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## Chapter 5 Locating the study: The disadvantaged school as a heteroglossic site

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**Figure 5 Advertisement for Banfield in local newspaper 1992**

*Children at our school enjoy:*

- \* Spiritual Expression
- \* Expressive arts: Silk painting, Fabric work, Puppetry, Drama, Dance
- \* Permaculture gardening
- \* Computers
- \* Before and after school care
- \* Second language program

*and much more!*

If you would like to see the school or discuss enrolment for your child, contact:

NAME OF PRINCIPAL  
phone number

*Enrolment open for 1993 and 1994*  
Holy Mother Primary School, Banfield  
(A unique learning environment)

[P]rocesses of change are processes of struggle: uneven, contradictory and dialogic rather than unilinear and monologic. (Fairclough 1990, p.66)

### 5.1 Introduction

Local institutions can be construed as heteroglossic sites where competing discourses are 'recontextualised' in everyday situations (Bakhtin 1981). Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia is helpful here because it foregrounds the importance of context over text, that the meaning of any utterance can never be determined by purely linguistic analysis. Words are invested with multiple meanings which bare the traces of historical usage and the social conditions and relations of the particular times and places. My interest here is in Banfield as such a site. Thus when educators at Banfield speak of "literacy" or "empowerment" or "disadvantage", their statements are already invested with prior

meanings which collide, intersect and overlap in ways which are impossible to unravel and which are specific to the function of their usage at that time and in that place. At Banfield I am concerned with how the members of the institution struggle over meanings. And I am concerned with the school as a site of discursive change, shift and conflict.

Taking literacy as social practice, the importance of understanding the contexts of its production in local sites becomes crucial. My aim in this chapter is to explore the school as an environment: the communities it serves, its staff, its ethos and recent history. Further I introduce the discursive practices of the Banfield community, signalling events, circumstances and contentious issues which relate to the construction of literacy in this disadvantaged school. Here I introduce the competing and overlapping discourses in evidence in this school.

## 5.2 Banfield - School and Community

Banfield was established in 1951 as a Catholic Parish School to cater for the Spiritual development and educational needs of local children. Today our school population celebrates diversity in cultures, faith traditions, needs and personal stories. (excerpt from Banfield Religious Education Policy 1991)

At the time of the study, Banfield was a small inner suburban Catholic parochial school, enrolling around one hundred and twenty students aged from five to thirteen years of age. The student group was heterogeneous in relation to race, ethnicity, language and religion. Seventy percent of its families were below or just above the poverty line. For this reason Banfield was classified as a disadvantaged school.

### 5.2.1 School location and environment

The school is located in an inner suburban, semi-industrial area three to four kilometres from the capital city. It is situated amongst a number of residential houses, small factories (producing sheet metal, fastening systems, ferrous products, disposable packaging, detergents, plastics, smallgoods) and a number of workshops, warehouses and service industries (including marble and cement, carpets, resin sands, gasworks, crash repair, nappy services, printing). The surrounding area is divided between industrialised properties and residences. In the two kilometre radius of the school neighbourhood there are few sports grounds or parks, no amusement centres or movie theatres. As the school secretary put it the community could be seen as 'disadvantaged in terms of access to amusements, sporting and cultural resources'. Historically, much of the housing was state government controlled cheap rental accommodation. Recently the suburb had become popular with first home buyers seeking inexpensive housing close to the city. Several new housing estates were also being developed near by. The school was under a major flight path for interstate and overseas airlines and as a result lessons were



frequently interrupted as jets thundered overhead. Banfield was one of two primary schools in the suburb, the other being a larger state school about five hundred meters away and on a main road.

The most obvious observation to be made about the school's physical environment is its size. All school structures could be seen at a glance from the entrance gate. The buildings had been erected at different stages in the school's history and were a mixture architecturally and in what they offered in space and comfort. The permanent red brick buildings were erected in 1950s when the school was first established. One building housed four classrooms and the staffroom. A newer annexe included office space, a sick room, the principal's office and a classroom. A second old brick building housed the before and after school care program facility, a one room 'library' and a room used for school assemblies, liturgies and fitness activities. On the edge of the car park was a very small transportable building, used as an office for a Maths adviser in 1992 and later as a classroom. The grounds were kept clean and tidy. Regular reminders about tidiness were recorded by the principal in the day book. An asphalted area doubling as a car park and a surface for ball games, a grassed area and a small wooden play gym completed the school yard. Insufficient space was available for sports such as cricket, basketball or football. Due to the risk of injuries children were unable to play these games at recess and lunch times when the play areas were crowded. A small group of older children, usually boys, played handball boisterously against the brick wall of a classroom, with a vocal group of spectators looking on.

Buildings, including the staffroom and office block, were modestly furnished. Here again space was limited. Classroom furniture and resources varied, as some classrooms had recently benefited from extra funding. One classroom was very comfortable with new carpet and furniture, whilst most others showed considerable signs of wear and tear. Each of the classrooms was configured with children sitting in groups. All had a carpet square, where children sat when the class gathered together. Some classrooms were filled with teacher made books, children's work and a limited selection of big books, reading series and children's literature; others seemed poorly resourced by comparison. For example, it was difficult to walk in one room because children's work hung low from the ceiling, teacher made books rested on stands and decorated grocery boxes were overflowing with children's writing. Along the corridor another room was almost bare, with little evidence of children's work or books of any kind. The differences between the rooms depended to some degree on what each teacher had been able to gather during her time at Banfield and also on the teacher's own levels of energy and expertise in enhancing what was a basic classroom shell, with few resources provided. The four class teachers

shared two recently leased Macintosh computers which they moved from classroom to classroom.

