, Gee (1990) argues, will always have difficulties with dominant discourses because they conflict with the values and viewpoints of their primary discourses. Schools require children to use new language or use language in new ways. As discourses construct subjectivity, the requirement to employ new discursive practices produces new and at time alienating subjectivities. Using language in new ways involves acting like a different person. It cannot be reduced to a skill or a set of cognitive accomplishments. In the Australian context, Michael Christie claims that the ways in which literacy has been taught have contributed to the cultural genocide of the Aboriginal people.

The imaginations of white educators ran wild for a decade - lap reading, big books, words in colour, concentrated language encounters, uninterrupted silent sustained reading, etc.... In order to preserve their Aboriginal identity from the intrusion of individualistic European teaching methods, Aboriginal children everywhere have been actively resistant to learning to read and write. (Christie 1989, p.28)

'Resistance' theory foregrounds the student analyst weighing up the consequences for taking on school ways of being for their present and future lives. According to this argument what counts as success in mainstream schooling may have little to offer disadvantaged student, but threaten the loss of identity and peer and community networks.

Literacy educators have often used the metaphor of 'joining the club' to describe the process children go through when they learn to read and write - 'joining the literacy club' (Smith, 1988). However an absent question for many mainstream teachers was: 'But what kind of literacy club do I join and who am I like?' (Edelsky 1991). Ogbu argues that schools need to 'develop programs to help these minority children learn how not to equate mastery of school culture and language with loss of group identity and security' (Ogbu 1985, p.868). This may require that literacy education programs are constructed with the involvement and input of the communities they serve (Delgado-Gaitan 1990).

4.3.5 Literacy as a social construction: The importance of locality

Explanations for disadvantaged children's differential performance with school literacies, drawing on different discourse and ideologies, compete actively in educational institutions. As I have suggested, even in the face of contrary theorising, it may be extremely difficult to displace 'deficit theories', which become part of a commonsense and taken-for granted 'truth' and hence part of the discursive resources available to

teachers (Badger et al. 1993; Freebody et al. 1995). It is not that the 'difference', 'structural inequalities' and 'resistance' explanations are themselves without risks of constituting new stereotypes and limitations for disadvantaged students and their teachers. However, such theories offer educators some productive and positive, if interim, ways of explaining why some students experience educational disadvantage in regard to literacy. They create counter-hegemonic discourses which work against deficit discourses.

Educational ethnographers and sociolinguists drawing on such theories, have demonstrated the ways in which material circumstances and everyday language practices in local sites combine to construct power relations which may result in unequal access to school literate practices. In the field of literacy education, researchers have increasingly recognised the need to look closely at how what counts as successful school literacy is constituted through classroom talk and institutional practices in local communities (Baker 1991; Baker & Freebody 1993; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Dyson 1993; Freebody et al. 1995; Luke 1993b, 1993c).

Taking the view that literacy is socially constructed in specific cultural sites, Luke (1993b) provides a comprehensive review and discussion of literacy and equity and of studies of literacy in home and school contexts, indicating the ways in which school constructions of literacy impact on disadvantaged students. As a summary to this section of the chapter I outline his conclusions. Luke states that despite the fact that all children with healthy physiological and neurological functions develop communicative competence with oral language, schools continue to fail to provide disadvantaged children with the literate competencies they need. As the student population of Australian schools is increasingly drawn from a diversity of ethnic, community and social class cultures, teachers are challenged to find new ways of working.

Luke (1993b) goes on to point out that because literacy events vary culturally, children start school with different sets of values and practices counting as literacy. For instance, literate practices with elders are not the same in all communities. Who can say what, when and where about which texts are not universal givens. The language and literacy repertoires children bring to school may or may not complement the structures, ideologies and power relations of school speech and literacy events. Schools tend to value the practices of the dominant classes and in effect punish children for not having already what schools are charged with delivering. This is frequently evident in the choice of classroom literature where dominant and selective cultural traditions are maintained.

Luke (1993b) concludes that language learning is tied up with class and culture-based learning about the politics of everyday social relations. While he points out that there are no guarantees which come with literate proficiencies, literacy and education are means for access to cultural knowledge and social power and are therefore important sites for social action. According to Luke, Australian primary teachers remain the final arbiters on what counts as literacy in the classroom and exercise considerable power over decisions about which texts, contexts and competencies to teach.

A key move then which Luke and others have noted is to examine the kinds of literate practices which count in schools (Baker & Freebody 1993; Luke 1993b)

The issue is not whether school-designed literacies will continue to count (they will), but whether the particular forms that are formally taught and learned in schools will continue to be those that privilege the already advantaged (Baker & Freebody 1993, p.281).

These broad explanations have been taken up by literacy educators working on curriculum and pedagogical solutions. In recent times, in Australia literacy educators, including myself, have produced competing pedagogies along with promises of better literacies for all students and empowerment for the disadvantaged. These different orientations towards literacy teaching and learning have resulted in considerable and highly public debate. It is to these debates to which I now turn.

4.4. Debates about literacy pedagogy: Theoretical solutions for the disadvantaged child?

In this section of the chapter I consider contemporary debates about literacy instruction which surrounded the period of the present study. I discuss the competing instructional approaches with a particular focus on how each of these have been represented in academic papers and materials written for teachers in Australia. My aim here is not to review empirical research about different pedagogical approaches, but to focus on what is claimed and what the points of contestation have been in order to establish the context of competing professional discourse in literacy education during the time of the present study.

Debates about what constitutes literacy, the best ways to teach it and its effects are not new. It is an area which seems to promote contesting positions, often in the form of binary oppositions:

- phonics vs whole word
- basal readers vs children's literature
- whole language vs skills

- process vs product
- reader response vs literary criticism
- natural development vs explicit teaching
- whole language vs genre
- genre vs critical literacy.

In this way the field of literacy education seems to have subscribed to a modernist view of progress (Popkewitz 1991). There has been a continual hunt for new and better pedagogical solutions which would make teaching and learning easier, more enjoyable, more empowering, more certain and so on. At the same time there has been the continual criticism of previous allegedly 'flawed' pedagogies. Theorists have seen their work as having universal significance, apparently believing that an adequate scientific theory should explain literacy development for all children, including and sometimes especially disadvantaged children.