On the walls of the foyer, the principal's office and the staff room were colourful and striking student works of art. These included not only children's drawings or paintings but also complex quilting, stitching, silk printing and other forms of craft. Such displays documented the local environment, family, school and classroom events. Here the Banfield community exhibited the results of its Expressive Arts program which received funding from the Disadvantaged Schools Program from 1991 to 1993. In 1992 the school held a major student and staff art and craft exhibition at a community arts centre which was extremely well attended by school, Catholic Education dignitaries and the wider community. Visitors to Banfield could not fail to notice the artefacts adorning the walls of the school.

Hidden behind the main classroom block and accessible only through the staff room or classrooms was a garden where the children and teachers grew vegetables and flowers and kept ducks, rabbits and chickens. All classes shared responsibilities for different aspects of management of the garden. Staff believed the integration of the garden with the school curriculum attracted a number of the 'alternative' parents seeking a non-traditional form of community schooling.

From the outside, the school environment appeared limited by its lack of space and the aging nature of the buildings. The school environment reflected its history - bits added on at different periods, transportable classrooms and a separate toilet block. Nevertheless, within the school there was a sense of resourcefulness, of staff doing the best they could with what they had. Despite the limits of the space and structures, the school community managed to offer music, aerobics, expressive arts and a productive garden in addition to the required curriculum. In offering these additional programs Banfield capitalised on the many talents of its dedicated teachers and their commitment to the students.

However, it is important not to discount the effects of limited material resources on what a school can offer its students. The 'library' is a case in point. In 1992 the library contained six shelves and two drawers of books. The collection was old and extremely restricted in terms of reference material. The Banfield community did not have the financial resources to supplement school funds for the establishment and updating of a library. Nevertheless, when her responsibilities allowed, the principal conducted library lessons with each class for an hour once per week. There was no librarian in attendance at other times. All teachers complained about the lack of library resources and at least two teachers regularly bought books for their students to read at school and at home.



In the middle of 1992 an outside consultant working with the Banfield community on a School Development Plan wrote concerning the lack of resources that, 'There is little doubt that some drastic changes need to take place to increase the viability of the school in this context'. Referring to the facilities the principal made the following statement.

Banfield is a pleasant, well cared for environment. It is made attractive through the endeavours of the teaching and grounds staff. The environment is however quite adequate for the needs of the students. Enrolment numbers are increasing significantly. Consequently more classroom space, small work space and individual curriculum space are required to accommodate the children and cater to their learning needs. Upgrading of toilets, existing classroom areas and administration facilities are essential to cater for basic requirements. The grounds also present some concerns. Inadequate space and the need for upgrading play areas for safe play are essential. (Principal's application for reappointment, underlining in original)

Despite the principal's stoic and cautious statement that the environment is 'quite adequate' there are many signals here that she believes that the school's physical environment requires considerable improvement. Following her initial positive comments she outlines the 'basic requirements' which are 'essential' for catering for students' needs. As a relatively recent female principal in what remains largely a patriarchal hierarchy, the politics of seeking further financial support at a time of economic recession were complex. And indeed Banfield's case may not be unusual. The Catholic school sector has the worst facilities, in terms of buildings, laboratories and sports and recreational facilities, compared with the state and other private schools (Marginson 1993, p.202). In this climate, there was a sense in which she must 'tough it out' and that her arguments must be focussed on students' basic requirements rather than staff needs.

There were costs as well as benefits in being a small disadvantaged school. Banfield's size meant that it was allocated a smaller budget which made the upgrading of facilities and resources extremely difficult to fund. It struggled to qualify for special education and ESL (English as a second language) support funding. One teacher described the effect this had in terms of extra resourcing.

She's not funded; neither is T. They are both worse than A. V's not funded, L's not funded. How bad do they have to be? God! (...pause...) And that's the other thing. I worked in other schools where kids who are nowhere near that bad are funded and where like at [other disadvantaged school] they have ESL people spilling out of the windows and I just can't work out how come they get all that and we get nothing. It's a numbers game.

The teacher's argument suggests that small disadvantaged schools may experience an exponential disadvantage in that they do not have the numbers to justify supplementary finances and resources. This may impact on teachers' work and the opportunities offered to students. On the positive side Banfield's size allowed it to maintain an informality, where principal, teachers, parents and children greeted each other warmly by name,

enjoyed shared jokes and a sense of belonging. Next I explain why Banfield is classified as a disadvantaged school and introduce the school community.

### 5.2.2 The school population

Banfield caters to a clientele where 70% of its students receive School Card, a recognised indicator of poverty. Where multiple factors of disadvantage occur i.e. poverty, ESL, gender, unemployment, non ownership of housing, low educational levels of parents, single parent families etc. there is an increased need for Adaptive Education support, counselling services and low class sizes. Only minimal services of this nature are available at school or through outside agencies. Banfield requires more support in these areas. (Principal's report to Registration Board 1992)

In an official account to the Non-Government Schools Registration Board, the principal described the student population and their related special needs. Like many disadvantaged schools, Banfield served an extremely diverse community. What the community had in common was the experience of relative poverty. As the principal explains 70% of Banfield's students qualified for government assistance (known in South Australia as 'School Card') due to their families' poor economic circumstances. Of the other 30% of students whose families who were not receiving government assistance in 1992, the principal reported that most were just above the poverty line and earning around \$25000 per annum. Census data for 1991 indicates approximately 20% unemployment for the immediate area of Banfield with 79.5% of wage earners receiving less than \$25,000 per year. Only 1.8% earned above \$40,000 per annum. 28% earned between \$5,000 to \$8,000 per annum. In terms of combined family incomes 46.9% of families in the area received less than \$25,000 per year. The census figures substantiate the extent of low income and relative poverty in the Banfield area. The principal also reported that the majority of parents had 'low educational levels of achievement'. The 1991 census data for Banfield indicates that sixty four percent of the population had no post-school qualifications.