In Australia, four main approaches to primary school literacy pedagogy - skills, whole language, genre and critical literacy - have competed for prominence over the past thirty years. In the late seventies and eighties, a progressive pedagogical orientation, variously known as "whole language", "natural learning", a "process approach" or "the new literacy" (Willinsky 1990) became the official discourse around literacy, nation-wide. This dominance was evident in policy, university teacher education courses (Christie et al. 1991), curriculum materials, professional association publications and in inservice programs such as the Early Literacy Inservice Course (Education Department of South Australia 1984). The implementation of the Early Literacy Inservice Course was funded through the use of Commonwealth funds. Inservice courses for primary and secondary school teachers, based on the Early Literacy Inservice Course model and progressive literacy education orientation, were developed by State Departments of Education and Catholic Education. Even as whole language was officially mandated in most states and popularised through the professional associations, challenges to its dominance were being produced from different theoretical and political standpoints.

These challenges came from the continuing skills lobby operating through Special Education networks (see for example, Dobson 1994) and conservative state governments, from systemic linguists' theories of 'genre pedagogy' (Hammond 1990; Martin 1985; Martin et al. 1988) and from a number of critical and feminist poststructuralist theorists in different locations working on critiques of dominant and totalising models of pedagogy (Baker & Davies 1993; Gilbert 1989; Kamler 1992; Luke et al 1989; Walton 1990).

Here my aim is to summarise the debates as they relate to the focus and location of the present study. During the years in which I conducted the study at Banfield, most public debates in the literacy education community were concerned with the pros and cons of whole language and genre pedagogy. Hence what follows is my account of the claims and critique surrounding whole language and genre pedagogies.

4.4.1 Whole Language: Contribution and Critique

Historically, whole language emerged from the traditions of progressive education associated with the educational philosopher, John Dewey and from the linguistics of Noam Chomsky. Echoes of Dewey's emphasis on the need for school to be a social community where children learn by doing real activities in which they were interested, can be heard in the key whole language principle that children will develop literacy if given opportunities to engage in meaningful language use in authentic contexts for their own needs and purposes. In Dewey's work individualism and socialism were to be deployed together in education in order to ensure the future progress of a democratic society (Dewey 1915).

Though Chomsky was critical of what he perceived as the general tendency to rely on 'experts' in contemporary life and sceptical about the usefulness of linguistics for designing language pedagogies (Chomsky 1971, p.153-155), his work was nevertheless influential in education. In Chomsky's view, language acquisition was the result of a universal innate propensity to understand the 'deep' structure of language.

The child who learns language has in some sense constructed the language for himself on the basis of his observations of sentences and nonsentences (i.e. corrections by the verbal community. (Chomsky 1971, p.147)

The construction of the child as a natural language learner who actively works out the rules for grammar matched well with the ideal child of Dewey's progressive pedagogy. In early versions of whole language Dewey's inquiring learner and Chomsky's theory of language acquisition are both in evidence. For instance in *Language and Thinking in School* (Smith et al. 1970) the possible usefulness of Chomsky's linguistics is discussed directly:

The greatest contribution that linguistics will make, particularly as it is linked with psychology, is the insights it will provide into the developing child as a user of language. (Smith et al. 1970, pp.183-184)

The psychological discourse to which they refer is a 'composite' based on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, which constructs the child as discoverer, assisted in their active learning through natural dialogue with adult language users (Smith et al. 1970, p.136). In

North America, whole language has sometimes been characterised as an oppositional or radical pedagogy or at least as having the potential for emancipatory practices and effects (Edelsky 1991; Giroux 1987; Shannon 1990; Willinsky 1990). Constructed as the anti-thesis of skills approaches which removed power for decision making from teachers and students alike, whole language held out hope of generating a negotiated democratic curriculum which would include all students. The rationale was that pedagogical strategies based on the ways in which all children learned language would prevent literacy learning difficulties (Smith 1973).

Similarly in Australia, whole language advocates argued that by replicating in the school the conditions which exist in the home for language learning literacy learning would be easy, natural and enjoyable (Cambourne 1983; Education Department of South Australia 1984; Holdaway 1979). These conditions included using literacy for 'authentic' purposes; being engaged in demonstrations of meaningful literacy events; being immersed in a literate culture; expecting that children will learn; allowing students to take responsibility and make approximations; and providing response in context (Cambourne 1988). Whole language approaches claimed to liberate learners from the isolated skills exercises of traditional approaches (Cambourne 1987). In addition to the success model taken from the analysis of early oral language learning, whole language theorists also drew on their analysis of the processes of proficient adult readers and writers. Thus students were constituted as authors and as readers of 'real' literature. As authors and readers they were granted rights to make choices about which texts to read and write. Students were reconstructed as producers and interpreters of texts, not simply the doers of teacher-constructed assignments. Because the texts of literacy lessons were 'real' and meaningful, there was satisfaction to be had from learning. Students and teachers were given permission, indeed expected, to enjoy reading and writing.

Whole language, with its accompanying techniques of student-teacher conferences, peer feedback and reader response groups, to name only a few, opened up possibilities for new kinds of classroom discourse in literacy lessons. Conferencing entitled students to set the agenda and to initiate one-to-one conversations with the teacher. Peer sharing times sanctioned students talking with each other about the academic focus. Common cycles of classroom interaction – where the teacher asked a question, the student responded and the teacher evaluated the answer – were interrupted during these literacy events.

The whole language movement in Australia was also associated with teacher research and reflective practice. Teachers were constructed as researchers, not simply as consumers and translators of educational research. Teacher action research was published through

Education Department newsletters and 'windows on practice' booklets, university course materials and the professional associations such as the Primary English Teachers Association, the Australian Reading Association and also through collections of edited articles based on local teacher research (Hancock & Comber 1987; Badger et al. 1990).

Whole language approaches were seen to have the potential to change the kinds of literacy to which students had access in schools and also to change the roles of teachers and learners in the production and interpretation of texts and knowledge. The advantages of such an approach promoted by its advocates included its relevance; its emphasis on what children can do; its emphasis on student responsibility; its democratic talk structures and its encouragement of collaborative peer-peer learning. Because whole language began from the progressive educational axiom of 'starting from where the student was at' it seemed particularly well suited to the needs of a diverse and disadvantaged student communities. Because whole language promised enjoyment and relevance it seemed that it might capture the interest of students who might otherwise reject traditional academic approaches to literacy learning.