Despite these statistics it should not be assumed that this community was homogeneous. While they shared poor socio-economic circumstances the origins and extent of the poverty experienced were quite diverse. For example, some parents were artists living on small grants or welfare payments, others were recent overseas refugees, others were longterm unemployed, others were under-employed, others were recently divided families, others experienced health problems which prevented them working, others were involved in further study and living on education allowances, and so on. The principal and several teachers described a significant percentage of the school community as living 'alternative' 'hippy-type' life styles by choice. Many children lived in single parent situations and a number lived in situations where families had combined. Some were new



to the area and others had lived in the community for some time. Whilst relative poverty was a fact of life for the majority of the Banfield's families, in other ways it was an extremely diverse group.

In maintaining the school's commitment to serving children of the poor, fees had been kept to a minimum and children were not denied a place at Banfield if their families could not afford to pay. Very few families at Banfield were able to pay full fees, and the principal organised a sliding scale fee structure which worked in ratio to family income. For children on concession the Banfield fees were \$10 less per year than the 'free' local state primary school.

The student population included Aboriginal, Anglo-Australian, Cambodian, Chinese, Czechoslovakian, Greek, Irish, Italian, Polish, Thai and Vietnamese children. The 1991 census data for the immediate Banfield area indicates that Italian, Greek, Polish, Yugoslavian and Vietnamese communities were established in the local area. However, as in many Catholic schools, the Banfield school community was more diverse than the immediate local area, with many children travelling from outside the radius accounted for by the census to attend the school. For a significant number of children English was a second language or dialect and in the playground a number of languages continued to be spoken, particularly by children who had recently arrived in Australia. A variety of 'faith traditions' was represented, including for example Church of England, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Baha'i Christian, Methodist, Assemblies of God, Buddhist and Catholic. A small number of students described themselves as atheists and agnostics. In 1991 only twenty percent of the school population identified as Catholic.

It is not immediately obvious why a small Catholic school attracts such a high enrolment of students from "other faith traditions", the principal's term for children who were not Catholic. Just two blocks away, but across a busy road, was a larger state primary school. Teachers reported that parents believed Banfield's caring and family approach allowed a less formal entry into the education system. At Banfield classes were composites of grade levels (reception, one and two; three, four and five; six and seven). Therefore it was possible for siblings to be together in the same class. Banfield's pastoral reputation spread by word of mouth. Different aspects of the school ethos matched for different parents. According to the staff the garden was a selling point for 'alternative lifestyle types' seeking non traditional schooling. Yet other parents saw the school as offering a moral education. In selecting a school it seems that families may identify with different discourses in the school's repertoire. The same school site will therefore attract different groups from the community.



My study coincided with a period where the staff profile at Banfield was totally female. The all-women staff included the principal, the religious education coordinator, the school secretary, four classroom teachers, a part-time teacher, a visiting music teacher and an ESL/Special Education teacher. The principal was highly respected in the Catholic Education System. Teachers and administrators from other Catholic schools often remarked to me that I was lucky to be researching in her school. The principal was completing a masters degree in education exploring liberationist theories of education and Catholicism in a 'multi-faith school community'. The secretary was the longest serving staff member and a great source of school history. She had grown up in the local area and attended the school herself as a student. Of the four classroom teachers, two had been at Banfield between six and ten years, and two were beginning their second year at the school. One teacher had undertaken further studies in counselling and two in literacy education. The part-time music teacher, part-time teacher and ESL/Special Education teachers worked with individual children, small groups and relieved when class teachers were away. A Josephite nun was religious education coordinator for the school. All of the teachers were highly experienced, the minimum number of years teaching being eight.

The Banfield community in action was characterised by its energy, humour and open affection. The before school scene is indicative of the atmosphere of the school. On arrival students greeted the staff, and other visiting adults such as myself, warmly. Younger students could be seen offering teachers food and treats such as crisps and candy, telling stories of younger brothers' and sisters' exploits at home, showing special things such as a pet rat brought to school for show and tell, giving or receiving cuddles. The multicultural nature of the school population was both visible and audible, with children of different race, colour, and language distributed across the play area, noisily talking and playing together. Teachers, parents and children stood chatting in small clusters around the yard. Older children often approached teachers asking about particular plans for the day. In the staffroom those teachers not yet on duty often shared a quick breakfast of toast or coffee, whilst continuing to gather what they need for the morning. Unless she was talking with a parent, the principal was usually on hand, organising coffees or snacks for rushed teachers, inquiring about teachers' health or family lives and generally being available to chat. A small group of 'smokers' braved the weather for a last puff, before the day got under way. Before school times were lively affairs in the staff room characterised by joking, repartee and personal anecdote. Visiting parents were invited to sit down and have a coffee. From my point of view as a researcher it was an extremely welcoming and open environment.

When the bell was rung by senior students, those staff who had not already left for their classrooms were quickly on their way. In the classrooms children returned books taken home the previous evening and collected together on the carpet square and chatted as they waited for the teacher to complete the roll and organise lunches. In most classrooms the day began with the teacher letting students know her plans and sometimes negotiating the agenda. These times usually began informally with teachers and students checking on administrative and personal information. In most classrooms late-comers continued to arrive for the first ten minutes or longer. Teachers usually made the transition into the academic focus within the first ten minutes of the day. At this point the rules changed and students were expected to behave accordingly. They were expected to listen carefully, not interrupt the teacher or their peers and focus on the task at hand. The lively and cheerful atmosphere of the arrival period was gradually replaced by a more subdued and ordered ambience.

### **5.3 School ethos and history**

Schools are dynamic institutions constructed and shaped by their histories and by their community members. School communities respond to material realities and public discourses in local ways. In so doing they produce a school ethos. My interest here is in portraying the Banfield ethos - the social structures, values and belief systems which characterise particular institutions, which may be evident in the rituals, symbols and myths shared and practised in the community (Acker 1995; Lesko 1988; McLaren 1986). Institutions will have different emphases which emerge from the ethos constructed by its community. For example a school community may emphasise its caring approach, or its competitive outcomes, its Catholic values and so on. The ethos is both historically formed and continually reconstituted by the current community members. In this case I consider how the school describes itself to the community, its clients, education authorities, its members and to me as a researcher. I then move to a brief account of events in Banfield's recent history, which understood alongside wider competing political and educational discourses, shaped changes in the school's discursive and institutional practices. Here, drawing on key documents and quotations from the staff, I introduce the competing discourses at work in the constitution of this school as a dynamic ecology. I begin by exploring Banfield as a Catholic school, its recent history and the competing discourses contributing to its ethos and priorities at the time of the present study.

#### **5.3.1 A Catholic School?**

In Australia, parochial schools were created to educate the children of Catholic families. Initially these schools were staffed with members of religious orders. However in contemporary suburban parish schools, such as Banfield, the majority of the children



may not be Catholic and usually the staff are lay people, who may or may not be practising Catholics (Day 1994). In the mid to late eighties in Australia there was a significant swing to private education and during the economic recession, Catholic schools, which are often less expensive than other private schools, became a popular alternative. In the Banfield area the 1991 census data indicates that forty percent of primary aged children were attending non-government private schools. At Banfield even the twenty percent of children who identified as Catholic may have been Catholic in name only. The religious education coordinator explained what attracted parents to the school.

I think at the moment that what's happening in the garden and those kinds of things, but I might be wrong in this, but I just really think religion is really not the be all and end all of it; and if there's any hint they'd like the children here because of the religion, it's going back to the ancestors, loved Catholic relatives - 'because my husband's mother was a Catholic and she'd love her to be here' - I've heard that once or twice.

The staff had no illusions about the parents' attitudes to Catholicism.

When we had that parent thing, where the parents came and talked about all the positives of the school and what they'd like to see changed and all that, they put that the positive asset of the school was its spirituality and its togetherness, you know family, community, and what they'd like to get rid of is the Catholic part. Sr C just thinks that's great and change the name.

My question concerns what it means to be a Catholic school serving largely a non-Catholic population. In what ways was Banfield a Catholic school? How does Catholicism contribute to the competing discourses in play in this school at this time? The ingredients historically associated with Catholic schools, such as a chapel, sacramental programs, catechism, religion lessons, prayers, religious symbols and artefacts (McLaren 1986), were at first sight absent at Banfield. Yet religious discourses found a place through reading texts with moral messages, developing dramatic liturgical celebrations to mark particular events in the Catholic calendar, singing hymns and songs, the display of teacher made classroom artefacts and through an informal curriculum that maintained the Catholic ethos. The religious aspects of the educational program were woven throughout the academic program. For example, the text below appeared on a chart reminding children of punctuation conventions.

**Figure 5.3.1a Punctuation Chart**

**Special signs in writing**

Use quotation marks (speech marks) at the end of a quote (talking).

Jesus said, "Love one another."

Use a fullstop at the end of a sentence.

I like writing.

Catholic traditions were visible also when teachers got together to plan. In a morning devoted to collaborative planning of an across the curriculum whole school focus the

principal suggested that their plans should 'lead into Easter'. However, getting the balance right was a matter of discussion. The religious education coordinator argued that they needed to be careful not to over-emphasise religious education at the expense of academic subjects.

I would be worried we would focus too much on RE and not other curriculum areas. We mustn't let a religious theme pervade everything.

Despite her sentiments above, as the religious education coordinator put it, 'We don't apologise for it either'. The school's 'vision statement', given to all prospective parents, makes the Catholic ethos clear.

**Figure 5.3.1b Banfield Vision Statement**

Catholic schools, in partnership with parents, in union with Christ's saving mission and school communities, educate young people for participation in the Church and world communities today.

At Banfield we are committed to:

developing the whole person

Therefore we-

- provide a balance of learning experiences based on the spiritual, intellectual, social and physical needs of the children.
  - challenge and support every child towards reaching full potential
- encouraging a life long search for truth

Therefore we-

- provide opportunities for questioning, discussion and decision making with a view to opening up ways of seeing and understanding.
  - draw on the collective wisdom of the Church and humanity.
- challenging students to servant leadership

Therefore we -

- promote the development of skills for students to take up leadership roles.
- use Jesus' model of leadership through service.

We invite our students to:

journey to personal faith

Therefore we -

- provide experiences and knowledge which fulfil spiritual needs
- draw inspiration from the values of the Gospels

Therefore we-

- teach children that the values found in the Gospel are a frame of reference for their lives.

We want our students to:

- grow in responsibility and freedom
- recognise the unique presence of God in all people.
- pursue excellence in all areas of school life
- celebrate the gifts of humour, creativity, joy, accomplishment, acceptance and peace
- develop an open and critical attitude to the world today
- value equality and solidarity amongst all people.

[School insignia]

Banfield is a place of acceptance, belonging, challenge, achievement and celebration.

When parents enrolled their children at Banfield, they knew that they were agreeing to a Catholic education. By inserting this text in the Parent Information Pack, along with consent forms for excursions, schedule of school fees and concessions, information about the uniform, the time table and the hot weather policy, the Catholic school vision



statement becomes just another text about the school. Parents have been told; no apology is made about the school being Catholic. At the same time Catholicism is not overtly stressed.

The vision statement draws together key themes which contribute to modern Catholicism - individualism, social justice, excellence, achievement and Gospel values. Drawing on progressive and human capital educational discourses and combining these with a humanist post Vatican II spirituality, the school vision is produced. Yet, as the following comment from the religious education coordinator indicates, the traditional values associated with a Catholic education also survive.