In theory, whole language appeared to many educators, including myself, to have considerable potential for engaging diverse groups of students in meaningful literacy curriculum at school. In Australia it was commonly associated with a discourse of empowerment and liberation (see Cambourne 1987). However the potential of whole language was not always realised in practice. Indeed, it has been argued both in Australia and in the United States, that in some contexts whole language practices can create new boundaries and new sets of problems for minority and disadvantaged students (Christie 1989; Delpit 1988; Gilbert 1989; Luke 1993c; Luke et al. 1989; Martin et al. 1988; Walton 1993). It is to a summary of the major criticisms of whole language to which I now turn. Critiques of whole language or natural approaches have come from educators informed by systemic linguistics and from feminist and critical standpoints.

A group of systemic linguists from Sydney University (sometimes referred to as the 'genre school') have been central in critiquing whole language pedagogies, in particular the process approach to teaching children to write (Martin 1984; Martin et al. 1988). In Australia the continuing debates between process and genre schools have received considerable attention from the media, departments of education and the professional associations. Newspapers, radio and television current affairs programs, curriculum and syllabus documents, national conferences and journals are examples of the textual sites where this debate has been played out over the past decade. It is not my intention to discuss this debate in detail here (for further discussion see Cope & Kalantzis 1993; Kamler 1994b; Luke 1996; Reid 1987; Richardson 1991). Rather my aim is to

summarise the points of difference in order to contextualise the competing discourses available to teachers during the period of the present study.

The genre school makes three main criticisms of process or natural pedagogies: an over-emphasis on narrative at the expense of other expository genres, the over-valuing of spoken registers and the minimising of the teacher's role in literacy learning.

A study reported by Martin (1984) argued that primary teachers largely restricted children's writing to stories and personal recounts. According to the advocates of genre, the emphasis in whole language on narrative meant that children were not prepared for other forms of reading, writing and talking, which society values and high schools require. In this view certain forms of writing or genres, such as reports, discussions and explanations, are powerful and should be taught. They claimed that unless such genres are explicitly taught at school, students from non-English-speaking and disadvantaged backgrounds may not get access to the language of power - the 'secret English' - which makes things happen in society. They argued that children need to be directly taught how different genres work grammatically in order for them to produce these forms correctly and further that the production of these forms is crucial to success in higher education and employment (Christie 1990; Cope & Kalantzis 1993; Martin et al. 1988). Another negative consequence of the over-emphasis on personal narrative and recount, was that requiring students to write or talk about their lives may intrude on family and community privacy. Students were sometimes in the position of having to invent an 'authentic self' which could be safely exposed at school. In addition, textual practices which require children to make choices about revealing their own lives may be culturally inappropriate or disadvantage children whose life experiences are affected by socio-economic disadvantage (Gilbert 1991; Martin et al. 1987).

A second criticism emerging from systemic linguistics was that whole language approaches over-value spoken language (Hammond 1990). In the rhetoric of whole language pedagogy, teachers have been encouraged to say to children, 'If you can say it, you can write it'. The rationale was simply to get children writing and with many young learners this technique has been a useful starting point, however it is claimed that children need to realise from the beginning the different demands of spoken and written genres. Drawing on Halliday's (1979) earlier work and her school-based studies, Hammond has argued that spoken language is accepted as an appropriate model for writing when in fact different registers are required (Hammond 1990). By implication, those children whose spoken language varies most from mainstream Standard Australian English are likely to be more disadvantaged by such advice than children whose spoken language more closely resembles the registers required for school written language.

The third main criticism of whole language made by the genre school was that natural approaches to literacy acquisition downplay the important role of the teacher in children's language learning (Gray 1987; Painter 1985). Informed by studies of parents' and children's interactions at home, Gray (1987) and Painter (1985) argue that parents take an active and interventionist role in scaffolding children's talk. The point here is that some whole language texts (Gray includes the work of Graves, Cambourne and Turbill, Harste, Woodward and Burke, and ELIC) minimise the teacher's role on the assumption that children learn oral language without any instruction (Gray 1987). In Gray's view, because pedagogical techniques such as conferencing or shared book experience are based on a faulty analysis of parent-child interactions around print, the pedagogy itself is problematic and limits teachers to a responsive or facilitative role. This facilitative pedagogy may further disadvantage children, for whom school literate and oral language practices are discontinuous from their home and community practices.

The genre school calls for the need for a more explicit pedagogy and particularly articulates this argument in relation to the needs of disadvantaged children (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Gray 1987; Martin et al. 1988). Not surprisingly the genre movement in New South Wales became closely allied with the Disadvantaged Schools Program in that state (see Cope et al. 1993 for an historical account of the relationship between the Genre School and the Disadvantaged Schools Program).

Critical and feminist educators have argued that whole language lacks an analysis of power relations as they are shaped through literate practices (Baker & Davies 1993; Baker & Freebody 1989; Gilbert 1989; Luke 1988; Stuckey 1991; Walton 1993). Because the benevolence or innocence of literacy were taken for granted, the possible differential and negative effects of situated pedagogies on boys and girls, children of different class, race and ethnicity were sometimes not anticipated (Dyson 1993; Gilbert 1989; Kamler 1992; Lensmire 1994). The social, gendered, cultural and ideological aspects of classroom literate practices were ignored or subsumed by the rights of the individual.

An unanticipated effect of raising the status of children's writing, constituting them as authors and emphasising student ownership, was that teachers at times felt powerless to prevent the publishing of racist, sexist and violent writing (Gilbert 1989; Lensmire 1994). Children's writing was sometimes treated as sacred. For example, Gilbert (1989) researched a group of primary school boys who constructed stories in which the female characters (named after the girls in their class) were attacked and killed. A group of male students used the 'free space' of the writing classroom to promote their own ways of seeing the world and to exercise power amongst their peers.

When school literate practices are based on children's experiences in their home communities, assessment can become a site for privileging tastes, cultural preferences and class-related recreation (Freebody 1990; Luke 1993c; Willis 1995). Yet the impact of teachers' cultural, gendered and political standpoints on their evaluations of children's writing and talking is not always addressed in whole language theories.

Many of the criticisms of whole language relate to the fact that so-called 'natural' approaches to teaching are based on what happens in white middle-class families when children learn to talk (Luke et al. 1989; Luke 1993b; Williams 1991). Basing a pedagogy on a set of 'universal' and 'natural' conditions which are neither 'universal' nor 'natural' is a problem. It casts children who do not come from homes where these 'natural' conditions exist as deficit. While whole language promised much for disadvantaged children in theory, its enactment in local sites sometimes produced unanticipated effects which maintained inequities.