Well, I think they are hoping that there are some moral standards here that you may not get (...pause...). I mean you may get a better deal in a Catholic school. I think there's some moral, (...pause...) the discipline. They're really going on what they've heard about the school.

Staff reported that while parents may not want the Catholic doctrine, nor the Catholic name of the school, they associated a Catholic schooling with the provision of discipline and moral standards. On the one hand, some parents chose a Catholic school hoping for the discipline and traditional moral standards which they assume accompany Catholic education. On the other hand, for some parents the attraction seems to have more to do with modern Catholicism, as characterised by progressive concerns including pastoral care and individuality.

Paradoxically Catholicism in this context comes to stand for both traditional and progressive educational practices. When parents were asked to state what they liked about Banfield as part of a School Development Plan repeated themes reported were:

- caring relationships between teachers and students
- feeling welcome, feeling safe, feeling comfortable
- positive friendly atmosphere
- small numbers of students
- the garden
- acceptance of children's differences, non-competitive, fostering self-confidence, respect, worthwhileness, equality, multiculturalism
- responds to what local community wants
- non-traditional approach
- children enjoy learning, have fun.

(School Development Plan 1991)

Banfield offered a set of values that the diverse parent community and staff could tolerate and use - caring community, diversity, morality, discipline, individuality. At Banfield the

humanist and progressive discourses of modern Catholicism were sustained in a respect for difference uniqueness and individuality. The religious or doctrinal aspects of Catholicism were not foregrounded in everyday events. There were times when an impending religious event did lead to the literacy lesson being abandoned or rescheduled but these occasions were unusual. Thus the Banfield staff were pragmatic about their approach to Catholicism. As one teacher explained students did not tolerate an emphasis on religion.

I discovered that they didn't like singing and they made fun of that and that they didn't believe in God as a group and they made fun of it.

Despite the teacher's comments, in an eighteen month period I witnessed only two instances where students questioned activities related to religious celebrations. There was a reciprocal tolerance of different belief systems. However, Catholicism by no means disappeared from the Banfield ethos, but was recontextualised within the teachers' institutional and discursive practices.

As is evident in the school policy statement teachers drew on a multiplicity of available discourses to make sense of their work and to develop a school ethos.

A visitor to our school will see.....

Banfield continues to develop as an inclusive community with Catholic roots that acknowledge that all religious cultures are involved in the same universal human issues and therefore have commonality.

We celebrate life, rejoice in difference and find bonds in our similarities.

In our school you will see our community struggling and succeeding in...

- having faith in themselves and each other
- respecting the dignity of the human person
- striving for excellence
- working towards a just and equitable environment
- living in a partnership with one another, our environment and our religious traditions
- celebrating success and challenges.
- The spirit of the journey is one of support and compassion.

You will see us cherishing our roots and unfolding into that spiritual journey which is genuine for each of us.

(extract from Banfield Religious Education Policy)

In the religious education policy above echoes of human capital ('striving for excellence'); social justice ('inclusive community', 'a just and equitable environment'); humanist ('respecting the dignity of the human person', 'living in partnership'); progressive education ('celebrating success and challenges') and religious discourses ('all religious cultures', 'spiritual journey') coexist as bullet points. In the opening statement, the writers describe Banfield as an 'inclusive community'. And although the Catholic roots are mentioned, the emphasis is on universal human issues and on the commonality



in 'all religious cultures'. The use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our' matches the claims for community and inclusivity and suggests consensus. The writers also claim to 'rejoice in difference', though the difference is not attached or owned as 'our'. The school community is described as 'continuing to develop', suggesting that the goal is still to be reached. This is picked up again in the next sentence as reference is made to the 'community struggling' and later in the 'journey' metaphor. 'Struggling' is made an alternative to 'succeeding' acknowledging that the policy goals are complex and difficult to achieve. Echoes of gospel narratives of personal struggle and salvation are suggested here. The religious discourse of progressive Catholicism provides an overarching metaphor for the community's work, without excluding other available discourses. This extract from the policy document indicates the ways in which a multiplicity of discourses is deployed together at Banfield.

In addition to progressive and traditional discourses, a liberationist view of Catholicism and the construction of religious activity as social activism were also in evidence at Banfield. Influenced by her graduate studies in religious education which took a critical theory perspective the principal reframed Catholicism in social justice terms. Specifically she drew on texts produced by the Anglican group, The Brotherhood of St Laurence, and ensured her staff had professional development around the 'Four Power Model', (Benn 1981). This model is the centrepiece of the philosophy of the Brotherhood. According to the four power model inequalities in society mean that some people are made powerless in relation to:

- resources (including income, housing, health care, education, material possessions, law and order, transport);
  - information (including access and use);
  - relationships (including those with self, people, community and organisations); and
  - decision making (which requires use of resources, relationships and information).
- (Benn 1981)

What is important here in considering schools as sites of discursive change is the way in which the principal's own theorising led her to contest the discursive practices of her colleagues. In her words she attempted to shift the thinking from a 'St Vincent de Paul's mentality', 'a deficit model' of rescuing the victim to an 'empowerment model'. It is not enough then to describe Banfield as a Catholic school. Catholicism itself is contested terrain. Debates about the kind of spirituality the school should produce for its staff and students are not unrelated to the overall ethos of the community. I arrived in the school at a period where the principal was actively contesting many of the assumptions which Banfield staff had taken for granted about disadvantaged children and what they needed, about religion, about good teaching and about literacy.

### 5.3.2 Recent history: Schools as sites of discursive change

At particular points in history and in particular locations social, cultural, political and material conditions produce what Fairclough describes as 'discursive change' (Fairclough 1992b). In such periods ways of talking about a subject may fundamentally alter. As recent examples of discursive change, Fairclough suggests the marketisation of education and the trend for personal and the private discursive practices (such as counselling and conversation) to be employed in public discourse. Social and cultural changes within a society produce contradictions and innovative responses to such contradictions can lead to unpredictable shifts in discursive practices. As well as the largescale discursive changes in which the media assists in distributing, changes in discursive practices also occur within local institutions and communities. I joined the Banfield community in a period marked by social change within the institution and as I have discussed in Chapter Four it was a period of considerable debate about schooling, social justice and literacy.

At Banfield, the arrival of the new principal and two new teachers in a staff of four full-time teachers were key internal events which altered the constitution of the community and its discursive practices. Teachers frequently commented about how the school 'used to be' and how it was changing. In addition to the picture of the recent school history which I was able to glean from talking with staff and examining school artefacts, I have drawn extensively on the principal's written analysis of the school's history from 1990 to mid 1994, which she prepared for her application for reappointment. In the eighties pastoral care of children and their families had dominated the Banfield ethos. The principal notes this in her analysis of the school's strengths.

During my first year of tenure, I found a number of strengths within the school. The pastoral care of parents and students was the most obvious strength. (Principal's Statement in support of reappointment to Banfield)

During this period the school is said to have functioned as an ad hoc community centre, helping families with the immediate problems that confronted them, such as clothing, housing and family traumas. The school secretary explained that this emphasis was inevitable due to the large numbers of recent refugees and families in crisis who made up the school population. Classroom curriculum was designed to foster self-esteem and confidence. Teachers reported an emphasis on the garden, an oral culture, unstructured time and free activity.

Over this decade 'The school's financial situation was desperate' (Principal's Statement in support of reappointment to Banfield). Banfield was threatened with closure due to falling enrolments. The school's reputation, it seems, was at risk in the local community.



The school buildings were in urgent need of attention and resources were out-dated and insufficient. In 1990 when the new principal was appointed this was her inheritance. There was urgent pressure to redress the school's large budget deficit, to re-build the school's reputation for academic achievement and at the same time to maintain the ethos of the community school. With her arrival, and the advent of two new teachers the following year, new discursive practices about schooling were inserted into the conversation. It was at this point in the school's history that standards of literacy became a problem.

On her arrival at Banfield, the principal expressed horror at the low standard of children's written products. Reviewing her period of tenure, she wrote:

The academic levels of achievement, particularly in the areas of literacy were of great concern. Whilst the children's oral language was generally very good, their ability to read and write was in the majority of instances at a functional level only.  
(Principal's Statement in support of reappointment to Banfield)

She immediately drew teachers' attention to the issue of standards. When she had the opportunity to select new staff, she chose teachers who had reputations as 'high fliers' in literacy pedagogy and who had extra professional development in literacy education. The new teachers also expressed shock when they looked at the children's written work. The new staff were talking a different language - accountability, standards, quality. The new trio displaced a vocabulary of self-esteem and child-centredness with challenge, work and achievements. A contradictory view of education for social justice was presented. Their critical response caused tensions between the staff. The performance of veteran Banfield teachers whose priorities had been pastoral care and a sense of community were now being assessed by their peers in terms of students' literacy. The principal was not unaware of the tensions this created amongst the staff and the parent community. Reviewing these circumstances later, she wrote:

There were some areas where there were wide difference of opinion. The most obvious difference related to academic achievement of students. Some parents and staff members expressed concern over setting very high standards for achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. There was a strong belief that where children faced difficulties associated with poverty and its stresses, they would be unable to cope with high expectations of school achievement. (Principal's Statement in support of reappointment to Banfield)

The principal was sympathetic to the teachers who had been at Banfield for some time; the prevailing belief was that they had been doing a good job in terms of what had been required of them at the time. However the priorities had changed. The principal saw what was required as 'a paradigm shift'.

I considered that deficit thinking about children was in place and that classroom programs and indeed the structures of the school reflected an unarticulated belief that the children and

their parents and therefore the school itself, were unable to stand on their own feet. The deficit thinking resulted in accepting poor performance in all areas of school and school life. Overcoming the challenges I had identified for the school required a paradigm shift towards empowerment, democratic reform and taking responsibility for oneself and one's actions etc. These concepts emanate from Critical Theory. (Principal's Statement in support of reappointment to Banfield)

One strategy was to use the new staff to move the old staff in the 'right direction'. Collaborative planning across the curriculum was the vehicle for such change. The principal hoped that the new teachers' input would demonstrate how to raise the standards and quality of children's academic performance and a major priority was literacy. However this privileging of the knowledge and discursive practices of the new 'high fliers' met with considerable resistance in their early years in the school community.

One of the new teachers used my being there as an opportunity to vent her frustrations with the school community, which she described as 'a group of teachers at risk'.

We don't mutually talk about the same things. I mean there's so much bandaid stuff, so much dealing with the chaos of the moment. Maybe it's in how we view education and in how we view what the Banfield community is about. There may be a history there. I don't know.

In describing her professional life at Banfield in the first year she listed a set of absences and problems:

- no sharing
- no support
- nobody would give an inch
- of course there's absolute silence
- we don't mutually talk about the same sorts of things
- grievances don't get aired because these kids are disadvantaged
- stuff gets side-stepped all the time
- when you put stuff off you devalue
- shelving stuff

These images of what isn't said and how 'stuff gets side-stepped' suggest the ways in which teachers exercise power over one another. This teacher encounters extreme resistance on the part of her peers when she attempts to introduce a different language. Her 'stuff' is shelved. In talking about her colleagues she rarely names them, but describes them as 'other people', 'certain people', and 'others'. Through her language she defines herself as separate and different from most of her peers. Only the principal and one teacher are seen 'as talking the same language' or as 'being on the same wavelength'. Thus while there was a rhetoric of 'cooperative planning', professional



development activities were infused with strong resistance and tensions which relate to teachers' different professional discourses. I return to these issues in Chapter Six.