In this brief discussion of debates about literacy pedagogy in Australia my interest is in highlighting the points of difference between the discourses of contrasting pedagogical positions, particularly as they relate to the perceived needs of disadvantaged students. What I am discussing here is the public face of the debates, rather than the actual enactment of such pedagogies. In the rhetoric of such debates, emotive and evocative vocabularies are sometimes deployed.

When whole language advocates name whole language they make linguistic choices which portray it very positively: *empowering, liberating, emancipatory, humane, meaningful, a force for social equality*, and so forth. Adversaries of whole language make linguistic choices which portray it in quite negative terms. These include *soft, romantic, confused, a communist conspiracy, lacking a research base*, and so on. (Cambourne 1994, pp.330, italics in original)

As Cambourne, himself a whole language advocate, notes above (in an issue of *Reading Research Quarterly* devoted to arguments about the rhetoric of whole language), what occurs in such debates is the critique of a discursive construction of a generalised caricature of the targeted pedagogy. Cambourne describes this as a 'rhetoric of camouflage' and notes that, 'We all do it' (Cambourne 1994, p.332). Notwithstanding the valuable and detailed theoretical critique and empirical studies which educational researchers might produce, these debates emerge in the public arena often in reduced and simplified formats and it is the binary oversimplifications which are sometimes offered to teachers as the current state of the field. These debates, as discursive practices, have material effects including impact on curriculum development, policy statements, inservice

training and funding of research and so on. Traces of such rhetoric produce effects in local sites as teachers make decisions about what to teach and how to teach it.

Despite Cambourne's concern that some of the critique is likely to produce negative effects for education, on the other hand such debates can be seen as vital to the development of education (Willinsky 1994). For instance, the contestation about whole language claims for empowerment for disadvantaged groups can be seen as positive, in that it has more overtly politicised the work of whole language advocates. Edelsky's point is illustrative:

We in whole language need to make the social a more explicit part of our theory and practice. We need to consider the children's interests, and certainly their interpretations and creations of texts, not only as matter of individual personality or their family circumstances but also as a matter of the different positions they are put in as members of a class, a race, a gender, a culture. (Edelsky 1992, p.327-328.)

Critiques of whole language have then indicated the need for a revised political analysis of the effects of the pedagogy in local communities. The problems inherent in presenting pedagogies as universally appropriate solutions for diverse student communities are foregrounded. Analysing the differences between theories of pedagogy is important intellectual work towards improving the access of disadvantaged students to a multiplicity of literacies and resources through schooling. The danger of binary debates is that the positive moves made for social justice, such as students working on real issues of importance to their lives in whole language for instance, may be overlooked or discounted in the 'new' pedagogy. With this caution in mind I move now to genre pedagogy, its strengths and the critique.

4.4.2. Genre pedagogy: Contribution and Critique

Genre-based literacy teaching or genre pedagogy emerged in Australia during the eighties. Taking up a Halliday's theme: 'learning language, learning through language, learning about language', it grew out of his model of 'systemic functional linguistics' (Halliday 1978, 1985). Halliday's aim was to show educators how knowledge of linguistics could be a 'practical rather than esoteric tool' (reported in Cope et al. 1993, p.231). Emphasising the social and cultural rather than psychological nature of language, Halliday's linguistic analysis was concerned with the use of language in specific contexts. In Halliday's terms 'genre' is the purposeful use of language in a particular situation where the production of a grammatically appropriate text depends on the speaker's (or writer's) understanding of the meaning of the context. Following Halliday's stress on language functions, in the late seventies and early eighties Jim Martin

and two of his graduate students, at that time, Jan Rothery and Fran Christie, began to analyse children's written texts produced in schools.

As the earlier critiques of whole language have indicated above, advocates of genre-based literacy teaching challenged what they found to be a dominance in primary school literacy curriculum of narrative and personal writing genres and their oral counterparts, the morning talk or show-and-tell (reported in Martin 1984). Martin and his colleagues developed a definition of genre 'as a staged goal-oriented social process' and from there began to identify the genres which they saw as missing from school literacies, such as argument, explanation, report, discussion. Further they argued that children's development in using a repertoire of genres is dependent on the teacher rather than natural language development (Christie 1988; Martin et al. 1987). They argued that personal narratives were not those required for academic success in secondary school and they did not provide disadvantaged children access to the 'genres of power' (Martin et al. 1988).

The genre school claimed that as well as narrative, other genres should be explicitly taught to students from the early years of schooling. To understand and teach these genres, teachers needed to develop a knowledge of systemic functional linguistics. Whereas whole language has constructed teachers as writers and readers who modelled enjoyment and authentic use of literacy, genre pedagogy constructed teachers as linguistic experts who would pass on this knowledge to the student apprentices. In Martin's view the establishment of children's expertise with familiar meanings and genres precedes their creative usage for social change (Martin et al. 1987, p76).

Throughout the eighties and early nineties, Martin and his colleagues worked on an analysis of common genres through the use of systemic functional linguistics in deconstructing exemplary texts (Martin 1985) and at the same time a wide team of educators and systemic linguists worked in different educational sites to develop a theory and practice of pedagogy for explicitly teaching generic forms (see Cope et al. 1993 and Martin et al. 1987 for accounts of this period).

Perhaps the best known pedagogical practice arising out of the genre approach is the 'curriculum cycle' (see Cope & Kalantzis 1993 for a detailed account). This was represented as a series of cyclic processes where the teacher defines the field of study, helps students to collect information, leads the students in deciding the genre in which they will present their knowledge of the topic. The teacher then explains how the genre works including its schematic, discourse and grammatical features. This is done by deconstructing a model of an effective text of the same genre. Through a process called joint construction of a text, the teacher writes a model text in the genre with the students

using the teacher's and students' combined knowledge and resources. Finally, the teacher asks students to write the genre independently. Much of this work was done in consultation with educators employed through funds from the Disadvantaged Schools Program in New South Wales (Callaghan & Rothery 1988; Cope et al. 1993; Macken & Rothery 1991). This pedagogical model was published extensively through the Language and Social Power Project, which was funded through the Disadvantaged Schools Program in New South Wales. A group of genre-based literacy educators give an historical account of their work at this time:

Prior to this experiment DSP program had always been slanted towards personal growth and development as its compensatory logic was geared at enhancing students' self-esteem. In terms of literacy, this had been translated into an emphasis on process writing, and in practice this meant a concentration on narrative writing at the expense of the factual writing most needed by both students and the community. (Cope et al. 1993, p.239)

The above statement encompasses the kinds of critiques made by the genre school of natural approaches to literacy teaching and it suggests the kinds of claims which the genrists make for their approach. The story of the development of genre-based literacy teaching in Australia is complex and ongoing and a detailed explanation is beyond the scope of the present study (see Cope et al 1993). However, it is important that I make clear the impact on the genre school in the field of literacy education in Australia. Over a ten to fifteen year period school literacy was reconfigured as more than just the literary and the personal, but as social practices which are used across the subject disciplines in particular kinds of ways. Attention was given to how children might be taught these forms of 'secret English', rather than assuming they would naturally develop. The genre movement also reinstated the teacher as expert and advocated the need for explicit teaching.

The strengths of genre approaches are seen as its identification of and emphasis on powerful genres which 'count' in school and society; its explicit teaching of knowledge about how language works; and its apprenticeship model for the construction of texts. The genre school made major challenges to whole language which was at the time the dominant model of literacy pedagogy and curriculum. The genre critique and increasing ascendancy in terms of curriculum authorisation at a systems level (see for example the curriculum documents produced in New South Wales and Queensland which are based on systemic functional linguistics) meant that whole language was no longer accepted as the best or only pedagogy for the development of literacy. While the official take-up of genre theory and pedagogy has varied in Australian states, it has been significant nationally. In South Australia, elements of genre pedagogy were evident particularly in professional development courses for teachers of English as a Second Language

(Education Department of South Australia 1991) and in programs for teachers in disadvantaged schools.

Having recognised both the impact and the contribution of genre pedagogy I turn now to a brief discussion of the claims that the genrists have made in regard to the literacy needs of disadvantaged students.

The Language and Social Power Project, motivated by this growing evidence that all was not well with current literacy programs, was designed specifically to redress these problems. By 1987 these insights were by no means only held by a few intellectuals and theorists. While the process approach seemed to fit quite comfortably into the 'happy schools' philosophy, many teachers were finding themselves, in despair, becoming actively opposed to it, feeling that it was simply not working. (Cope et al. 1993, p.239)

The evidence referred to here consists largely of reports from individuals involved in the Language and Social Power Project. Lee (1993) has argued that such self-referentiality is characteristic of the genre project and is one way that it produces its own position of dominance in the literacy education field. My object here is not to disprove the genrists' bibliographical account, but rather to note the way in which the rhetoric of the passage positions the genre movement as the solution to problems created by process approaches and as in alliance with the teachers of the disadvantaged schools. In this account the genre pedagogy is characterised as the solution and as rescuing teachers in despair. The writers go on to acknowledge the achievements of their project.

[T]he teachers in the Language and Social Power Project were discovering that genre theory was a progression in the true sense of the word. Moreover, it was easily recognisable as a literacy program which embraced the issues of equity and empowerment - the cornerstones of progressivist and process-based pedagogies - although it was approached from a radically different direction. (Cope et al. 1993, p.240)

Genre pedagogy then, in its history and in its rhetoric has had close ties with disadvantaged schools. In the discourse of the genre movement process pedagogies were characterised as having failed teachers and students in disadvantaged schools. According to this account, unlike progressivists, genre theorists really know what 'progress', 'equity' and 'empowerment' mean in the 'true sense'. Genre-based literacy teaching clearly set itself up in opposition to what was seen by them as faulty and misguided logic and ideologies of process approaches.

My concern here is not to evaluate the relative claims or pros and cons of these approaches, but to make several observations, which relate to the present study. One of the effects of the debates between these schools has of thought has been the construction of a highly public contest about literacy teaching, which has contributed to an ideal

context for the production of a media 'literacy crisis'. For teachers this has resulted in a period marked by low morale and professional dissatisfaction. Given that teachers are the professional users and consumers of educational theories, the rhetoric of genre pedagogy critique positions them as the unwitting victims of whole language. It professes to provide what teachers really need and want. For teachers who work in disadvantaged schools genre approaches claim to offer a solution to the problems they are said to be experiencing and indeed creating.

From the early nineties some genre educators have described their project as 'critical literacy', or 'critical social literacy' highlighting its promises for the improved outcomes for disadvantaged students (Christie et al. 1991; Macken & Rothery 1991; Martin 1991). However, assumptions that the teaching of genres provides access to power have been questioned, as has the extent to which genre pedagogy helps students to conduct critical social analysis about textual practices. While whole language pedagogy has been critiqued on sociological and linguistic grounds concerning questions of access, equity and consequences, so too has genre pedagogy itself been critiqued from feminist poststructuralist and neo-marxian positions (Kamler 1994b; Threadgold 1994; Lee 1993; Luke 1996; Poynton 1993).

Poynton (1993), herself trained in systemic linguistics, makes a broad criticism of the limitations of a systemic linguistics from a feminist poststructuralist position. Her view is that while this discipline has produced some useful analytic tools, some of its frames of reference are 'apolitical' and do not have the capacity to handle issues of power and discourse. Taking the systemic approach to 'field' as her example, she argues that it is limited in that it deals only with what 'is' and ignores absences and other ways in which the text might have been constructed. Her explanation for this weakness is that systemic linguistics fails to engage with social theory. She sums up her criticisms in ways that have implications for literacy pedagogy:

Part of the problem is that systemics functions like all linguistics with investments in keeping things separate, in proliferating distinctions, distinctions which are all too narrowly based in language itself. However useful its technology is for textual analysis, its models of context and the social are ultimately impoverished. (Poynton 1993, p.11)

Poynton's critique is a reminder that systemic linguistics is in itself a discipline with a vested interest in proclaiming its own importance, and therefore produces a logocentric view of the world, with logocentric solutions. Her point is pertinent to all theories of language and literate pedagogies which claim empowering and emancipatory social and material effects.

Also taking a feminist poststructuralist standpoint, Lee (1993) critically evaluates genre-based literacy pedagogy. She argues that linguistics alone is insufficient in producing an analysis of literacy curriculum and pedagogy. Lee refers to an earlier study of high school geography, where she 'was specifically concerned to address the question of what is at stake for differently gendered students' (Lee 1993, p.131). She claims that in a genre-based systemic analysis, geography is treated as though it were unified and singular natural science, rather than a highly contested discipline also informed by social science. Further she contends that genre-based analysis appears to proceed from the assumption that school textbooks represent neutral and truthful views of the world as it is constituted in subject-disciplines. Given that critical literacy, in genre pedagogy, is constituted as access to 'secret English', the fact that 'secret English' is taken as though it was unproblematic truth represents a major flaw in the theorising. Lee argues that the genre approach to science curriculum, such as geography, promotes conservative, technicist, masculinist and modernist forms of literate practices. She suggests that there is a need to go beyond 'a politics of access and participation' (her view of genre) to 'a politics of representation and subjectivity' (Lee 1993, p.153-154).