Within the institution both longterm history and recent changes produced difficult dilemmas for teachers and the principal. At the same time outside pressure for accountability measures and change escalated. The Non Government Schools Registration Board was due to conduct school visits. At the end of the first day of the school year the principal gave teachers early notice of the visit and the Board's requirement for documentation.

It needs to be a statement about what you can expect from your kids this year. You can use or refer to curriculum documents. We really need to be sure that stuff like that is up to scratch.

Documentation had not previously been a high priority of the school. Now it was no longer a matter of choice within the school. In addition to increased state mechanisms of accountability, the Commonwealth Disadvantaged Schools Program and the basis of funding arrangements were also under review during this period. In the early nineties human capital theory made a mark on the National Equity Program for schools (formerly the Disadvantaged Schools Program). In the agreement between the South Australian Commission for Catholic Schools (SACCS) and the Commonwealth concerning the National Equity Program signed early 1994, SACCS takes this discourse on board. In the rationale for the National Equity Program the following sentences indicate how equity and excellence were linked.

The SACCS acknowledges that there are a significant number of young people at school today who are disadvantaged in a way which makes their educational experience less rich, less rewarding and less effective than that of their counterparts. Without intervention these students often become invisible and do not get the resources or programs they need. The range of educational outcomes they experience is therefore more limited. This is unacceptable in terms of social justice, the personal development of the student and of the economic and cultural development of society... As a nation we cannot maximise our resources while many young people do not fully participate in, or receive the full benefits of, their education. They are prevented from contributing their skills and resources to the full advantage of our society...The achievement of equity is a national imperative, with our economic and social future largely dependent on improving the quality, equity and excellence of our school education. (Agreement between The Commonwealth of Australia and the South Australian Commission for Catholic Schools, National Equity Program, February 1994)

Thus internal and external events and changing educational discourses had specific effects at Banfield at this time. It was at this time in Banfield's history that I arrived to research how literacy was taught in this disadvantaged school. I should point out that when I decided to conduct this research at Banfield I was unaware of the nature of the conflicts and the specific dilemmas this school community faced. My arrival just happened to coincide with a period of transition where contradictory discourses and unresolved

dilemmas were foregrounded. My presence no doubt further complicated the context and added to the pressures teachers were under. Not surprisingly therefore teachers' early conversations with me were characterised by uncertainties, doubts and fears about their work. High levels of stress and tension were also common themes.

Public discourses which construct schools as failing, teachers as incompetent, literacy standards as dropping, children as at risk, poverty as escalating and the material and institutional conditions in which teachers work as deteriorating, together produce uncertainties and tensions. In her first appointment as an administrator at this level, the principal was under pressure to make Banfield attractive to the local community, to make it workable for old and new staff and most important from her own point of view to provide an empowering education for the children living in a community disadvantaged by poverty. The need to make the school pay, to attract clients and to deliver a quality curriculum had to be juggled with the principal's commitment to schools as sites of pastoral care and social justice.

#### **5.4 Selling the school: The marketisation of education in the local community**

Advertising for clients by educational institutions became an international trend in Western societies during the late eighties as increasingly schools and universities were required to be self-funding (Fairclough 1993). Faced with the problems outlined above, the Banfield principal was proactive in advertising the school in the community through the local paper (which was delivered free to every household). In 1991, she published an article entitled 'Learning's fun at local school' (See FIG 5.4a), accompanied by a photograph of children displaying their puppets. On the same page a boxed advertisement for the school was also included (See FIG 5.4b). I discuss the texts which advertised the school in the public media at this time.



Figure 5.4a Article on Banfield written by principal

**Learning's fun at local school**

Banfield has been invaded this year by a horde of tiny creatures! No, not millipedes, but legions of puppets, lovingly crafted by the students as part of a new Expressive Arts program.

The program started with much enthusiasm with workshops run by Sharon Hill, a well-known puppeteer. Sharon was already familiar to the children through her work on the television show 'Mulligrubs'. All of the children made a wide variety of puppets - hand puppets, finger puppets, shadow puppets, even life-sized ones! Then they learned how to work the puppets on stage. These creative activities have been combined with other curriculum areas. The children wrote plays as well as producing books, descriptions and procedures for making puppets. Therefore, many of the children's experiences in reading and writing were related to puppetry. The results have been fantastic!

The children's performances explored social skills and relationships, and social justice and environmental issues.

Another creative area the children have learned about is printmaking. Lara Howe has been an Artist-in-Residence at the school during Term 4. She has taught the children and staff the printmaking techniques of lino cuts, screen prints, glass prints etc. An exhibition of children's work was displayed for all to enjoy.

Visiting mime artists also held workshops for the students and teachers. Learning mime techniques has helped the children gain confidence in performance.

This year has certainly been an exciting one, with everyone acquiring lots of new knowledge and skills. The Expressive Arts program has greatly enhanced the Language Arts program and other curriculum areas.

Next year will also be an exciting one! There will be opportunities to learn about performance, stage lighting, film and production. Artists will also teach painting, collage and fabric printing techniques.

Julia Smith, a Year 6 student, made this comment on the program: " I enjoyed the pride of making an original (puppet) and not being able to buy it anywhere. I enjoyed the pride of saying 'I made it.' But most of all, I enjoyed making people laugh."

Julia, like most of our children, is now a confident and competent puppeteer. Doesn't it make you wish you were at school again?