As is implied from the previous critiques, the rhetoric of genre has sometimes given the message that certain ways of writing and speaking are the best or only ways to produce an appropriate text for a situation. Threadgold (1994) argues that the assumption that certain genres fit specific contexts is a 'fiction' and that teachers should question the value of explicitly teaching this knowledge as if it is fact. In Threadgold's view by making certain genres the ones that count and organising school curriculum to those ends, genre pedagogy continues to accept that some texts and knowledges count more than others. For instance, the traditional science report becomes *the* way to write about scientific inquiry rather than *one* way. Rigid forms of genre teaching may result in the continued privileging of masculinist, western and middle and upper class genres and the continued exclusion of non-mainstream literate practices (Threadgold 1992, 1994). In contrast, she argues that a critical social literacy would enable people to move from the 'comforts of specialized and disciplined habits' (Threadgold 1992, p.4).

Because genre approaches emphasise the effective reproduction of mainstream texts, there is the risk that the gendered, social and cultural consequences of texts are ignored or downplayed. Some unanticipated effects of a genre approach in the classroom emerge in a recent report from Kamler (1994b). She describes a case where a primary school teacher praising a young male writer for a piece entitled, 'Girls into Concrete'. His writing met the linguistic criteria for the procedure genre. He had explained in fact how to set girls in a concrete tub! Because the teacher evaluator's criteria were linguistic alone she made no critical analysis of the content or meaning of the piece, nor did she require

the child to re-assess his writing in these terms. This instance highlights the potential dangers of any literacy pedagogy which foregrounds the text and ignores the substantive ideological content.

If teaching is social, cultural and political work then linguistics, of any kind, necessarily presents only one of the knowledges and analyses teachers require. The genre school privileges linguistic knowledge as central to teaching literacy and social mobility. The university linguist is constituted as top of a knowledge hierarchy in the child literacy area. Yet the assumption that linguistic knowledge and competencies guarantees access to power has been seriously questioned (Luke 1996). Luke (1996) argues that genre pedagogy assumes a 'hypodermic' effect for literacy: 'that their preferred literate practices directly inculcate power'. Luke also makes problematic how the preferred genres are chosen and what those selections represent. Working from neomarxian and poststructuralist theories of power and capital, Luke claims that opportunities for choice and power relate not only to linguistic competencies but also to economic, political, social and cultural practices in place at a particular time. He concludes that genre-based approaches to literacy pedagogy are problematic in assuming that linguistic expertise is directly connected to social power. In Luke's view a political and ideological analysis of the work genres do is missing from the current versions of genre-based literacy teaching.

Despite promises of power later, genre-based literacy teaching returns many of the decisions, which whole language gave to the student, to the teacher. Teachers are responsible for choosing the field and the genre of the texts to be studied and produced. The roles and responsibilities of students are limited in an apprenticeship relationship. Further, how space may be made for students' knowledges and language practices in the official school world is not made clear in genre theory. With its emphasis on explicit teaching, genre pedagogy has been described as a transmission model of teaching (Luke 1996). Indeed, like transmission approaches, genre pedagogy assumes that what is important knowledge and skills is clear and that this can and should be unproblematically delivered to students.

To sum up, genre pedagogy promised to deliver 'secret English' to disadvantaged children who may not have access to these literate practices in their homes and communities. To do this it advocated the use of explicit teaching of linguistic knowledge within a hierarchical model in which teachers and students were constructed as apprentices. As was the case for whole language, genre advocates constructed a pedagogy with the hope of it making a difference for disadvantaged students. The extent to which genre pedagogy was marketed as an appropriate approach for disadvantaged communities is evidenced by the corpus of materials produced through funding from the

New South Wales Disadvantaged Schools Program (see references in Cope & Kalantzis 1993).

The scenario of wide official support and large scale funding through the Disadvantaged Schools Program is reminiscent of the way in which the Early Literacy Inservice Course was promoted and funded nationally less than ten years earlier. As Luke points out, the recent history of literacy education is marked by a series of searches for a definitive formula and a concomitant 'positivist replacement of untruths by "truths", of wrong theories by right ones, of archaic practices by "state of the art" sciences of pedagogy' (Luke 1996, p. 1). In Australia the recent debates about literacy pedagogy and curriculum reform have reflected this progressivist view of progress (Popkewitz 1991).

Despite the differences between whole language and genre pedagogies, they do have features in common. Each approach has been, to some extent, a response to the perceived shortcomings of the emphasis that preceded it. Both made claims about the ways in which their approach would lead to success or power for disadvantaged students. Both assumed that literacy is in and of itself empowering. Both have been critiqued for their failure to take into account the ways in which literate practices exclude and position different groups of people. Both have been critiqued for their acceptance of mainstream values when it comes to what counts as literacy in schools. Both were promoted with funding from the Disadvantaged Schools Program. Both made claims for and were critiqued in terms of social justice. Combinations of both pedagogies are to be found in many primary schools across Australia (Badger et al. 1993). Both can be seen as simply providing different official accounts of what literate practices will be valued and how they are best learnt.

Genre pedagogy and whole language can be read as particular ensembles of discourses which claim to tell the truth about what counts as literacy, about the nature of language acquisition and literacy learning, about the effects of literacy and illiteracy and about pedagogical solutions for the problems as they define them. In so doing they construct particular subjectivities and relationships for teachers and students (Baker 1995; Green forthcoming; Lee 1992). Missing in both theories of literacy teaching however, as was implied in the above critiques, is any sociological and political analysis which takes into account the embodied teacher and student as gendered, raced, classed and cultured subjects: as people living in particular communities. Critiques of both approaches have been productive and continue to be instructive in the emergence of critical literacies. A key problem in the discourses of whole language and genre theories alike is perhaps their over-estimation of their own significance. Threadgold cogently captures the problem:

To imagine that a single theory, or a single orthodoxy, a theoretical story constructed as epistemology and projected onto the facts it seeks to analyse, could ever account for this complexity, seems to me the ultimate in disciplined-based tunnel vision, the ultimate fiction. (Threadgold 1992, p.5)

4.4.3. The emergence of critical literacies in primary school education

By the end of the eighties there was considerable interest in how these challenges might be taken up pedagogically in Australian primary schools. At the time of the present study the problems unresolved by whole language and genre pedagogies were taken up by educators exploring the possibilities for the construction of critical literacies in school classrooms (Baker 1991; Baker & Freebody 1989; Baker & Luke 1991; Freebody & Luke 1990; Gilbert 1989; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Lankshear 1994; Luke & Walton 1994; Mellor et al. 1991). These explorations were informed by a range of theories including neomarxian literary theory, Freirian pedagogy, poststructuralist feminist theories, deconstruction, and critical linguistics (Luke & Walton 1994; Lankshear 1994).

By 1990 critical literacy was increasingly the subject of discussion in academic sites but it was not foregrounded in public debates nor in state and national curriculum. The word 'critical', however, started to appear in official policy documents, albeit often a commonsense usage of the term (see Lankshear 1994). It is not my intention to outline the history of this arguably burgeoning field, but briefly to summarise critical literacy as an emergent theme in discussions of primary school literacy pedagogy and as a further competing discourse to which some teachers had access. Given that my interest here is in contextualising the discourses available to Banfield teachers at this time, I devote most attention to local representations of critical literacy. (For extended discussions and multiple perspectives on critical literacy in Australia see the *Australian Journal of Reading*, vol.14, no. 2 and the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, vol. 17, no.2; Comber 1994; Lankshear 1994; Luke & Walton 1994; Luke et al. 1994b; Muspratt et al. forthcoming.)

Historically 'critical literacy' is usually associated with the overtly political project of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970). Freire developed a pedagogy whereby poor workers developed literacy through problematising the experienced problems and injustices of their everyday lives. In his teaching, inscribed in the phrase, 'reading the world and the word', literacy was not constituted as a skill but as a way of thinking about and working on and in the world. Literacy pedagogy was characterised as a pedagogy for liberation and empowerment, where oppressed people would become conscious of sources of domination which worked against them. Freire's conceptualisation of teaching as political and cultural work has been influential in adult literacy and basic education

programs world-wide and in approaches to critical pedagogy generally. Freirian pedagogy has been critiqued on the grounds that it may conceal its own sources of authority and unwittingly down play the significance of race, culture, class and gender in the social and discursive construction of identity (Luke 1996; Weiler 1991). Nevertheless as a catalyst in the building of overtly political oppositional pedagogies and critical literacies it continues to have profound importance (Lankshear 1994; Luke & Walton 1994).

While internationally critical literacy has a lengthy history its explicit connection to the everyday work of primary school literacy teachers in Australia is recent. In school-based inservice work in the late eighties and early nineties for instance, I found that teachers commonly responded to the topic 'critical literacy' with questions such as, 'What's that?' This is perhaps not surprising, as a national review of preservice and inservice language and literacy teaching found that critical social literacy was given little attention in university degrees (Christie et al. 1991). However in the last five years the interest in critical literacy in the educational community in Australia has dramatically increased to the point where Luke and Freebody (forthcoming) now claim:

[I]n Australia it has gradually moved from the margins to become part of the official knowledge of state curriculum, a concern for teacher-educators, professional developers and inservice educators, policy-makers, regional consultants and school administrators. What is of interest here is the extent to which critical literacy has moved from the status of a "heretic discourse" -- a family of unruly and dangerous practices pushing the boundaries of school and university orthodoxy -- to the status of an authorised discourse. (Luke & Freebody forthcoming).

Recent developments in critical literacy in Australia have grown from a range of contemporaneous educational research projects, curriculum and pedagogical developments emerging from critical sociology, ethnomethodology, critical pedagogy, literary theory, feminist poststructuralist analyses and critical linguistics (Lankshear 1994; Luke & Freebody forthcoming). Unlike whole language and the genre movement, critical literacy remains an eclectic and multi-discursive project, as Lankshear recently emphasised:

Underlying everything I say is my strong belief that there is no ultimate *paradigm* - no final orthodoxy - of critical literacy waiting to be uncovered. Rather, there are many ways in which coherent meanings for critical literacy might be - and have been - constructed. (Lankshear 1994, p.4)

Luke and Freebody (forthcoming) take a similar line of argument.

The term "critical literacy" has come to refer to such a wide range of educational philosophies and curriculum intervention that their family resemblances and shared characteristics would be hard to pick. (Luke & Freebody forthcoming)

The open and contested nature of what will count as 'critical literacy' is both theoretically consistent with its project of interrogating textual claims to truth, and yet problematic in establishing any normative guides for educational change. However the temporary or interim nature of critical literacy, constituted from a range of competing and affiliated discourses, is a fact of its history and, considered optimistically, creates an important space for local political action (Luke & Freebody forthcoming) and for negotiating and constructing critical literacies 'from the ground up' (Lankshear 1994). It is to my involvement with such a project to which I now briefly turn.

In the late eighties, in South Australia access to ideas about critical literacy mainly occurred through professional development events, university graduate programs and local publications. Along with my colleagues, I reworked our graduate programs to include critical literacy as a major focus (if not the unifying pedagogy) of our courses. Increasingly we received requests from schools, particularly disadvantaged schools, to conduct inservice events about critical literacy. As a teacher educator, I was involved in helping teachers access theory and research into critical literacy. At that time, working from my reading, I identified three principles which I saw as contributing to the practice of critical literacies, which included: positioning students as researchers of language; exploring minority culture constructions of literacy and minority resistance to school literacies; and analysing and critiquing classroom and public texts (reported in Comber 1994).

In this work I was concerned to emphasise how critical literacies involved teachers in actively changing the ways in which they and their students related to each other and to texts; that critical literacies were about changing the positions from which teachers and students could consider language practices at school. While I worked to construct critical literacies in broad and non-reductive terms, it was to text analysis that teachers at that time seemed most attracted: the interrogation of classroom and public texts.

I found that teachers were interested in exploring ways in which they and their students could begin to contest the taken for granted nature of the worlds and identities which texts construct (Baker & Freebody 1989; Janks & Ivanic 1992; Luke et al. 1994a). Suggestions that children could contest and argue with texts from the earliest stages of schooling prompted intense discussion amongst teachers. So too did the advice that community, media and popular culture texts might become the objects of critical analysis

in the primary school (Baker & Freebody 1989; Luke et al. 1994c). At inservice events during this period I often proposed that we begin by critically reading the texts from the popular press which spoke of literacy crises and the problems with public schooling, the kinds of texts I discussed earlier in this chapter. Having begun by working on their own critical reading practices some teachers were keen to take up the challenge that teachers and young learners working together could disrupt the transmission of dominant ideologies.