[Principal's name]

In the article the principal constructs an image of how learning happens at Banfield. Her overall argument is signalled by her title, 'Learning's fun at local school'. Referring to the Expressive Arts Program, she paints a picture of what goes on in her school, cleverly foregrounding its marketable features. Aware that there is a strong artistic contingent within the local community she makes this the centrepiece of her strategy - the selling point. She uses an artistic vocabulary, indicating her own expertise, including printmaking, lino cuts, screen prints and so on. Another layer of credibility is added by reference to the well-known puppeteer, who appears on television, the Artist-in-Residence and the visiting mime artists. She also appeals to those readers who may be seeking an alternative school, with her mention of fun, social justice and confidence. Further, she reframes these activities in educational discourse as drama, performance, creative activities, Expressive Arts and links them with reading and writing. Having established the case that learning is fun, she reassures her readers about educational outcomes with, 'The results have been fantastic'.

On the one hand she constructs images of schooling as fun, as play, as enjoyment, while simultaneously inserting contemporary professional educational discourses of accountability with results, competence, knowledge and skills. She describes what has been done in 1991 and outlines more 'exciting' plans for the following year. Next she quotes a student participant as evidence for the argument learning can be fun. Finally, she directly addresses her parent audience, 'Doesn't it make you wish you were at school again?'. Absent from the article and the advertisement which followed that year were any references to Catholicism.

This article achieves a number of things. Outside experts, programs, children, and activities are foregrounded. Images of children engaged in drama, art, puppet shows, writing, learning and craft are prominent. The text cumulatively constructs a school where children enjoy themselves, whilst learning forms of artistic expression and reading and writing as well. All bases are covered here. Parents wanting alternative, non-traditional curricula are catered for, as are those seeking results in traditional school subjects. Teachers are mentioned only once, in relation to their learning from visiting mime artists. Through the emphasis on programs the school is constructed as a marketplace with an array of educational commodities on offer, for those lucky enough to have access to modern schooling. The parent reader is positioned to desire this form of schooling, which they never had, for their child. Next to the article and the photos of the children with their puppets the advertisement below appeared.

**Figure 5.4b Advertisement for Banfield**

<p><b>LOOKING FOR A SCHOOL FOR 1992?</b></p> <p><i>We offer a...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caring environment</li> <li>• Environmental focus</li> <li>• Children's gardening program</li> <li>• Expressive arts program</li> <li>• Computer education</li> <li>• Music lessons</li> <li>• reception to year 7</li> <li>• Before and after school care</li> </ul> <p>Holy Mother Primary School 39 West Tce, Banfield Phone number of school and principal at home]</p> <p><b>ENROLMENTS ARE NOW BEING ACCEPTED</b></p>
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The advertisement takes the same line in commoditising the school's offerings. Beginning with the pastoral care for which the school has had a longterm reputation, these include other non-traditional areas of study, such as gardening and expressive arts. Hence the principal anticipates what might attract her local readers to a school such as Banfield. She goes with current strengths, which she knows are highly valued in the



community, and uses contemporary vocabulary to repackage what's on offer, for example, the gardening and environmental focus. In addition she recognises that 'computer education' is likely to be a concern to many parents and particularly those who may not have access to computers themselves at work or home. At the time of the advertisement Banfield had budgeted for two computers for the school in the following year.

The principal then was a skilled reader of the local context and broader educational trends and discourses. In order to make the kinds of shifts that she saw as necessary and to guarantee the survival of the school she needed to position the school as a viable competitor. To do this she adroitly manoeuvred to make the best use of the resources she had available to her at the time and to access those which she could see she would need in the future. The advertisement for the following year was slightly modified and included spiritual expression, permaculture gardening, computers and a second language program 'and much more!' It concluded with the phrase, 'A unique learning environment'. The principal both mediates external public discourses, directs teachers to what counts as important in their school at a particular time and also contributes to the public image which the community has of the school. At Banfield the principal worked hard to debunk the deficit discourses operating within the school and the community about what could be achieved by, for and with Banfield's students

In February 1991 Banfield had only ninety students enrolled. By February 1995 one hundred and seventy four students were enrolled. Thus within five years the school had almost doubled its intake. The school buildings and grounds had been extended and refurbished. By the end of 1995 an entire new storey of classrooms had been constructed. Banfield was no longer threatened with closure. However this part of the story is beyond my scope here. My focus is particularly on the period from later 1991 to 1993 and the ways in which competing discourses contributed to the construction of school literacies at Banfield.

### **5.5 The disadvantaged school as a heteroglossic site: Competing official discourses**

In constructing Banfield as the context for this project, my concern has been to suggest the dynamic nature of this school site. I have attempted to portray the material realities and conditions which impinged on teachers' work and the areas of contestation which impacted on teachers' institutional and discursive practices. I have suggested that the newly appointed principal was central as a mediator and producer of official discourses.

Her arrival and that of two new teachers signalled a period of destabilisation and discursive change.

As the principal worked to keep the school open, she drew on a number of competing discourses and traditions. She sustained the pastoral and ecumenical aspects of modern Catholicism and encouraged her colleagues to do the same. Yet she actively worked against missionary formations of Catholicism, which she saw as positioning community members as 'victims' and as 'deficit'. She took up contemporary educational discourses which paired social justice and equity with excellence and quality and in so doing she made literacy central in lifting the academic standards of the school. However she did not do so without taking into account the local community. Her reading of critical theory led her to operate from community strengths and interest, in the areas of Expressive Arts and gardening for instance. Literacy and quality were initiated as areas of importance through these established school priorities. In appointing two new high fliers with recognised expertise in literacy education, however, the principal unleashed debates over which ultimately she would have little control.

The scene was set for conflict and struggle as questions of effective pedagogies for 'these kids' were raised. How the recent school history and competing discourses contributed to the construction of school literacies is the subject of the remaining chapters in this thesis.