Teachers who were cautious about the political nature of critical literacy were inspired by accounts from other educators that it was possible to produce local versions of critical literacy even within political regimes which tightly control schooling (Bigelow 1992; Janks 1993). For instance Janks and her colleagues working in Johannesburg under apartheid were able to produce materials which taught students how to practice critical literacy in a variety of contexts. I found teachers were interested both in the challenges and the stories of critical educators but had many questions about how critical literacy would mesh with their current classroom practices and with their own personal and political standpoints. What priorities should they make in their literacy curriculum? How would they ensure that they were not simply re-indoctrinating children into their preferred ideologies?

During this period I worked on ways of contextualising critical literacy so that it would not be seen as a replacement pedagogy for what teachers had done before, nor as a panacea for the educational disadvantage typically experienced by poor, minority and indigenous students. One productive response to these issues was the advice from Freebody and Luke (1990) that rather than searching for the 'right way' to teach reading (or writing), what is needed is an analysis of the literate practices students need to be able to do. Following this approach Freebody and Luke developed a useful framework with respect to reading. They argued that successful reading requires that readers take on four roles simultaneously.

[A] successful reader in our society needs to develop and sustain the resources to adopt four related roles: code breaker ('how do I crack this?'), text participant ('what does this mean?'), text user ('what do I do with this, here and now?'), and text analyst ('what does all this do to me?'). We use these categories as a heuristic guide for literacy educators to consider what 'literacies' are offered in various instructional programs. This issue thus becomes not whether a 'basic skills' a 'communicative', or a 'critical' approach to literacy instruction is most appropriate or necessary, but rather that each of these general families of approaches displays and emphasises particular forms of literacy, such that no single one will, of itself, fully enable students to use texts effectively, in their own individual and collective interests, across a range of discourses, texts and tasks. (Freebody & Luke 1990, p.7)

This approach explicitly invited teachers to move beyond the oppositional debates and to consider how the emphases of different pedagogies could be employed together in ways that were useful to students as readers.

In order to explore what might be possible in primary school classrooms I began working collaboratively with a small group of teachers who were researching critical literacies (Comber 1994; Comber & O'Brien 1993; Luke et al. 1994c, O'Brien 1994a, 1994b). In particular, I learnt from my collaboration with Jennifer O'Brien. O'Brien was at that time working as a junior primary teacher in a suburban disadvantaged school. Using the insights of socially critical researchers and educators she began to actively reconstruct her literacy program. She changed the questions she asked about texts, the kinds of texts which she used and the kinds of conversations and activities she organised around the construction of and interpretation of texts.

This work is documented in detail elsewhere (O'Brien 1994a). What is of interest here is the way in which a teacher theorised and worked on her own practices taking up challenges from academic research and recontextualising the implications of their findings in her own workplace. O'Brien's work suggests the importance of understanding how teachers work on theory in local sites and the potential role which teachers might have in mediating theory for and with their colleagues.

Such was the growing official interest in critical literacy that the Department of Education reprinted an article which Jennifer O'Brien and I had written to describe our practices as part of their Social Justice collection of papers for teachers in Disadvantaged Schools. These locally produced materials which mediated and illustrated critical literacy were taken up by one of the Banfield teachers in ways which I discuss further in Chapter Eight.

To conclude this discussion of debates about literacy, I reiterate that each of the competing pedagogies has made claims for their positive effects in making a difference for disadvantaged students. Indeed making literacy (or 'English' or 'Language Arts') the centrepiece of primary school curriculum has a long history in Australia which predates the current debates (Cormack & Comber 1996). The accomplishment of literacy, however it might be defined and by whatever means it is thought best to teach it, continues to be constructed as the most urgent responsibility of the primary school teacher. Despite the priority given to literacy and its rhetoric of promises, educators have found no generalisable solutions for the difficulties sometimes experienced by diverse and disadvantaged student communities in acquiring school language and literate practices.

Given the fact that no promises can be made for the positive effects of literacy, negative consequences for what is considered illiteracy continue to be predicted. These discursive conditions have produced a sense of urgency across whole language, genre-based literacy and socially critical educators over the past decade as they work on possible if temporary and local 'solutions'. The proliferation of discourses about literacy education can then be seen to have had (and continues to have) both positive and productive and often unanticipated and negative effects in different educational and workplace communities.

4.5 Contradiction and (un)certainty: the dilemmas facing literacy teachers in disadvantaged settings

Considered together, the constructions of literacy, pedagogy and disadvantage described in this chapter place those who must work in disadvantaged settings in an unenviable position. A period marked by grandiose claims for literacy in media and policy fields has also been a period where a succession of literacy pedagogies have been strongly criticised for their inability to deliver promised universal literacy – the apparent certainty that students in disadvantaged settings would fail. At the same time that literacy has been cast as a set of certainties (progress, reform and improvement), teachers in disadvantaged settings have been faced with increasing uncertainty. Teachers in these settings face questions about how literacy can be delivered, what counts as proper literacy and how equitable outcomes can be achieved for groups of students who begin schooling with different language practices and discursive resources.

While producing uncertainty, the scepticism of critical literacy may also have positive effects in that it shifts the debate from the myth of a single 'right way' to teach a 'single right literacy'. It opens up a space for local theorising and work on practice of the kind pursued by Jennifer O'Brien and other teachers working in disadvantaged schools. However, as I am continually reminded by teachers, if critical literacy as a discourse is colonised exclusively by academic theorists it runs the risk of producing alienating and unhelpful rhetoric detached from the lives of people who work in the schools.

Literacy has been a high priority area for Disadvantaged Schools Program funds for many years. 'New' literacy pedagogies attract considerable attention there as teachers strive to enhance the outcomes for the children they teach. How the academic debates and public attention concerning literacy, young people and schooling position teachers in the disadvantaged schools is a question to which I return in the chapters which follow. As I have shown there is not one dominant view of 'literacy', 'disadvantage' or 'pedagogy'.

The discourses available to Banfield teachers were complex and contradictory and at the same time the quality of teachers' work was itself the subject of critical attention.

In the next chapter I begin the stories of teachers' work and the construction of literacy pedagogies in one school community. My hope is that the discursive practices of educators in this local community can be read in the context of the broader available public discourses which I have outlined in this chapter.